# Christians and Dialogue: An Opinion Piece

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**Abstract:** Christianity's traditional claim to universal, revealed truth is not conducive to dialogue, only to proselytism and comparative studies. Once understood as a human construct, along with other religious and secular belief systems, with all the relativities and openness that implies, dialogue becomes possible; hence the profound changes in Christianity's position on such matters as Creation, slavery, and sexuality even before it's human rather than divine nature was fully recognised. The paper argues however that the best approach to interfaith dialogue is not to focus on the various faiths and belief systems which we do not share but on human issues and endeavours which we do share. Extended examples are given including an interfaith centre whose strap line became: 'Learning to live well together' in multi-faith communities, to faith-based development agencies, to the shift in emphasis within the ecumenical movement from unity in 'Faith and Order' to unity in 'Life and Work'. Four further considerations are discussed: the need to be aware of the social and political contexts within which dialogue takes place; that Christian contributions to dialogue must be on equal terms and cannot claim privileges in the marketplace of ideas; that often, and fortunately since it enables co-operation, there is a disjunction between theology and social policy where secular disciplines can claim a measure of autonomy; and finally dialogue and imbalances of power.

**Keywords:** Dialogue, Human Constructs, Interfaith Co-operation, Theology, Social Policy, Power

## Introduction

Although its Founder knew quite a bit about it, Christianity's traditional self-understanding does not bode well for dialogue. It proclaims a revealed truth about an in-

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carnate god who sacrifices himself in order to meet the demands of justice and defeat humankind's greatest enemies of sin and death. His resurrection demonstrates his victory. Reparation having been made, sins can now be forgiven, and the way is cleared to eternal life. This truth is superior to all other claims to truth. It is fixed and final and universal in that it is true for everyone and everything, everywhere and in all times. It inspires and justifies imperial ambitions and missionary endeavours in the name of love as well as truth and aims to convert or colonise the whole world.

The chorus to George Kitchen's stirring nineteenth-century hymn, still sung in many churches, just about sums it up:

> Lift high the cross
>
> the love of Christ proclaim,
>
> till all the world adore his sacred name (anon, 1983)

On the one hand, the hymn was written for a missionary society, SPG (the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel), whilst on the other, it was said to be inspired by the conversion of Constantine the Great when he saw the sign of the Cross in the sky with the words: 'in this sign you will conquer' ('in hoc signo vinces') and when the 'love' and 'adoration' of the hymn rapidly became 'power' and 'obedience.'

Understood in this triumphalist way, Christianity is not genuinely open to dialogue, only to efforts to understand the other, present its own case, and note the similarities and differences. The picture, painted in quieter tones, fits well with many an image of so-called 'interfaith dialogue.' In the academic world in my student days, it was known as Comparative Religion, later to become Religious Studies. Beyond that, interfaith encounters look more like proselytism, persuading people of other religious faiths and none to 'come up higher' as it were and convert to Christianity.

Things look more promising once we accept that Christianity, along with all religious and secular convictions, including scientific assumptions, are human constructs. Religions may talk about the divine, but they are inevitably human. They are 'made up' by women and men. Even the insistence that, for example, they are not 'made up' by women and men but are revealed or given to them by God, is itself a human construct – it cannot be otherwise. This is not to say that those who believe these constructs are strangers to the truth, whatever the truth may be. Their beliefs may be faithful to their experience and to their observations of life around and within them. They may be true to what we call the 'facts.' They may command wide agreement. They may be enduring as if to prove their validity. Accepting religious traditions as human constructs, whether ours or another's, is not to dismiss them as arbitrary, as if anything goes and we sink into 'relativism.' At best they are serious

about truth. They remain, however, human and so share our human characteristics, such as the way we are affected by circumstances, what we believe to be the facts, our cultures, and self-interests. Where such contingencies change, our beliefs are likely to change as well, whether we are in accepting or resisting mode.

