

**Methodism and Other Faiths: a critical examination  
of the contribution of Methodism to a theology of  
inter-faith dialogue**

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## 1. Introduction

One of the first inter-faith<sup>1</sup> groups in Britain, the Leeds Concord Interfaith Fellowship, was founded in 1976 by a Methodist local preacher, the late Dr Peter Bell, whose work for inter-faith relationships won him an OBE. The Fellowship still has a large proportion of Methodists in its membership. In the first Peter Bell Memorial Lecture, in 2009, Dr Elizabeth Harris, a former Secretary for InterFaith Relations within the Methodist Church, spoke of her meetings with Bell during the 1990s, and of the many other Methodists like him who pioneered inter-faith dialogue from the 1970s onwards, such as Geoffrey Parrinder,<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Cracknell,<sup>3</sup> Pauline Webb<sup>4</sup>, Inderjit Bhogal,<sup>5</sup> and Martin Forward, her predecessor as Inter Faith Officer in the Methodist Church. Remembering the opportunities and the challenges of those days, she spoke of how the 1970s were ‘a period of incredible enthusiasm’ in the pioneering of inter-faith dialogue, yet how difficult it was sometimes to overcome the apathy, resistance and scepticism of many Christians in the pews (Harris 2010, p.3). When she herself went in 1986 to Sri Lanka to study Buddhism her father, a Methodist minister, was ‘deeply distressed’ and one Christian had prayed for her, because she would be ‘at risk from demonic influences’ (p.5).

Others besides Harris have claimed that Methodists have made a significant and distinctive contribution to inter-faith dialogue.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spellings of the term vary—‘inter-faith’, ‘inter faith’, ‘InterFaith’, etc.— in an endeavour to acknowledge a relationship between discrete entities without implying a syncretistic midway position between them as ‘interfaith’ seems to do. In this dissertation the original spelling in titles of officers, organisations and publications is retained, and elsewhere ‘inter-faith’ is used.

<sup>2</sup> (1910-2005) Lay academic who pioneered the study of African Traditional Religion and wrote numerous books on comparative religion

<sup>3</sup> The first Executive Secretary of the Committee for Relationships with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF) of the British Council of Churches

<sup>4</sup> Former Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC World Service

<sup>5</sup> Then Director of the Yorkshire and Humberside Faiths Forum , currently Director of the Corrymeela Community

<sup>6</sup> Forward (2000, p.95), for example, makes a similar ‘roll-call’ of contemporary British Methodists involved in relations with people of other faiths, calling it ‘a distinguished list for a small denomination.’ Cracknell (1998, pp.13-14) attributes his own involvement to his Methodist roots: ‘For thirty-five years now I have studied other religions and have interacted with their adherents. In this work I have been grateful to have inherited a theology which allows me to relate ungrudgingly to the different faith traditions. People of other Christian backgrounds often have real difficulty in being as open and as generous to truth and holiness outside the church just because of the ‘theological entails’ of their traditions. Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, even Anglicans were all involved in overcoming their Latinate theologies (extra ecclesiam nullus salus, extra Christum nulla salus) of exclusivism and restriction.’

The **research questions** which this dissertation addresses arise from that claim. Have they indeed made such a contribution? If they have, what is it about Methodist theology that facilitates or encourages inter-faith outreach? What is the purpose of such outreach? Is it really a cover for evangelism? Do all Methodists take the same view? If not, why not?

The **methodology** will be a critical examination of Methodist official statements and the key writings of a representative range of Methodist inter-faith theologians, with particular focus on Cracknell and Ariarajah as the two most internationally prominent Methodist exponents of inter-faith dialogue, along with a study of the sources of their ideas in John Wesley's writings.

The **aim** of this dissertation is to evaluate the contribution of some leading Methodist theologians who have sought to demonstrate that inter-faith dialogue is more than a permissible option for Christians: that it is a necessary implication of a properly worked out Christian theology, and that the Methodist contribution to inter-faith theology is one that has value and significance for all Christians. It will be observed that the ambivalence noted by Harris can still be found widespread within Methodism today. The Church's official position, which has developed by stages over the decades, is that it supports inter-faith dialogue, but it does so with a large degree of caution, and in some quarters with reluctance, for a significant number of Methodists remain committed to an evangelism that desires a Christian hegemony. The **purpose** of this dissertation is to argue that the failure of the Methodist Church to follow where its own theological principles lead is a failure in faith which the Church urgently needs to address.

This study must necessarily be confined to the position of the Methodist Church in Great Britain because World Methodism is too vast and varied to be covered within the limits of a dissertation. However, since scholarship transcends denominational and international boundaries, and since some of the key players have been prominent on the world stage, the views of some American and Sri Lankan theologians as well as English ones must be considered.

The structure of the dissertation will be as follows:

- an outline of the Methodist Church's position on inter-faith engagement
  - an outline of sources of Methodist inter-faith theology
  - a detailed study and critique of the contributions of Cracknell and Ariarajah
  - a brief consideration of a range of other Methodist perspectives
  - a discussion of the range of Methodist responses
  - an analysis and evaluation of the diversity
  - a conclusion.
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## 2. The Position of the Methodist Church on Inter-faith Engagement

Since the early 1970s there have been several significant landmarks in the development of the Methodist Church's official stance on inter-faith matters. The Faith and Order Report: *Use of Church Premises* in 1972 (summarised in Methodist Church n.d., p.2) said that local churches should take the initiative to establish 'dialogue' with representatives of other faiths, and that Methodist premises could be used by adherents of other faiths for secular and social activities. It encouraged Christians to engage in sympathetic observation of worship in other faiths whilst warning against engagement in any worship that would compromise their faith or tend to syncretism. By 1982 confidence had grown sufficiently for the creation of the Inter Divisional Connexional Committee for Relationships with People of Other Faiths, and in the following year the Methodist Conference adopted a report commending the 1981 British Council of Churches booklet *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain*, which was largely the work of Kenneth Cracknell.<sup>7</sup>

In 1985 the Methodist Conference adopted a report on multi faith worship, adding that Conference 'encourages the Methodist people to engage in multi-faith dialogue with their neighbours as the first steps towards mutual understanding, tolerance and love' (cited in Methodist Church n.d., p.2), but neither the report nor conference made any recommendations about engagement in multi-faith worship.

A 1994 Report to the Methodist Conference on the Decade of Evangelism (summarised in Methodist Church n.d., p.3) included the Code for Conduct of the Inter Faith Network, which Conference endorsed. Its support for inter-faith dialogue, though, was rather tainted by underlying evangelistic motives.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This booklet laid down four principles of dialogue:

dialogue begins when people meet with each other  
dialogue depends on mutual understanding and mutual trust  
dialogue makes it possible to join in community service  
dialogue becomes the means of authentic witness.

The report said, 'We understand dialogue to be a proper part of the total mission we are called to.' (Cited in Methodist Church n.d., p.3)

<sup>8</sup> It is evident that there were underlying tensions between those who supported interfaith dialogue for its own sake and those who wished to use it as a tool for evangelism. Eight principles were set out:

1. Our multi ethnic society is a gift from God, an expression of the sort of society God wants us to establish, within which all human beings can flourish.
2. Meeting with people of other faiths is essential for building relationships of trust through mutual understanding.

Caution also characterised the 1997 Faith and Order Report: *The Use of Church Premises by Other Faith Communities*. It recognised that inter-faith dialogue had 'led to a greater awareness of, and a greater respect for the sensitivities of each community', but also to 'a growing shared realisation that it is unhelpful to blur or to ignore the distinctiveness of faiths.' It saw value in inter-faith dialogue for friendship building, enriching communities and individuals, 'a source of harmony and positive aid towards the elimination of prejudice and tension.' However, the Working Party clearly wanted to affirm and uphold 'the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition of worship and life' (Methodist Church n.d., p.3).

One of the most important statements that the Methodist Conference has made in recent decades is in the 1999 Faith & Order Report *Called to Love and Praise* (Methodist Church 1999). The influence of such theologians as Cracknell and Ariarajah, whose ideas I shall consider later, is evident both in the nature of the reasoning used and in the attitude adopted in the report, which Conference adopted as its official policy. There is extensive, detailed and scholarly examination of relevant New Testament teaching, recognising differences of view within scripture as well as different ways of understanding the material and its relevance today.

The central theme of *Called to Love and Praise* is that the Church is called to share in the *missio Dei*, 'reflecting the life and image of the creating, redeeming God'. The encounter between Christians and people of other faiths in recent times has helped many Christians to recognise in people of other faiths 'a deep appreciation of the importance of the spiritual life, and an awareness both of God's presence and of their relationship with God,' which has deepened and enriched their own faith. (p.16)

A particularly significant statement in the report is that (on p.17) which declares emphatically:

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3. Opportunity must be given to Methodists to learn about the beliefs and practices of people of other faiths.
  4. Methodists engaged in working among people of other faiths should be encouraged in their work, and assured of the Methodist Church's warm support for what they do.
  5. The faiths of humankind are diverse and do not all aim at the same goals.
  6. Methodists must be encouraged to share the stories of their faith
  - 7 The story of Jesus is the Church's greatest gift, to explore and to share, it is usually Jesus, not the churches, who fascinate others.
  8. Methodists need to affirm a variety of vocations within the body of Christ, which affect relationships with people of other faiths.

The first five principles reflect openness to dialogue, 6 and 7 reflect an urge to evangelise, whilst the rather ambiguous and obscure 8 might be taken as suggesting that interfaith dialogue is not something for all Methodists since it might be incompatible with some vocations—presumably those of evangelists and missionaries.

‘The Church’s understanding of the significance of other faiths cannot be determined by appealing to individual texts in the Bible. Some (e.g. John 14.6) sound exclusive; others (e.g. Acts 10.34-5) sound inclusive. All without exception must be interpreted in the light of their historical and literary context ... the world was created through the Logos ... Christians, therefore, may gladly affirm of other faiths that ‘where there is truth and wisdom in their teachings, and love and holiness in their living, this, like any wisdom, insight, knowledge, understanding, love and holiness that is found among us is the gift of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>9</sup>

The Methodist Church’s official stance, then, is a cautious approval of inter-faith dialogue, with some ambiguity about the purpose of such dialogue.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Sources of Methodist Inter-faith Theology

#### 3.1 John Wesley’s Writings

Before examining the contributions of some contemporary Methodist thinkers, some consideration needs to be given to the key sources from which most of them draw. The scriptures are one source: another is the teaching of John Wesley<sup>11</sup>. Although John was a prolific writer, who published books on an astonishingly wide range of subjects, he never wrote a systematic theology. The reason is probably twofold: because his theology was dynamically evolving through his lifetime, and never definitively settled; and because he was opposed in principle to the idea that the essence of true religion can be captured in credal statements, or philosophical discourse, or theological treatises. Even before his heart-warming experience in

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<sup>9</sup> Quoting *Religious Plurality: Theological Perspectives and Affirmations*, (a document prepared by the Dialogue sub-unit of the WCC), p.2.)

<sup>10</sup> The most substantial and practically useful document that the Methodist Conference has received and commended is a 71-page resource book for individuals and groups called *Faith Meeting Faith: ways forward in inter-faith relations*, the work of the Methodist Church Inter Faith Relations Committee led by Dr Elizabeth Harris, published in 2004 and since 2010 available on the Methodist Church website. It addresses 30 questions that Christians ask about inter-faith matters, expressing the doubts, reservations, concerns and fears about where inter-faith involvement might lead. In relation to each it outlines the issue, gives some brief quotations that ‘People may say’, a page or so of analysis ‘To consider’, and then several ‘Ways forward’ suggestions, which generally involve further research and engagement with people of other faiths. The value of this carefully written, balanced and sensitive document is that it addresses both the benefits and the dangers in inter-faith dialogue, and takes seriously the very genuine concerns that make many Christians fearful or uncomfortable about it. A resource that provides a stimulus and systematic agenda for individual or group study, at a level accessible to ordinary church members yet still thought-provoking to the theologically educated, and that is itself a model of sensitive, rational empathy, is rather remarkable, and it is a pity that it is not more widely known and used.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Wesley’s hymns are hugely important too. There is no room to consider them here.

