Baha'i Christian Dialogue Interest Group

This paper was published in the Association for Bahá'í Studies Australia (1997) *From Poverty to Prosperity: Proceedings from the 1996 National Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies Australia.*

Prerequisites for Successful Bahá'í-Christian Dialogue

Colin Dibdin

Introduction

Inter-religious dialogue can take several forms. At its most formal, the parties to the dialogue will be well versed in their own religion, and have at least a basic knowledge of the other. The aims of the dialogue will be made explicit, and the potential obstacles understood. Ground rules may be set in advance with the intention of minimising those obstacles. At the other end of the scale individuals of differing Faiths may find themselves discussing or debating, in ordinary social situations, their respective beliefs. Recently the field of informal religious dialogue, including exchanges between Bahá'ís and Christians, has received a great boost from the availability of electronic discussion groups operating via the Internet.

The aims of inter-religious dialogue, especially the informal kind, seem to be diverse, ranging from the desire to further the interests of one's own religion to a genuine search for truth and beauty. The aims may not always be articulated, particularly if one party approaches the dialogue with a hostile or prejudiced attitude. It would be convenient to adopt a definition of dialogue which excluded such attitudes, because true dialogue is almost impossible under such conditions. However, because it is a human activity, and it involves the discussion of matters close to the self-concept of each participant, it will be useful to assume a broad definition of dialogue which requires us to recognise and deal with human limitations.1 The outcome of Bahá'í Christian dialogue will depend largely on the attitude of the participants.

It is not difficult to find examples of fruitless or destructive outcomes when great religions have met or 'collided'. Even personal experience verifies that religion, like politics, is not normally a 'safe' topic of conversation. Yet the shrinking of the planet into something resembling a neighbourhood means that religious world-views can no longer exist in isolation. We each need to consciously choose an appropriate attitude to our new neighbours - the 'aliens' of the past. We are free to continue to searching for, and condemning, evil in our neighbours. Or we may decide to learn, understand and create friendship and love. It is easier to find scriptural support, in any religion, for an intention to love one's neighbours.

Bahá'í-Christian dialogue is a practice in its infancy. Although there have been many happy and fruitful points of contact between these two religions in the short history of their co-existence in the global neighbourhood, they are as yet relatively isolated from each other. A Bahá'í and a Christian may work in the same room but subjectively live in different religious 'worlds'. However the Bahá'í Faith is a growing religion making some extraordinary claims which Christians will find difficult to ignore. Whether the meeting of these 'worlds' results in alienation or in friendship, will partly be determined by how well each understands a few principles for successful dialogue.

Resources for Bahá'í-Christian Dialogue

Until recently much of the Bahá'í literature about Christianity has not been written with dialogue in mind. Generally these books 'proclaim' the Bahá'í Faith and explain Biblical teachings from a Bahá'í viewpoint. Although the exalted stations of Christ and the Bible are reaffirmed, insufficient regard has been given to the perspective of the Christian reader.

There are now a number of excellent books available from Bahá'í writers which directly address the difficulties of dialogue.

Michael Sours, in his series subtitled Preparing for a Bahá'í Christian Dialogue volumes 1 and 2, writing for a Bahá'í readership, emphasises 3 principles:

* Emphasizing areas of agreement; * Listening to other points of view and learning about the scriptures, beliefs, and terminology of those with whom we converse; * Adapting our presentation to the particular terminology and temperament of the people to whom we speak.2

Sours draws out, in a readable style, the relevant Bahá'í principles and in volume 2 provides a comprehensive introduction for Bahá'ís to some fundamental Christian beliefs.

Gary Matthews wrote He Cometh with Clouds for Christian audiences.3 Matthews possesses the rare and much needed ability to empathize with the 'average' Christian who may see the Bahá'í Faith as alien, irrelevant or threatening.

