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## Freedom and Witness in a Multi-Religious Society

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# FREEDOM AND WITNESS IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

## A BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE

### PART II

The first part of this article attempted to indicate how a Baptist perspective on the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue could draw upon the powerful and creative themes of Scriptural centrality and religious liberty in order to contribute fresh impulses to contemporary Christian thought and action. In this second part of the article, we turn to the remaining three 'notes' of the Baptist vision.

#### ECCLESIOLOGY IN A NEW SOCIAL CONTEXT

The pattern of Christian existence in community which is advocated by the Baptist vision is that of a fellowship of believers who have freely covenanted together. This concept originated in a context in which Church and State were two aspects of one society - whether in the form of a Christendom governed by Pope and Emperor, or in the post-Protestant Reformation ideal of a national church based on the idea of 'cujus regio, ejus religio'. In this context, the Baptist vision of the Church as a community of free and committed people challenged any social or geographical conception of the Church as co-terminal with a nation or state. As W. J. McGlothlin pointed out, in a 'primitive tribal or national conception of religion... the defection of the individual in religious matters was equivalent to spiritual suicide for himself and the worst treason to society.'<sup>1</sup> The Baptist rejection of the 'corpus Christianum' of Constantinian ecclesiology was clearly expressed in the practice of baptism upon confession of faith. As Wheeler Robinson has argued, in contesting infant baptism, 'Baptists are testifying against much more than an isolated and relatively unimportant custom; they are testifying against a whole complex of ideas of which it was a symbol', and that the Baptist argument for baptism on confession of faith 'becomes a mere archaeological idiosyncrasy if it be not the expression of the fundamental constitution of the Church.'<sup>2</sup>

These ecclesiological convictions led Baptists into the forefront of nineteenth century opposition to the established status of the Church of England. After J. H. Hinton's motion at the 1838 Baptist Union public meeting, the Baptist Union officially adopted Voluntaryism and Establishment was identified as being 'a violation of the law of Christ.'<sup>3</sup> Another General Secretary of the Union, Steane, was a founder member of both the Church Rate Abolition Society and the Religious Freedom Society. Hinton and Joseph Angus were involved in the foundation of the British Anti-State Church Association, to which the Baptist Union was the only representative body to send official delegates.<sup>4</sup> This position was not simply rooted in a negative rejection of the Anglican Establishment based on the natural desire of Baptist fellow-citizens no longer to be at a social disadvantage in relation to Anglican citizens, but it was rooted in a prior understanding of Christian existence as something which is free, chosen, and responsible.

In recent years, Jurgen Moltmann has recognised the significance of baptism upon confession of faith and of congregational ecclesiology for the life of the Church in the present global context. In *The Open Church* Moltmann argues that:

Whatever forms the free churches in England, America, and then, since the beginning of the nineteenth century also in Germany have developed (there are, of course, dangers, mistakes, and wrong developments here too), the future of the church of Christ lies in

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principle on this wing of the Reformation because the widely unknown and uninhabited land of the congregation is found here.<sup>5</sup>

In sociological terms the congregational model of the Church is often referred to as the sectarian pattern. Bryan Wilson defines this pattern as being characterised by the independence of the Church from the State coupled with the freedom of the individual from coercion in matters of conscience and religion.<sup>6</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, in his *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*<sup>7</sup> demonstrated how the Church-type and Sect-type of ecclesiology have existed in tension throughout Christian history. The Church-type has been dominant in Christian history and has tended to result in social privileges for some religious communities coupled with restrictions for others. The Sect-type, on the other hand, does not seek to impose its discipline on others outside its community of faith. However, as J. G. C. Norman points out in an article on 'The Relevance and Vitality of the Sect-Idea', sectarian communities do have their own kind of tendency towards absolutism, which manifests itself not in social relations but in intra- ecclesiastical matters: 'They demand external toleration, but within their own borders they practice a spiritual discipline of doctrine and morals.'<sup>8</sup> And as Wheeler Robinson has stressed, 'Liberty within is a more difficult attainment than liberty without. Prejudices which we nurture within our own hearts are more subtle and dangerous than those whose folly and injustice we can see plainly when they belong to others.'<sup>9</sup> But if the Baptist vision's conception of 'soul freedom' in conversation with the Scriptures and the Jesus to whom they bear witness is developed along the lines already suggested, then it is possible for the Sect- type of ecclesiology to promote both external and internal religious freedom.