1738, and certainly after it, he believed that true religion consists in loving God and one's neighbour with total commitment.<sup>12</sup>

Within the corpus of his writings a few have been particularly important in shaping the attitudes of Methodists first ecumenically towards other Christians, and latterly towards people of other faiths.<sup>13</sup> All of the various Methodist scholars whose views I shall consider draw from this same material, so to save repetition later it will be helpful here to outline briefly some of the seminal works.

The conviction that all may be saved—what Cracknell has called 'Arminian optimism'—is a constantly recurring theme in John Wesley's preaching and Charles Wesley's hymns, and is the motivating power that drove their tireless evangelism and social outreach. As Whaling (1995, p.17) observes, John Wesley was 'Arminian in his practicality, his experientialism, his spirituality, and his faith.'

In Wesley's understanding, salvation is not so much an event as a process, the basis for which was laid in Christ's sacrificial death long before the individual was born. Prevenient grace works in individuals to bring them to salvation as the direct work of the Holy Spirit. Those who respond to grace by faith may have full assurance of God's favour. The growing into Christian maturity, the process of sanctification, is an ongoing progress towards Christian perfection or perfect love. It must necessarily find expression in active works of charity, in abstemious living, in the dedication to God of every moment of life. 'The means of grace', such as the sacraments, prayer and the Bible can assist both to convert the unconverted and to support those striving towards perfection. Nevertheless, Wesley was always insistent that salvation comes not as a reward for good works: it is God's free, undeserved gift, received by faith. Religious practices have no merit in themselves: they are of value only insofar as they nurture real, inward religion, the love of God and of neighbour.

If God wills that all should be saved, what are the prospects for those who have lacked opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel message? This was something that troubled Wesley greatly, and he frequently comments on it. Forward (2000, p.17) has observed that Wesley wrestled over many years with the story of Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11 and his conclusion<sup>14</sup> was that those who reverence God

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<sup>12</sup> 'The perfection I hold is so far from being contrary to the doctrine of our Church, that it is exactly the same which every Clergyman prays for every Sunday: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name." I mean neither more nor less than this.' (Wesley 1872a, p.450)

<sup>13</sup> For a wider and deeper study of the relevant Wesley material, see Miles, R.L. (2000), 'John Wesley as Interreligious Resource: Would You Take This Man to an Interfaith Dialogue?', in Forward, Martin, et al (eds.), *A great commission: Christian hope and religious diversity: papers in honour of Kenneth Cracknell on his 65th birthday*. Bern & New York: Peter Lang. pp. 389-412.

<sup>14</sup> Set out in the Minutes of the 1745 Conference and in his 1754 *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*,



and act according to the best light they have are acceptable to God, even if they do not know Christ.

In a letter in 1748 Wesley (1872f, p.178) made clear this same conviction:

'The benefit of the death of Christ is not only extended to such as have the distinct knowledge of His death and sufferings, but even unto those who are inevitably excluded from this knowledge. Even these may be partakers of the benefit of His death, though ignorant of the history, if they suffer His grace to take place in their hearts, so as of wicked men to become holy.'

As Whaling (1995, p.4) observes, the view that grace is available to those who live by the light of their own dispensations anticipates the insights of such theologians as Panikkar, who maintains that Christ works unknown through other traditions.

It follows that Wesley's judgment of the religion of others was focused less upon what they claimed to believe than upon how they behaved, and what fruit of the Spirit they displayed by their manner of living. It was this that enabled him to recognise the work of the Spirit in people of other Christian traditions initially, and then, by extension, in people of other faiths.

In 1748 Wesley (1872b, p.249) told the Vicar of Shoreham that in his view 'orthodoxy, or right opinions, is at best but a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all', and that he had resolved

'to use every possible method of preventing, ... a narrowness of spirit, a party zeal, a being straitened in our own bowels; that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves.' (p.257)

In the following year Wesley wrote Sermon 38<sup>15</sup>, *A Caution Against Bigotry* (1872c), using a text in which the disciple John seeks Jesus' approval for having forbidden a strange exorcist from casting out devils in Jesus' name and is rebuked. Wesley considers any attack on evil as 'casting out devils', and lists as examples of evil-doers 'swearers, drunkards, whoremongers, adulterers, thieves, robbers, sodomites, murderers.' If Methodists see someone else 'casting out devils', they should give support, even if the exorcist is from one of those groups which both Wesley and his hearers would consider heretical.

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<sup>15</sup> In 1787-8 Wesley published eight volumes of sermons, many of which had been published earlier in a series of collections over the previous 40 years. The numbering is not consistent across all volumes. The numbering used here is that of the 1872 edition edited by Thomas Jackson, which was authorised by the Wesleyan Conference in London, and later reproduced by the photo offset process by Zondervan. There is an online version at the Wesley Center Online, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/>

The dating of the sermons is attributable to Timothy L. Smith, published in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (17, 2, Fall 1982), online at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-chronologically-ordered/>

‘What, if I were to see a Papist, an Arian, a Socinian casting out devils? If I did, I could not forbid even him, without convicting myself of bigotry. Yea, if it could be supposed that I should see a Jew, a Deist, or a Turk, doing the same, were I to forbid him either directly or indirectly, I should be no better than a bigot still.’ (p.491)

This sermon illustrates well the willingness of Wesley to recognise that what matters is that God’s will prevails when good is done and evil restrained, whoever the agent may be.

One of the most remarkable sermons is number 39, *Catholic Spirit* (Wesley 1872d)<sup>16</sup>, based on a curious text from II Kings in which the violent Jehu finds an ally in the peaceable Jehonadab, son of Rechab.<sup>17</sup> It gives Wesley the opportunity to say ‘give me thy hand’ to anyone whose heart is like his own.

‘Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? (p.493)

Catholic spirit does not require that others should change their views, but those who have it will be as open and loving to those who are different as to those with whom they agree.

‘But while he is steadily fixed in his religious principles in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus ... his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love. And he that has this is of a catholic spirit.’ (p.503)

Wesley is talking, of course, entirely within a Christian context. He takes for granted that the differences are in opinion about modes of worship and church government, not about the Lordship of Christ. It is open to debate whether he would have extended the same spirit to Hindus and Muslims in the 21st century: I, with many others, think he would.

This is Wesley at his most open-minded. He was in many respects a man of his age, and could be extremely biased and bigoted, despite his good intention to be otherwise. His view of Muslims as expressed in Sermon 63, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, displays the most astonishing prejudice.

‘A little, and but a little, above the Heathens in religion, are the Mahometans. But how far and wide has this miserable delusion spread over the face of the

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<sup>16</sup> Written Sep 8 1749

<sup>17</sup> ‘And when he was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him, and he saluted him, and said to him, Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? And Jehonadab answered: It is. If it be, give me thine hand.’ II Kings 10:15

earth! Insomuch that the Mahometans are considerably more in number (as six to five) than Christians. And by all the accounts which have any pretence to authenticity, these are also, in general, as utter strangers to all true religion as their four-footed brethren; as void of mercy as lions and tigers; as much given up to brutal lusts as bulls or goats. So that they are in truth a disgrace to human nature, and a plague to all that are under their iron yoke.’ (Wesley 1872e, p.278)<sup>18</sup>

If it seems hard on Muslims, Wesley has just as much to say in condemnation of Eastern Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and even of most Protestants.

Wesley seems to have been working his way to an understanding of the diversity of religion as representing different degrees of closeness to God. In Sermon 106, *On Faith*,<sup>19</sup> he reviews the faith of the Materialist, Heathen, Deist or Servant— and argues that faith as belief in propositions has no saving value. One needs the spirit of adoption, the Spirit of God witnessing ‘with his spirit, that he is a child of God.’ He recognises, though, that a true religious spirit is found in some outside the Christian dispensation:

‘As to the ancient Heathens, millions of them, likewise were savages. No more therefore will be expected of them, than the living up to the light they had. But many of them, especially in the civilized nations, we have great reason to hope, although they lived among Heathens, yet were quite of another spirit; being taught of God, by His inward voice, all the essentials of true religion.’ (Wesley 1872e, p.197)

There are echoes here of that earlier conviction that it is inward faith, the disposition of the heart, and the holiness of life that follows from that disposition, that matter to God, not belief in theological doctrines. Christians whose faith is not of the heart are in no better position than non-Christians. Yet Wesley clearly thinks it possible that there are heathens and Muslims who have ‘the essentials of true religion’, and though at the last he admits to a necessary agnosticism about their place in God’s kingdom, he can admit that many live holier lives than some ‘Christians’ do.

But with Heathens, Mahometans, and Jews we have at present nothing to do; only we may wish that their lives did not shame many of us that are called Christians. (p.201)

Forward (2000, p.96) analyses this sermon in detail and claims that although ‘modern readers may be unfavourably struck by this hierarchical model’, it is

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<sup>18</sup> April 2nd 1783

<sup>19</sup> April 9th 1788

‘remarkably open and generous’ for the 18th century, anticipating insights that ‘had to await explication by fine minds in the late twentieth century’.

These and many other evidences of Wesley recognising spirituality in non-Christians have encouraged Methodists today to discover a Wesleyan theological foundation for an inter-faith theology. Lott (2000, p.245) finds inspiration in John Wesley’s words, ‘[Be] grounded in love, till thou art swallowed up in love for ever and ever.’ As a young missionary in India he found an affinity between Methodism and Hinduism in the Hindu concept of bhakti,

‘that loving trust in God, which makes the divine love evoking this trust the central reality of human existence. The personal, experiential, anti-cultic nature of bhakti is very similar to what Wesley called ‘real religion’.

Other characteristics of what Whaling (1995, pp.28-9) sees as ‘premonitions’ for inter-faith work are Wesley’s ‘insatiable inquisitiveness’ about all manner of things from logic and language to popular medicine, a willingness to go wherefore the Holy Spirit leads; a deep and wide-ranging spirituality, both inward and outwardly expressed in ‘a sensitive involvement in wider society’; and a capacity for self-criticism.

Methodists do not view Wesley uncritically, or always agree with him, and there is no unanimity among Methodist scholars about how his legacy is to be understood and used to shape an inter-faith theology. My own view is that whilst Wesley’s opinions on numerous matters are outdated, the fundamental principles underlying his theology are the authentic principles of ‘true religion’ in any age, and they therefore can provide—and have provided—a firm basis both for a Christian inter-faith theology and for a fruitful dialogue with people of other faiths.

### 3.2 The Debate on Authority

The different perspectives that Methodists have on inter-faith engagement are closely related to the different views they take on the relative importance of different sources of authority in Methodism. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss the ongoing debate in detail, but some mention of it is necessary for appreciation of its relevance.

Although Wesley on occasion called himself ‘a man of one book’, he never really agreed with those Protestant Reformers who took *sola scriptura* as their slogan. Following Hooker, he regarded scripture, tradition and reason as the sources of Christian authority, and added to them experience,<sup>20</sup> by which he usually meant

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<sup>20</sup> Chapman (2010) has argued that this commonly held view is mistaken. He attributes it to Outler’s dependence on the erroneous views of Hooker’s 19th century editor, Paget, coupled with a failure to appreciate that a focus on experience was characteristic of Anglican Latitudinarianism and not an invention of Wesley’s.

the workings of God directly in the human heart. The term 'Wesleyan (or Methodist) Quadrilateral' has come into use. The American United Methodist Church, formed in 1968, has a statement in its *Book of Discipline* (2008, pp.50-51) which sums up its essence thus:

'[Wesley] believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal and corporate experience, and confirmed by reason.'