Although both authors assume a view of Biblical authority which some Christian and Bahá'í scholars have difficulty with, their understanding of the issues of Biblical Criticism is sufficiently sophisticated, and the principles they recommend are sufficiently universal in application, to ensure that their contribution is useful for dialogue at all degrees of scholarship.4

Outside of Bahá'í literature there are pathfinding works by many thinkers and practitioners of dialogue. One article that this writer recommends is by Leonard Swidler, and is dramatically titled Death or Dialogue: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue.5 Swidler discusses the need for religious dialogue, and places it in the context of the new "relational" view of truth that

has transformed Western ways of thinking. He follows this with ten comprehensive ground rules for authentic inter-religious dialogue, "...learned from hard experience...".6 The first of these rules is that "We come to dialogue so that we ourselves can learn, change, and grow, not so that we can force change on the other, our partner, as the old polemic debates hoped to do."7

Some General Principles Conducive To Successful Inter-Religious Dialogue

1. Recognising intellectual obstacles

Christians encountering the Bahá'í Teachings are generally unwilling to seriously consider the proposition that Bahá'u'lláh's 'station' is that same as that of Jesus. Christ is, according to most Christian creeds, unique and sufficient. This exclusivist doctrine is given scriptural support by the verses "...no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." [Jn 14:6] and "...there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." [Acts 4:12]. If a Bahá'í goes on to explain that Bahá'u'lláh was the return of Christ, a typical response is that the signs of Jesus' second coming, such as those described by Jesus in Matt 24, have not been fulfilled. Furthermore, a Christian might point out, the Bahá'í teachings contradict Christian belief, and Christians have been warned against 'false prophets' [Matt 24:24] and 'the antichrist' [1 John 4:3].

Is there sufficient ground for dialogue when one participant has already rejected the need or value of the other's Faith? In extreme cases probably not. Indeed, as Udo Schaefer points out, such 'dogmatic intolerance' can lead to 'practical intolerance', which is hardly conducive to a collaborative search for truth.

...all these [historical examples of inter-religious cruelty] are consequences of claims to exclusivity and finality...8

Consider the approach to 'dialogue' employed by Francis Beckwith. In a paper considering some key issues of Bahá'í-Christian Dialogue Beckwith concludes: "On this basis Christianity stands vindicated as true and Bahá'ísm stands condemned as a rejection of God's truth as revealed in Jesus Christ."9 In a booklet titled Bahá'í: A Christian response to Bahá'ísm he likens non-Christian religions and philosophies to poisons, in the guise of remedies, sent by enemies.10 This is certainly an extreme example of intolerance. Unfortunately however, Beckwith's 'contribution' is one of only two book-length introductions to the Bahá'í Faith written from a Christian perspective, and has for the last decade been the sole introduction to the Faith in many Christian bookshops.11

Fortunately most Christian churches are becoming more open to dialogue and respect for other religions. John Hick describes a trend moving away from a Ptolemaic (i.e. one's-own-religion centred) to a Copernican (i.e. a God-centred) view of the religious life of mankind.12 The Catholic Church at the 2nd Vatican Council (1963-1965) moved from an exclusive to an inclusive position in its attitude to other religions. Thus it became possible for Catholics to see followers of other Faiths as part of the Divine plan of salvation. "Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is

looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel"13 Hick notes, however, that this inclusivism is still a big step short of pluralism, which would recognise that "the great world faiths, including Christianity, are different and independently authentic spheres of revelation and salvation."14

Many Protestant churches are also finding that it is possible to be true to their theological traditions, yet be able to engage in dialogue with other religions. Schaefer quotes the World Council of Churches which stressed that dialogue cannot take place in a spirit of triumphalism and condescension. The Council calls upon Christians to endeavour to speak the truth in the spirit of love.15

