

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE 1986

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*the implications of the ending of
religious isolationism*

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the implications of the ending of religious isolationism

Kenneth Cracknell

The traditional form of Western scholarship in the study of other men's religion was that of an impersonal presentation of an "it". The first great innovation in recent times has been the personalization of the faiths observed, so that one finds a discussion of a "they". Presently the observer becomes personally involved, so that the situation is one of a "we" talking about a "they". The next step is dialogue, where "we" talk to "you". If there is listening and mutuality, this may become that "we" talk with "you". The culmination of this process is when "we all" are talking with each other about "us".

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These immensely pregnant words were first written by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in an essay on the study of Comparative Religion as long ago as 1959, and since repeated from time to time in other writings - most recently in his masterly Towards a World Theology in 1981.¹ There he adds the comment: "The study of comparative religion is the process, now begun, where we human beings learn, through critical analysis, empirical enquiry, and collaborative discourse, to conceptualise a world in which some of us

are Christians, some of us are Muslims, some of us are Hindus, some of us are Jews, some of us are sceptics; and where all of us are, and recognize each other as being, rational men and women."

I must resist the strong temptation to expound the thought of Wilfred Smith, whom I count not only as a great friend and encourager, but also, through his manifold writings, as one of the wisest of my mentors. Happily, Towards a World Theology makes such a task otiose, as in this remarkable book he expounds lucidly all the seminal thinking that he has contributed through such classic statements as The Meaning and End of Religion, Questions of Religious Truth, Faith and Belief and his numerous occasional writings, beautifully anthologised by Willard Oxtoby in Religious Diversity.² For I am asked to try to set before you some perceptions on the matters of inter-faith dialogue which have come to me in the course of extensive involvement with our multi-faith scene here in Britain. In the course of these remarks I shall frequently, whether consciously or unwittingly, be expounding Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Therefore it is no other than right and fitting that I should begin by paying this tribute to him and all I have learnt from him. I, too, want to call for a world theology in the sense of a reasonable, articulate discourse about the one God who has been at work among all his human children at all times and in all places. We, all of us that is - Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Baha'is as well as all those I would call "faithful atheists" - from the Stoics and Epicureans through to contemporary Marxists and Humanists, make up in our separate histories the one single religious history of humankind.

The Ending of Religious Isolationism

There is a story of an extremely pious clergyman who

was told by an undergraduate that comparative religion formed part of her theological course. He exclaimed with horror, "My dear, I would rather you read Lady Chatterly's Lover than that subject!". Professor Trevor Ling, telling this story, comments that "the desperate nature of the comparison showed how strong his feelings were".³ I use the story merely to illustrate what I mean by "isolationism" - the idea (prevalent not only amongst Christians) that it is better to know nothing about other people's faith. Dr Stanley Samartha, the great ecumenical pioneer of the way of inter-religious dialogue, has recently commented on the situation in his own country of India: "the negative attitude towards other religions based on the missionary theology of a colonial era prevents many Christians from entering into dialogue ... Even to this day in our theological colleges the systematic and scholarly study of other religions remains marginal. There seems to be the assumption that the less one knows about other religions the stronger will be one's sense of mission."⁴ This is the ideology of isolationism, and it appears to me to be a moral imperative to be rid of it, speedily and in our own time. And this for three reasons.

- i. Because it is untrue to the empirical realities of our world.

These are in one sense so obvious that they need no spelling out, yet the way the religious map of the world has changed is not yet fully appreciated by even leading thinkers and educators in our country, or in other lands, let alone within the deep consciousness of the mass of the population. Britain is now a religiously plural society; five hundred mosques serve the million Muslims who are our fellow citizens and minarets tower above the skyline in our cities and major towns; temples and gurdwara equally serve the religious needs of the five or six hundred thousand Hindus and Sikhs; Buddhist pagodas are to be found on the banks of

the Thames and by a lakeside in Milton Keynes; retreat centres run by Zen Buddhists, Vedantists and many other exponents of eastern paths attract thousands upon thousands of people every week of the year; smaller groupings, Baha'is, Jains, Zoroastrians are growing in influence. Living Judaism is powerfully present to us, whether through the eloquence and moral leadership of Sir Immanuel Jakobovits the Chief Rabbi and his other orthodox colleagues, or through the wit and wisdom of such men and women as Lionel Blue, Hugo Gryn and Julia Neuberger, Rabbis of Reform and Progressive Judaism. Nor must we forget the influence of the often highly controversial new religious movements.