Examples are, not surprisingly, everywhere. Here are a few that for various reasons come to my own mind. Early Christianity dramatically changed its tune from being a messianic crusade to a salvation myth for cultural and political reasons as it moved out into the Graeco-Roman world (MacCulloch 2009). It drastically changed its tune again in South America in the twentieth century and began to talk about liberation when its eyes were finally opened to the endemic poverty and oppression to which the church had acquiesced (Gutierrez 1974). From the Enlightenment onwards, science taught it to radically rethink its teaching about a God-given creation and what Christianity had taken to be his permission to exploit it. A shift from hierarchies to democracies also began to creep in. Economics broke through the refusal of many Christians to believe that black people were human beings, so justifying both slavery and apartheid. Psychology among other things challenged Christianity's penal theories of atonement and its taste for penal practices, whether in courts or confessionals. So-called 'secularisation', undaunted by religious authorities, erodes what seemed unassailable attitudes to sex, marriage, and sexuality. Everywhere we can see new knowledge, self-interest, cultural shifts, political nous, historic and social circumstances hard at work giving Christianity second thoughts. They do not determine the outcomes, but they do influence them. One might be tempted to say that in this ongoing inter-play we can recognise some of the most profound and significant examples of 'dialogue.'

Once Christians are clear about the human terms on which they consciously enter into dialogue, and that in that sense at least there is a level playing field where humanity meets humanity, calling for modesty and respect on all sides, what sort of dialogue are we talking about? For me, it is probably not the stereotypical 'interfaith dialogue' which I can find interesting and enlightening but not very productive beyond that. At worst it can feel like a talking shop. The desire to talk in the first place presumably goes beyond curiosity to the desire to overcome divisions if not differences and build constructive relationships, in which case, the more productive approach may not, perversely, be to put the focus on 'faith' or 'faiths' at all, religious or otherwise, comparing and contrasting them. Instead, the focus is not initially on 'faith' and what we do not share, but on the human issues we already have in common.

Here are some examples from my own experience which seem to point in that direction. They are all examples of building relationships across dividing lines by talking

together about shared issues and working together to resolve them. In so doing, the point of talking about issues of faith, if at all, becomes clearer and more purposeful. 'Dialogue', if you like, is contextualised.

a) The St Phillip's Centre in Leicester, of which I was a trustee, was set up in 2006 by the Anglican Diocese initially under the leadership of Canon Andrew Wingate, already well-known for his involvement in interfaith relations in India and Europe. From the outset, the Centre had a stated interest in educating churches about the other faith communities in their city. Courses, including visits to mosques and temples, were provided for local congregations and still continue at the time of writing. For all their importance, such courses could fail to connect with what was happening not inside but outside places of worship. Leicester was one of the first cities in the UK where so-called ethnic minority groups were becoming the majority. The shift was accompanied by rising social tensions aggravated by familiar social issues including racism, deprivation, unemployment, and lack of opportunity. No-one suggested that religious differences were not part of the mix but tackling them head-on did not seem to be the best way of addressing what was needed. As a result the Centre re-framed its work under the strap-line: 'Learning to live well together'. In practice, it meant everything from enabling members of multi-ethnic, local communities to become friends rather than strangers to dealing with some serious problems, including violence and abuse, that all of them faced. At one end of a whole spectrum of activities supported by the Centre was the allocation of relatively modest grants from government to fund local initiatives like street parties and play groups.

At the other end was a highly contentious issue. The government's Prevent programme was designed to prevent young people, and young men in particular, from being radicalised in the wake of 9/11. Although in theory it was directed at all young people, the Muslim community felt it was particularly targeted at them and so greeted it with hostility. The elected Lord Mayor of Leicester did not wish to manage the programme, possibly for political reasons (such as losing the substantial vote of the Muslim community), and asked the Centre to do so on his behalf! Against doing so was the risk of destroying the good relations and trust built up between the Centre and large sections of the diverse Muslim community. In favour was the plain fact that here was a problem that had to be faced and that the Centre was perhaps best placed to deal with it without making matters worse. After some difficult debates, the Centre agreed to the mayor's request. Its very able deputy Director, himself a Muslim, managed the Prevent programme along with a second member of staff working with the Home Office. The dialogue, so to speak, was about learning to live well together in very difficult circumstances. Within this and other initiatives con-

versations about faith inevitably arose but in a way relevant to the context of a community's life.