In an article which utilises sociological analysis to develop Wilfred Cantwell Smith's protest against abstractions in religion, Trevor Ling argues that when examining the structure of religious life it is important not only to include the interplay between personal faith and cumulative tradition, as in Smith's analysis, but also to take account of the structuring of personal faith and cumulative tradition into a variety of institutional forms:

This pair of concepts, cumulative tradition and personal faith are offered, if I have understood correctly, as likely to produce a more realistic insight into the structure of what is commonly called Christianity. It is at this point that I am inclined to think that his scheme needs supplementing; one needs to know more about the structure of the vast intervening area of institutions and organisations that extends between the personal faith of the individual and the cumulative tradition.<sup>10</sup>

In comparing the sectarian with the national/state Church pattern, Ling points out that, in the Church pattern, belief may vary, but only within a commonly accepted institutional framework; whereas in sectarian ecclesiology there is a voluntary, like-minded mutual association on the basis of a common belief and practice. The Church-type pattern tends to approximate its structures to those of the prevailing social system and thus does not so clearly define the boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', yet in terms of its role in society it has tendencies towards social dominance. The sectarian pattern is not as 'open' to 'outsiders' as the Church pattern because its whole basis is to be found in a commonality of belief which can result in the drawing of a tight circle around the faithful, but it does also leave others free to live within their own 'circles' of faith.

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Through Ling's analysis we can see the inherent tension of Baptist ecclesiology which, in providing a clear religious identity in a society of many religious beliefs and none, at the same time reinforces some of the perspectives which drive wedges among Christians and between Christians and people of other religions. However, in the social sphere, its institutional structures support the social conditions which enable a free and genuine inter-religious dialogue to take place on the basis of social equality. Although there are arguments which can be made for the positive benefits which can accrue to the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue from a national/state pattern,<sup>11</sup> it would seem that a sectarian pattern of ecclesiology is a more appropriate shape for corporate Christian life in a multi-religious society. As Norman notes:

... the presence of the sects encourages tolerance. When there are such wide differences in understanding and interpreting the truth, are we not made aware that at best our viewpoint is but partial? How then can we be other than tolerant of others' points of view?<sup>12</sup>

This is the case because, by breaking up the single social/religious framework contained in the Christendom idea:

... sectarianism challenges Christians and non-Christians alike to think through their beliefs and attitudes. It may be more comfortable to drift along lazily in a form of belief accepted by one's community, but creativity is stifled that way. The presence of dissent provokes thought.<sup>13</sup>

Baptist ecclesiology thus has a particularly important contribution to make to the contemporary ecumenical theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue through its promotion of congregationalism. Because neither personal faith nor cumulative tradition exist as timeless abstractions, the institutions and organisational structures of a religion are highly significant parts of the content of that religion, forming its public face at the meeting-point between cumulative tradition and personal faith. The face which the Church-type of ecclesiology presents to society is typified in today's Britain by the structures of the Church of England. Despite enormous changes in its theology and practice this face still remains one of institutional privilege in its terms of its access to Government, presence in Parliament, and positions in social institutions such as hospitals, prisons and schools. When this situation is examined in the light of the significant social correlation which currently exists between religious and racial minorities, it can be seen that the maintenance of religious privilege for a section of the Christian Church contains seeds of possible future social conflict. Although the Church of England does include a significant number of black members and has learned to live circumspectly within both the limitations and the privileges of its position, a very real danger remains in the light of the growing ideological strength of arguments in favour of cultural homogeneity. Roger Scruton's *The Meaning of Conservatism*, for example, invokes religion not so much as a belief or a way of life but more as the glue of cohesion for a social order.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, it is perhaps an appropriate time to put the disestablishment of the Church of England back onto the religious and political agenda - not as an item of business left over from a past of intra-Christian controversy, but as an issue of real significance for a multi-faith society. The Establishment of a section of the Christian Church reinforces all the wrong signals when the contemporary religious

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plurality of Britain needs to be more fully reflected in its social and institutional structures. Where the lines of religious difference overlap to a considerable extent with racial and ethnic groupings, and when the political discourse of racism is ever-more frequently expressed in cultural terms, any reinforcement of ideas which posit an identity between 'Englishness' and 'Christianness' becomes extremely dangerous. The continued Establishment of the Church of England reinforces those tendencies which identify 'our' way of life with Christianity and which define English Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews as essentially 'alien'. This underlines how important it is to examine questions of inter-religious relations within their social, political and ideological context, especially when people such as Scruton can say that:

