

## Foreword

Invitations to participate in events which involve Christians taking part in ceremonies with members/representatives of other religions are new experiences for all member churches. Whenever such representatives come together as religious persons there is necessarily a religious aspect to the meeting that needs to be recognised. This document reflects upon the religious nature of such meetings and explores a possible theological basis for them.

In the preparation of the document it was recognised that the Victorian Council of Churches member churches have had different experiences and varying opportunities in regard to such meetings, ranging from no experience at all to actually having hosted several public multifaith events.

Even for those with some experience the principles of participation are still being developed and understood. There is however one principle that remains clear: that involvement in such gatherings cannot mean a dilution of our commitment to the Christian gospel (see Part II, Paragraph C of the Statement).

It also needs to be said that we are still at a stage where the benefits of multifaith gatherings have to be balanced against risks of misunderstandings on all sides. Nor is there any indication at this point that a line of general agreement is emerging among member churches which the Council may take as normative. However, there is a commitment on behalf of member churches and the Council itself that these issues need to be explored together in Faith and in good faith.

When reading the following text, take note that:

1. It has been accepted by the VCC Executive and issued in the name of the VCC.
2. 'One Faith – Multifaith' is not an agreed statement by the member churches of the VCC.
3. 'One Faith – Multifaith' attempts to take a balanced approach and is presented for discussion.
4. The Faith and Order Commission will continue to seek comments and welcomes reflections on the document.
5. It is proposed that, in the light of on-going reflection in this fast-developing field, that a revised text would be produced, perhaps in three years time.
6. It is proposed that in the light of the Parliament of the World's Religions to be held in Melbourne in December 2009, the VCC/Faith and Order Commission conduct a seminar for member churches addressing the issues raised in the text.



# **‘One Faith - Multifaith’**

## **A theological basis for multifaith gatherings**

Faith and Order Commission  
Victorian Council of Churches  
2005

**Commissioners:** Rev. Dr. John Dupuche (Roman Catholic) (chair), Rev. Dr. Merryl Blair (Churches of Christ), Rev. Dr Helen Granowski, (Anglican), Rev. Jeff Gray (Uniting Church of Australia), Fr Samuel Elias (Coptic Orthodox), Rev. Cecil Schmalkuche (Lutheran), Rev Ian Scutt (Uniting Church of Australia), Prof. Richard Snedden, (Anglican), Dr Max Stephens (Roman Catholic).

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## **Preamble:**

### **a. The question:**

In the wake of September 11, 2001, Mr Bracks, the Premier of Victoria, approached the Victorian Council of Churches (VCC) with a view to conducting a religious service. The VCC recommended that any such service should be multireligious. Accordingly, the event at the Rod Laver Arena involved prayers and statements by a wide range of religious groups and reflected the diverse nature of our society.

To what extent was the event a valid religious act? Was it simply a laminating of components which did not jell? To what extent was it folkloric and merely a gesture? This paper attempts to answer these questions.

### **b. The respective roles of civil and religious authorities:**

Civil authorities may at times of grief, celebration or thanksgiving, initiate interfaith gatherings and will accordingly provide support and representation. The event should, however, be directed by the religious groups involved.

### **c. The role of non-religious participants:**

Australia is a civil society in the sense that while many of its citizens hold religious views and claim the right to freedom of practice, there is no established religion. Indeed many Australians of good will and honest character do not associate with any religious tradition. In moments, therefore, of collective sorrow such as occurred after the bombing in Bali in 2002 or of collective celebration as happened at the Centenary of Federation in 2001, what is the role, in an interfaith service, of those who espouse no religion? The urgency of this question is felt particularly by those Christian traditions which attach high value to 'getting together with others'.

It is possible, of course, for religious and non-religious persons to join together in a common cause concerned with issues such as justice and peace. They may also appreciate sharing the cultural aspects of a variety of religious traditions through their music or food, or be invited to experience a religious service led by one group according to their custom.

However, in the case of a request being made by the civil authority for a combined religious act, it would not be appropriate to invite those who possess no religious faith to participate in its planning and presentation. The event would, of course, be open to all to attend.