b) The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), of which I was Director for a few years from 2001, offers a very different example. It was set up by James Wolfensohn, then Director of the World Bank, and George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury. For a number of years, it had only one paid member of staff and then two and a grandiose scheme, which never materialised, to employ many more on a budget stretching to millions of dollars. Its aims were obvious. Recognising the considerable influence of faith leaders internationally, nationally, and locally, it set out to encourage them, with funding and other forms of support, to work together to tackle poverty worldwide. Activities could range from large high-level international meetings attended by Wolfensohn and Carey and government representatives such as the UK's Minister for International Development and her counterparts in other countries, to small-scale efforts to work with faith communities on the ground, efforts which Wolfensohn was always anxious to 'scale up.' One such effort involved enabling marginalised mixed-faith groups in Africa to contribute effectively to government development policies. Conferences were also held between practitioners to share experiences. The curious feature of this interfaith dialogue was that at all levels it rarely if ever in my experience involved dialogues about 'faith' as such. I attended and spoke to a session of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona, but here and elsewhere the talk was almost always about development and how to cooperate in ways that really made a difference between destitution and a decent standard of living, between disease and health, ignorance and education, insecurity, and safety.

c) To come to a third example, Christian Aid's activities could strike an equally curious note. Apart from the Roman Catholic Church, it is the ecumenical agency or development arm of all the churches in Britain and Ireland. It was often accused (e.g. by people on the doorstep during the annual collection in Christian Aid Week in May) of only helping Christians or of being a missionary movement on the lookout for converts. In fact, it was very careful to distance itself from the missionaries, sometimes to their annoyance, and was always keen to support and work with people of all religious faiths and none, alongside its responsibility to encourage churches round the world to engage in development work. My first ever visit overseas as Director was to a Muslim organisation in Bangladesh! What was curious was that an overtly faith-based organisation rarely if ever engaged in interfaith discussions about faith, either between the different Christian confessions it represented or between Christians and other religious believers. Instead, discussions were about the practicalities and funding of faith-based efforts to tackle together the plight of refugees and

the poor. We had our differences, of course, but differences over faith did not apparently get in the way, a point to which I shall return!

d) Christian Aid can be seen as part of a wider ecumenical movement represented in the UK by councils of churches, national and local, and internationally by the World Council of Churches based in Geneva. At its heart was always the desire to build better relationships between various Christian traditions which had grown apart: Roman, Orthodox, and Protestant (with its own divisive tendencies) – an 'inter-confessional' rather than 'interfaith' dialogue you might say, though as time went on, it broadened its understanding of 'ecumenical' and engaged quite vigorously with people of other faiths. Interestingly, and relevant to my argument, it gained a great deal of its early impetus from some very practical challenges. One was the realisation among missionary societies that they should stop competing with one another in the field, exporting their confessional divisions in the process, and negotiate ways to avoid it. Another was the refugee crisis following the Second World War, first in Europe and then in Palestine, and the need to respond to the plight of so many across the political and ecclesiastical divides. That was when 'Inter-church Aid' was born, a precursor of the WCC.

As the movement developed two rather different but complementary approaches emerged and became known as 'Faith and Order' and 'Life and Work.' 'Faith and Order' looked like the more traditional form of 'interfaith dialogue', though, as has been said, it was 'inter-confessional.' The admirable aim was to remove doctrinal barriers to a united Christian community, which the world might then take seriously when it came to reconciliation for example, an aim that was captured in the oft-quoted words of John's Gospel: 'may they all be one that the world might believe.' A much discussed article of 'faith' was the so-called 'Filioque' clause in the creed declaring that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. Whether it was true and whether it should be there or not were issues which divided East and West. A familiar topic under 'Order' was the various orders of ministry of the church, such as bishops, priests, and deacons, with their authenticity passed down or otherwise from the apostles. In other words, who could be accepted as 'ordained' and who could not? The most well-known achievement of various 'Faith and Order' commissions over the years was a document known as BEM ('Baptism Eucharist and Ministry'), published in 1982, which in many quarters certainly eased tensions between the churches.

'Life and Work' took a very different approach and focused much more on the different Christian confessions working together on issues including peace and reconciliation, economics, apartheid, racism, social justice, refugees, and international

development. The whole enterprise looked less like 'interfaith dialogue' and more like conversations and co-operation around shared human issues.