Yet many people find this religious and cultural mixture a bewildering experience. Not only Christians but people of other faiths as well, find it strange to work as colleagues and to be neighbours with people who hold different world-views and observe different customs, who keep different festivals and holy days, and follow different teachers and masters. One reaction to all this is fear, and it is hardly surprising that we have on the part of the host community occasional outbreaks of xenophobia, and on the part of the incomers a tendency to create ghetto-communities. Strangeness begets intolerance, and perfect fear casts out love.

It would not be hard to give illustrations of this negative reaction within these islands. But the situation is even more fraught on the world level. It may not have mattered once that men and women lived with ideologies of isolationism, whether Islamic or Hindu, Buddhist or Confucian, Christian or Jewish. Then religion and culture and national identities were inextricably bound together, and religion itself functioned as the "sacred canopy" overarching each community, and giving legitimacy to the state itself, and its own particular significance to all aspects of the life of both community and individual. But what now that there are proportionally huge numbers of Christians and

Hindus in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States? What now that Hinduism has an enormous diaspora, and the very land of Hinduism itself has become a secular state? What now that China can no longer conceive of itself as "the middle kingdom" surrounded by "foreign devils"? What now that Japanese Shintoism is forced to give place to the needs of a modern industrial estate?

Such questions merely point to the immense psychological or, may we say, spiritual revolution that is in process, which we ignore at our peril, and which we are profoundly ill-equipped to understand. An apparently trivial example will suffice to point to the precariousness of our situation and the paucity of our resources to deal with these matters. I recall being in Washington, DC, in the Fall of 1979 in the very month that the Shah was deposed and the Islamic Revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded. Someone said to me, "Don't go looking for a copy of the Qur'an in a Washington bookstore. All the Qur'ans have been bought up by the CIA who are trying to figure out what's gone wrong.". Reductionist analyses which discount the significance of religious impulses in human motivation, or the extreme political naivety of supposing that the world can be divided into the "free" and the "Marxist" world are alike desperately dangerous.

So, in a world in which the big jets physically transfer four or five hundred people at a time from the Arab world to the West, or from China to Japan, or from Russia to Sri Lanka, and the TV satellites instantaneously transmit the view of Sikh separatists in London to New Delhi and Madras, or the utterances of Colonel Gaddafi to homes in the mid-west of the USA the physical isolation of religious traditions is gone for ever. Wishing this were not so is to emulate the ostrich. Taking it seriously and reacting positively with a profoundly new sensibility can be the only way forward. We have to commit ourselves deliberately to the ending of religious isolationism.

ii. Because it is untrue to our historical past.

I implied a moment ago that in the past different religious cultures lived in separation from each other: Muslims in the Middle East; Hindus in India; Buddhists in South East Asia and so on. Strictly speaking this is an over-simplification. To be sure, village people a hundred or even fifty years ago, whether in Arabia or Tamil Nadu, Thailand or Tibet (I use, of course, modern nomenclature) just as much as the rural population of Leicestershire or Thuringia would have lived out their lives knowing nothing except their own form of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity. For them that was religion. But modern research is making it daily clearer that religious traditions have always interpenetrated each other.

Let me give some examples, but without becoming too detailed. In 1978 Roy C Amore published a remarkable little book, Two Masters, One Message, which he subtitled "The Lives and Teachings of Gautama and Jesus".⁵ In this he looked again at the work of earlier scholars who, in the first flush of the discoveries of the sacred books of the east, had been bowled over by the similarities between the teachings of the Buddha and the Christ, and not just the teachings alone - because the Buddha, too, according to the Lalitavistara biography, was also virginally conceived. For a number of reasons the theories of such writers as Seydel, Pflieger, Schmiedel, Lillie, and Garbe that there was direct influence from Buddhism on the Gospel traditions were dropped, people preferring to suppose in the words of Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan: "Whether historically connected or not, they are the twin expressions of one great spiritual movement. The verbal parallels and ideal similarities reveal the impressive unity of religious aspiration. Buddha and Jesus are the earlier and later Hindu and Jewish representatives of the same upheaval of the human soul."⁶ Roy Amore believes that the arguments for direct influence deserve reconsider-

ation, and his book makes a strong case for that. But, more importantly, in the course of the argument he recapitulates the extensive evidence that we now have that the New Testament world was exposed to eastern influence. Buddhist missions deliberately expanded westward, and the East-West trade route traversed Palestine. So too did the "silk route" which passed northwards out of Egypt, through the Holy Land, Syria, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Northern Persia (Iran), Bactria (Afghanistan) and on through Central Asia towards Northern China. A branch of this route went south from Bactria, passing through what is now Pakistan and from there connecting with other trade routes across India. In addition there was a sea route connecting eastern India with Egypt, and Roman coins have been found in eastern Indian seaports as well as in Galle in southern Sri Lanka. There were Indian merchants in Alexandria. The great king Ashoka (3 cent. BCE) sent Buddhist missionaries to the Greek kingdoms of the west, and as a result one Greek king Menander became a Buddhist - he is known in Buddhism as Melinda. Ashoka's famous rock edicts included one in Greek and Aramaic, the languages of Palestine in Jesus' time.

