

## THE LAMBETH CONFERENCE 1988 – 'THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE'

### SECTION REPORTS - CHRIST AND PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

41 When speaking about the relationship between Christ and people of other faiths, it is important not to lose sight of the basic affirmations about God in Christ from earlier sections of this report. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus has been revealed as one whose very life is a 'being with'. The Son or Word, incarnate in Jesus Christ, is himself an outpouring of divine life rejoicing in itself and seeking to share itself. God is now with the community of Jesus as counsellor, advocate, challenge and guide, continuing Jesus' work of new creation. On this basis we have affirmed that the Christian way of being human is simply not compatible with any and every way of being human: it will conflict at certain points with aspects of particular cultures and, indeed, religions. It is against the background of these affirmations that we must raise the question of God's relationship to people of other faiths in the light of his self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.

42 The very life of God is a 'being with'. This was true in the beginning, is true today, and will be the source of the greatest joy at the end of time. Creation itself is an act of 'being with'; there was never a time nor a place when this fundamental affirmation about God was not true. There is not, a single person whose very being is not a manifestation of this truth that God is, by nature, a 'being with'. The Son or Word, the longing of God to share the divine life with others, was the one through whom all things were made. The Word who became incarnate in Jesus is the unquenchable desire of God to be with us (Emmanuel). The incarnation is itself the definitive expression of this longing on the part of God. How do we express in our own day the relationship between the universal longing on the part of God to be with all men and women, and Jesus who is the very incarnation of this divine reality?

43 The intimate relationship between God and humanity which we know in the person of Jesus is the fundamental paradigm of God's relationship with the world. It is for that reason that the Bible proclaims that God's purpose since before creation has been to sum up all things in Christ, so that Christ might in the end present them to the Father, that God might be all in all (Eph. 1.10, I Cor. 15.24-28).

44 To read in this statement the doctrine of 'universal salvation' is to miss the point. Its ultimate significance is Christological. It is a statement about who this Lord Jesus truly is. It is, however, intended as a corrective to an uncritical reading of certain 'exclusivist' passages in the Bible. Anything which is 'exclusively' true of the incarnate Lord is true of one who is precisely the most 'inclusive' reality, the divine life rejoicing in itself and seeking to share itself. All of creation is caught up in this movement, for all of creation has been called into existence by this movement of divine love.

45 On the other hand, we must not underestimate the reality of our estrangement from God. We recognise that throughout much of history human beings have often said 'No' to God. Many Christians believe that this is not a final word; and in any case the sole final word is God's Word in Christ, whose full meaning will become apparent only in the day when 'the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed'. Nevertheless this human 'No' is a real word which marks the need for repentance on the part of believers and non-believers alike.

46 That does not mean, however, that every human way which has not yet said 'Yes' to the incarnate Lord has said 'No' to the ultimate reality of his divine being. There are those who said 'Yes' to God before his gift of his Son. We believe, with the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, that their positive response to God could receive its full reward only in the reality of the incarnate Lord; but their fidelity was acceptable and accepted. This is not strange if, as we confess, all things have by God's will been appointed their fulfilment in Christ since before the foundation of the world. There are important Christological issues at stake here. We wish to continue to affirm, with the Creeds of the early Church, that the Lord assumed the fullness of our humanity. The 'scandal of particularity' is bound up with the universal significance of the particular person we confess as saviour. It involves us in proclaiming that the God whose Word of love became fully incarnate in Jesus is the God of all creation. There is much in him which we shall see to be his only in the fullness of time.

47 The same is true of the counsel, challenge and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus warned that the Spirit was wont to blow where it willed. The gift of the Spirit to the Church at Pentecost is again remarkable precisely because the Spirit who is given is the universal Spirit of God. Any interpretation of the person of Christ or of the Spirit which diminishes the universality of their presence or of their work ultimately diminishes the significance of the reality of the Church. To deny that the Lord of the Church is the one who is universally the Lord of creation, in presence, in sharing, in communication as well as in power and judgement, runs the risk of turning the God and Father of our Lord into a tribal God.