It would be difficult to say which of the two arms of the WCC has contributed most to the unity of the churches. The broad picture has not changed all that much. There are few outstanding examples of churches uniting and even the most widely known, the Church of South India, in places like Sri Lanka, functions as another denomination alongside all the rest, and its ministry is not everywhere accepted even by the churches which created it. In any case, the taste for a structurally united church may well have faded and was never really shared by the more evangelical churches. My point here, however, is a different one. In 2015 I traced the story of the debate about Capitalism amongst the churches involved with the WCC in the ecumenical movement (see my Christ and Capital 2015; WCC 133ff). I was not looking for it, but I was bound to note that as the debate went on its participants were gradually understanding unity less in terms of what they did or still did not believe together and more in terms of what they agreed to do together about, in this particular case, the economic order which rewarded relatively few and oppressed so many. In other words, if dialogue had to do with overcoming unhelpful, even damaging divisions and building constructive relationships, the focus was shifting from discussing what people believed to how they could co-operate to modify Capitalism's worst effects and build a more just and sustainable economic order. Not only was unity being found in active co-operation rather than theological debate, it was also the context within which discussions around faith came alive and the church came to be defined as standing with Jesus of Nazareth, for example, on the side of the poor. The direction of travel was so noticeable that those who opposed it dismissed it as a decline into 'social activism' away from rigorous theological thinking (or what we might call 'inter-confessional dialogue') and the search for church unity as originally understood.

To summarise so far, I have expressed doubts (and of course I am not alone in this) about traditional approaches to interfaith dialogue as the best way to build relationships and have declared a bias toward co-operation on shared human issues. Where matters of faith arise, their relevance or otherwise will be recognised and better addressed in that context of common concern. That having been said, there remain plenty of issues to discuss of which I will mention four.

First a rather obvious point but always worth remembering. When, for whatever reason, we do get into conversations about one another's faiths, preferably as I have said within the context of shared endeavours, what we are confronted with are not lifeless words on a page or propositional truths or self-contained ideas which only require us to try to understand what they mean. Because these ideas are 'man-made',

they are alive and infused with the many different factors that have helped to fashion them. As we listen, explain, and respond, we are dealing not only with words but with people's histories, cultures, personalities, good and bitter experiences, and self-interests. They may not all be relevant to the dialogue, but we should be aware that they might be and that some will be. I was struck by a recent example. I have been involved in an interesting dialogue, hosted to some extent by Regents Park College in Oxford, between Western and Chinese scholars (China Dialogue Project). It was not an interfaith dialogue, though faiths, including Confucianism, did come into the picture. Rather, it was about the criminal justice system and how to make it more humane: to heal rather than hurt, even more where harm has been done; to improve matters, rather than make matters worse. It involved explaining different viewpoints and practices. On one occasion, a Chinese participant explained what a Western participant regarded as a disappointingly half-hearted, even misguided approach and criticised him for it, completely forgetting the constraints imposed on him by the dominant culture and the political regime in his country. Again, highly conservative statements about homosexuality can represent a deep hinterland not just of faith but of culture and even concerns for survival. It is not just a matter of debating what is said but of being sensitive to the human complexities involved when people speak and what might be called the 'density' of the words they use.

A very different reminder of the same point came on a visit to Africa under the auspices of the WFDD when several faith groups refused to engage with one another over tackling the deprivations they all shared. The stumbling block turned out to be not the faith divides as such but what those faiths had come to represent: the icons of long histories of ethnic conflict and mistrust.

Turning to a second issue, where faith communities learn to live well together as they co-operate around shared human issues, the Christian faith has a contribution to make but it cannot (with that old imperial touch) rule the roost. It can claim no privileges in the marketplace of ideas. Its faith insights are of two kinds. Some will sound like statements of what is the case. Others will sound more like value statements. An example of the first runs right through Christian history and is signalled by words like 'sin' and 'original sin'. There is a deep fault line in human nature. Traditionally, it has been thought of as disobedience to God's benevolent commands and, going deeper still, the inherited tendency to do so from birth. I would not wish to describe it in those terms but, instead, in terms of our endemic fragility and insecurity as human beings which drives us towards self-interested and self-protective behaviour at the expense of others. For all our undoubted capacity for love and generosity, we will behave badly and, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, the outstanding Christian social theologian of the twentieth century, even more so when we get together in our tribes (Niebuhr 1960). Christians will, therefore, insist that failing to

take account of this indelible human characteristic will lead to disastrous social arrangements. The discipline of Christian social ethics calls it 'Christian Realism'. Had more attention been paid to it in the Brexit debate, the evident discontent over immigration in some communities might well have been avoided.