The term and what it implies has been vigorously debated ever since in the USA. Dawes (2004, p.112) has identified three issues in this debate: whether it properly represents Wesley's view and method; how the four elements are related and whether they are of equal weight; and what exactly Wesley meant by 'experience'.

Although British Methodism has not been engaged in the debate to the same degree, the issues it raises are important for British Methodists because the Quadrilateral model has been extensively used in the training of Methodist preachers. Prior to its recent closure, Wesley College in Bristol used the Quadrilateral as the structure for its ministerial training course, and since the 1980s it has also been the basis of *Faith & Worship*<sup>21</sup>, the training course for local (lay) preachers.

Some Methodists deny that the Quadrilateral has any validity. Others dislike it because it suggests that the four sources are independent and equal, whereas they would hold scripture to have primacy. Cracknell (1998) avoids using it because he regards scripture as carrying more weight than the other authorities,<sup>22</sup> though he is adamantly opposed to what he calls 'a new biblicism' and to fundamentalism.<sup>23</sup> I share Dawes' view (2004, p.114) that whilst 'the distinctions between the four constituents are far from clear-cut and a geometric model is too tidy by half' it does at least 'engage with current discussions about the authority and inspiration of the Bible and how we read it.' That scripture is 'the primary witness to the grace of God in which we stand' he concedes, but the 'primacy of scripture' perspective of one of the parties in the American debate he holds to be inadequate because 'the Bible does not interpret itself; it is not self-explanatory.' Before the Bible can be

<sup>21</sup> In Unit 1 (Barber 2003) the elements are called 'the Building Blocks of Faith'

<sup>22</sup> In a footnote on p.50 he explains why he does not believe that the 'so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral ... exists.' 'Reason is not one equal element with the other three (all three are of necessity to be handled rationally, as best we can, and experience does not mean the general experience of humankind.'

<sup>23</sup> Cracknell (*Ibid.*, p.17) identifies five 'nostrums or cure-alls' that are often suggested for what some 'see as the Methodist "malaise": a return to Biblicism, a retreat to patristic theology, or to the theology of the reformation leaders, a Wesleyan scholasticism, or assimilation to 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism and 20<sup>th</sup> century fundamentalism.

quoted and used it has to be opened, and passages have to be selected and interpreted.

It needs to be noted that John Wesley would not necessarily have supported the primacy of scripture argument, either. In a letter written in 1748 (Wesley 1872f) about Quakerism he allows at least an equal role, if not a greater one, for the Spirit.

<sup>24</sup>

Within Methodism today there is a spectrum of views on the authority of scripture ranging from fundamentalism to an extreme radicalism. Not surprisingly, attitudes towards other religions are closely related to people's views of scripture. This will be evident as I turn now to the contribution of some theologians of inter-faith dialogue.

## **4. Approaches to Inter-faith Theology: Cracknell and Ariarajah**

### **4.1 Kenneth Cracknell: Christology is the Key**

Kenneth Cracknell is an international giant in the field of inter-faith dialogue<sup>25</sup>. That he is also a Methodist minister is no coincidence: his catholicism is deeply rooted in his Methodist theology, whose central themes he expounds in one of his later books, *Our Doctrines: Methodist theology as classical Christianity* (Cracknell 1998).<sup>26</sup> In a chapter headed 'Evangelical Arminianism and Salvation Optimism' Cracknell

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<sup>24</sup> Wesley quotes the correspondent, Thomas Whitehead, and responds thus (p.178):

' "Yet the Scriptures are not the principal ground of all truth and knowledge, nor the adequate, primary rule of faith and manners. Nevertheless they are a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit. By Him the saints are led into all truth. Therefore the Spirit is the first and principal leader."

If by these words--"The Scriptures are not the principal ground of truth and knowledge, nor the adequate, primary rule of faith and manners" --be only meant that "the Spirit is our first and principal leader," here is no difference between Quakerism and Christianity.

But there is great impropriety of expression. For though the Spirit is our principal leader, yet He is not our rule at all; the Scriptures are the rule whereby He leads us into all truth. Therefore, only talk good English; call the Spirit our "guide," which signifies an intelligent being, and the Scriptures our "rule," which signifies something used by an intelligent being, and all is plain and clear.'

<sup>25</sup> Cracknell is a Methodist minister, who taught in Nigeria with the Methodist Church Overseas Mission Division. From 1978 to 1987 he served as the first Director for Interfaith Relations in the British Council of Churches. For eight years he held a Chair at Wesley College Cambridge, followed by a Chair at Brite Divinity School, Texas. He has worked for the World Council of Churches through much of this time. He is now retired.

<sup>26</sup> This began as the Cliff College annual lecture on 'Classical Christianity' given during the Methodist Conference in Scarborough in 1998, by which time Cracknell was a Professor in Theology and Mission in Texas Christian University.

explores the most fundamental conviction of John Wesley and of Methodism: that salvation<sup>27</sup> is for everyone, and comes about solely through the operation of divine grace. Grace, for Wesley, says Cracknell, 'is the very life of God within human beings and as such is all pervasive and certainly prevenient' (p.63), whether they know it or not. Cracknell holds this doctrine to be invaluable to pastors who have to deal with people lost in self-deprecation and self-contempt, but of equal importance to missionaries concerned with the fatalistic emphases of some eastern traditions, including 'those whose spirits are subdued by karmic fatalism or the *kismet* of Islamic folk religion' (p.64).

The chapter on 'The Catholic Spirit and Religious Reality', though short, is seminal in identifying two other elements essential to a Wesleyan inter-faith attitude: what Cracknell calls 'a realistic common sense in discerning both goodness outside Christianity and evil within it', and 'an incipient recognition of ... a Logos Christology' (p.75)—a concept with which he deals in greater depth in his later books.

In *Towards a New Relationship* (1986) Cracknell brought together material he had published during his years of working for British Council of Churches.<sup>28</sup> The Wesleyan roots of his theology are evident also throughout this book, and made explicit in a chapter 'Towards a New Spirituality', where Cracknell outlines the key points in John Wesley's sermon on Catholic Spirit and says,

'What he wrote of the universal catholic love applying to all human beings is surely seminal, but like him, I also hold fast to what I know of Jesus. I am open to God at work everywhere but committed to Jesus through whom I know God.' (p.133)

It is interesting to find Cracknell drawing as freely and openly upon his Methodist theological resources when clearly writing for a broadly Christian audience as he does when writing specifically for Methodists. He thus endeavours to make a distinctively Methodist contribution to a wider debate. He is evidently conscious

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<sup>27</sup> Understood as 'a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health' to quote Wesley. *Ibid.*, p.31

<sup>28</sup> During his time as secretary of the BCC Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths Cracknell worked with others to develop a response to the 1979 World Council of Churches' *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. Perceiving that biblical support for interfaith dialogue was crucial for Christians of all churches, he undertook an extensive analysis of the material in both the Old and New Testaments that is relevant to the issues, which was eventually published in several forms. Some of his thinking went into his BCC paper *Why Dialogue?* (1979) and from there into the seminal BCC document *Relationships with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain* (1981). His 1986 book *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faith* gathers together material from previous books, lectures, essays and articles, and endeavours to demonstrate the need for inter-faith dialogue, to provide a biblical and theological justification for it, and then to examine the ethical and spiritual issues that such dialogue entails.

that many in the wider audience need to be persuaded scripturally, theologically and rationally that dialogue with people of other faiths is legitimate, permissible, and consistent with gospel values. One senses at times that he feels himself walking on eggshells. He clearly desires to reassure readers that inter-faith dialogue does not require them to weaken or abandon their Christian faith, compromise their integrity, or involve them in an idolatrous syncretism. No reader can doubt that Cracknell brings to his task an impressive weight of biblical, theological and historical scholarship, not only in Christianity but in other faiths too, as well as an immense amount of personal experience, and this he deploys systematically, logically, persuasively to set out and support his argument.

Cracknell examines a number of quotations from Calvin, Luther and Wesley, who share the view that all who are without Christ are condemned,<sup>29</sup> concluding that it is exceedingly difficult to break away from the Augustinian, Calvinistic, Lutheran or Wesleyan entail in our thought patterns; yet these Western forms of theologizing are really long ‘diversions away from a more authentic tradition of Christian understanding’ found in the New Testament, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Zwingli and the renaissance humanists, Schleiermacher and Maurice, etc, who

‘widened horizons to enable Christians to see what their faith had to say about the unity and goodness of creation, the purposes of God in history, and about the universality of the action of the Divine word.’<sup>30</sup>

We can break the entail of the past and treat ‘the opinions of even an Augustine, or a Calvin, or a Luther, or a Wesley as conditioned by their own circumstances and limitations in their knowledge and experience.’ (Cracknell 1986, p.16)

Some of the damaging effects of that entail may be seen in Christian approaches to mission. Looking at theological presuppositions of Christian missionary activity from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cracknell observes two dominant themes: that other religions are false, and that Christianity is ‘destined very soon to triumph over all these false gods’ (p.19). The tendency of missionary discourse, and of hymns sung by British congregations, is ‘to see everything overseas in terms of spiritual

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<sup>29</sup> Luther says, ‘For whatever is outside faith (*extra fidem*) is idolatry.’ (Cracknell, *Ibid.*, p.11)  
Wesley: ‘Every man born into the world is a rank idolater. ... We do not, like the idolatrous heathens, worship molten or graven images. We do not bow down to the stock of a tree or the work of our own hands.’ (Sermon XLIV).( Cracknell, *Ibid.*, p.12)

<sup>30</sup> In *Resisting the Tyranny of Genesis Three* Cracknell (2005b) has followed Maurice in deploring the dominating part played by the story of Adam and Eve’s fall in Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies which leads ultimately to an extremely pessimistic predestinarianism. He finds pervading the writings of the Wesleys a doctrine of creation that anticipates Maurice’s universalism, which focuses on God ‘as renewing the whole creation, gathering everything into one in Christ’ (*Ibid.*,p.9). “‘No man living”, said Wesley,”is without some preventing grace, and every degree of grace is a degree of life.” Cracknell (*Ibid.*,p.9)



darkness', missionaries being 'so to speak, programmed to see the darkest and basest side of the religions and cultures among which they ministered' (p.20).