48 We look and listen, therefore, when we encounter men and women of other faiths, indeed of other kinds of deep commitment as well. We listen in order to overhear what dialogue there may be between God and these people - between the God who calls all into being by a process of sharing and communication, and other people in their religious cultures. This is difficult. We may not know the language and culture in which the faith of the other person is expressed. But without learning this we cannot understand either what they are hearing or what they are saying back. We listen not only, or even primarily, to judge but also in order to learn. We have already spoken of the need to correct our particular expression of Christian faith in the light of other Christian experience. We may also have to correct it in the light of the commitment of non-Christians. We may not yet have even heard the questions which, in their context, they are struggling to answer. There may be new questions for us to explore, questions which have not been our questions before. There may be new aspects of the human condition which we have not experienced. Our understanding of Christ, the only fully human person, can only be enriched by such exploration. But we may entirely miss the challenge unless we can be open to the searchings of others. God is surely there. It is God who calls our brothers and sisters into being and who stands over against them in the reality of their partial, human lives. How much of the fullness of Christ there is to learn in the experience of all those he loves! But this will be the case only if we care, truly care, to learn their words, their means of expression; and only if we dare to believe that we will see there something of the presence of the God who called them, no less than us, into being who and what they are.

49 Because of this, it does not surprise us to find echoes of the Gospel in the deep convictions of our non-Christian brothers and sisters. It would be surprising if we did not. Neither is it strange that the Church has constantly deepened its faith in its struggle with questions, concepts and experiences which ultimately derived from philosophies, religions and patterns of thought to which the Gospel of Christ was as yet unknown. We are the richer for the struggle of the Church to understand the implications of the Gospel in the light of the religious and philosophical experience of the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds of the first few centuries of our era. We shall be poorer when Christians stop exploring the full meaning of Christ in the light of the experiences and languages of the many cultures and religions in which human life is lived to the full.

50 There seems to be no reason, therefore, to break the long tradition of the majority of Christian apologists in affirming what we can in the deep commitments of our non-Christian neighbours. Christian faith throughout the ages has been able, in its encounters with other traditions, to deepen its understanding of and its faith in the nature and work of God as presented to us in the Scriptures. The general approach of early Christian apologists was that all truth is the truth of Christ. Not only did they affirm what was true, wherever they may have found it, they actually appropriated it and claimed that ultimately it was 'Christian truth'. It is to be hoped that Anglicans will continue to be open to the search for an ever-deeper understanding of the things of God, calling upon the insights of the many traditions, cultures and languages in which the Churches of the Communion are to be found.

51 People sometimes fear that to affirm the presence of any encounter with God outside of Christianity is to imply that any truth to be found there may, in its own right, be 'saving truth'. We wish to affirm that the only 'truth' which has saving power is God. The incarnate Lord said, 'I am the truth'. It is this truth alone which saves. Since the only truth to which we are prepared to ascribe saving power is God, there is a sense in which no human knowledge has saving power at all. This means that such questions about the ultimate salvation of non-Christians are perhaps not possible of a definitive answer on the part of the Church. A number of contemporary theologians, among them leading Anglican Evangelicals like John Stott and Sir Norman Anderson, have professed a certain 'agnosticism' on this particular question. It is undoubtedly healthier to be 'agnostic' here than to claim for ourselves a judgement which is finally God's alone. Sir Norman, indeed, seems to move beyond agnosticism to a more positive evaluation of those followers of other religions who, in repentance and brokenness, are seeking God.

52 Men and women today live by a number of rival views of reality which claim their allegiance and to which they struggle to be faithful with varying degrees of commitment. Some of these systems of life and thought have traditionally been called 'religious', such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Hinduism, African traditional religions, among others. Some have not traditionally been called religious, such as secular humanism, existentialism, Marxism among others. All of them, however, have shown themselves capable of claiming the allegiance of large numbers of men and women. Christians can and should explore together with all such committed individuals and groups the fullness of humanity which, for them, is summed up in Christ.