The Bahá'í Faith is pluralist in its attitude to other religions. The great Faiths are seen as valid and independent responses to Divine revelation. This gives a Bahá'í a distinct advantage in dialogue with someone from a Christian fundamentalist background, because the Bahá'í is, ideally, already open to the possibility of discovering of new truths in the beliefs of his or her partner in dialogue. It must be noted, however, that individual Bahá'ís are as much beginners in the art of dialogue as anyone, and are themselves often responsible for adding unnecessary intellectual obstacles to the process. Sen McGlinn, in a review of some Bahá'í apocalyptic literature, refers to "...a certain tactlessness in appropriating the Bible".16 McGlinn examines the approach used by one Bahá'í writer and finds that:

Instead of asking Christians to extend and enlarge the truths they hold, this approach asks them to begin by conceding that they never held any truths, that Revelation was not a Christian book at all, but rather a Bahá'í book in disguise.17

Bahá'ís have also been known to assert that Christianity has been superseded, to deny the physical resurrection of Jesus, and to claim that St. Paul misdirected Christianity. Even before any analysis of the validity of these assertions, it is clear that they are not conducive to bridge-building and gaining a sympathetic response. Indeed they invite the partner in dialogue to become defensive.

2. Recognising psychological obstacles

Psychological difficulties associated with fear and the discomfort of encountering something alien will not usually be an explicit part of the rational exchange of views. But they are usually not far below the surface.

True dialogue involves, at some point, seriously considering the truth-value of the 'alien' world view. But one instinctively knows what the consequences will be if the truth is actually found there, especially if it is perceived to undermine ones existing beliefs. Changing one's religion is like choosing to become a Martian (to expand the 'alien' analogy). It seems to imply a betrayal of one's deepest loves and beliefs, and of community and traditions. It appears to require an admission to oneself, ones family and friends that one has been on the wrong track - that one's religious past has

been a waste. Furthermore there is the risk of making a mistake. Dialogue, we can see, is not merely a rational activity. It may lead to a confrontation with one's own fears, and it should not be surprising that those fears often prevail.

'Conversion' is not the only source of fear. Another is that one may be 'playing with fire' by seeking to learn from something which one believes to be misguided or evil. Yet another is the natural fear of being defeated in argument, whatever the subject. Formal religious dialogue establishes 'unifying factors' and 'virtues' to minimise such fears. These virtues, as outlined by Miguel Gil, include respect for alien beliefs, bracketing (the holding in suspense of one's beliefs so as to avoid interference in the perception of alien views) and empathy (the capacity to revive or recreate in oneself the experience of the other.)18

Bahá'u'lláh counseled His followers to:

Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.19

And to:

Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him. A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding.20

'Abdu'l-Bahá provided a simple ground rule for dialogue which, when applied, could even eliminate most of the emotional and psychological obstacles that each participant in dialogue might face. He wrote:

...we should look upon others with respect, and when attempting to explain and demonstrate, we should speak as if we are investigating the truth, saying: "Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine where and in what form the truth can be found.21

In this passage we can see that true dialogue is not a battle between two teachers, each trying to instruct the other, but a mutually supportive classroom where God is the teacher. Application of this ground rule removes the fear of conversion and its consequences from the dialogue. Instead each participant is enabled to see his or her past as, say, that part of the mountain which has already been climbed. Neither claims to have reached the summit and to have seen the whole panorama. Each can help the other in the ascent.

3. Recognising spiritual obstacles

Spirituality means 'nearness' to God. To a Bahá'í it is the purpose of existence. In Christian terms it is salvation. Beyond the rational and psychological levels of dialogue we should hope for a communication of spiritual truths.

St Paul wrote:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. [1 Cor 2:14]

One hopes that neither participant will be "without the Spirit", but if one of them is, then the other (whether Bahá'í or Christian) has an added responsibility to be patient and considerate.

Bahá'u'lláh, wrote of the spiritual qualities of "the detached wayfarer and sincere seeker"22 as follows:

Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being.23

So we find that spiritual growth and discernment is not only fundamental to the lives of both Christians and Bahá'ís, it is also a prerequisite to true understanding, which is the aim of dialogue.

