

# REFLECTION

## What does Ethical Dialogue Look Like? A Reflection

Julian Bond

Some, particularly Evangelical,<sup>1</sup> critiques of or opposition to inter faith dialogue are based on its inappropriateness from a confessional perspective. This position argues that the committed Christian should not be involved in the dialogue of exploring commonalities without also, firstly, being clear about the difficulties of dialogue and its scope for doctrinal confusion. There cannot thus be full and meaningful dialogue about the love of God and neighbour without defining or describing God at the outset. Within this environment, although the words themselves – God and neighbour – unite, doctrine divides. For the Christian who shares this position, the first step in opening dialogue is through a confrontation between Trinity and Tawhid.

The reader will be aware that Trinity and Tawhid are confessional watchwords. The two religions, Christianity and Islam, could hardly be further apart than when they proclaim these distinctives which safeguard the core and the boundaries of each of the faiths. Proponents of confrontational dialogue can be found in both faiths, often leading to the expression that dialogue is impossible, unwelcome or inherently flawed. Yet, although these imposing theological superstructures tower intimidatingly over more gentle conversations, they do not speak for either tradition. In fact, the famous ‘Common Word’ verse in the Qur’an is an invitation to dialogue that is based explicitly on Tawhid:

*Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). (Aal ‘Imran 3:64)*

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1 This is not to suggest that Evangelical Christians cannot be involved in inter faith dialogue.

Likewise, in Christianity, we have the example of the Apostle Paul who uses the texts and philosophies of other religions and cultures to establish common ground, including when he is talking about God, and does so adventurously. At their core, both religions are thus inherently dialogical.

Real dialogue always involves some risk, although, given the levels of certainty expressed in our scriptures, this is hardly mentioned. However, in conservative manifestations of our religions, possibly an alien concept in comparison with the radical messages of our founders, we have become risk averse. It is this risk aversion which leads to bipolar anxieties about compromise and confrontation.

As a concrete example, there is the Christian, and sometimes Muslim, obstacle that we do not share the 'same God'. Given the openness of both traditions and of their leading figures, it is hard to see this 'same God' problem as anything other than a distraction. A greater awareness, gained through dialogue, of how different scriptures and doctrines do point to a shared belief in the Abrahamic God addresses this anxiety. To avoid, condemn or derail such a possibility is surely contrary to the imperative to witness to one's faith, which is strong in both traditions. The 'Common Word' Declaration of 2007 fits neatly into this space, although theological, or cultural, suspicions in some quarters mean that it has not always been accepted as being either genuine or valid.

Often, when the question of whether to dialogue is being discussed and ethical issues are raised, these relate to the risk of theological compromise. This kind of concern, however, has more to do with pessimism than with protecting one's creed. How ethical is it, when a loving and faithful overture is met by the recipient turning his/her back? This is exactly what theological reservations convey if we judge the warm approach of others by our doctrinal hurdles and put a lid on our own warmth by constraining it within religious boundaries. If we do that, how are we supposed to talk to anyone? This is where such strictness can lead.

As an alternative I offer patience. There is something essentially impatient about saying to a dialogue partner: 'I am not going to listen to you until I have explained my theological system to you', to do so takes time. I see this impatience and dialogical dissatisfaction when I attend events where Muslim speakers have given a perfectly reasonable and encouraging picture of Islam and the QandA session that follows begins with Christians asking: 'But why doesn't Islam say this or that? Why is it not as developed as Christianity in this area?' It may be that these are valid questions and observations, but are they asked with humility, with good grace, do they give an opportunity to expand, or are they veiled, or not so veiled, criticisms? Have the questioners fully understood the Islamic position that they seem ready to judge?