Roy Amore also instances the absolutely certain "direct borrowings" which illustrate the cultural and religious inter-penetration that all this coming and going must needs imply. One of the most famous instances of this is the story of Barlaam and Josaphat whose central ideas are quite obviously the life story of the Buddha.⁷ Of the ramifications of this story Wilfred Cantwell Smith has written with his customary erudition, also, in Towards a World Theology: but he goes on to make a further point. He writes: "The historical fact is that, through this story, for a thousand years the Buddha was a Christian saint. This fact we can now acknowledge." And he uses this historical fact to ask us to see that "we have all along been participants in the world history of religion; although we did not know it. More accurately, until recently we knew it only imaginative-

ly, mythically in the form of legends and of tales. The breakthrough is that now we do know it, accurately. I, for one, rejoice."⁸ I have dwelt on the work of these two North American scholars because they help us to see inter-penetration at one particular level. But there are many other instances. I merely point to the convivencia in Spain and the Mediterranean littoral in the high middle ages, when Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars were deeply aware of each other's works and profoundly influenced each other, both negatively and positively. How many people know, for example, that Anselm's great Cur Deus Homo? was originally written on the eve of the first Crusade as a dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim?⁹ Or, again, of the profound effect upon Catholic Christian thought of Solomon Ibn Gabirol of Malaga. His Fons Vitae, mystical and neo-Platonic in character, was regarded for centuries as having been written by a Christian called Avicbron?¹⁰ More familiar to most of us is the extent of the indebtedness of Christian scholasticism to the precedent Islamic scholasticism which included the formulations and thought-patterns of such figures as al-Ghazzali and Ibn Rushd (known to us more commonly as Averroes).

This continual inter-penetration of the religious traditions happened not only in the eastern and western Mediterranean areas, and one illustration of its happening elsewhere must suffice to prevent my account from being merely ethnocentric, or Euro-centric. One of the most outstanding virtues of Percival Spear's great history of India is its clear account of the religious aspects of India's past which made up the creative agents in the formation of the present. The formation of Hindu society, the rise of Buddhism, and the coming of Islam in its Turkish form are treated as themes relevant to the present day, while details of wars and dynasties, chronological controversies and frontier changes find only a secondary place, or are omitted completely as irrelevant. So Percival Spear describes for us how great a contribution to modern India Islam

has made: "the Muslim religion, modified by its Turkish and Afghan race-bearers, was further modified by the Persian culture by which all the invaders were more or less influenced."¹¹ Persian became the language of official business and polite society and Persian literature was studied by Hindus as well as Muslims reaching a peak during the Mughal period. Spear summarises the mutual influence of Hinduism and Islam during this period: "On the Hindu side we find during the Muslim centuries a greater emphasis on the unity of God. We also find the bhakti movements' emphases on such things as sin and forgiveness, which have a distinct Judaic ring. A number of reforming movements have attacked caste. There have been a number of movements, of which Sikhism is the best known, which started by trying to bridge the gulf between the two communities; their basis was usually monotheism, no caste and personal devotion. On the Muslim side we may say that the Indian atmosphere softened the original Turkish intolerance. Many Muslims were influenced by Hindu philosophy. In daily life saint-worship and other Hindu practices established themselves, and the caste system made itself felt in marriage arrangements."

These few brief examples from West Asian, European and Indian history could be multiplied from China and Japan, sub-Saharan Africa, north and south America. But I hope the point is made. Religious traditions did not exist in isolation from one another in times past. A truer awareness of the history of religion should enlarge our capacity to feel at home in our one world. We are talking about common strands and mutualities of influence within a single human history. What we once regarded as our special "revelations" bear the marks of other insights, other traditions. The ideology of isolationism is untenable at this level, and we are compelled to have done with it.

iii. It is untrue to the best and highest in
Christian theology

Professor Trevor Ling's "extremely pious clergyman" was, of course, the victim of his religious and theological nurture. We have no need to speculate whether this was evangelical or catholic, Calvinist or Methodist (we may be fairly sure he was not a Unitarian!), for the case will be essentially the same, whatever school he belonged to. Outside the Church, there is no salvation, merely heathenism and false figments of God, mere idolatry. Such conceptions may be found in Augustine and Calvin, Luther and Wesley and may indeed have their origin in one tradition within the New Testament. Certainly the words of St Paul in 2 Corinthians 6.17: "Come out from them, and be separate from them ..." have been elevated into the master text for the Christian ideology of religious isolationism. They are the foundation upon which quite terrible missionary theologies have been based, and as expounded within the framework of these theologies still exercise their dire influence on Christian communities all around the world which we have already seen Dr Samartha lamenting in India.¹²