There will be religious revivals, and it is politically important to guide the direction that they take... the restoration of the Church could well become a serious political cause.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast with the Church-type pattern, the congregational ecclesiology of the Baptist vision does not seek social privilege and is of a kind which relativises the institutional position of the Church. As Jackson warns:

Once ecclesiasticism establishes itself... whether in the form of the Roman Church or the so-called Free Church of Protestantism, it exercises its authority to maintain its own status and is not concerned with a theological understanding of the purpose of God.<sup>16</sup>

The result of ignoring such a warning is that a theological understanding of our faith, our world, and other faiths becomes subordinated to the institutional needs of the Church. The contemporary theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue in Britain ought not to begin with the institutional position and needs of the Church, but by facing the question of whether or not the 1977 British Council of Churches Assembly declaration that, - '... the presence in Britain of significant numbers of people of faiths other than Christian is within God's gracious purposes'<sup>17</sup> - represents a true discernment of our current situation. If it does, then it can be seen how a congregationalist ecclesiology could undergird this perception since it challenges any ecclesiological tendencies towards absolutism in social practice. But in order to promote an adequate congregationalism, the Baptist vision must also take full account of the importance of the social dimensions of Christian discipleship so that it projects a congregationalism which lives in full solidarity with the world, rather than a congregationalism of withdrawal from social responsibility. As Keith Clements points out with regard to Moltmann's proposal to take congregationalism more seriously:

- all this is as much a challenge to the general pattern of our conventional 'gathered church' as it is to the more obviously institutionalised 'established' or 'catholic' churches.<sup>18</sup>

## CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN THE MARKET-PLACE OF FAITHS

The Baptist vision's rejection of the 'corpus Christianum' logically implied the rediscovery of Christian mission and evangelical responsibility, although until the rise of Fullerism and the Evangelical Revival, this part of the Baptist vision had in

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large measure been smothered by either the hyper-Calvinist or universalist tendencies of the 17th century. Since 1904, however, the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle has clearly included the clause that: '... it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.'<sup>19</sup> Wheeler Robinson said with regard to this Baptist commitment to Christian witness that:

... the consciousness of this responsibility is strongly developed among Baptists, and they are justly proud of their contribution to the evangelisation of the world. It is not an accident of history that they have led the way in foreign missionary work; it is a logical and obvious deduction from their emphasis on individual faith. The measure of personal conviction is seen in its vigour of expansion, its zeal of propagation.<sup>20</sup>

However he also warned that whilst the missionary spirit is always a test of Christian conviction, '... we cannot reverse this, and say that where there is propagating zeal there is the Christian conviction of a world-gospel, because many other motives may lead men to become zealous proselytisers.'<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, J. G. Oncken's slogan, 'every Baptist a missionary', does encapsulate a central part of the Baptist vision. And this conviction is expressed at the heart of Baptist worship every time a believer is baptised. As Denton Lotz points out, 'Believer's baptism remains a constant sign to Baptists of the unique responsibility to evangelise and do missionary work.'<sup>22</sup> It would be historically true to characterise the Baptist pattern of Christian witness as predominantly conversionist, as can clearly be seen from the 1805 Form of Agreement, on the basis of which Carey, Marshman and Ward agreed to carry out their mission work. This says of the Hindus of India that:

While we mourn over their miserable condition, we should not be discouraged as though their recovery were impossible... The promises are fully sufficient to remove our doubts, and to make us anticipate that not very distant period when he will famish all the gods of India, and to cause those very idolators to cast their idols to the moles and bats, and renounce for ever the work of their own hands.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike Anglicanism, Baptist Christianity has not generally had a strong tradition of natural theology to appeal to in providing a conceptual framework for acknowledging truth in other religious traditions. But as Kenneth Cracknell points out:

There is some evidence that Carey himself came to change his mind about such a general condemnation of Hinduism, and indeed himself paved the way for what later writers like T. E. Slater were to call the 'Higher Hinduism'.<sup>24</sup>

And furthermore:

The story of how Carey and his colleague, William Marshman, issued for scholars the collated text of 'the Ramayana' is not as well known as it should be. Carey and Marshman were not blind to its human interest and literary power, whatever doubts they may have had about its theology. But their home-based colleague Andrew Fuller pleaded with them to desist. For Fuller, 'the Ramayana' was 'a piece of lumber'.<sup>25</sup>