How can we break away from this legacy and start again? Cracknell's answer is to look at the concept of dialogue to be found in the New Testament. In a fascinating study of Paul's work at Ephesus as described by Luke in Acts 19:8-10, Cracknell reflects on the significance of the methods Paul employed to 'dialogue' about the kingdom of God first with Jews in the synagogue, then with gentiles in the 'school of Tyrannus', a teaching place for Greek philosophy (p.27). He understands Luke's view to be 'that the Christian movement was being prepared here for the thrust into the Hellenistic world whereby Christianity out-thought all the pagan philosophies' (p.28). He observes three other activities of Paul at Ephesus in Acts 19: an 'ecumenical dialogue' with disciples of Jesus who knew only the baptism of John (vv.1-7), attacking the spurious and false religion of the sons of Sceva (vv.13-19), and the 'unmasking' of the economic basis of the cult of Diana (vv.23-41). Dialogue, he concludes, 'is misunderstood if it is presented as the only way of mission or if it is represented as being complacent and tolerant in the face of evil nonsense.' But Paul shows us that

'dialogue means meeting the other person on his or her own terms and really attending to what they say, believe, feel. We also see that it is a way of seeking to share persuasively the best of our own conviction. (p.29)

In the light of this understanding, Cracknell examines Paul's address to the philosophers on the Areopagus (Acts 17) and finds it not, as some have claimed, a failed effort at preaching philosophically that led Paul to abandon philosophy thereafter (p.30), but rather as a successful dialogical engagement with Greek philosophy, which may have led Paul in later years to deliberately 'spend his valuable time in just such a centre as the School of Tyrannus' (p.31).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> There is much wisdom in this suggestion, yet it not altogether convincing. Paul's intention may have been to demonstrate empathy, but in his address as Luke reports it he commits at least four blunders that are major hindrances to successful inter-faith dialogue. Firstly, his opening observation that the men of Athens are religious [scrupulous, superstitious] because he has seen an altar to an Unknown God may well have been seen, not as a helpful contextualizing introduction but rather as an insult by the Stoics, who would not have associated themselves with superstitions of the popular cults, and as naïve by the Epicureans, who spurned all notions that the gods had any relevance for human life. Secondly, in describing the images of deities as 'objects of worship' Paul betrays that misunderstanding of the nature and role of images that runs through the Bible and creates a hindrance to inter-faith understanding. It is highly unlikely that any but the most unintelligent worshippers would have worshipped the image itself rather than the invisible deity which the image symbolizes. Thirdly, his declaration that his audience is ignorant is unforgivably rude. (Paul's education, as far as we know, was that of a yeshiva student, and probably extremely narrow. The Court of the Areopagus, we may surmise, comprised the intellectual elite of Athens—a sort of Oxford Union—who would have been liberally educated across a range of disciplines, not the least of which were logic and rhetoric.) Fourthly, it is unwise in an interfaith context to assume that all members of an audience think alike. Paul's quotations from Greek philosophers may have built some bridges with the Stoics, but he has nothing to say

The range of biblical material that Cracknell reviews is far too extensive even to summarise here. Suffice it to say that he is able to demonstrate that there is an abundance of material in both the Old Testament and the New to justify Christians in believing that God's work is not only among Jews and Christians.<sup>32</sup>

Part of the strength of Cracknell's approach is that he demonstrates his openness to learn from other traditions by writing in positive terms of the value of what people from other traditions have contributed to the development of dialogue, and in this he is wide-ranging. In a chapter on 'A Pluralist and Inclusivist Theology in the Making' he reviews appreciatively the work of philosopher John Hick, the United Church of Canada's Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the Roman Catholic priest Arnulf Camps, the Conservative Evangelical Sir Norman Anderson, a Bishop of Guildford, David Brown, the Virginian Professor Donald Dawe, and two Orthodox Bishops, Georges Khodr and Paul Gregorios. Whilst his inter-faith theology is rooted in the soil of Methodism, it is nurtured and enriched by what it receives from many other Christian sources, even from people with whom Cracknell would strongly differ on many aspects of faith and practice. By demonstrating that a dialogue between Christians of different traditions is illuminating and fruitful, he opens up the prospect of success for a similar dialogue between religions. He thus provides a model which could have been applied more widely if he had explored in a similar way ideas from representatives of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

'... it is an inclusivist Christology that is needed if we are to be faithful as Christians in an age of religious pluralism.' (*Ibid.*, p.68)

Cracknell follows another Methodist, Geoffrey Parrinder, in believing that two New Testament verses in particular are 'the only ones that the majority of Christians have in their repertoire when they are forced to think about the existence of other religions and, with them, the whole activity of God in his dealings with humankind' (p.60). These are Acts 14:12, 'there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved', and John 14:6, 'no one comes to the Father but by me.' He agrees with Parrinder that these texts must not be dismissed as inauthentic or explained away: 'they are both central to the Christian tradition, and express the profoundest commitment to the Jesus who is acknowledged as Lord and Master in that tradition' (p.69). Rather he welcomes them as of inestimable value, and argues for them to be understood inclusively as setting forth a christology

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that would appeal to the Epicureans. Paul's most successful dialogue may have been that which took place before he was invited to say his piece to the gathered assembly. The speech, though, reflects very little understanding of the depth, diversity and sophistication of the religions and philosophies that Paul is rejecting. Cracknell fails to mention any of these things.

<sup>32</sup> Cracknell insists that the Christian Church went far astray when it regarded the covenant with Israel as superseded, with the Church taking the place of Israel as the people of God and the only source of salvation. There must be a repudiation of every form of anti-semitism.

that is ‘all-embracing, cosmic and universal in its scope, illuminating all the processes of creation and history and human creativity in culture, arts, music, science and literature’, encompassed in a ‘christology of the Word, the *Logos* of God’ (p.70).

This, perhaps, is rather over-egging it, for he can do no more than assert that the doctrine has such implications, not prove and illustrate them.

Then, in what Brown (1987, p.274) calls the ‘most brilliant contribution’ in a book that is ‘a reverent and articulate exposition of the inclusivist thesis’, Cracknell offers four inclusivist readings of John 14:6, all of which he claims have merit, but none of which conveys all that may be read out of this text. The most compelling of these is a reading that sets the verse in the context of the *Logos* doctrine in John 1 and what Cracknell sees as the missionary purpose of John’s Gospel (*Ibid.*, p.99). Ranging widely across theologians from Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria to Pittenger and Hick, he maintains that John’s Gospel plainly requires us to draw a clear distinction between the eternal *Logos*, the second person of the Trinity on the one hand, and Jesus of Nazareth on the other. It is the *Logos* that pre-exists, not Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>33</sup>

‘We may speak ourselves with good and generous faith as we recognize the ‘coming to the Father’ of those who stand outside the Christian tradition. We must respond with grace and gratitude to the presence of truth and wisdom in the other religious traditions of humankind.’ (p.105)

He adds that we can hardly suppose that the author of the Fourth Gospel thinks the relationship that exists between human beings created in and through the eternal Word, the *Logos* ‘has come to an end because the Word has become flesh and lived among us’ (p.107).

Although little of this is original, Cracknell’s detailed analysis of the text in its contexts, his assembling and organizing of the interpretations of others, and his systematic setting forth of the argument and its implications with lucidity are typical of his thorough, compelling and winsome scholarship.

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<sup>33</sup> Cracknell (*Ibid.*, p.105) quotes in particular and with evident approval John Hick’s very clear and succinct words:

‘If selecting from our Christian language, we call God-acting-towards-mankind the *Logos*, then we must say that *all* salvation, within all religions, is the work of the *Logos*, and that under their various images and symbols men in different cultures and faiths may encounter the *Logos* and find salvation. But what we cannot say is that all who are saved are saved solely and exclusively by Jesus of Nazareth. The life of Jesus was one point at which the *Logos* – that is God-in-relation-to-man – has acted; and it is the only point that savingly concerns the Christian; but we are not called upon nor are we entitled to make the negative assertion that the *Logos* has not acted and is not acting anywhere else in human life.’ (Citation from Hick, John (1980), *God Has Many Names*. n.p.:Macmillan, p.75)

Cracknell is less convincing in his attempts to read Acts 4:12 in an inclusive way. He suggests that it might be translated ‘there is no healing in any one else at all ... there is no other name ... by which we must be healed’, admitting that ‘the usual translation is more likely’ (p.108); that it is not a ‘general statement of universal validity’ but one ‘appealing to the Jewish leaders that such a healing is reason for them to accept their Messiah’; and that Acts 4:12 ‘might help us to think of ways in which the grace and love of God operate in the world without being named at all’ (p.109) — which evades the problem.

Cracknell’s strategy is to try to win over Christians who are not persuaded that scripture supports an acceptance of the validity of other faiths. His unwillingness to challenge the exclusivist claims based on these verses witnesses to his desire to ‘be all things to all people’, but it can appear to be a disingenuous attempt to evade the issues.<sup>34</sup>

## 4.2 Wesley Ariarajah: The Ministry of Dialogue

Cracknell, as we have seen, regards scripture as the primary source, whilst valuing and drawing upon tradition, reason and experience as valuable secondary sources. A different approach, which puts experience more to the fore, is that of S. Wesley Ariarajah, born and brought up as a Methodist in Sri Lanka, and theologically educated in India, America and Britain. He served as a Methodist minister and as a lecturer in the History of Religions and New Testament in Sri Lanka before joining the staff of the World Council of Churches in 1981. He led the Council’s Dialogue sub-unit, then in 1992 became the Deputy General Secretary of the WCC. Since 1997 he has been Professor of Ecumenical Theology at Drew University. Such a

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<sup>34</sup> Price (1991, p.118) observes that Cracknell’s treatment of John 14:6 is a combination of humility and dogmatism. Heath (1990, p.222), from a conservative perspective, rather unfairly accuses Cracknell of ignoring syntax and context, and is unpersuaded by his reasoning since Cracknell rejects the divine inspiration of the Bible.

The themes explored in these earlier books by Cracknell are taken up and developed later in *In Good and Generous Faith* (Cracknell 2005a), which was welcomed by Ariarajah (2006, p.401) as ‘a must-text for all those who teach and learn about Christian response to religious pluralism.’ Cracknell’s Methodist theology inevitably undergirds his writing, though not so visibly as in earlier books as he is here writing on a wider canvas. The principal new element in his thinking that is relevant to our purpose, is in a chapter on ‘All the Peoples of God’ where he takes issue with the concept of Heilsgeschichte as set out by Cullmann and others, which sees God’s purposes as focused almost exclusively in the salvation first of Israel, then of the Christian Church. This, Cracknell claims, leaves out the greater part of the human race (pp.2-5). Cracknell finds what he calls ‘a salvation history for religious pluralism’ in the biblical narrative of creation, the universal covenant underlying the early chapters of Genesis, and particularly the story of Noah and his descendants (p.10). His treatment of the Tower of Babel story brings out God’s intention to scatter humanity and promote diversity. The theme of universality is then developed with typical meticulous attention to the Hebrew and Greek texts, through the ‘nations’ in the Psalms and later prophets, the writings, the wisdom tradition and key passages in Acts and in Revelation. Cracknell demonstrates by the use of an abundance of biblical material that a thread runs through both testaments that acknowledges true spirituality and true worship of God in people outside the covenant with Israel but inside God’s covenant with humanity.

breadth of background, coupled with his own unique gifts, gives a widely-respected richness and authenticity to Ariarajah's contribution to inter-faith understanding.

The title of Ariarajah's *Not Without My Neighbour*<sup>35</sup> reflects a deep concern which troubled Ariarajah himself and many of his Sri Lankan neighbours in his youth. Having grown up in a Methodist family in close friendship with a devout Hindu family, whose children worshipped in each others' households, he knew them as 'a family rooted in God's love' (Ariarajah 1999, p.2). As a student at boarding school, and as a young adult in church study groups, he met a hardline Christian evangelicalism that taught that Christianity alone offered salvation, that Hindus 'as "idol worshippers" and "superstitious"' would go to Hell, and that mission to convert them to Christ was therefore essential and urgent. Ariarajah felt 'it would be unfair on the part of God to receive us, the Christian family into heaven, and send our next-door Hindu neighbours to hell' (p.4). Many Christians in Asia, he believes, appreciate the spiritual life of their neighbours of other faiths and would not want to be in a 'heaven' to which their neighbours are denied admission (p.5). Here, then, is a theology whose origin lies primarily in experience, and in a perception of 'real, inward religion' as Wesley would have understood it.

In *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* Ariarajah (1985, pp.16-17) examines a range of key scriptural passages that provide strong support for inter-faith dialogue, often in surprising ways. He describes the story of Cornelius's conversion as 'the story of the conversion of Peter.' For Peter to learn the lesson Jonah learned, that 'there is no need to "channel" God to people ... God has direct access to people', God had first to 'convert Peter to his way of looking at humanity.'