But this is not the only tradition within the Christian church. There has always been another one, which has recognized God at work far outside the boundaries of the Christian community. This one is associated with the names of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, Ulrich Zwingli and other renaissance humanists, the Radical Dissenters and Unitarians who are your forebears, the Cambridge Platonists, John Wesley (when he was primarily concerned with religious experience), Friedrich Schleiermacher and F D Maurice (who never lost the marks of his Unitarian upbringing), T E Slater and Alexander Allen. The last two names are probably the least familiar to you, but I use them to stand for a great company whose perceptions were profoundly altered as a result of their involvement in the "great

century" of Christian missionary expansion, and who began the revolution in Christian missionary theology which is even now only just beginning to take effect.¹³

The essential point about all these great figures of the past was that they cared about God, not about ideologies, whether expressed as credal formulas or church principles. That is why they speak in the several ways so decisively to our present situation. For we now know, not merely intellectually but with the totality of our being, that men and women outside the boundaries of the Christian community have been "touched", "spoken to", "healed", "held", "inspired" by God. Notice in this list of words I have not used the term "saved", yet we see in these men and women God savingly at work. But the church appears to teach that it alone is the vehicle of salvation and in this has given offence even to some of the best of its own members. Here is the problem as Wilfred Cantwell Smith expressed it: "If it had turned out that God does not care about other men and women, or was stumped and had thought up no other way to save them, then that would have proven our Christian understanding of God to be wrong. For a century or so recently, much of the Church seemed to take this line: and a good many members decided that the Christian teaching must indeed be wrong and left."¹⁴

I believe Wilfred Smith here unerringly puts his finger on a central issue, yet one little reckoned with in discussions about the widespread decline in church allegiance in western Europe. It is simply that the God who is preached is too small. The Creator of the Universe has been made into a tribal deity for a tiny part of his creation. Deeply religious instincts rebel against such a diminishing of the inexhaustible activity of God. A truer representation of the God we have come to know through the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth must declare that he is not merely at work among Christians. He is the One who is endlessly

merciful and compassionate, who numbers the hairs on the head of every single one of his human children, who suffers in all their sufferings, and rejoices in all their joys. When we encounter living and, yes indeed, "saving" faith far beyond where Jesus is named, then are we not to rejoice in the greatness of God? Those of us who know something about Buddhist or Hindu, Jewish or Muslim, Chinese or African or whatever other expression of faith and spirituality must, says Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "affirm with joy and triumph, and a sense of Christian delight, that the fact that God saves through these forms of faith too corroborates our Christian vision of God as active in history, redemptive, reaching out to all men to love and embrace them". All I need to add to this is the two words "and women"! But corroboration it most certainly is, of the best and highest understanding of God.

Such a theological affirmation demands the ending of religious isolationism. Not only does it come as "good news" (and any preaching of the Gospel of Jesus in our time must therefore surely include this as a major element in its message) but it also sets us free to recognize, and to make our own, all truths about God and creation and the nature of being human, wheresoever and through whomsoever they have been apprehended. We, all of us, will be able to speak in a new way, about what God has done amongst us, all of us. We shall be speaking about us.

I turn in the second half of this lecture to consider how this may be approached, and offer some theoretical considerations, as well as some practical examples drawn largely from my own experience. But first here are two statements about what "we talking about us" cannot mean.

"We talking about us" is not syncretism

There is no more common misconception of the aims of those of us who spend virtually all our professional lives in inter-religious dialogue than that we are "trying to create one world-religion". This misunderstanding is prevalent as much among our friends as among our detractors, for, if some religious believers cannot believe that there may be truth beyond the confines of their own system, there are at the opposite extreme from them those who believe that all religions ultimately teach either identical or complementary truths. The technical term for this is "syncretism", which may be said to be "conscious or unconscious human attempts to create a new religion composed of elements taken from different religions". In a recent editorial in the invaluable WCC publication Current Dialogue, Allan Brockway has written that as a result of long experience of actual dialogue this kind of bogey-man for orthodox people has "finally been exposed as the straw man it always was by the clear awareness that, even if it were desirable it is impossible; none of the world religions, including Christianity is interested in the least in such an enterprise".¹⁵

Allan Brockway goes on to affirm that in fact the opposite is the case, and that the actual practice of listening and sharing in inter-religious meeting has revealed to participants how much they have realised the differences between themselves and have come to appreciate the specificities of their own traditions. Allan Brockway writes: "... far from producing homogenization, inter-religious dialogue results in strengthening and deepening the faith of the various partners in their own religion".