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But even Andrew Fuller confessed:

Finally, it is not for us to say what may be effected by an extraordinary way upon the minds of men. A ray of light shot athwart the darkness of paganism, into the minds of the Eastern Magi, and led them to worship the new-born Saviour.<sup>26</sup>

But however much such Baptists might have recognised the wider activity of God beyond the boundaries of the Christian community, the person of Jesus of Nazareth remained at the centre of their Christian witness, and it was their Christological interpretations which were at the heart of the conflicts which developed between them and people such as the Hindu reformer, Ram Mohan Roy, with whom they otherwise closely collaborated on both scholarly matters of study and translation and ethical matters such as the campaign to abolish the practice of 'suttee'.<sup>27</sup> In the final analysis, Christians have only one distinctive offering to people of other religions - Jesus. But in view of our past behaviour and attitudes, Christian integrity demands a new way of testifying to what we have discovered in Jesus. In our contemporary multi-religious situation, as in earlier ages of theological ferment and exploration, Christological issues will inevitably come to the fore. The Southern Baptist Professor of Comparative Religion, H. C. Jackson, maintained that:

The next several generations will see the appearance of what might be designated another 'Age of the Heretics' for this is inevitable in a period of creative theological advance. The 'protection' in this era of mutation in theology will be, as it was in the case of the ancient Ecumenical Councils, the Bible. So long as there is real fidelity to the Scriptures, there need be no fears about what will be the permanent outcome.<sup>28</sup>

Re-opening the Christological question presents enormous emotional, ecclesiological and theological problems for many British Baptists because of the upheavals of 1972-1973 which surrounded Principal Michael Taylor's Baptist Union Assembly presentation on the theme of 'How Much of Man Was Jesus?' As Brian Haymes points out:

There is evidence to suggest that Baptists are not very good at Christological discussions in this generation. We do not seem to be able to talk about the one who is so important for us without falling out about him. It is a sad commentary on us and means that we cannot face the heart of the faith in trust together. We ought to reflect on that sadness, we who would claim to love the Lord, for this fact has missionary implications.<sup>29</sup>

There are, in fact, elements of the Baptist tradition which ought to impel us to ask whether the Nicean and Chalcedonian formulations about Jesus need, or even should be, determinative for theological exploration. Whilst it is true that Baptist confessions of faith have never repudiated the ancient creeds of the Church and indeed have sometimes explicitly appealed to them,<sup>30</sup> it is also undeniably the case that even where the Baptist tradition has affirmed such formulations, it has not accepted them as being exhaustive definitions of the truth and certainly not as instruments for the coercion of conscience, especially where such coercion has been reinforced by the power of the state.<sup>31</sup> From this standpoint serious questions need

to be asked about the nature of the ancient creeds of the Church since these were formulated in a Constantinian context where the Roman Emperor was the enforcer of Conciliar decisions. In *Constantine Versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*,<sup>32</sup> Alistair Kee traces how Constantine sought to use the Ecumenical Councils to impose a political unity in his Empire. As a result of this, creeds took on the role of instruments for ensuring the 'unity' of the Church and therefore of the Empire rather than being a means for bringing people into a covenant relationship with Jesus as Lord. From a Baptist perspective, then, the issue must surely be posed as to whether Constantinian Christology is questionable on the grounds of theological ethics. This was one of the issues that was examined in a series of conferences that were held in the USA during the 1970s in order to explore the question of whether there is or could be a specific Christological approach characteristic of the historically identifiable believer's church traditions.<sup>33</sup> In the context of these conferences the Mennonite theologian, J. D. Weaver, held that the Chalcedonian formulas were at least partly a reflection of the developing Constantinian ecclesiology of the Church and, therefore, that:

... the believer's church ecclesiology, whose constitutive elements include the voluntary nature of the church as a community around Jesus and the conviction that to belong to the community means to follow the example of Jesus, is served better by beginning with a narrative Christology than by the ontological Christology of the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulas.<sup>34</sup>

Such a narrative Christology offers the possibility of sharing what we as Christians have received in Jesus with people of other religions in such a way that they are better enabled to make their own response to Jesus himself rather than finding access to his life and work restricted by credal definitions that were partly a product of the Constantinian synthesis of Church and State. The *confession of Jesus* enables an encounter with Jesus in the way that *definitions about Jesus* do not. In a context of internal and external religious freedom it offers an invitation to Christians and to others to join in Christological exploration whilst still maintaining his centrality as the key point of reference for Christian faith and practice.