Ariarajah (*Ibid.*, p.20) collates the key 'exclusive verses' of the Bible, as he calls them, instancing John 3:16, 18, 14:5-6, Acts 1-12, Hebrews 10:9-10 and 1 Timothy 2:3-6. He observes that 'it is dangerous to develop a whole theology or missiology on the basis of a few verses'<sup>36</sup> and contrasts the picture of Jesus portrayed in the Synoptics with that of the 'exclusive verses'. The key difference is that the Synoptic Jesus is God-centred, never calls himself Son of God, but son of man, makes no claim to divinity and challenges others 'to live lives that are totally turned towards God' (p.21). Jesus also 'seems to place enormous emphasis on the actual life lived and the actual attitudes held, so much more indeed than on what is said or believed' (p.22).

Ariarajah distinguishes then between the 'Christ of faith' on whom St Paul and the Letter to the Hebrews are focused, primarily interested in the 'meaning' of Jesus'

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<sup>35</sup> Harris (2001, p.91) regards this book as 'a robust and helpful aid for those involved in interreligious dialogue, a challenging read for those who are not.'

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21. Arthur (1998, p.254) holds that Ariarajah has effectively discredited the strategy 'which slams the door of intolerance, if not irreverence, in the face of any genuine effort at dialogue, and then bolts it fast by a resolute focusing ... on a few isolated verses of the Bible.'

death and resurrection, and the Jesus of the Synoptics, 'primarily a teacher' (p.22), with John half-way between them 'in his attempt to bring out the meaning through interpreting the events in the life of Jesus and his teachings' (p.23). These statements of faith about Jesus the Christ 'describe their meaning in the context of faith, and have no meaning outside the community of faith' (p.23). They were not definitive. The community of faith struggled with many different titles and terms to try to explain what God had done in Jesus. (p.23)

'The claims that the Christ is the only way, the only Saviour, the one Mediator, etc., are made in the language of faith, and should be understood within the context of the church's faith-commitment. The excessive emphasis on *only* is part of the early Christian polemics against the Jewish people from whom the Christians were growing out as a separate community.' (p.24)

The logic of the circumstances and their own convictions led the early Christians 'to make claims for Jesus which he would not perhaps have made for himself' (p.24). Ariarajah observes in Christian theology

'a significant shift from the theocentric attitude that characterized Jesus' own teaching ... Gradually Jesus comes to the centre and God is pushed to the periphery. God is not celebrated as the saviour, but Christ is the saviour. Our new life is rooted not in God but in Christ.' (p.24)

Ariarajah holds that 'truth in the absolute sense is beyond anyone's grasp, and we should not say that the Christian claims about Jesus are absolute because St John, St Paul and the scriptures make them. There will be others who make similar claims based on authorities they set for themselves. Such claims to absolute truth lead only to intolerance and arrogance and to unwarranted condemnation of each others' faith-perspectives' (p.27). The claim that Christianity can have certainty because it depends not on human knowledge but the revelation given by God does not hold, because most religions – like Islam and Hinduism – claim to have revelations. 'Revelation itself is part of the faith-claim, and its validity also has to do with the faith of the community.'(p.28)

For Ariarajah the most compelling scriptural basis for inter-faith dialogue lies in its affirmation of God as the creator of all peoples, whose love extends to all humanity.. This was affirmed in the WCC's Baar Declarations, in which Ariarajah was centrally involved, and which echoes Wesley's Arminianist universalism. In *Not Without My Neighbour* (p.115) Ariarajah claims that 'an undeveloped theology of creation lies at the heart of the Protestant inability to deal with plurality.' It is inconceivable that the God whose love and compassion have been revealed in Christ would not have a relationship with those whom God has created (p.116).

Ariarajah tends to see mission and dialogue as distinct activities. He is emphatically in favour of what he calls 'dialogue ministry' or 'the ministry of dialogue', a term he claims to have coined.<sup>37</sup>

Ariarajah expresses his concern about the attitude of Christians who oppose dialogue because of their 'excessive obsession with "converting the whole world to Christ"', but even more about conservative groups who support dialogue only as a tool of mission. This sends mixed messages to people of other faiths, who are not sure about Christian intentions. (p.74) He abhors the ambiguity of the late Lesslie Newbigin, who affirmed both dialogue and traditional mission, insisting that 'both are possible and needed, and that they must be separated', so that at times he was 'in dialogue' with his Hindu neighbour and at other times 'in mission', which Ariarajah considers confusing for the Hindu. (p.75)

Criticising the attitude of those committed more to mission than to dialogue, Ariarajah claims that 'missiology is perhaps the one area of theology where there are too many loose ends' and asks some very pointed questions (p.76):

'Why are we in mission? Is it because God is present with our neighbour or because God is absent? If God is absent in the life of our neighbour, what do we make of our belief that God loves all people and that they live and move and have their being in God? If God is present, what is the relationship of our message to the religious life of our neighbours? ... What is mission about? Is it about discipleship, healing, new life or "salvation"? If it is about salvation, what constitutes salvation, and what are the signs of being saved?' (p.125)

Addressing the question whether people of different religions can or should worship together, Ariarajah suggests that Christians have more problems with this than Hindus do, and that their hesitancy stems from theological, biblical, liturgical, cultural and psychological sources. Theologically, some Christians 'live with a "functional polytheism", assuming that the Hindu and the Muslim are praying to "other gods"' (p.28). Biblically, 'few Christians take the trouble ... to understand the meaning of images in Hinduism and Buddhism' (or, indeed, in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions' (p.29). The psychological block tends to apply in the third world in relation to traditions that Christians or their ancestors "'left behind" to follow the "true faith" that was presented by the missionary or Christian evangelist. If they had believed that God listened to the prayer of the Hindu they might not have converted to Christianity' (p.30). Fear of compromise or syncretism is part of this, and issues of identity are particularly important. Places of worship and the way in which each tradition worships are 'secure sources of identity', which can be

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<sup>37</sup> 'As far as I am aware, I was the first person who, however unconsciously, brought the words "ministry" and "dialogue" together. It may simply be part of my Methodist heritage, but I think there is more to it. ... Dialogue is a "service" aimed at facilitating life in community; it is a ministry,.' *Ibid.*, pp.83-4

particularly important to migrant groups, who reproduce as much of their worship life as they can in their new environments (p.31).

Ariarajah, like Wesley, is agnostic about whether there is 'salvation' outside Christianity, but feels bound to affirm the witness of Hindu and Muslim neighbours to the importance of God in their lives.

'Since I believe in one God who is the source and sustenance of all life, the Hindu and Muslim witness has to become a part of my theological data. Without it I cannot think theologically in a pluralistic world.' (p.123)

### **4.3 The Different Perspectives of Cracknell and Ariarajah**

Neither Cracknell nor Ariarajah overtly uses the Quadrilateral framework of scripture, tradition, reason and experience, yet these are evidently the sources upon which they draw. There is pragmatism in their dependence on experience and reason that allows them to be critical of Christian tradition and of scripture even whilst they demonstrate the utmost respect for them. Ariarajah is more radical than Cracknell in this regard, being more willing to set aside biblical teaching that he regards as no longer relevant in a modern context. He is also much less committed than Cracknell to the defence of a high Christology, placing more emphasis on the importance of a doctrine of creation. What they have in common, arising from their common Methodist heritage, is a recognition that where the fruit of the Spirit is brought forth, the Spirit must be at work, and 'real religion', as Wesley understood it, should be welcomed wherever it is seen, under whatever name. This is radically different from the exclusivism of Barth, which Ariarajah has criticised in strong terms (Ariarajah n.d.). He speaks of the Barth-Kraemer theology of mission 'which entirely occupies the protestant churches today' as one that 'is based on the truth of our religious tradition and the falsity of other religious traditions.' Yet those who argue this way, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has said, have not met and experienced in depth the religious life of the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim. 'What is it,' Ariarajah (n.d., unpagged) asks, 'about the Christian faith that we can't handle the reality that other people have a life with God and that God has a life with other people? Why is it that other people should be wrong in order for us to be right?' One hears echoes of Wesley's sermon against bigotry here.

Cracknell and Ariarajah are internationally recognised and respected major contributors to the debate on inter-faith dialogue. The differences between them are on the whole less significant than the broad measure of agreement in their common passion for inter-faith dialogue. Cracknell conservatively leans towards an inclusive Logos theology derived from Johannine and Pauline Christology:



Ariarajah, more radically, towards a pluralism based on respect for other people's faith claims. Both have an immaculate Methodist pedigree.

## 5. Other Methodist Perspectives

The spectrum of Methodist views on inter-faith dialogue is much wider, though, than those represented by Cracknell and Ariarajah. It is therefore necessary, albeit more briefly, to review some of the alternative approaches or refinements advocated by other Methodist scholars.

### 5.1 An Evangelical Standpoint

Inderjit Bhogal (2008, p.13), a Christian of Sikh origin<sup>38</sup>, reflects on how Jesus' 'manifesto' in Luke 4:16-21 is often read for its message of good news for the poor without its sequel in which Jesus meets mob violence for mentioning God's favour shown to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian.

'Jesus risked his life for proclaiming God's care that includes people who are considered to be outside the Covenant. It is as risky as ever to proclaim a God who is inclusive, and to proclaim God's call to inclusiveness.'

Bhogal speaks of his experience during his year as President of the Methodist Conference, when he received much mail and a deal of personal abuse (p.26) from evangelical Christians for supporting pluralistic inclusiveness. He describes harassment and abuse after preaching at 'a large festival gathering at a Methodist institution' by some twenty or thirty people who threw John 14:6 at him as though this one proof text were a decisive argument. His own view of it is that it speaks of how

'God draws people to God's own self, in God's own myriad ways ... in many tongues ... enriching dialogue ... not to be used to exclude people of other faiths from an experience of God.' (p.24)

Bhogal reminds us that within British Methodism, and even more within American Methodism, there is a significant evangelical movement that embraces a bible-based exclusivist approach to world religions. Methodist Evangelicals Together, for example, is a movement within the Methodist Church that aims to 'uphold the authority of scripture.'<sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup> One of its moderate scholars is Stephen Skuce, Academic

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<sup>38</sup> A Methodist minister and former President of the Methodist Conference, Bhogal is the former CEO of the Yorkshire & Humber Faiths Forum, and currently Leader of the Corrymeela Community. He was awarded an OBE for his interfaith work in 2005.

<sup>39</sup> The Mission Statement of Methodist Evangelicals Together (n.d.) is: "Our vision is to fulfil 'Our Calling' and the 'Priorities' of the Methodist Church as we:- uphold the authority of Scripture; seek Spiritual Renewal; Pray for Revival; Spread Scriptural Holiness; Affirm the centrality of the Cross of Jesus as God's unique act of atonement."

Dean at Cliff College,<sup>41</sup> who holds (2009, p.77) that engagement with people of other faiths is a missionary imperative (though not solely for evangelical purposes), and would encourage Methodists to engage in inter-faith activity and supports the hospitable use of Methodist buildings for inter-faith work, though not for non-Christian worship.

‘Wesleyans cannot withdraw from an evangelistic inter-faith engagement and remain true to their traditions and understanding.’

Skuce acknowledges the significance of the contributions of Parrinder, Cracknell, Ariarajah and others, but holds that there is not as yet ‘a received Wesleyan theology of religions’ (*Ibid.*, p.74). Sketching the outline of what such a theology might be, Skuce emphasises the importance of prevenient grace, yet denies that this is sufficient:

‘Wesleyans can engage with the peoples of the world with the understanding that God is already at work and in a relationship with all. Yet this is not necessarily a saving relationship. There can be a positive awareness of the work of God beyond Christianity while still understanding the need to offer Christ so that all may have the opportunity to enter into a full and saving relationship with God through Christ.’ (p.75)

Yet there is some self-contradiction in his position, for on soteriology he says:

‘The salvation of people who are not Christians is a matter on which contemporary Wesleyans can remain agnostic ... it is for God alone to pronounce on a person’s spiritual state’, (p.76)

a view which is more consistent with Wesley’s and which must at least admit the possibility of non-Christians having a ‘full and saving relationship’.