That this is actually the case may come as rather bad news to those who do believe that there are lowest common multiples or highest common factors in the religious domain. Those who have espoused the propo-

sition that there are complementary truths in the religions, or that all religious language is but inadequate human effort to express the one and the same spiritual experience will be alike dismayed. I am aware how great the dismay here may be, and would not wish to pass over this matter lightly. For some great twentieth century thinkers have urged us to look for the transcendental unity of all religion, and to busy ourselves as a matter of the highest priority with the creation of a world religion adequate to the immense needs of our times. I need perhaps mention only the names of Arnold Toynbee, Carl Gustav Jung, Frithjof Schuon and William Ernest Hocking. Let me dwell for a moment on the vision of the last of these in his book, The Coming World Civilization.

Hocking wrote: "... retaining the symbols of their historic pieties, the great faiths will grow in their awareness of a unity more significant than the remaining differences. As an ancient Hindu tradition runs, the place of the junction of such rivers has a peculiar sanctity, because each of the streams then realises its full being. But if the Jumna and the Ganges run together, shall the lower united stream be called Ganges or Jumna? Is it neither? Is it both?". This he sees as the religion of "the unbound Spirit who stands, and has stood at the door of every man, and who in various guises, still appears to him who opens, both as an impersonal world and as a personal presence".¹⁶ This "unbound Spirit" he says will be the cause and ground of the world faith for which he so vigorously pleaded.

Hocking has some claim to be regarded as one of the last great Liberals, but personally I have no doubt that there will still come forth new vindications of "liberal religion" and of "liberal Christianity", and equally have no doubt that there are some in this audience today who are perfectly capable of writing such vindications.

But I would call your attention to one of the more remarkable books of recent years concerned with the theological enterprise. This is George Lindbeck's The Nature of Doctrine, with its significant sub-title "Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age".¹⁷

Professor Lindbeck's theme, baldly stated, is that hitherto we have taken religious statements to be "cognitive propositional", that is as truth claims about objective realities. Religious systems were thus similar in nature to philosophy or science as these were originally conceived. For the person who understood doctrines in this way, if a religious statement was once true, it is always true, and if it is once false, it was always false. If there are differences between theologians, these can only be resolved by one side or other, or perhaps even both, abandoning earlier positions. But with the rise of liberalism, some thinkers have preferred to treat doctrines as "experiential-expressive", that is as "noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations". Lindbeck refers explicitly to Schleiermacher, and also to some contemporary Roman Catholic theologians who have tried to combine "cognitive-propositional" modalities with the "experiential-expressive" style, like Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan.

But, George Lindbeck goes on to argue, there is an alternative way of understanding religious language. This is what he calls the "cultural-linguistic model". Drawing upon insights from recent work in the human sciences, he notes that it has become customary to emphasize neither the cognitive nor the experiential-expressive aspects of religion. Rather, emphasis is placed on those aspects in which religions resemble languages. For languages are at once the vehicles of culture and the moulders of culture. They create and sustain reality and value-systems. So, for Lindbeck, doctrines are not expressive symbols or truth-claims,

but "communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action". He calls this general way of conceptualizing religion the "cultural-linguistic" approach.

I have to say that this is the most illuminating theoretical treatment of my own experiences in inter-religious dialogue that I have found. The technical theologies and official doctrines I meet within other communities of faith are indeed, as Lindbeck suggests, rarely successful in making affirmations with ontological impact, but are much rather to be understood as "explaining, defending, analyzing and regulating the liturgical, kerygmatic and ethical modes of speech and action within which such affirmations from time to time occur". They are the rules for the game, or the grammar of the language, played out or spoken within communities of faith.

This brief summary does little justice to the complexity of Lindbeck's suggestions, but it was necessary in order to enable me to underline his most fruitful suggestion that his "cultural-linguistic" model will enable dialogue partners "to regard themselves as simply different" (underlinings mine). They are then set free, not only from the old style of "if I am right, you must be wrong", but also from the equally prejudicial assumption that there is a common experiential core. In Lindbeck's own words: "In short, while a cultural linguistic approach does not issue a blank endorsement of the enthusiasm and warm fellow feelings that can easily be promoted in an experiential expressive context, it does not exclude the development of powerful theological rationales for sober and practically efficacious commitment to inter-religious discussion and cooperation."¹⁸

In a "postliberal age" therefore we ought to expect a new "toughness" of discourse within each religious community based upon a proper internalizing of the

rules of each faith tradition. We are beginning to see this kind of rigorousness develop as the new stage in dialogue gathers momentum. "We talking about us" will involve learning whole new "languages", and it will be the responsibility of the faith communities themselves to understand thoroughly and to articulate to the best of their several abilities the "grammar" of those different languages for the sake of the rest of us.