A fully balanced Baptist perspective would continue to insist that religious indifferentism is inadequate to our Christian roots and that our faith is indeed to be shared with others, but it would also insist that our emphasis on religious liberty could contribute some distinctive and significant impulses to a more appropriate contemporary style of Christian testimony. This style might best be described by the use of the word 'witness', upon which the recent San Antonio conference of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism focused. This word makes it clearer that the object of evangelism is what Christians have seen in Jesus, and that testimony to this takes place *before God* and *in conversation with others* whose religion and integrity is respected, and emphasises that it is not an activity which is directed at others in any manipulative or threatening way. Such an approach gives people of other religions the social and theological space to make their own witness and also to be free to make their response to the Christian witness to Jesus. Although Jesus is the distinctive focus of the Christian way, and his person and work form the substantive content of Christian witness, he is not the property of Christians. Christology needs to take full account of the perceptions of Jesus which people of other religions have since as Brian Haymes stresses, 'We would be unwise to absolutise our own or anybody else's experience and understanding of Christ.'<sup>35</sup> *Dialogical witness* among people of other religious traditions can enlarge our

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understanding of the person and work of Jesus, and as Haymes sharply reminds us, Christology is not the whole of theology:

Christians after all have usually spoken of God in Trinitarian terms, in recognition that, for all there is a crucial relationship between God and Jesus, there is more to God than Jesus Christ. In speaking of Jesus we believe we are making a statement about God and so we have resisted turning Jesus into a personal experience. It is in no way dishonouring to say that statements about Jesus Christ do not exhaust the nature and meaning of God. Thus 'Jesuology' or 'Christomonism' represent unbalanced expressions of the faith. When this happens Jesus is in danger of becoming merely a cult or tribal figure, the Christian God.<sup>36</sup>

By developing and exploring Christology in conversation with those who confess Jesus as Lord as well as with those who do not, a Baptist perspective on witness to Jesus can be set within a theological and eschatological framework which reminds us of the eschatological provisionality of all contemporary claims to knowledge. Whilst a Baptist perspective on Christian witness maintains that Christians must continue to confess Jesus as Lord and affirms their obligation to bear witness to him, it also insists that this can and should be achieved without the necessity of promoting a definitive interpretation of the person of Jesus which closes him off from people of other religions. Just as the Christological understanding of the early Church was formed out of the forge of an inter-religious social context and in the course of a conscious dialogue with other religions and philosophies, today, too, the Church needs to be engaged in a new process of Christological discernment through its witness to Jesus in the context of dialogue with people of other religions.

The ending of aggressive evangelism does not necessarily entail any lessening of evangelical concern. As W. S. Page pointed out in a contention which could be amply substantiated from Baptist history prior to the rise of Fullerism:

It is a remarkable fact that missionary enthusiasm was at its lowest ebb in the years when Christians were most positive in consigning to eternal perdition not only those who had not accepted Christ, but even all those who did not hold the same opinions about Him as themselves.<sup>37</sup>

In our present context and based upon the constant reference-point of the Scriptures in the process of discovering the truth; the theological advocacy of religious liberty in Church and society; and a congregational ecclesiology which does not make inappropriate claims within a religiously plural context, dialogical witness undertaken within a vision of relational finality could represent an authentic expression of the Baptist vision. With E. L. Copeland, we would affirm that '... Christian evangelism should always be dialogical. True evangelism is witness proceeding from love by the method of empathy.'<sup>38</sup> Such a style of Christian witness is firmly rooted in the Baptist vision since it seems to be rooted '... in an almost naive confidence that truth, when freed to compete in the market-place of faiths, would win out over all opposition.'<sup>39</sup>