Skuce considers (2011, p.10) that ‘the religious pluralist position does not stand up in light of Christian tradition, revelation or philosophy.’ He draws on a range of Old Testament passages that suggest that God is in relationship with other people than the Israelites, and holds that ‘it is the God of mission who has a Church and we join in where God is already at work’ (p.11). He asserts (p.11) without any qualification: ‘Scripture also teaches us that there is no way to God apart from Jesus (John 14:6), and that there is no other name given to us for salvation (Acts 4:12).’ He reads the Cornelius story as indicating that, though Cornelius clearly is in relationship with God, it was not a saving relationship, ‘as Peter still needed to bring to Cornelius a

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<sup>40</sup> Other Methodist evangelicals can be found, *inter alia*, in the Wesleyan Reform Union, Independent Methodist Churches, the Free Methodist Church, and the Evangelical Methodist Church in the USA.

<sup>41</sup> An Irish Methodist minister, Skuce has been a missionary in Sri Lanka, and wrote his PhD on Irish Methodist inter-faith understanding. Cliff College is a Methodist institution that specialises in training lay people for mission and evangelism.

message “by which he and his household might be saved” (Acts 11:14)’ (p.12). Skuce reads the story of Paul at Athens likewise as recognizing some religious truth among the Athenians, ‘but with the need for a saving relationship through Jesus as a necessary further development’ (p.12).

‘We can affirm that many individual Muslims, Jews, Hindus etc can be in a close relationship with God ... But we also are clear that without knowing Christ there cannot be a saving relationship, and so we seek to win the world.’ (p.12)

In this view Skuce is clearly at odds with Wesley, who, as we have seen, wrote of ‘the benefit of the death of Christ’ being extended to ‘those who are inevitably excluded from ... knowledge [of that death].’ If the ‘benefit’ does not mean salvation, it is difficult to know what it might mean.

How does Skuce come to such a view? It would seem that everything rests on John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. We should note, however, that Skuce’s reading of John 14:6 is at odds with the text itself, which does not say that the way to God is through knowing Christ: it can only be made to mean that by conflating it with Acts 4:12, which represents the view of Peter before the Cornelius event changed his attitude. The text of John 14:6 itself claims no more than that it is through God that people come to God.

It is difficult to understand the concept of a God who would ‘save’ those who have made a profession of faith in Christ but not ‘save’ those who are in relationship with him and have not heard of Christ. There is a pettiness about such a view that borders on absurdity. A God so arbitrary, so unjust, so incompetent could be feared but never loved.

## 5.2 A Fundamentalist View

An even more extremely exclusivist view is that of Ajith Fernando.<sup>42</sup> Like Ariarajah, Fernando grew up as a Methodist in a multi-faith environment in Sri Lanka. His mother had converted to Christianity from Buddhism. Whereas Ariarajah’s experience of Hindu spirituality led him to reject Christian evangelicalism and embrace pluralism, Fernando has gone in the opposite direction. Fernando (2001, p.75) explicitly rejects Ariarajah’s idea that the Bible expresses the faith and experiences of its writers rather than presenting objective truths. For Fernando ‘the scriptures are a unique revelation from God, containing objective and absolute truth.’

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<sup>42</sup> National Director of Youth for Christ Sri Lanka since 1976. A lay preacher of the Methodist Church in Nugegoda, some of his postgraduate theological research was undertaken at the United Methodist Asbury Theological Seminary, which has subsequently awarded him an honorary doctorate.

‘We [‘Biblical Christians’] believe that God has revealed truth to humanity in the Scriptures and supremely in Jesus. This truth is without error and is the only way for the salvation of all peoples all over the world.’ (*Ibid.*, p.15)

Fernando therefore engages in dialogue not in any expectation of receiving any benefit but in order to create opportunity to bear witness to Christ and to attempt to convert the other. He sees Paul’s address at Athens as a model for contextualised Christian evangelism, analysing it in some detail, and returning to it several times in his book. Whereas Cracknell finds in it encouragement for dialogue, Fernando sees it as a direct, courageous, confrontation of the Athenians with the inadequacy of their concept of God, their temples, their worship, their ‘idols’, and of what is required for salvation. ‘Part of the task of persuasion is to show others where they are wrong in their beliefs’(p.38).

It is notable that Fernando does not appeal to the Wesleyan roots of his thinking as Cracknell and Ariarajah do. Nor is this surprising, for there is little of the catholic spirit evident in his thinking. One cannot say that tradition, reason and experience have no weight at all as sources of authority for him, but he makes no appeal to them. Scripture is ultimately his only authority, and this he reads very conservatively, somewhat literalistically, and with a conviction of its inner harmony (p.178). He refers to Thangaraj’s idea that one should not build a theology from a few proof texts, and rejects it, firstly because he is ‘suspicious of an approach that permits incompatible truths to be found in different places in the Bible, but secondly because he holds that ‘all the parts of both segments of Scripture point to the absolute uniqueness of God’s way as opposed to other ways’(p.179). He sees no prospect of salvation for anyone who does not confess faith in Christ, so he rejects even inclusivist understandings of Christology. His extreme conservatism, bordering on fundamentalism, is derived from a general Protestant evangelicalism that would be more recognisable outside Methodism than within it, but which has to be acknowledged as a view that would be held by many Methodist evangelicals in Britain, some of whom remain uneasily within the mainstream Methodist Church, others of whom have departed to form independent evangelical Methodist churches linked to the Evangelical Alliance.

### 5.3 A Response from Scriptural Pluralism

Israel Selvananayagam<sup>43</sup>, from a similar Sri Lankan background, however, is not led to the same conclusions as Fernando. His coverage of the biblical material is deeper and more wide-ranging and more critical. He finds evidence of syncretism both in Old Testament and New Testament religion. ‘In fact no religion is an

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<sup>43</sup> Presbyterian of the Church of South India, who has taught at Wesley College, Bristol, and at the ecumenical Queen’s Foundation in Birmingham, where he was Principal of the United College of the Ascension

exception from it although the degree and measure may vary' (2001, p.61). He also lays bare the diversity of views, often contradictory, to be found in the Christian scriptures, and the need for discernment in the use of them. He denies that scripture must lead us to Christian exclusiveness,

'... otherwise we exclude millions of people before and after Christ who in some way had an experience of God, which was reflected in their outstanding deeds. This is not to deny that Jesus opened a new avenue to understand the heart of God, but it is to affirm that God is not only the Father of Jesus but also the Father of all.' (p.234)

Regarding John 14:6, Selvanayagam says, 'As far as I am aware, there is hardly any study of the Gospel, particularly of 14:6 done with an awareness of the difficulties in understanding the text in a multifaith context' (p.229).

Selvanayagam (*Ibid.*, pp271-2) warns that 'Christ was the product of a particular religious vision and tradition although he was later identified with the eternal Word and Son of God.' There are dangers, then, in the sort of inclusivism represented by Panikkar's inclusivist *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*.

#### 5.4 Holiness Perspective

Truesdale<sup>44</sup> (2006), writing from the perspective of the American Holiness tradition, follows Wesley in emphasising prevenient grace, universalism, and a need to show kindness 'in word and deed' to all. This, however, 'has nothing to do with endorsing religious pluralism, with baptizing ways of salvation independent of Christ, or with saying that God's favor can be gained through good works and good intentions' (p.144). He rejects talk of the 'universal and timeless activity of the Logos' unconnected with the Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth.

Wesley made a distinction between 'the faith of a servant' and 'the faith of a son' who can cry 'Abba! Father!' (Galatians 4:6). Truesdale sees that as useful for distinguishing between the status of Christians (as sons) and people of other faiths (who may be servants) of God.

'Given the scandal of particularity (Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life) and the uncompromising importance of evangelical faith, is there a Wesleyan standard for assessing the role and importance of the non-Christian religions? Yes. The standard is expressed in the form of two questions: "To what extent does the religion in question serve the purposes of prevenient grace?" and "In what ways does it promote a 'righteousness' that approximates the 'faith of a servant'?" (p.154)

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<sup>44</sup> Minister in the Church of the Nazarene and Emeritus Professor of the Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City

These criteria allow Truesdale to value Sikhism more highly than the cult of Kali, and to claim that 'some Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and others better serve prevenient grace than many superficial, egocentric, and semipagan Christians.'

'No religion has saving merit of its own (including Christianity). No religion offers a path to God independent of Jesus Christ.' (p.155)

There are very clear echoes of Wesley in this. Moreover, it usefully raises some challenges to the pluralism of Hick and Ariarajah, and to the inclusivism of Cracknell, as to whether it is desirable or even possible to engage in a totally unjudgmental and neutral dialogue.

### 5.5 A Pluralist Approach

Over against these conservative approaches may be set the more radically pluralistic view of Bishop<sup>45</sup>, who calls for more objective and open approach to dialogue than some other Methodist contributors. Bishop (1988, p.8) writes as a Methodist minister but also as one who teaches Religious Studies, and who therefore can approach other religions and his own with a degree of objectivity.

'An academic objectivity is one tool by which dialogue might be made fruitful, by encouraging participants to learn and to understand what the other person is actually saying.'

Underlying the evangelicalism of such people as Fernando and Skuce, and even the inclusivism of Cracknell, there is a sense that Christianity enters into dialogue to teach more than to learn. Bishop challenges that assumption, arguing that genuine dialogue must be two-way: Christians must be open to receive as well as give in the exchange, and to risk a change in the understanding of their own faith.

'It is time to campaign against arrogance and exclusivity in religion, and to assert the positive values of tolerance, humility, and the acceptance of those whose religious orientation is different from our own.' (p.130)

Bishop argues that Christian communities often put pressure on people 'to become pale copies of mediocre role models' (p.118) and suggests that Christians have much to learn from, for example, the three paths to enlightenment in the Hindu Gita: the ways of knowledge and intellectual understanding, of social action, and of devotional religion, and the tolerance in Hinduism that allows people to follow one or more of these paths according to their personal psychological make-up and stage of development. 'All are legitimate, and all deserve tolerance from those whose way is different' (p.129). All of these ways can be paralleled in Christianity,

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<sup>45</sup> Peter D. Bishop, a Methodist minister, who has served in the Church of South India, is a former Head of the Department of Humanities at the University of Brighton

but often coupled with strong and intolerant conviction that one way alone is right and all must be made to follow it. Bishop does not mention Wesley

## 6. Discussion of the Range of Methodist Responses

The various approaches so far discussed illustrate a spectrum of Methodist thought from the pluralism of Bishop and Ariarajah, via the inclusivism of Cracknell, to the exclusivism of Fernando, with some more mixed and cautious responses like those of Skuce and Truesdale, hovering between inclusivism and exclusivism. The key issue for the exclusivists is salvation, which they believe is ultimately possible only through Christ. Inclusivists are able to skirt around that issue by a Logos doctrine that allows the salvific work of Christ to be achieved anonymously. These differences of view prompt us to ask whether 'salvation' is really as important an issue as some theologians think, and whether this is the right way to be looking at other faiths.

The importance to Christians of Christ's role as Saviour has often coloured Christians' attitudes towards other faiths. Forward (1995, p.49) is highly critical of the way in which theologians are 'entranced' by soteriology, and have been 'lured to disaster' by their use of Race's typology of patterns—exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism<sup>46</sup>. They have 'attached it to soteriology, inappropriately applied to other religions, and inattentively and inexactly to their own.'