53 Such common exploration of the ultimate significance of the human condition has recently been called 'dialogue'. The word is not new, but its use in a phrase like 'inter-faith dialogue' has been the cause of some confusion and controversy. To some, dialogue, because it implies the need to listen seriously and openly to the other person, seems to suggest that proclamation of the Good News of what God has done in Christ is not necessary. There seems to be some fear that the use of the word 'dialogue' is intended to preclude such a proclamation. In the light of what has been said here, dialogue is a common and mutual exploration of the ultimate significance of the human condition. Understood in this way, it can not preclude the proclamation of the Gospel. On the contrary, such open and honest discussion necessitates proclamation, for we come to 'dialogue' already enriched by a particular understanding of the significance of our common humanity, an understanding which is both grounded in and defined by the reality of Christ.

54 It is true that there will be a stage in this process when we do not yet understand our partners' language, culture and commitment well enough to make our own viewpoint accessible and intelligible to them. We should not look for short cuts here that would relieve us of the hard work of listening. Human history is full of tragic episodes due largely to the failure of groups or individuals to communicate with each other. It can be disheartening to struggle with learning a foreign language. In the case of dialogue we may be struggling with two foreign languages at once. Our partner may literally speak a different language from our own as well as having a religious language which requires patient learning in order for us to understand. At this stage we may be tempted to take a short cut and start speaking before we have mastered either language, or having mastered only one. If the dialogue is to progress, someone must take the trouble to be sure that there is a common area of discourse.

55 This common exploration of the ultimate significance of the human condition which we have called 'dialogue' is not only the realm of specialists. To be sure, they are needed. The Church must especially prepare some who are given the time and training necessary to go deeply into the languages and scholarly disciplines involved in the rich and varied traditions which hold the allegiance of our brothers and sisters. But it must never be restricted to specialists. There is a real sense in which dialogue may begin whenever people meet each other. We know that this is true even when Christians meet each other. It is also true when we meet people of other faiths and ideologies. If we are seriously open to their experience, we share together much of what it means to be human and, perhaps, share new insights with each other.

56 For such an encounter to take place, however, there must be mutual understanding and mutual trust. This may take a long time to establish. It does not mean that there can be no dialogue until there is perfect understanding and trust. To whatever extent there is mutual trust and understanding, we can honestly explore together the common implications of our humanity and of our individual hopes, fears and commitments. Such a sharing can become the basis for a deeper trust and understanding. Even if only one partner is truly interested in understanding the experience of the other partner, there can be the beginning of dialogue.

57 Such mutual exploration of the implications of our life together makes it easier to share in service to the community. When we realise how much we have in common with other human beings, when we allow ourselves to feel their pains and their joys, to fear their fears and sing their songs, to see them as they see themselves (and perhaps ourselves as they see us), then we find much on which we can co-operate. This is also a way of dialogue. To work together on a common problem, to pursue a common goal, means learning to communicate. If co-operation requires some ability to communicate as a prerequisite, it also develops and trains that ability to an even higher level.

58 The experience of meeting, understanding and co-operating with others becomes an effective medium of authentic witness to the Gospel of Christ. When we reach the point where we can actually work together with men and women of other commitments, then we are in a position actually to demonstrate how our understanding of the ultimate significance of the human condition in Christ affects the life we live. (Paras. 55-58; cf. Resolution 20.)

59 In the course of this we shall have had the privilege of being near to the presence of God in one whom he loved into existence. In time, we will learn to hear something of the hidden conversation between God and another human being. We shall be richer for that; our understanding of God will be richer for that. Perhaps, our partner will also be richer for that.

60 For some Churches of the Anglican Communion, there is much opportunity for dialogue with secular humanism, which is historically derived from the Renaissance in Western Europe. As Western culture has become secularised, humanism has cut itself off from its Christian roots, and is now a rival religion in that it commands ultimate allegiance in the place of a faith relationship with Jesus Christ. But it also holds values, attitudes and cultural goals in common with those of Christians. This common ground opens up tremendous possibilities for dialogue in terms of the understanding of dialogue set forth in this report.