## THEOLOGICAL ETHICS FOR A PLURAL SOCIETY

Very particular theological ethics are implicit in a believers' ecclesiology and the promotion of religious liberty. These theological ethics which form the final 'note'

of a Baptist perspective on the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue arise from the free commitment of Christian believers to Jesus as Lord. As Wheeler Robinson pointed out with regard to arguments in favour of infant baptism, 'the common element in all these interpretations is the necessary passivity of the infant being baptised,'<sup>40</sup> but 'The Baptist position ... stands outside of them all as the only baptism which is strictly and primarily an ethical act on the part of the baptised.'<sup>41</sup> The Baptist tradition thus stresses the personal responsibility of the disciple and it was because of the social implications of these theological ethics that Baptists were to be found amongst the revolutionaries in the social and political upheavals of the English revolution. Such people as Samuel Oates, Thomas Lambe and Edward Barber were generally supportive of the Leveller positions, and Henry Jessey and Hanserd Knollys were active in the Fifth Monarchy movement, both of which posed radical challenges to the existing order. Later on, among the Baptist missionaries, it was this 'note' of the tradition which inspired the Serampore Baptists in their confrontation with the authorities over the practice of suttee, and resulted in John Fountain questioning the monopoly of the East India Company. It also stimulated the solidarity of Timothy Richard with the Chinese people and William Knibb's struggles against the evil of slavery.<sup>42</sup> The nexus of theological ethics which is formed by the combination of the 'notes' of the Baptist vision of Christianity which we have already examined is clearly focused in the ethical implications of the Baptist commitment to religious liberty. As A. S. P. Woodhouse said in the introduction to his *Puritanism and Liberty*:

The amazing importance of the struggle for religious liberty is due partly to the momentous issues with which it deals; but beyond that is the fact that it holds, as it were in solution, within itself all the rest of the struggle for liberty and equality.<sup>43</sup>

That this is indeed so can be very clearly seen in Robert Hall's *Christianity Consistent With a Love of Freedom*<sup>44</sup> and his *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press and For General Liberty*.<sup>45</sup>

A theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue in Britain which draws on Baptist theological ethics also has particularly important impulses to offer to the debate about the appropriate shape of the Christian community and the style of its witness in a multi-religious society. A Baptist perspective would insist that these matters lie at the very heart of the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue and should not be relegated to the status of ethical afterthoughts. No theology exists in a vacuum. A proportion of its content always reflects its social context and this recognition needs to become much more a part and parcel of the process of constructing the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue than has hitherto been the case. In the contemporary British context, this must include an attempt to wrestle with the social implications of theologies of inter-religious dialogue in a society where religious, racial, cultural and ethnic groupings often overlap and in which racism is a serious reality. In contradistinction to Christopher Lamb's critique of Wesley Ariarajah's book *The Bible and Other Faiths*, this is not a matter of allowing '... the ethical tail to wag the theological dog.'<sup>46</sup> But it is to affirm what Paul Knitter argued in the closing chapter of *No Other Name?* - that ethics should not be separated from systematic theology. Based upon this conviction Knitter posits a new model of truth in which:

... truth will no longer be identified by its ability to exclude, or absorb others. Rather, what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to relate to other expressions of truth and to grow through

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these relationships - truth defined not by exclusion but by relation.<sup>47</sup>

This methodological approach is echoed in an intriguing historical question with contemporary overtones which J. W. McClendon Jr. asks:

Is it not worth considering how different might have been the history of Christianity, if after the Constantinian accession, the Christian leaders had met at Nicea, not to anathematise others' inadequate theological metaphysics, but to develop a strategy by which the church might remain the church in the light of the fateful political shift - to secure Christian social ethics before refining Christian dogma.<sup>48</sup>

If ethics are central to the theological task rather than being relegated to an addendum or postscript to theology proper the praxis of inter-religious dialogue must be understood as a foundation of truth, and orthodoxy must be continually re-evaluated in the light of orthopraxis as we try to relate what we as Christians have received through Jesus to the realities of people who live by other ways of life and faith. On this basis we can grow in knowledge by a 'doing of the truth', in which truth is understood not so much in terms of intellectual definitions but more in terms of transformative understanding. Writing with reference to Christian-Muslim relationships Kenneth Cragg argues that:

The contemporary relationship of faiths is a 'doing' that is looking for 'knowledge', aware that the knowledge that may finally justify the doing can be had in no other way. Like Peter in the house of Cornelius, we may feel at once both compelled and compromised in being where we are.<sup>49</sup>

Such a theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue is about faith in action seeking understanding and, as such, could provide a basis for the provisional verification of religious claims. John Hick made a proposal for the eschatological verification of religious truth-claims. But an emphasis on theological ethics would ensure that the possibility of verification is not entirely removed from this world. Toynbee argued that until the time arrives when the local heritages of the different historic nations and civilisations coalesce into a common heritage of the whole human family the only effective standard of judgement is that, '... all the living religions are going to be put to a searching practical test. By their fruits ye shall know them.'<sup>50</sup> Toynbee in fact attached an equal importance to the relational patterns between religions as to the issue of which interpretative stance to adopt. Indeed, in Toynbee's approach interpretative stances and relational patterns cannot be separated but are integrally related to each other and produce mutual critiques and modifications. Interpretive stances and theological convictions thus need to be examined in close connection with both proposed and actual relational patterns.