Salvation, Forward claims, is 'not a category which other people of faith than Christians use in order to interpret their relationship with transcendent reality' (p.47). Moreover, even within Christianity there is no single understanding of the meaning of salvation or agreement about its centrality. Any theological approach to other religions needs first to view each religion on its own terms rather than through Christian spectacles (p.49), and then to recognise that every theological assessment of religious pluralism is based, not on objective criteria, but upon the choices of the theologian, which 'consistently reveal their origins', even in the writings of such great scholars as Kung and Hick, whose Catholicism and Protestant evangelical backgrounds respectively influence their judgements more than they realise (pp.51-52).

One cannot but agree. The empathetic, neutral stance pioneered by such scholars as Parrinder and Smart, and promoted by such bodies as the Shap Working Party and the RE Council, has been a *sine qua non* in the field of Religious Studies and Religious Education since the 1980s, so that it is now even enshrined in laws for syllabuses and regulations for public examinations. Theology sometimes lags

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<sup>46</sup> Race, Alan (1983), *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, n.p.:SCM, 1983, cited by Forward (1995, p.49)

behind Religious Studies in needing to be reminded of what will seem utterly obvious to teachers of Religious Education. The story of Paul at Athens looks radically different if one reads it wearing Stoic or Epicurean spectacles, which even scholars like Cracknell fail to do.

Forward's own view is that Christology rather than soteriology should provide 'the primary theme by which Christians must understand themselves in relation to others' (p.53), but he fails to argue convincingly why this should be so, and there is a lack of clarity about what he means by 'Christology'. It would seem to have more to do with Jesus' teaching and his 'embodying and reflecting of the universal love of God' (p.54) than with the traditional debates about his divinity and humanity, though quite why the Christology prism should be less distorting than soteriology for viewing other faiths is not evident.

Pape (1995, p.68) welcomes the thrust of Forward's view, especially his notion of Jesus as the embodiment of the universal life of God, but sees it not as an opting for Christology as opposed to soteriology: 'it is a Christology which is full of soteriological implications. ... The love of God Jesus specially embodies is by its very nature universally operative, where there is Christian faith or not.' He quotes Wiles' claim:

'If God makes himself available to be known by way of a universal offer of divine self-communication, any knowledge of God arising from that potentiality is necessarily a saving knowledge. For divine self-communication implies more than external knowledge of God's existence; it implies also whatever transformation of human life is required for human beings to enter into a true relationship with God.'<sup>47</sup>

This quotation, incidentally, provides the counter to Skuce's notion that there can be relationship between God and people of other faiths that is not saving.

Pape (*Ibid.*, pp.67-68) holds that one of the main barriers to Christian engagement with other faiths is 'the excessive emphasis in much Christian witness on salvation from sin.' For Hinduism it is not innate sinfulness that is the root cause of human evil but ignorance of our true nature. More focus on our true potential, rather than on our depravity, might be more effective.

Cracknell (2005a, p.40) considers that Christology provides 'the most helpful approach' to creating a theology for inter-faith dialogue. Thangaraj (2000, p.293) disagrees. 'We should begin our dialogue with our understanding of God, humanity, and the world, and from there move on to talk of Christ.' Thangaraj's examination of some of the difficulties involved in interpreting Christology in Asian theology, even for Christians, shows that it is problematical. The concepts implied by *Christos*

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<sup>47</sup> Wiles (1992), p.68, cited in Pape (1995, p.68)



are not easily paralleled in Asian culture (p.170). 'The concept of Logos as such is foreign to Asian religio-philosophical traditions' (p.171), and although the concept of incarnation as avatar is well known, it is misleading to think of Jesus as an avatar of God because avatars are temporary and static, whereas Christ's dual nature is permanent and dynamic (p.172).

Cracknell's dependence on Christology as his way of justifying inclusivism may look sound from a western Christian perspective, but it is not quite so convincing to Asian Christians or easy to interpret to people of other religions. Jews and Muslims may honour Jesus of Nazareth as a religious teacher: they reject utterly Christian claims that he was Son of God or that God was incarnated in him. The same, however, must be said for many Christians. The debate within Christianity about the divinity of Jesus has ebbed and flowed since the 19th century, and whilst a high Christology may be back in favour among post-Barthian theologians, there tends to be Christological confusion among the laity of Methodism and other Protestant Churches. As White (2002) has argued, Jesus of Nazareth is honoured as a man and worshipped as a saviour, or heretically as God, in popular evangelical hymns and extempore prayer, to the loss of a Trinitarian balance. A doctrine that Christians hardly understand and do not wholly believe does not seem to be the best starting place for a dialogue with people of other traditions.

## **7. Analysis and Evaluation of the Diversity**

### **7.1 Methodism's Muted Response**

In the light of all these views, it is evident that the underlying theology and traditions of Methodism strongly support a sympathetic outreach towards people of other faiths, and that is one thing on which all of the Methodist contributors agree. How surprising it is, then, to find that the Methodist Church seems very reluctant to go where its inter-faith scholars would lead.

Quite as notable as the many Methodist contributions to a theology of inter-faith relations is the almost total silence on the subject where one would expect something to be said. The most recent book on Methodist theology, Kenneth Wilson's (2011), has only one paragraph on the subject. Although Wilson regards discovering 'where there is common ground with other faiths' as a theological task whose importance 'can hardly be exaggerated', he has nothing to say about it in this book, and such authors as Cracknell and Ariarajah are not mentioned. There is even less in Shier-Jones (2005) and the Methodist Catechism (Methodist Church 2000). Langford (1998, pp.78-96) dwells at length on contemporary trends, making much of Methodism's ecumenical concern and involvement, yet manages to avoid any mention of inter-faith theology, even when outlining the contributions of

Methodist theologians who have addressed inter-faith issues, such as Pailin, Stacey and Wainwright. Again the work of Cracknell is completely overlooked.

In the training course for local preachers, *Faith & Worship*, now a quarter of a century old<sup>48</sup>, Barber (2001, pp.7-12) mentions other faiths only by reference to Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion, briefly unpacking the definitions of doctrines, myths, ritual, ethics, experiences and community with a few examples from Christianity and other faiths. This superficial and inadequate account avoids any consideration of a need for any further study of other religions.<sup>49</sup>

Most importantly, the document *Priorities for the Methodist Church* (Methodist Church 2004), which was adopted by the Methodist Conference in 2004, has been promoted strongly at every level in the Church's organisation as the framework within which all decisions should be taken. It makes evangelism a priority but is totally silent about inter-faith relationships, thus by implication dismissing them as inconsequential.<sup>50</sup>

It is not possible within the limits of this dissertation to compare the Methodist Church's stance with that of other churches. It is sobering, though, to look at one example, that of the Roman Catholic Church, which, traditionally, has been notorious for its exclusivity. *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* (Catholic Bishops 2010, pp.34-35) sets out the recent teaching of the Catholic bishops on inter-faith matters. It echoes the inclusivist teaching of Vatican II, that

‘ ... what is true and holy in the religions are “a preparation for the Gospel”, waiting to be healed and perfected by the word of the Gospel and the sacraments of Christ.’

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<sup>48</sup> Expiring in 2020 and replaced by a new course.

<sup>49</sup> One of its examples (on p.11) is an extremely biased, disgraceful and objectionable paragraph attempting to portray Christianity as pacifist and Islam as violent, based on inaccurate information and tendentious selection of evidence.

<sup>50</sup> The document states:

‘In partnership with others wherever possible, the Methodist Church will concentrate its prayers, resources, imagination and commitments on this priority:

To proclaim and affirm its conviction of God's love in Christ, for us and for all the world; and renew confidence in God's presence and action in the world and in the Church

As ways towards realising this priority, the Methodist Church will give particular attention to the following:

Underpinning everything we do with God-centred worship and prayer

Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor - in Britain and worldwide

Developing confidence in evangelism and in the capacity to speak of God and faith in ways that make sense to all involved

Encouraging fresh ways of being Church

Nurturing a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible

Though the conviction remains that

‘Christ, and Christ alone, is our Saviour: that is, he is the only way we human beings can come to our common goal in the glory and happiness of God ...’

yet it is recognised that Christ’s grace operates outside the Church, and those of a sincere heart who follow their conscience ‘can obtain eternal salvation’. Dialogue is encouraged, not as a covert form of proselytism, but as ‘honest witnessing’ and ‘a sincere listening to the belief of the other person’ (p.43).

Many of the ideas we find in Methodist sources are here too: that God is already there before those who engage in mission; the same Biblical passages about God as the God of the whole earth are employed. But what there is also is positive encouragement for Catholics to work with local authorities and inter-faith groups in the active promotion of inter-faith dialogue. All this a Methodist can applaud. It is deeply disappointing that Methodism’s official statements and practical involvement are so half-hearted by comparison.

## **7.2 The Reasons for Lukewarmness**

We are bound to wonder why it is that attitudes within Methodism are so very varied in relation to these issues. Given that there is so large a measure of agreement about the keynotes of Methodist doctrine—Arminian universalism, catholicity, etc—and that officially the denomination approves of inter-faith dialogue and has appointed talented officers to engage in it, why is the Methodist Church as a whole so uninvolved? It would require empirical research to seek out answers to that question. All I can do here is suggest some of the possible factors.

The nature and extent of people’s experience must be a significant consideration. The strongest support for dialogue, we may surmise, comes from those who have lived or are living in multifaith environments, or engaged in mission in multifaith contexts, or teaching or studying in multifaith settings. It is those who—like Ariarajah and Bishop—have seen for themselves the spirituality of non-Christians who are most fully aware of the gulf between Christian theory and the reality of the world as it is. In much of Britain Methodists have little personal experience of meeting people of other faiths, and this is even truer of Methodist ministers than of Methodist laity since lay Methodists often know people of other faiths as work colleagues or neighbours. Inter-faith dialogue will seem remote and irrelevant to those who have little opportunity for it. Inter-faith dialogue may seem to be irrelevant by those in rural communities and towns where they never meet anyone from a different faith tradition.

For all people of faith there is some risk involved in stepping outside one’s tradition to view it impartially. Teachers and academics in the field of Religious Studies learn to be impartial, to bracket out their own convictions. It is harder for theologians to

be critical of their own faith tradition, and more difficult still for those ordained because of the vows of commitment they have made. Lay Methodists are not in general encouraged to study their faith and scriptures from critical perspectives.

Then there are the varying views that people take on the importance of particular authorities. The theological problems of inter-faith dialogue are greater for those of a literalistic, fundamentalist or evangelical mindset than for people of liberal or radical outlook. Thangaraj (2008, p.199) has suggested that 'literalism in an approach to the Bible and exclusivism in religious vision are dangerous in multicultural and pluralistic religious contexts; they only foster ethnic conflicts and terrorism.'

The traditions in which people have been brought up have major influence too, and Methodism has traditionally been strongly committed to seeing mission as the proclamation of the gospel to bring about conversions, fired by a vision of a world in which every knee bows before a triumphant Jesus. Scores of hymns reinforce that ideology. It is a long way yet from grasping the truth of what McBratney (2000, p.431) says:

'In the construction of authentic Wesleyan missiology, there must be a sense of searching for the divine, rather than taking the divine. The Church's job is not to be God's tourist guides on earth, when the divine deigns to go on walkabout. Rather, the watchword of evangelism in the Wesleyan spirit, is not action, not even proclamation, but attentiveness.'