"We talking about us" does not exclude witness or "mission" to each other

In the same editorial in Current Dialogue, Allan Brockway goes on to say, "... no responsible advocate or practitioner of inter-religious dialogue has ever suggested that consistent and vigorous testimony to the Christian Gospel is alien to dialogue. On the contrary, Christian witness within the context of dialogue is what dialogue is all about. Thus the term "mutual witness" came into currency: Christians witness to e.g., Hindus and Hindus witness to Christians".¹⁹

From a theoretical point of view this is the corollary of the remarks against syncretism that have just been made. If indeed each community of faith has its own "language" through which a whole world view comes to articulate expression, disparate from other world-views, but at once "teachable to" and "learnable by" any other human being, we are in quite a different business from constructing some kind of spiritual Esperanto.

A moment's reflection on the experience common to many of us of trying to learn French or Greek will give an almost precise analogy to what I have in mind here. At the very simplest level we soon discover that there are French or Greek words for which there is no English equivalent; as we make progress with our studies we discover that we are learning to think in quite a

different way. As we begin to think in the new language we discover that our perception of the world itself has subtly altered. There is a Czech proverb to this effect that, as often as we learn another language we become a new person. We experience "passing over" into another cultural framework, and then "coming back" with the sense of having been enormously enriched.

Such "cultural-linguistic" experiences certainly do not lead us to suggest that languages other than English in its international form, or some other nova lingua must be supplanted. Quite the contrary, we affirm that all human languages are precious repositories of insight and wisdom, and the common heritage of all of us. "No voice is wholly lost that is the voice of many people" said one of the ancient Greeks, but we would have to write more prescriptively, "no voice is to be lost" that has borne wisdom and understanding for any part of humankind.

Thus within the Christian families that will make up the "coming great Church" the Unitarian voice is not to be wholly lost, nor the Methodist, nor the Quaker, nor the Calvinist, however much the form of expression may differ from the exclusivist polemics of previous centuries. We have a responsibility within our different Christian traditions to understand the "deep grammars" of our own cultural-linguistic forms. This is even more the responsibility of the world's diverse religious communities. We need each other's "witness". We need each other's mission.

But, now, in our time, mutual witness and mission will always be in the context of "we talking about us". How this can be, I would like now to illustrate with just a few practical examples.

Christians and Jews talking about us

Some years ago I had the privilege of leading a shi'ur, or seminar, on the story of the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 in a British Rabbinic College. You will recall that the sign of this "covenant" made with all creation is the Rainbow. I affirmed what all the Jewish scholars' present knew already, that the rainbow is neither a pretty bauble in the sky, nor set there in order to make glad human hearts. On the contrary, the Hebrew word for the bow is geshet, which means "war-bow". Its contemporary equivalent would be something like a rocket-launcher. It points not towards humanity, but towards the heavens, that is towards the heart of God. The text expressly tell us, that it is a "sign" for God: "when the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh". This led directly into a discussion of the anguish of God, confronted continually by human wickedness. Certainly, at this point "we were talking about us", but more than that. In the course of the discussion, one learned participant asked me if I was seriously saying that God could suffer, for if I was, would I remember that my Christian forebears put to death a Rabbi in the eleventh century for teaching precisely that? Yes, indeed, this was the Patripassian heresy: Christians taught for a long period the "Impassability of God". But now perhaps we have discovered something else. I spoke of three books which have come from the fires of our century: Kazoh Kitamori's Theology of the Pain of God, Jürgen Moltmann's The Crucified God and Choan Seng Song's Third Eye Theology. One Rabbi noted all these titles down, and then asked me, what difference I thought it would make to him, if he were to believe in Jesus as I did, and we entered into new depths of discussion. What you see here, is not only a process of reconciliation. To be sure we do have to find a way of forgiving the past

and the terrible things we have done to each other. We do also have to find a way of drawing on each other's insights into the very nature of God. For Jews and Christians all our theology has to be done "after Auschwitz", and it is now surely one of the most moving features of our present time to see and to experience such profundity of discourse as Jews and Christians talking together about us (which is all humanity) in the light of our understanding of the suffering God, "after Auschwitz"....²⁰

Christians and Muslims talking about us

"In the Arab world Christians and Muslims have shared a long history together; the same language, culture, national feeling have united them at a level that transcends the differences of forms and beliefs by which they devote themselves to the service of the one God." So runs a piece of self-description from a group of Arabic speaking Christians and Muslims. The words are the more poignant and the more relevant because they were written in Jerusalem. Later the same document speaks of their painful learning in their situation of "the inestimable value of brotherhood in pluralism" and "the cruelty of living in the absence of such brotherhood". They ask, "As a result, is it not precisely our vocation to be more open to the needs of the world today, and to be ready to bring our own irreplaceable contribution to the construction of a society that is more just and more fraternal?".