**d. The relationship between ecumenism and interfaith relations:**

The specific role of the Victorian Council of Churches is to enable the member churches to draw closer together and to achieve the unity for which Jesus prayed. This does not, however, preclude the VCC from involvement in interfaith relations. On the contrary, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are intimately related, for the Christian traditions can, in the context of religious diversity, truly give witness to the person and work of Jesus, their one Lord, only if they are united amongst themselves. “By this shall all know you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (Jn 13:35) The wish to establish valid relations with members of other religious traditions requires Christians to establish unity of faith with each other. Interfaith dialogue will reinforce the consciousness of Christian identity, and place denominational differences into perspective. The ability of the churches both to acknowledge their differences and to discover their unity as members of the one Body of Christ will help them meet members of other faiths and appreciate what God has accomplished.

**e. The special place of the Jews:**

There is already an intimate and essential relationship of the Christian community to the Jewish tradition, for the Christian people is ‘grafted’ onto the Chosen People. As St Paul says, Israel “is the root that supports you”. (Rom 11:18) The Christian community, for its part, looks to the time when both communities, Christian and Jewish, will come to acknowledge their respective Covenants. Furthermore, the reconciliation of Christians and Jews is the model for the unity of all peoples and religious traditions.

**f. The common cause of peace:**

It is to be hoped that the relationships enjoyed by Christians and members of other religious traditions may lead them to discover that they have more in common with each other than they do with the dominant materialistic culture. Indeed, all religious traditions can join together to counter the dehumanising effects of militant secularism and the extremism of those who misuse the name and purpose of the religious tradition they claim to promote. Those members of our community who do not claim religious affiliation may nevertheless appreciate that religious commitment can be valuable in the process of securing peace and human dignity.

**g. The religious value of multifaith gatherings:**

Multifaith gatherings, we propose, lead to a deeper experience of the Transcendent, however this may be conceived. Such gatherings, whether at moments of trauma or at times of celebration, give access to profound religious experience. For, indeed, meeting with people of vastly different points of view would seem to reveal the hidden depths beneath the inadequate expressions. The encounter with other forms of wisdom is at once a consolation, for we recognise

in them a divine truth that is our own; and also a challenge, for their truth is expressed so differently from our own.

**h. The price of non-participation:**

Non-participation in multifaith gatherings, whether arising from a reluctance to break with past practices or from some sense of exclusivism, can be counterproductive, leading some to believe the other faith traditions are not to be valued. It also fails to confront prejudice and fundamentalism wherever they exist, and may be seen to condone the marginalization of those who follow a different tradition. Most importantly, opportunities are missed to express in a public way a common commitment to justice, respect for the human person, peace, compassion and mercy. Not to do something is to make a statement.

**i. The purpose of this present work:**

The issues are many and complex. On the more practical side, the Living Faiths - Dialogue and Community Commission of the VCC has developed *Guidelines for Multifaith Gatherings*.<sup>1</sup> For its part, the Faith and Order Commission wishes to explore the issues in detail and to establish theological foundations for such gatherings.

This work, *One Faith – Multifaith*, therefore, sets out the parameters which the VCC (and the Heads of Churches) might wish to communicate to the relevant government departments so that their requests for future interfaith gatherings can be adequately addressed by the religious traditions according to their own principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Published by the Victorian Council of Churches in collaboration with the Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2004. 15pp.

## **Introduction:**

### **a. A vastly changed world:**

In an article, “Confessing Christ in a religiously pluralistic context”<sup>2</sup> Canadian theologian Douglas Hall suggests that a sober recognition of the fact that the church no longer holds the power it once held during the long period of its “Constantinian Captivity” can be the beginning of a life-enhancing relationship with non-Christian religions. “We are now,” he suggests, “in the biblically normal situation that includes a plurality of religions and or quasi-religious alternatives.” Hall suggests that for the last sixteen centuries, Christians have seen themselves to be the sole bearers of truth, the natural rulers over people, and the sole upholders of the good life. We now know that we share this planet with other faith communities who also believe with intensity and who have cultural values and styles of living with their own integrity and beauty.

This change may appear to some as a loss; however, it can also be seen as a discovery of the true nature of Christianity. Christians living in the manner of Jesus will want to avoid any hint of crusading fervour, triumphalism or rudeness towards the adherents of other faiths. His hospitality, forgiveness, care for the stranger and interest in the outcast are to be woven into our manner. Who we are speaks louder than our words. Many of us may never speak directly of Jesus in our meeting with people of other faiths but our way of being with them is itself our confession. Christians engage in dialogue because of Christ. His inspiration leads followers to value all people, to discover their insights and work with them for a better world. It is the example of Jesus that leads us towards others.