Conclusion

Bahá'í-Christian dialogue is subject to the same difficulties as all inter-religious dialogue. Without preparation, including a basic understanding of the intellectual, psychological and spiritual obstacles that all human beings are subject to, it is unlikely to proceed harmoniously towards a better mutual understanding of the participants' respective Faiths.

All religions, cultures and nations are coming to terms with the challenges of co-existence. To see other humans as aliens, and to treat them accordingly, is no longer a functional survival mechanism. A shrinking neighbourhood requires the development of tolerance and cooperation, and the recognition that we are one human family, under the care of God, requires humility and love.

Ground-rules and personal qualities which facilitate successful inter-religious dialogue are being discovered and applied. Christians and Bahá'ís can and should learn from the experiences of those who have already entered this exciting field. The most helpful guidance, however, is to follow the principle taught in the sacred Books of both Faiths, that we are all seekers, and God is the One sought.

Endnotes

1 Philip St. Romain advised: "Remember that religious beliefs lie very close to one's self-concept; this is why religious discussion sometimes becomes very emotional. Criticizing a person's religious beliefs cuts to the heart." in his pamphlet How to Get Along With a Fundamentalist, Liguori Publications, Missouri, 1988.

2 Sours, M., Preparing for a Bahá'í/Christian Dialogue: volume 1, Understanding Biblical Evidence (1990), OneWorld, Oxford, 1990p.4.

3 Matthews, G.L., He Cometh with Clouds,

4 For a brief an overview of the range of perspectives on the Bible see, Dibdin, C., "A Bahá'í View of the Bible", in 75 Years of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia (Conference Proceedings), Association for Bahá'í Studies Australia, Rosebery, 1996, pp.115-126.

5 Swidler, L., DEATH OR DIALOGUE: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue, This paper was accessed via the Internet. The URL is no longer available. The author is Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, Philadelphia PA 19122.

6 ibid

7 ibid

8 Schaefer, U., Beyond the Clash of Religions: The Emergence of a New Paradigm, Zero Palm Press, Prague, 1995. pp 72-73

9 Beckwith "Bahá'í-Christian Dialogue: Some Key Issues Considered", Christian Research Journal, Christian Research Institute, San Juan Capistrano, CA, Winter/Spring 1989.

10 Beckwith, Bahá'í: A Christian response to Bahá'ísm, the religion which aims toward one world government and one common faith, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, 1985, p.40.

11 Another illuminating example from a mainstream Christian church is found in The Leadership papers: A short course in Christian doctrine for groups or individuals, St Matthias Press, Kingsford, Australia, 1988. Chapter 5, titled 'The Importance of Being Obstreperous' makes a virtue of exclusivity and proudly asserts that "Evangelicalism is an exclusive theological position. It claims to be right and (by definition) declares all others wrong"

12 Hick, J., God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion, OneWorld, Oxford, 1993, pp120-132.

13 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, , promulgated 1964, quoted in Hick, op.cit., pp125-126.

14 Hick, op.cit, p.vii.

15 World Council of Churches, Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, Geneva, 1979, quoted in Schaefer, op.cit, p.89.

16 McGlinn, S., From an untitled paper accessed via the Internet. The URL is no longer available. Sen McGlinn may be contacted via myself, C. Dibdin, c/- ABS - A, PO Box 319, Rosebery NSW 2018. Australia.

17 Ibid.

18 Gil, M., "Religious Dialogue, a Pathway to Peace", in Davidson, J., & Tidman, M., Cooperative Peace Strategies, Bahá'í Publications Australia and the Association for Bahá'í Studies - Australia, Mona Vale, 1992, pp50-52.

19 Baha'u'llah, in Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette Ill., 2nd ed. 1956, p.289.

20 ibid.

21 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Selection from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1982, p.30.

22 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Iqán: The Book of Certitude, Bahá'í Publishing Committee, New York, 1931, p.195.

23 ibid, p.195-196.