61 In addition to secular humanism, there is the need to be in dialogue with other forms of secular ideology which have grown up beside it. In particular, there is an urgent need to speak with men and women who are committed to various forms of Communist ideology. In many parts of the Christian world such a dialogue is already a reality. Our deeply committed Christian brothers and sisters tell us that their faith has been deepened even as it has been challenged by the deep commitment of Communists in their struggle for human liberation and for a just society. Their experience is calling many of us in the Church to a renewed struggle for human rights, justice and peace. It is a good example of a dialogue which has a profound influence on our Christian awareness, even among Christians who are not themselves directly involved in it.

62 Many Christians have felt that their faith has been deepened and their understanding of the human condition broadened through dialogue with Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, we have not had the opportunity to review much of this work at this Conference. We urge those of our Communion who live in contact with men and women committed to those faiths to explore with them their experiences and to reflect together on the problems and also on the rich tradition of Asian countries and civilisations. We hope that they will share with all of us what new insights are gained into the reality of the fullness of humanity which is ours in Christ.

63 However, it is the 'Abrahamic' faiths, as they are often called, of Judaism and Islam with which dialogue is both most immediate and most difficult. Where Judaism is concerned, Christians in the West must not be allowed to forget how centuries of antisemitism led up to the unparalleled atrocity of the Holocaust in our century. It is only by showing some authentic repentance and identification with the victims of antisemitism that western Christians can earn the right to challenge the violent reactions of an insecure and threatened Jewish state, and to do so not only on behalf of Christian and Muslim Arabs, especially in Palestine, but in the name of the Jewish heritage itself. We note with interest and sympathy the emergence of a 'Jewish Theology of Liberation' which we may expect to take up the cause of the oppressed from within the international Jewish community.

64 Islam has long been seen - especially in the Middle Ages - as a negative counter-force to Christianity. The rich legacy of Islamic art and literature, theology and mysticism, to which oriental Christians have made a significant contribution, and the profound Muslim concern for true social equity under God are things for which we give thanks. We remember too that there have been Muslim states whose religious tolerance puts Christians of the same era to shame (as in early mediaeval Spain). Today, as sometimes in the past, many of our Christian brothers and sisters face an aggressive and exclusivist Islam, threatening the very life of the Church in many lands. They have our prayers and support. If there is to be dialogue with Islam, it must be on the basis that modern 'Islamic fundamentalism' is no more the whole story of Islam than the Crusades are of Christianity. We can be enriched by the Muslim way of being human in its historical fullness. A truly informed Christian dialogue may be one factor which helps Muslims themselves to recognise that fullness and resist the pressures towards a violent and narrow response to Christians and others.

65 From a commitment to inter-faith dialogue, there arise a number of practical issues concerning which brief comments can be made here.

66 Can persons of differing religious traditions worship together? Such persons share a common belief in 'that which is other' and through common concern for the unity and well-being of the human race have sometimes felt it right to pray together for justice and peace. The Assisi event in October 1986 was one such occasion. The form of this event itself, however, suggests that we cannot share anything like a common liturgy, the specific act of a specific community, but can only pray alongside each other.

67 Is there a Christian obligation of hospitality to persons of other faiths? In many Provinces, Christians have shown a desire to welcome and help immigrant and refugee communities. Part of this help has sometimes consisted in sharing and selling church property so that persons of other faiths may have places to meet and worship. At times such hospitality has embarrassed Christians in countries where the Church is a beleaguered minority, and where such hospitality has been used as an opportunity for religious and political propaganda. Despite this, we wish to reaffirm our commitment to proper hospitality for those who are strangers and disadvantaged. In this we believe we are following the example of our father Abraham.

68 We believe that freedom for religious communities to gather for their characteristic activities and liturgies is a fundamental human right, and that it should be granted and protected by all governments. We regret that in some Islamic states such freedoms are not granted or protected. (See Resolution 23.)

69 The problem as to whether shared worship is legitimate brings us back to the kind of thing Christianity actually is. It is an active response to God's atoning and reconciling work in Christ, which takes shape primarily as a pattern of things done, and not primarily as a system of ideas. So we turn next to the question of how the 'pattern of things done' makes a coherent whole and what the Anglican Communion in particular understands to be the authoritative points of reference for its life and teaching.