### **b. The theological questions involved:**

Our belief in Jesus Christ and the way of being present to the God that he proclaimed and embodied do not exist in a vacuum. In every age, Christian believers seek to express their commitment in terms of the questions and challenges that surround them. The age of interreligious encounter, according to Rowe, brings its own fresh questions:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Walter Brueggemann and George W. Stroup, (eds), *Many Voices, One God: Being faithful in a pluralistic world*, Westminster, John Knox Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Rowe, *Living with the Neighbour who is Different: Christian Faith in a Multi-Religious World*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 2000. p. 14f.



- What is the purpose of God in permitting a variety of religions to exist side by side – some sharing things in common but disagreeing on many important matters?
- The old question whether salvation is to found outside the Church is posed in a new way. Is the Church the only embodiment of the purposes of God? Do the other religions have a role to play in God's offer of salvation? Is God present in the non-Christian world? Is Christ present in the non-Christian world?
- Can people who differ greatly in their core beliefs work together for the common good without compromising those same convictions?
- Who is Jesus and how do we speak of him in a world of many religions? What does it mean when Christians identify Jesus as the unique embodiment of God's love? Is it better to speak of Jesus being normative rather than unique?
- Does dialogue with people of other faiths lead to a loss of evangelical passion? Is the goal of our dialogue the conversion of the other or is it a modification of their living in the light of Jesus but from within the framework of their own religion?
- What is the mission of the Church in a multireligious neighbourhood?
- Will Christian life be enriched or diminished by a growth in appreciation of the beliefs of others?

Theologians are giving increasing attention to such questions. David Tracy speaks for many when he says:

... dialogue among the religions is no longer a luxury but a theological necessity ... Like many others, I find myself in the uncharted territory of the new interreligious dialogue aware that both our present situation demands that entry and ... so does Christian faith.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David Tracy, *Dialogue with the other: the Inter-religious Dialogue*, Eerdmans, 1990.

## **PART I Some basic terms and considerations:**

### **1. Interreligious dialogue:**

#### **a. What it is not:**

Interreligious dialogue is not the same as the study of various religions or a comparison between them. It is not a debate between followers of various religions. It has no wish to produce a sort of super-religion and it certainly does not aim at conversion or proselytism.

#### **b. What it is:**

Interreligious dialogue is a meeting of people of differing religions, in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, in order to listen to the other, to try to understand that person's religion and hopefully to seek possibilities of collaboration.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the act of listening is the pre-eminent attitude. Cardinal Arinze defines it as follows:

Willingness to listen implies appreciation of what the other person is, believes, prays or lives, together with a conviction that it is worthwhile sacrificing some time to be informed about all that.<sup>6</sup>

#### **c. The four forms of interreligious dialogue:**

##### **i. The dialogue of life:**

Dialogue of life is interreligious dialogue at the level of the ordinary relational situations of daily life: family, school, and place of social or cultural contact, village meetings, work-place, politics, trade or commerce.<sup>7</sup>

As we live in a multicultural society, there will be a need to improve our social and religious tolerance. There will be a need to communicate and discuss with the various religious organizations, ways in which each organization could encourage its members to be accepting of, and have respect for, other religious groups. There is a real need for groups to work more effectively to quell any sense of hatred and to reflect this in their mission-focus or statements, and to produce evidence for carrying out such programs.

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<sup>5</sup> Arinze, Cardinal Francis, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. *Sunday Examiner* (Hong Kong), November 29, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Even if we do not worship the same God we do share a common humanity. This has somehow to be expressed and emphasised if we are to live peaceably together. Our effort should therefore be focused on exploring ways through which we do so effectively so that this harmony is achieved and experienced by all involved.

As people wanting to develop our sense of community, we look for ways to learn more of each other, to understand more of each other's lives. This can be done in many ways; e.g., meeting as next-door-neighbours, having community picnics or cultural events.

**ii. The dialogue of action:**

This refers to Christians and other believers cooperating for the promotion of human development and liberation in all its forms.<sup>8</sup>

This could be any cause truly worthwhile such as community well-being and the promotion of harmony, justice and peace. To work together in the cause of justice is indeed pleasing to God, according to the prophets.<sup>9</sup> Service to one's fellows is a form of service to God. In this sense, worship is indeed offered to God, but indirectly.

This train of thought could be extended to include practical cooperative effort for the healing, restoration and well-being of the environment; for God's creation has been placed in our care.<sup>10</sup>

**iii. The dialogue of discourse:**

Christians and members of other religions meet

... to exchange information on their respective religious beliefs and heritages. They listen to one another in an effort to understand the religion of the others at a deep level and as articulated by qualified and well-placed representatives of the other religious traditions. They try to see what beliefs and practices they share and where they differ. Together they try to face modern problems and challenges in the light of their differing religions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Amos 5, Micah 6 etc.

