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Inter Faith Dialogue: A Response

CHRISTOPHER LAMB

Chris Wright has put some sharp hermeneutical questions to the authors of the Report, which space prevents me from taking up in detail, though I think he is on stronger ground in the Old Testament than in the New. There are indeed problems in deciding what 'the Bible as a whole' says about other faiths, if only because Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Sikhism were totally unknown to the biblical authors. I welcome his comments as a reminder of the complexity of the issues.

It was precisely for such treatment that the Report was intended. Though we wanted to see people moving in a certain direction we had no illusions that we were producing a definitive report, as our title *Towards a Theology* . . . shows. The occasional muddle Chris spots is not only (and inevitably) the result of people of widely varying viewpoints trying to agree on a text, it is also due to the complexity of the issue, and its unfamiliarity to most British Christians. Necessary brevity was also a problem. We are not at liberty to write a book.

We over-simplified, of course, in categorizing Exclusive, Inclusive and Pluralist responses, and many thoughtful people have said that they did not recognize themselves anywhere on that map. Others, like Chris, have felt very protective of the Exclusive position, and failed to spot the Report's careful distinction between different versions of the same broad position. (His comment on the first sentence of paragraph 15 shows a complete misreading of its plain sense). What I find interesting is that the Pluralist case has not been adopted by any commentator on the Report. The reason may be that it is Christianly untenable, but whatever the reason the result has been a confusion with the Inclusive case and the smearing of the latter by association with the former. Chris seems to think that we have left ourselves quite unprotected from the Pluralist (or syncretist) arguments. If I had thought so I would never have signed the Report, but so much depends on the presuppositions you bring to its reading.

For instance, I would never have supposed that what Chris describes as 'neutral dialogue' was dialogue at all, nor would I imagine that the passages he quotes from paragraphs 66, 71, and 77 presuppose a 'deficiency in the Christian faith as such'. But it is part of my own experience that the witness of Muslims, in particular, has awakened

me to aspects of the Christian faith I had never properly grasped before, and that therefore I owe that Christian understanding, empirically, to Muslims. I hope Chris will share the same experience in India, for without it this whole debate is a mere exchange of words.

This brings me to the vexed question of Christianity being 'one religion among others', which seems to me sociologically self-evident, for *Christianity* – whatever Visser't Hooft said – is a human construct. It is Christ who is unique, and Christ whom we preach, not Christianity which is our wayward, imperfect witness to him. The distinction may be difficult to maintain but unless it is made we head for disaster. Despite the validity of many of his exegetical comments (I like the 'hermeneutical skid-pan') I do not hear Chris making it. Yet Christianities are many, but Christ is one.

The Revd. Christopher Lamb is Co-ordinator of the BCMS/CMS Other Faiths Theological Projects Birmingham and was a member of the Inter Faith Consultative Group.

***Anvil* Offprints**

Because of the current debate on inter-faith dialogue, we have printed a small number of additional offprints of the Chris Wright article with a short reply from Christopher Lamb. These are available at 80p each including postage and packing (2 for £1.40, 5 for £3.40). Please send orders to The Editor, Trinity College, Stoke Hill, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, BS9 1JW.