A vast range of finely nuanced interpretative stances remain possible and legitimate in the Christian theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue. But there is a clear consensus in British Christian theological reflection on inter-religious dialogue that its tasks can no longer be conducted in an intellectually, morally, or socially responsible way without reference to the reality of other religions and the people who live by them. The days of ignorance are gone and life in a multi-religious society poses its own questions which cannot be answered by the

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solutions of yesterday, nor postponed or ignored. The importance of keeping actual *people of other faiths* firmly in the centre of theological thought is also generally recognised. As Kenneth Cragg has said, '... what converses in dialogue is not 'religions' but people; not doctrines *in abstracto*, but doctrines *in vita*; not rites *in vacuo*, but worships in the heart.'<sup>51</sup> This relational humanism has been noted by a number of writers as being a characteristic of the contemporary English approach to the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue and it has been accepted by a majority of British Christian theologians on all sides of the ecumenical debate because it is recognised that books about other religions and even the holy books of those religions do not convey the lived reality of these religions in all their complexity and ambiguity, not to mention individuality. As the World Council of Churches Guidelines on Dialogue put it, '... dialogue should proceed in terms of people of other faiths and ideologies rather than of theoretical, impersonal systems.'<sup>52</sup> A dialogue which proceeds on this basis has theological ethics at its very heart and is rooted in a respect for the freedom of 'the other' such as that which is clearly advocated within the Baptist vision of Christianity.

### SIGNPOSTS FOR THE FUTURE

The American Baptist theologian, H. Moody, has drawn attention to the fact that:

In the evolution of the Christian community and in the spread of the Christian vision, various people chose different messages and emphases out of Christian doctrine and teaching, to lift up and on occasion to absolutise.<sup>53</sup>

H. Wheeler Robinson summarised the various strands of the Baptist vision of Christianity by saying, 'The Baptist tabernacle is not always a graceful structure, but at least we may say of it, that the twin pillars at its door are evangelism and liberty.'<sup>54</sup> This article has attempted to demonstrate that when the Baptist vision's twin poles of 'witness' and 'freedom' are brought into conjunction with the contemporary context of multi-religious Britain, a field of creative tension is produced out of which new impulses are released which could enable a transformation of the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue into something which is more adequate, both to its social and historical context and to its roots in the Christian faith.

Theological reflection can no longer be conducted responsibly without sociological analysis, and British society is moving fast into the kind of 'shot-silk' pattern of the interpenetration of religious life which Arnold Toynbee foresaw as long ago as 1956:

The adherents of each religion... seem likely to come gradually to be distributed all over the 'oikoumene', but it may also be expected that, in the process, they will come to be intermingled everywhere with adherents of all other faiths, as the Jews are already intermingled with Muslims and Christians, and the Parsees with Muslims and Hindus. As a result, the appearance of the religious map of the 'oikoumene' may be expected to change from a pattern of a patchwork quilt to the texture of a piece of shot silk.<sup>55</sup>

In this context, questions of truth are posed ever more sharply as religio-cultural monopolies are cracked open and an increasingly wide range of religious options

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stand side by side in a market-place of truth-claims. We have seen how a Baptist contribution to Christian epistemology stresses the continuing centrality of the Scriptures, whilst trusting in the truth's own power to convince during the process of open-ended dialogue and debate. But epistemological issues in inter-religious dialogue are no longer simply concerned with discussion and debate. Rather, they are now integrally connected with what might be called the challenge of 'doing the truth' in inter-religious relations. At this point, epistemology shades over into theological ethics and the emphases on congregationalism, discipleship, and liberty of religious belief and practice which are also affirmed by the Baptist vision bring an important contribution to contemporary Christian 'epistemological praxis'.