<sup>10</sup> Gen.1.

<sup>11</sup> Arinze, *op.cit.*

Suitable programs for discussions can be put in place with an aim to look at the benefits each faith group can contribute to society and how a sense of cooperation and trust might be achieved. Such discussions can focus on life issues, religious studies and religious experiences. It is not an act of worship as such but a willingness of each group to share ideas.

#### **iv. The dialogue of religious experience:**

... refers to persons deeply rooted in their own religious traditions sharing experiences of meditation, prayer, contemplation, faith and its expression, ways of searching for God as the Absolute ...<sup>12</sup>

This paper is concerned above all with this fourth form of dialogue within the context of shared ceremony. This sharing requires great sensitivity, for when people of different faith traditions gather together, each wishes to affirm what they believe to be true about their faith, and its expressions. They come with different convictions about God and the world in relation to the mystery at the heart of all things.

We need to remember that joining in the various forms of dialogue does not necessarily mean agreeing with others' beliefs.

## **2. Positions of participants in interfaith dialogue:**

It is common to identify three broad possibilities for Christian response to interfaith encounter.<sup>13</sup>

**a.** The **exclusivist** position sees salvation as coming only through Christ and his church and views the adherents of other religions as living in error and in need of conversion to Christ and incorporation into the life of the church.

As early as the third century, the view that “outside the church there is no salvation” became an unquestioned assumption in the theology and practice of the church. The commonly quoted biblical cornerstones of this view are: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved”;<sup>14</sup> “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> These are described somewhat differently in *Guidelines for Multifaith Gatherings*.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 4:12.

<sup>15</sup> Jn 14:6.

As Rowe notes, however:

Critics of the exclusivist viewpoint warn against taking these and other biblical passages out of context and reading into them implications not intended by authors who had no awareness of the great religions of the East or of Islam which emerged many centuries later. Leslie Newbigin, former missionary and Bishop of South India wrote, “anyone who has had intimate friendship with a devout Hindu or Muslim would find it impossible to believe that the experience of God of which his friend speaks is simply illusion or fraud.”<sup>16</sup>

The strength of the exclusivist position is the unswerving affirmation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The weakness is the tendency to place boundaries around the love of God and to deny the generosity of God enacted in Jesus. This makes it very difficult for those wishing to engage in interfaith dialogue to find common ground.

**b.** At the other end of the spectrum is the **pluralist** position. As Rowe notes:

There is great variety among Christian Pluralists but a cornerstone of this position is that Christians should set aside inherited views about the uniqueness of Jesus as Son of God so that they may more readily appreciate truth within other religions. ... Some deny the traditional Christological assertions, preferring to recognise Jesus as one among many human messengers of God’s truth. ... Others hold fast to traditional Christological claims as expressions of their own religious commitments but deny that these claims have universal validity. The culturally conditioned and equally certain apprehensions of final truth held by others are to be respected as ultimate truth for them just as Christ is ultimate truth for Christians. Christian Pluralists seek a theocentric rather than a Christ centric approach to truth, feeling that this permits respect for alternative understandings of God or of the ultimate mystery ...<sup>17</sup>

The strength of the pluralist position is its humble search for truth wherever it may be found and the desire, from a Christian viewpoint, to express the extent of God’s love for humanity. The weakness of the pluralist position is that it seems to require Christians to give up the central Christological assertions made in their creeds and doctrines. For many Christians this would be to alter so radically their inherited faith that it would in effect be a new religion. The

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<sup>16</sup> Rowe, *op.cit.* p. 17; Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Eerdmans, 1989. p.17f.

<sup>17</sup> Rowe, *op.cit.*, p.19.

pluralist assertion that every religion is salvific cannot be maintained without careful study of the beliefs and lifestyles of each religious expression.<sup>18</sup>

c. The **inclusivist** position endeavours to hold together the best insights and convictions of the two previous approaches. The saving presence of God in non-Christian religions is affirmed while Jesus Christ is still held to be the normative revelation of God.