The anguish of one particular group of Christians and Muslims may stand here for the increasingly widespread awareness of Christians and Muslims around the world that we are involved together in manifold situations of conflict. Increasingly dialogue between Christians and Muslims passes beyond the recital of differences, as long since it has ceased to be the assertion of religious superiorities. Muslim scholars see talking with

Christians and Jews as a divine imperative: "Speak with the people of the book in a spirit of love", as well as a moral necessity in this precariously divided world. They are rightly conscious of the enormous resources of their tradition, and yet know the distress of a community that is in disarray; of a community that is ill-equipped to cope with the acid of modernity; of a community that sees that the old triumphalist vision of "the House of Islam" covering the face of the globe is no more than an unrealisable dream. They want to take counsel with men and women of other faith, and long for that depth of sharing, in which they are still profoundly Muslim and we others are profoundly whatever we are. My own experience of Christian-Muslim dialogue suggests that we are only at the beginning of this road, but that we have vast resources for our common journey.²¹

Christians, Hindus and Buddhists talking about us

I met, when I was in Burma in 1984, a young man of Swiss origin who was a monk in Amarapura. U Nanadhaja told me of his spiritual quest which had led him through the Middle East, on into India, and finally to the embracing of the path of meditation taught by the great Burmese Abbot Ujanaka. All this had begun because the pastor of his German speaking church in Switzerland had gone away to military service! On the same journey I met a Sri Lankan monk who had just finished a wall-frieze in true Buddhist style for a Christian friend. He had been asked to portray Jesus's washing of the disciples' feet. The Master is on his feet before a very Buddhist looking Peter, who has his hand raised in the characteristic Buddhist gesture of rejection, "You shall never wash my feet". My Christian friend told me that one day the monk had said to him, "If you had looked like this (and he pointed to the kneeling Jesus), we Buddhists would never have turned to Marxism". It transpired that he was himself the editor

of a Marxist-oriented journal for Buddhist monks, and when I eventually met him, he was particularly anxious to talk to me about Christians and the peace movement. As influenced as I am by Third-world "liberation theology" we soon found a common mode of discourse. But as you all know "liberation theology" itself is indebted to Marxist analysis as well as to ideals of human rights and human dignity stemming from Pierre Bayle and other great (and in religious terms "sceptical") humanists. As one Christian theologian and one Buddhist monk spoke that afternoon just outside Colombo, innumerable themes within the human pilgrimage came together. We were talking about our common heritage as human beings, and as religious people we were talking about common religious history, and dare I say, our common hope for the future of all humankind.

I tell these stories merely to illustrate the degree of inter-religious penetration there already is, of which, of course, the life and witness of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is the supreme example. M. K. Gandhi's own experiments with truth led him to combine elements from Tolstoy (and through Tolstoy from Buddhism), the Sermon on the Mount together with understanding of more than one tradition of Hindu spirituality. We know how much richness of discourse has been experienced in the International Association for Religious Freedom, so helpfully documented in your own publications.²² It is surpassing clear that when we come to talk about spirituality, we are all talking about us.²³

Final comments

So much more must be left unsaid. I would however just finish by making it clear that I have used Christian-Jewish, Christian-Muslim, Christian-Hindu-Buddhist talking together merely as examples; we have to talk bi-laterally or multi-laterally with people of all religious traditions. I would also emphasise that this

is not at all to exclude those who would deem themselves religiously sceptical, agnostic or atheist. They, too, will be part of this total process of "we talking about us", and vitally so. But as a believing Christian I conclude with my own expectation that all this manifold sharing, all this wide-ranging mutual witness will be a discovery of what we have already been given to understand in Jesus Christ, that God enters into human history. Thus I associate myself with these words of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, with whom I end as I began: "Right now, He is calling us to let Him act through new forms, continuous with the old, as we human beings across the globe enter our strange new age".²⁴

NOTES

1. In "Comparative Religion: Whither - and Why?", in The History of Religions, eds M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa, University of Chicago Press, 1959, p 34 Towards a World Theology was published in Britain by Macmillan in 1981, and the reference is to p 101.
2. The Meaning and End of Religion, British edition, SPCK 1979; Questions of Religious Truth, Gollancz 1969; Faith and Belief, University of Princeton Press 1979, and Religious Diversity, Crossroad, New York 1982.
3. In the introduction of A History of Religion East and West, Macmillan 1969, p xvii.
4. In "Christian Concern for Dialogue in India", in Current Dialogue, No 9, Dec 1985, p 4.
5. Published by Abingdon Press, Nashville 1978.