These are but a few of the many factors that contribute to Methodist lukewarmness towards inter-faith involvement. As I have said, it would require empirical research to define, measure and evaluate them, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

### **7.3 A Better Model**

A more attentive approach to other faiths, working cooperatively with them and learning alongside them is not altogether well served by the term 'dialogue'. For all that the term has a diversity of connotations and applications, superficially it seems to lay emphasis upon some sort of conversation with matters of faith—and therefore potentially divisive differences—at its heart. There are in fact many more ways in which Christians need to relate to others than through conversation. There is no space to explore these systematically or in depth. I can but mention examples of a few of the ways in which a more informed and sympathetic understanding would be desirable, such as,

- the review of liturgical material and hymns to rid them of Christian triumphalism that demeans other faiths<sup>51</sup>
- the elimination from sermons of claims and illustrations that misrepresent other faiths
- acts and statements of outreach, support and solidarity when other faith communities suffer attacks
- inter-faith cooperation in various sorts of chaplaincies
- joint inter-faith activities in support of charitable and educational activities
- multicultural festivals.

All of these, and many more, do occur already, sometimes under the auspices of local inter-faith groups, and with Methodist support. Much more would be possible if the training of local preachers and of ministers included a much more substantial element of study of other faiths, as Sissons (1999, pp.132-133) has argued, claiming that Methodist resources for worship and study 'reveal for the most part an uncritical faith, which has little regard for the complicated challenges posed by other faiths', and 'the vast majority of Methodists have not been given the theological tools, the liturgical resources or the necessary encouragement' to learn from those of other faiths and to bear witness to their own faith. Thangaraj (2000, pp.294-6) too sees a need for ministerial training to be overhauled. He proposes that 'inter-religious conversation and dialogue' should become 'a pedagogical tool and an epistemological instrument' in theological education today to bring about a time when

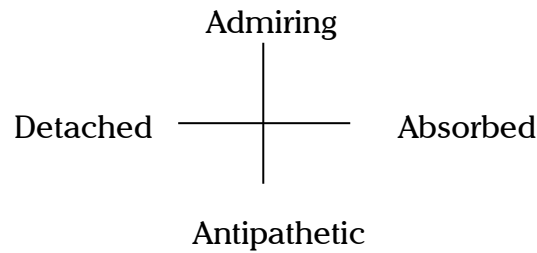
'it will be quite natural and easy for theologians and ministers to ask themselves every time they face an issue ... what do my Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist and Muslim friends think of this?'

Instead of Race's typology, which, as noted above, Forward thinks has 'lured theologians to disaster' it might be profitable to look at inter-faith attitudes in terms of at least two dimensions—one of direction and the other of participation—thus:

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51 White (2000, p.409) draws attention to the ways in which Christian liturgy, especially in its Holy Week, Good Friday and eucharistic traditions, often perpetuates anti-Jewish attitudes and fails to appreciate the centrality of the Holocaust in contemporary Jewish self-understandings.

'Certainly, much of Christian liturgical language and symbolism still partakes of implicit anti-semitism, overt supercessionism, and latent dispensationalism which have been woven tightly into the fabric of Christian liturgy and hymnody for most of our history.'



We might hypothesise that such a model would reveal four broad standpoints:

admiring-detached: objective scholarship, e.g. Hick, Smart

admiring-absorbed: bridge-building, e.g. Harris with Buddhism, Bishop with Hinduism

antipathetic-absorbed: missionary zeal, e.g. Fernando

antipathetic-detached: shunning of inter-faith involvement, e.g. Barth.

Of course, most people would take up positions near the middle of each dimension, and it is in the middle that there lies the greatest opportunity for fruitful dialogue that is empathetic but critically aware, engaged but unsyncretistic. It might be that a third dimension is needed to measure range of interest from one other religion to the whole spectrum of world faiths.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to develop this model, but it is introduced here simply to suggest that there are at least two major but little recognised hindrances to a fuller Methodist involvement in inter-faith activity, despite the eagerness of such theologians as Cracknell and Ariarajah. One is that there is a great gap still between the two disciplines of Religious Studies and Theology, and a need for the clergy and laity to engage with both. The Church is committed to Theology and often suspicious of and uninvolved in Religious Studies. Materials produced to support what the Church calls ‘Continued Local Preacher Development’, for example, promote reflection on theology, worship and preaching but ignore the wider contexts in which preachers and their congregations live and work, never encouraging preachers to stand outside their faith tradition and view it critically through the lens of another tradition. A Christian perspective that knows no other is a distortion of reality.

The other hindrance to fuller Methodist inter-faith involvement is that there appears to be very little enthusiasm for it among Methodists connexional leaders and Methodist ministers, some of whom are either committed to evangelical mission, or maybe detached and apathetic, or silently sceptical, or in a few cases covertly anti-

Semitic and Islamophobic. It would require empirical research to confirm this and to reveal its extent and impact.<sup>52</sup>

## 8. Conclusion: A Failure in Faith?

The arguments in favour of more inter-faith dialogue tend to be focused either on the missionary opportunities it presents, or upon the better community relationships that might flow from it, or upon the enrichment of faith that may come from entering into others' spirituality. Much Christian interest in Buddhism, for example, has been related to the benefits that may come from Buddhist meditation practices. What is taken for granted in Christian theology is that the revelation given to Christians is full, perfect and complete. If it is allowed that the Holy Spirit may have given insights to non-Christians, there is an assumption that it can only be a partial revelation, a diminished and cloudier version of Christian truth.

If, however, we take seriously the implications of a doctrine of creation that holds that God can communicate with all God's creatures, a Christology that holds that the Logos has a continuing inspirational and interpretative role, and a pneumatology that holds that the Spirit moves where it wills, must we not allow the possibility—or, rather, the probability—that God has revealed to people of other faiths some things not yet revealed to Christians? If that is so, inter-faith dialogue should be more than an interesting option: it should be an imperative for all who are seriously concerned to find 'the way, the truth and the life' in all its fullness, and embraced with an eager expectation. This is an implication of Wesleyan perspectives on inter-faith dialogue that is little considered or explored in itself, though it may be said that it tacitly underlies the efforts of all those Methodist (and other) scholars who have undertaken specialised studies of other faiths in relation to Christianity, such as Harris's work on Buddhism, Barrow's studies of Sikhism or Parrinder's work on African religions. The unwillingness of some Christians even to contemplate the possibility that God may have done some work among others than themselves is not only that 'miserable bigotry' which Wesley so despised: it is arguably a failure of faith in God's competence. If it is a wilful refusal to acknowledge the work of the Spirit outside Christianity, or a determination to call that work evil, it risks being the unforgivable sin.<sup>53</sup> Most certainly in the multicultural society of contemporary Britain all Methodist preachers need in their training to address the theological issues involved in inter-faith relationships, and any church statements on mission and evangelism that fail to engage seriously with the inter-

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<sup>52</sup> Price (1991) reported some interesting empirical research on these lines 30 years ago: it is out of date now.

<sup>53</sup> They were religious people, scribes from Jerusalem, who accused Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul, prompting his response that whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness (Mark 3:22-30).

faith issues and complications must be regarded as flawed at the outset and potentially irresponsible.

Finally I return to the claim and questions with which I began, concerning the validity of the claim that some Methodists have made a significant contribution to inter-faith dialogue, the theology that supports it, the purpose of inter-faith outreach, and the extent to which their views are universal in Methodism. It is clear that the legacy of Wesley's theology has provided a firm foundation for a Methodist catholicity upon which scholarly Methodist theologians of international repute have built impressively, often in relation to their own first hand experience of inter-faith engagement. There is widespread (but far from universal) agreement among Methodists that dialogue is desirable, yet extensive disagreement about its ultimate purpose, with some supporting it only as a tool of evangelism whilst others spurn evangelism and look to dialogue for an enrichment of their Christian faith and as an expression of their desire to build bridges, strengthen community life and promote peace. An unknown but substantial number of Methodists have made their own practical contribution by their involvement in inter-faith groups, as educators, or simply by being good neighbours to people of other faiths.

Yet when all is said and done, similar claims could be made by all the many Anglicans, Catholics, Quakers and others who have reached out into inter-faith activity, doing in practice things that the Methodist Church only talks about.<sup>54</sup> Current Methodism, sadly, is largely uninterested in the work of its inter-faith scholars and the rich spirituality of people of other faiths, and increasingly focusing on mission and evangelism. In the wider context, the willingness of a very small percentage of Christians to admit the possibility that Christianity may not be the only way to God must seem of little consequence to Hindus, Sikhs, and Bahá'is, for whom catholic spirit has always been an integral part of their faith and worldview.

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<sup>54</sup> Selvanayagam (2000, p.85) questions whether what Methodists think is distinctive about Methodism really is so. He challenges Cracknell's claim that Methodist theology is 'classical Christianity', asking 'can other denominations not make such a claim?' If John Wesley's relevance for today can be argued in relation to the ecumenical movement and religious pluralism, why not 'the newer challenges of biotechnology and genetic engineering!?' While Methodists 'are right in reclaiming the relevance of the founder of their tradition', they should understand that many other traditions can do the same about their founders, and 'Methodists today need to consult the concurrent theological reflections of other denominations before they make their claim for distinctiveness.' The criticism is not entirely valid. The essence of Cracknell's position is precisely not that Methodism alone can claim to be 'classical Christianity' but that classical Christianity is what Methodism has in common with other denominations. The distinctiveness of Methodism is not its difference from other traditions but its desire to emphasise its lack of difference. For example, Wesley's *theosis* focus, derived from the Fathers, makes for affinity with Orthodoxy. Methodists differ from Orthodox in many ways, and have no desire to become Orthodox, but they are happy to recognise Orthodox as fellow Christians, even when that recognition is not reciprocated. Nevertheless, Selvanayagam has a point in challenging excessive claims for Methodism's contribution.



## 9. Update to October 2020

It is depressing to find that eight years on from the writing of this paper the Methodist Church today is even less committed to interfaith dialogue than it was then.

The Methodist Church website has a page on Inter Faith Relations<sup>55</sup> which quotes from the 1999 Methodist Conference Statement: *Called to Love and Praise* a statement supportive of inter-faith dialogue:

‘In this mission, the Church’s vocation is to be a sign, witness, foretaste and instrument of God’s kingdom. This involves both evangelism and social action, and, in our day especially, engaging with people of differing cultures and religious faiths. Christians of all traditions are at the beginning of a long period of growing dialogue with people of other faiths. To refuse opportunities for such dialogue would be a denial of both tolerance and Christian love. To predict, at this point in time, the outcome of such dialogue would be presumptuous or faithless; Christians may enter such dialogues in the faith that God will give them deeper insight into the truth of Christ.

The resources which it offers to support such dialogue are, however, either old ones published in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century when there was a connexional interfaith officer, or ones published by other denominations or organisations. There is a copy on the website of a detailed report produced by a Methodist working group setting out an interfaith strategy for the Church, which was proposed to the Methodist Council in January 2013.<sup>56</sup> It examines the need for a connexional inter-faith officer, full-time or part-time, or for the responsibilities to be devolved to the Methodist districts. The Council received the report and clearly wanted there to be a continued support of interfaith dialogue at a connexional level. The Connexional Leadership Team, however, opposed the appointment on financial grounds and would not accept a responsibility for inter-faith by any of the Team. Financial constraints were used to justify making inter-faith training and dialogue too low a priority to be given any financial support. From then onwards the Methodist Church’s support for inter-faith dialogue has, at the connexional level, been in theory only.

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/building-relationships/inter-faith-relations/> (accessed 19.10.20)

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/building-relationships/inter-faith-relations/methodist-conference-and-council-papers/> (accessed 19.10.20)

In 2020 The Methodist Conference adopted a report on *Evangelism and Growth* that makes no mention at all of the multifaith, multicultural context of modern Britain.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-evangelism-and-evangelists-2002.pdf> (accessed 19.10.20)

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