Pope John Paul II showed a strong commitment to interfaith dialogue. He understood himself to be called both to proclaim Jesus Christ as “the Way, the Truth and the Life” and to promote dialogue with other religions that he claimed contain “a sort of secret presence of God.” His view is summed up in the following:

God desires the salvation of everyone. In a mysterious but real way, he is present in all. Humanity forms one single family, since God has created all human beings in his own image. All have a common destiny, since they are all called to find fullness of life in God.<sup>19</sup>

Salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make [members of other faiths] formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

In the Genesis story the creation that God declares to be good is permeated by diversity. As human life has emerged and developed in different environments, the inherent diversity within creation has been increased by differences of culture, religious conviction, social organisation, custom, historical circumstance and spirituality. In multicultural Australia, both Church and society are learning to live beyond the quest for uniformity.

The one God holds all the diversity of creation in unity. This is expressed well in the Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians. God’s purpose is seen to

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<sup>18</sup> Though essentially a twentieth century phenomenon, there have been Christian thinkers of past generations who have pointed in a pluralist direction. Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), for instance, described a vision in which he saw how religious differences were overcome in a larger unity. He imagined pagan and Christian, Hindu, Jew, Greek, Persian, Italian, German, even an Englishman, brought together in “the unity of the unattainable truth.” “All cults of Divinity,” he wrote, “witness to Divinity.”

<sup>19</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Agenda for the Third Millennium*, Harper Collins, 1996. pp. 213-4.

<sup>20</sup> ‘On the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate’. (*Redemptoris Missio*) 7 December, 1990. para.20.

embrace “all things” and to call for their “gathering up”. Paul’s normative description of the unity brought in Christ<sup>21</sup> does not suggest the obliteration of distinctions. Jews and Gentiles remain who they are, maleness and femaleness continue, economic distinctions are acknowledged, but in Christ these differences are robbed of their power to divide.<sup>22</sup> The Christian vision is that God’s unifying purpose is carried out by his great act of reconciliation in Christ.<sup>23</sup>

A final caution, however, needs to be noted: the three positions outlined above are useful models rather than rigid categories. The views of many thinkers may not fit into any of them.

**3. a.** The term **multifaith** is used to refer to a gathering of people of different traditions where each is responsible for contributing something of their tradition in turn, in parallel so to speak. The strength of this approach is that it can give equal treatment and recognition to each; the weakness is when the different traditions come together, in a form of lamination, without sharing in a cohesive act.

**b. Interfaith** supposes a commitment to a relationship of dialogue. The gathering celebrates the existing relationship and provides a context for participants to come to a deeper religious experience.

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<sup>21</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>22</sup> In the vision of unity presented in Isaiah 11:6-9, there is no obliteration of differences. Wolves and lambs, calves and lions, cows and bears, children and snakes retain their uniqueness. What is lost is the desire for one to overcome the other.

<sup>23</sup> Colossians 1:19, 20.

## **PART II Coming together for prayer? Praying together?**

How can we pray together if ‘prayer’ means ‘address’, for the Buddhists do not ultimately address a Deity? If the Christian addresses all prayer through Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and human kind, how can Muslims and Jews join with them in prayer? Many say that Christians, Jews and Muslims could be considered to pray to the one God of Abraham, however understood or mediated. Are humanists who focus on the glory found in creation,<sup>24</sup> to be excluded from interfaith gatherings? Can we pray together or are we constrained always to remain essentially divided? Can we never really join with people of other faiths? This is the question.

### **a. Christian worship:**

The English word ‘worship’ means simply ‘worthship’ and denotes the worthiness of the person receiving the special honour due to their worth.<sup>25</sup> However, in the religious context and from a traditional Christian perspective, the word ‘worship’ is reserved to God alone. Indeed the revelation God has given forbids worshipping anyone besides God. We believe in only one God. It is clear biblical and godly instruction that we must not worship any other god.<sup>26</sup>

Worship is rejoicing in all that God is, and ascribing to God the things which rightly belong to God, such as glory, honour, power, salvation, and thanksgiving. It is God’s due as Maker of the world and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth and as Redeemer, the source of all blessing, who is therefore to be blessed.

God in Christ is the definite, special object of Christian worship. In worshipping Christ the Father is worshipped,<sup>27</sup> for Jesus is the Son of God, the visible image of the invisible God.<sup>28</sup> Jesus Christ, as “the Lamb who was slain”,<sup>29</sup> is rightly the centre of Christian worship, to the glory of God the Father. All praise and thanksgiving go to the Father through Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Rm 1:20.

<sup>25</sup> The identical Hebrew word can be used for either ‘worship’ or ‘service’ and the same holds true in the New Testament for the use of the Greek word for ‘worship’ (*latreuo*), although *proskuneo* is used more often.

<sup>26</sup> Ex 34:14, Deut 4:39, Mt 4:10.