A Baptist perspective on the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue poses particularly sharp questions in the area of the Church's *institutional practice*. A convergence of social, historical, theological and institutional factors mean that the old patterns of Christian existence can no longer be intellectually or morally sustained. These patterns are based on premises which no longer 'mesh' with the structures of contemporary society or with the content of much contemporary Christian belief. Rather, they arose from a context which has since been radically transformed by the impact of secularisation. Of course, the concept of secularisation is only an adequate reflection of the reality of British society if it is understood in the sense in which Peter Berger defines it as, '... the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.'<sup>56</sup> It is not an adequate description of contemporary reality if it is used to refer to contemporary levels of religious belief since belief has, in many respects, undergone something of a resurgence, although often in non-traditional forms. Whether secularisation, in the sense in which Berger defines it, is welcomed or feared, it must be recognised that this process is now an inescapable part of the contemporary social and political fabric of Britain and is thus a part of the overall framework within which the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue must take place. Unlike many other Christian traditions, the Baptist vision contains a wealth of resources for a *theological* and *Christological* ecclesiology in a secular social framework. As E. G. Ernst points out:

Christians, when freed from the expectation of dominating the social order, and freed from the urge to gather everyone out of the world into the Church, may be able to live with corporate identity and integrity as whole persons within the secular world.<sup>57</sup>

Through its congregational ecclesiology, its affirmation of religious liberty and its emphasis on theological ethics, the Baptist vision provides a theological basis for critical adaptation to this new social context as the arena for Christian life and witness. However, whilst renouncing attempts at social dominance, the Baptist vision does affirm the continuing importance of a missiology centred on the person of Jesus and the Scriptural witness to truth. This need for Christian witness continues to be important not only because it is a central part of the Christian calling, but also because we need to recognise the danger that the process of secularisation can result not in pluralism, but in the replacement of Christianity by other dominant integrative symbols which could become just as socially restrictive as the Christian symbols once were.

To the casual observer, it may seem that an equal affirmation of religious liberty and of Christian witness produces an impossible contradiction. But as we have clearly seen, the Baptist vision's promotion of religious liberty is not a product of religious indifferentism. Indeed, the opposite is true. Freedom of religion

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necessarily entails the freedom to maintain a conviction, to argue and also to persuade. If social conditions are affirmed which enable a real dialogue to take place in a context without major imbalances of religious privilege, then freedom of conscience logically includes multi-lateral possibilities for persons to be free to seek and to find new light and truth in religious beliefs, practices or communities other than their own inherited ones, since religious liberty implies a convictional rather than a merely inherited, traditional or assumed basis for faith and practice.

It is my argument, therefore, that a perspective which draws on the Baptist vision of Christianity could provide an integrated theological basis for contemporary British Christian attempts to come to terms with the multi-religious context of British society. It could ensure that in this new situation there is not just a mere 'adaptation' of the Church to prevailing social trends. Rather, in the process of attempting to discern the truth, it could encourage engagement with contemporary social realities whilst remaining deeply rooted in the stable point of reference which the Scriptures provide. A Baptist perspective on the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue would undergird such a process by the theological advocacy of religious liberty in Church and society; by a congregational ecclesiology which does not make appropriate social claims within a religiously plural context; by an affirmation of the continuing importance of Christian witness; and by a theological ethics rooted in the call to believers's discipleship.

A variety of social, historical, institutional and theological factors have converged to produce a 'kairos' in the development of our multi-religious society and in the Christian theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue. A 'kairos' is a moment of decision which presents both an opportunity and a danger. The danger is that the transformations which have occurred in our social, historical, institutional and theological realities may provoke those who are theologically insecure to retreat into old patterns of life which offer only the illusion of security. These patterns are no longer adequate to the realities of the present situation and are a dangerous expression of moral irresponsibility because they contain the seeds of religious bigotry and conflict. But the 'kairos' presents an opportunity, too, for developing a more adequate Christian theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue. This article has tried to demonstrate how a Baptist perspective could make a radical *methodological contribution* to the basis on which the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue is usually constructed by giving a far more prominent place to theological ethics and to ecclesiology than has hitherto been the case. In this perspective the context and the content of the social relations between the religious communities are posited as being an integral part of the form and content of any adequate development of the Christian theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue. If the Christian theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue can successfully draw upon this perspective and the 'notes' that we have examined which lie at the heart of the Baptist vision, then life in a multi-religious society such as that of contemporary Britain need no longer be experienced as a problem to be solved so much as a liberative opportunity to be explored.

### NOTES

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