6. Eastern Religions and Western Thought, OUP 1940, p 186, quoted by Amore, p 105.
7. See Amore, Two Masters, One Message, p 119.
"According to the story, a prince was born as heir apparent to an Indian throne occupied by a tyrannical idolater who persecuted Christians. At his birth numerous prophets predicted his future greatness as a successor to the king ... To shelter him and prevent his conversion, his father locked him in the palace. He was eventually allowed to leave temporarily and happened to see a crippled man, a blind man, and a senile man, and so learned of life's darker side." The story goes on to tell of the coming of a monk named Balaam who converted him to Christianity. Eventually he abdicated the throne to which he had acceded and lived as a hermit in the desert, where he underwent many temptations. His relics were taken back after his death to the city, and greatly venerated. Apart from the obvious parallels with the life of the Buddha it has been convincingly shown that Josaphat is a corruption of Bodhisattvu, one of Gautama's alternative names.
8. Towards a World Theology, p 20.
9. See Jan Slomp's essay, "The Islamic Dimension in European Theological Studies" in Theology on Full Alert, Kenneth Cracknell and Christopher Lamb, BCC 1986.
10. For this and much more see, conveniently, Cup of Life: A Short History of Post-Biblical Judaism, Albert Polack and Joan Lawrence, SPCK 1976, p 62.
11. India: A Modern History, in the University of Michigan History of the Modern World, Ann Arbor 1961, pp 95-101.
12. I have written extensively about all this elsewhere: for my fullest treatment of this material see my forthcoming Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths, Epworth Press 1986, esp. chap 1, "About the Old Relationships".
13. For this see, e.g., Wesley Ariarajah, The Bible and People of Other Faiths, WCC 1985.
14. Towards a World Theology, p 171.
15. Current Dialogue, No 8, June 1985, p 2.
16. The Coming World Civilization, George Allen and Unwin 1959, p 170.
17. British edition published by SPCK 1984.
18. The Nature of Doctrine, p 55. The whole of chap 3, "Many Religions and the One True Faith" is of vital importance for the understanding of the nature of the doctrinal aspects of inter-faith dialogue.
19. Current Dialogue, No 8, June 1985, p 2.
20. We have already a little book whose significance is out of all proportion to its size, named Christians and Jews in Britain, URC 1983, for it is the first example known to me of the new genre of books to mark the end of religious isolationism. For it is Jew and Christian talking about "us" and thus is immensely suggestive for the way this particular dialogue may go forward in the future.
21. For an agenda in Christian-Muslim dialogue see for example Christians and Muslims Talking Together, English translation by Kenneth Cracknell,

BCC 1984. But this is sadly merely the co-operative work of Christians, and not of Christians and Muslims "talking about us". Such a handbook has still to be produced. The nearest thing we have so far is a document like the one I quoted from in this section "Muslims and Christians on the road together", which emanated from the Justice and Peace Commission of the Roman Catholic church in Jerusalem, but which is otherwise not easily obtainable.

22. See for example Peter Godfrey's summary symposium of the 25th Triennial Congress of the IARF in Tokyo, 1984, "The Religious Path to Peace - Eastern Initiative and Western Response" in Faith and Freedom, Vol 38, part 1, Spring 1985, No 12.
23. For a fuller treatment of what can only be suggestions here see the chapter "Towards a New Spirituality" in my forthcoming Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faith, Epworth Press, June 1986.
24. Towards a World Theology, p 194.



THE REVD KENNETH CRACKNELL was born in 1935 and grew up in London and Essex. After studies in Oxford, London and Leeds Universities, he served as a Methodist Minister in Nigeria, being chiefly engaged in educational and theological work. He and his family returned to the UK in 1967, having become caught up in the Nigerian Civil War. For nine years he worked in Loughborough as Chaplain to the University and Colleges, and teaching Religious Studies in both Loughborough and Leicester. In 1978 he joined the staff of the British Council of Churches as Secretary to the newly formed Committee for relations with People of Other Faiths. He is a member of the Working group of the Sub Unit for Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, and many other national and international bodies concerned with interfaith dialogue.

A prolific writer and lecturer, he is the author of many articles and booklets, and of two larger works which will appear in 1986: Theology on Full Alert (with Christopher Lamb), B.C.C., and Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faith, Epworth Press.