<sup>27</sup> Eph 5:19, 20; Col 3:16.

<sup>28</sup> Heb 1:3; Col 1:15.

<sup>29</sup> Rev 5:12.



**b. Aspects of Christian worship:**

There are many elements in Christian worship. Through Christ the worshipping community continually offers a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the “fruit of lips that acknowledge his name”.<sup>30</sup> Equally, thanksgiving and prayers of petition have a regular place in all worship, as do the reading of the Scriptures and the preaching of the word. Furthermore, in certain circumstances fasting and almsgiving will accompany worship. Songs too have their place, for the Holy Spirit inspires a joy expressed in psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles.<sup>31</sup> The Lord’s Supper is an important part of Christian worship.

Jesus himself gave an example of private worship as he often withdrew to lonely places to pray<sup>32</sup> and recommended to his disciples that they should withdraw to some private place.<sup>33</sup> This is also an important part of prayer in many Christian communities today.<sup>34</sup> However, Christian worship is more generally understood to be corporate, where procedures, customs and conventions of liturgy and ritual are performed within particular ecclesiastical traditions. As such it is described as congregational – a group of people coming together to share an organised, corporate religious experience.

**c. The essence of Christian worship:**

The centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian worship is not to be compromised.

Jesus Christ is normative for Christian believing and living. To deny this, or to obscure this would be to deny our Christian identity. Christ is understood by Christians to be the definer of life’s possibilities, the saving presence of God within human existence, proclaimer and embodiment of the purposes of God, revealer and bearer of the pain and love of God. All that is done and said by Christians in interreligious encounter is shaped by the confession of Jesus as Lord, Word of God and Son of God. The New Testament message is that “in Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19) and “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:20).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Heb 13:15.

<sup>31</sup> Eph 5:19.

<sup>32</sup> Matt 14:23, Mk 1:35.

<sup>33</sup> Matt 6:5-6.

<sup>34</sup> Matt 6:6.

<sup>35</sup> Rowe, *op. cit.*, p. 46f.

**d. Ecumenical worship and multifaith gatherings:**

Ecumenical worship has enriched the lives and faith of those who have taken part, and indeed has broadened and deepened the life and faith of the whole church. Experience has moved ecumenical worship from that which was designed to include all and offend none (which often tended to be somewhat bland) to entrusting others with the normal worship of each church as they draw on the richness of their tradition. In this, Christians have learned to value the differences, and be excited by the many, many things they have in common. It is not always plain sailing – the issue of an inability on some occasions to share Communion can indeed be very painful.

If Christians attend and are enriched by the worship of other Christian traditions, then it may indeed be possible to experience something similar in multifaith gatherings. And while this cannot be a communal and shared faith, each religion may however discover a perhaps unexpected depth of spirituality and insight in another.

**e. The problem of indifferentism:**

It is not realistic to suppose that all traditions or groups within a religion will wish to participate in an interfaith gathering; some will not attend at all, and others will attend only as observers. Yet again, others may give the false impression that the various religions are united in faith, which may lead to indifferentism – that one faith is as good as another – which is counterproductive and undermines the very purpose of the gathering. On the contrary, just as ecumenical experience tends to deepen denominational loyalty (although greatly enhanced), so interfaith gatherings will not ‘dumb-down’ religious identification, but enrich it.

So what then might be the basis of an interfaith gathering?

## **PART III      Towards a solution:**

Interfaith gatherings are very special occasions. We are coming together to share our response to particular issues. Christians need to remember that the very terms 'worship' and 'prayer' have different meanings in different religions. Furthermore, each religion has its own forms, words, symbols and concepts that make it distinct.

The hope and expectation are that people of faith and goodwill who are meeting in the face of common concern will be enabled to move beyond the mere formalities to something truly profound.

### **Transcendence:**

This Commission proposes that the experience of the Transcendent may provide the beginnings of just such a common ground.

Peak experiences in life and moments of intense emotion can lead to a knowledge of the Transcendent. Both disaster and triumph, whether individual or social, have the power to open humans to a deeper dimension all too often hidden from view. It is precisely this dimension that all the great religions claim to touch upon.

It is natural, therefore, on occasions of tragedy for people to turn to the great traditions, and by drawing close to ancient and profound wisdom, to rise above the horror that has struck them. This is done not in order to hide from it but to be able to look at it and come to terms with it. Similarly, in moments of intense joy the Transcendent is recognised as in some sense essentially the source of that joy, with the result that the success is received as a grace. By coming together in an awareness of the Transcendent on such occasions, the participants begin to overcome the disintegrating effects of disaster, or draw closer as one body in their sense of triumph.

The various traditions that have stood the test of time, all in their different ways, articulate the Transcendence which eludes the limitations of human discourse: whether this Transcendence be understood as the God who spoke to Abraham, calling him to leave all that was familiar and to set out for an unknown blessing; as the God who speaks in Christ sent from above and drawing all to himself; as Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate, who calls all mankind to trust in his inscrutable plans; as the deities of Hinduism who each in their different ways express the divine Reality that exceeds all names; as the Void of Buddhism which acknowledges the insubstantiality of all limited things. There are other religious groups, too, who understand the Transcendent yet again differently.

Even those who do not claim religious affiliation may also seek to express the hopes and fears that transcend both disaster and triumph.

The multifaith gathering will be merely folkloric or a temporary huddling together if the participants do not acknowledge in each other's tradition some awareness of the Transcendent. This is the basic minimum for coming together in a religious activity.

Any authentic multifaith ceremony starts, therefore, with the presupposition that the major religious traditions, of long-standing and tested efficacy, do touch upon the divine. Only on this basis can we come together for a religious ceremony. We listen to their teachings and witness their rituals so as to perceive the depths from which they spring and to be taken by them back into that depth.

The participants, in the variety of their traditions, turn to the foundation on which they place their trust and take their refuge. Though all are united in a sense of Transcendence all will express themselves differently and all should be allowed to do so in their own manner. It would be unconscionable to suggest the opposite.

Each religion has its own distinctive set of beliefs and expressions, rituals and images. These must be allowed without any attempt to blur the distinctions or to relativise the absolute value attached to them. Similarly their stories and histories must be acknowledged.

A multifaith gathering is not, however, a dialogue of the deaf. The acknowledgement of another's experience and expression of the Transcendent is not a denial of one's own but does involve turning to others and perceiving that they are not alien. The meeting of the other is a transcendence of the self.

The gathering involves listening with respect, if not agreement, to what the other has to say. Indeed, for all the traditions, these gatherings may raise questions capable of deepening and developing understanding for all participants. Openness to the values of other traditions can lead to a transcending of one's own; going beyond the limitations of one's personal understanding and discovering a new depth to the Mystery.

The multifaith gathering thus involves another transcendence: out of past limitations and accretions which have encumbered the essence of the traditions into a future where the divine and the human are more fully realised

Encounter with another begins with questions about ourselves: who are we, what do we believe, what do we hope for? The questions we bring to the

meeting with others are first asked of ourselves. These questions then recur as we meet with those who believe differently.

For Christians, this participation in multifaith gatherings does not in any sense mean relativising Jesus who is always proclaimed Lord of all and remains the unique Saviour. It does mean, however, that Christians are challenged to understand more fully in what sense Jesus is Lord. Christians, as true disciples, wish to learn in which other ways the Word-made-flesh has been expressed. By acknowledging the essential experience of other religions, without fearing them or ignoring or absorbing them, Christians can enhance their understanding of their faith.

Some aspects of Christianity can be seen in other religious traditions. Justin Martyr (c.100-165) may be helpful when he states that:

Whatever has been uttered aright by any men in any place belongs to us Christians; for, next to God, we worship and love the reason (Word) which is from the unbegotten and ineffable God; ... For all the authors were able to see the truth darkly, through the implanted seed of reason (the Word) dwelling in them. For the seed and imitation of a thing, given according to a man's capacity, is one thing; far different is the thing itself, the sharing of which and its representation is given according to his grace.<sup>36</sup>

Following Justin Martyr some Christians understand, in a Buddhist sense, that the Word is found in apophatic silence. The Word can also be seen as expressed in the language of the Koran and in the images of Hinduism. However, all Christians would believe that this Word was made flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. He revealed himself in words and works but especially in the last, inarticulate cry from the cross, which leads us shockingly into the presence of God. Indeed, the Word is made fully flesh when he ceases to be mere flesh. The revelation is complete when nothing can be seen: the tomb is empty.

We are not expected to agree with everything, although we should allow ourselves to be challenged and our faith clarified. As Christians, we believe we should treat others as we would like them to treat us. Therefore, to hear the Word expressed in other ways and to acknowledge the Word present in each other will allow our communion in the silence of the Word that precedes all speech.

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<sup>36</sup> *Apology*, 11. xiii.

Coming together in this way we can move to depths of the divine mystery and together rest in the Heart, the Void, the Father, however it is we wish to name that which cannot be named.

In short the multifaith gathering, properly understood, is an experience of transcendence, whether it be upwards to the One who surpasses all, or outwards to the other, or within to the unplumbed depths of one's own tradition or onwards to a future which is beyond human imagining.

In this way the commemoration of tragedy – or the celebration of triumph – is turned into an opportunity for enrichment that would otherwise not have been given. When at last the value of the experience has been perceived, all will give thanks and say, “Amen! Yes, it was good that it happened thus”.

## **CONCLUSION:**

While the acknowledgement of the Transcendent in the various religious traditions is the starting point and basic minimum if a multifaith gathering is to be a truly religious act, this acknowledgement will, we believe, finally lead to a common expression both in word and ritual. The gathering cannot remain forever at the inner, invisible and intuited dimension only. This is not to suggest that eventually the various religious traditions will arrive at a common theology or ritual, a sort of 'super-religion' or lowest common denominator. Rather, the character and style of multifaith gatherings will change and develop with the passing years as the understandings of the spiritual traditions are deepened by their encounters. There will necessarily be a certain unity of expression in word and ritual, for humankind is one and the Ultimate Reality is not multiple. What this way of approach will be cannot be predicted but will spring naturally from valued multifaith gatherings which embody an element of the Transcendent.

## **APPENDIX      Some common elements of ritual:**

While the various traditions entertain vastly different theologies and ritual practices, there are also elements that occur in most if not all of them. The advantage of the following list of elements is that they can provide some sort of guide to what might be included in a multifaith gathering.

- a. The most common element is the use of language. Even the Society of Friends, to take a Christian tradition for example, who are famous for the silence of their meetings, acknowledge that the central purpose of worship is for members to speak as the Spirit moves them. It must be remembered, however, that in some faiths the use of words is supplemented by specially created symbolic artefacts such as the 'writing' of icons and the turning of prayer wheels.
- b. Many words used in religious ritual come from sacred texts distinctive to each faith in presentation as well as in message. However, the artefact by which this message is made available is always venerated and placed in a special setting. It becomes central to the section of the ritual where a sacred text is read.
- c. All faiths identify sacred places as the correct, indeed sometimes the only settings in which ritual can be conducted. Even where this is permitted in the open, the holy place is created by the setting or by the symbolic artefacts brought to the site or by the orientation of the worshippers. For example, Muslims will always seek to face the holy city of Mecca.
- d. Most traditions construct buildings or centres for worship, often with long association in the history of that tradition. Indeed, some buildings have been used over the years by succeeding faiths. Great care is often taken within such buildings to create a sacred space which expresses the key aspects of the faith.
- e. Sayings, declarations, paintings, statues and ornaments are often painted or located prominently on the walls or in the area, thus defining the holy space. Traditional architectural conventions are used and even redefined over the generations while being still easily recognised by the congregation. The aim is always to create a beautiful, uplifting and secure environment in which the ceremony can be conducted.
- f. Sacred symbols are distinctive to each tradition: for example the cross or crucifix, the symbol of the redemption; the menorah or seven branched candlestick of the Jews, symbolic of the seven days of creation; the mihrab or recess found in the Muslim mosque, orienting the worshippers towards the Ka'aba. Hindus and Buddhists also have their appropriate symbols, many and varied according to the traditions within those traditions.

- g. Light, whether captured by stained glass windows, by candles or by the play of sunlight on water, has been used as a symbol down through the ages.
- h. For those with particular roles in the ceremony, special clothing, titles, and seating arrangements may be significant.
- i. Music is also common to ritual. Songs, chants, prayers, hymns, psalms and mantras may be used as well as instruments and other forms of accompaniment. These vary according to the tradition and styles of various eras and may be essential to the worship.
- j. Silence is used in many rituals, with varying significance.
- k. There may be a call to gather for the sacred event. Sometimes it is a bell or it may be the Muslim muezzin calling from the minaret. The invitation to gather for worship may, on the other hand, be the first formal part of the worship service.
- l. There is often a leader in ritual whose role is to secure a degree of cohesion in presentation and order. For example the Imam leads the prayer of his Muslim congregation; the Jewish cantor leads in song; the Christian priest or minister may preside; the Hindu priest and the Buddhist teacher may also lead in the ceremony.
- m. Movement, whether it be procession or prostration, the veneration of the icon or holy book by kissing or even the formal position of stillness: these and many other corporeal acts are to be found in all traditions.
- n. The list could be further extended: fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage, rites of passage ...



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