Examples of value statements rather than statements of what is the case are numerous and include, of course, disinterested love along with empathy, acceptance, forgiveness, justice, and so on. If not unique to Christianity, they are certainly upheld by it – in theory at least. In each case Christians are saying in effect that upholding them will improve the quality of our lives.

Interfaith and inter-ethnic communities have to find common ground beyond their common interests if they are to co-operate. They need a degree of common understanding of what they are dealing with and some shared values when they respond. In the case of values, we come up against the somewhat 'academic' discussion about their justification and how far we need to agree about it. In other words, why something like 'empathy' or 'justice' or 'equality' is a good thing, and whether an 'ought' has to have its roots in an 'is' because morals are necessarily grounded in faith, such as those Christian faith statements which sound like statements of fact. Put bluntly, can a value such as equal respect survive when cut loose from some sort of faith statement such as 'Humans are made in the image of God', and are 'ethics' inevitably 'theological ethics'? If you take away the ideology, do you uproot the value? A debate of this sort emerged in the rivalry between Faith and Order and Life and Work in the WCC, where one slogan proclaimed that 'Doctrine divides, Service unites.' It correctly reflected the experience that it was easier to co-operate on practical issues than to agree about doctrine. It incorrectly suggested that no theological issues, including divisive ones, arise when we do co-operate. Apartheid became a glaring example with the need, as Desmond Tutu once said, for Christians to find a 'new anthropology' (Taylor 2000)– or shall we say 'new roots'?

If values must have their reasons, one thing Christians cannot do in the public square is to suggest that certain values must be upheld for reasons tied to their particular Christian faith. That is what I mean by 'ruling the roost' or claiming privilege. Ideally, in an interfaith (including non-religious faiths) context the common ground would include both shared values and shared reasons for upholding them. For example, to return to the reality of self-interested behaviour in the face of insecurity, Christians may find a rationale for taking it seriously in their faith and others may or may not do likewise in relation to theirs, but everyone might find it in the common recognition that no-one is perfect and there is good and bad in us all. And when it comes to a commitment, say, to empathy, it may well be inspired for Christians by traditional teaching about Incarnation and the deep immersion of a god in human

experience, whilst everyone, including Christians, might see how valuable it is because of our human need to be understood. Yet another approach, following Aristotle, upholds certain values not because of faith but as contributing to commonly agreed goals. In these and other cases the common ground is fairly deep, recognised by the religious and the secular, where Christians do not expect others to move onto their faith territory if they are to work with them. Insights drawn from faith are offered but theological imperialism is set aside in the search for the common good.

Differences which can turn into difficulties will inevitably remain, but one or two further considerations can also be of help when fostering the common ground that is needed for co-operation. For example, intuition may play a part where there is widespread recognition of a value without feeling the need to go into the reasons why. There is a moral theory which is rather keen on this (cf. Kant) whilst others treat it with caution. Or again it seems possible for people to share values but for different reasons. They set out, if you like, from different places but arrive at much the same destination. Another version of the same point is the familiar discovery in early forays into comparative religion of values common to all, most obviously the commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself' or 'do unto others as you would be done to', although agreement may not come so easily once rather general concepts like 'love' and what it means in practice are further clarified; and values like faiths are contingent on change and contexts.

A third of my four further considerations takes us back into my own particular interests, namely social ethics and social theology. It concerns the necessary gap between theology and social policy. You cannot go directly from one to the other or characterise an actual detailed policy as 'Christian' apart from it being promoted by Christians who presumably regard it as compatible with their faith. At local and national levels faith communities along with others in this country will share an interest in policy issues such as social care, 'levelling up', and immigration, to name but three. We have already indicated that a faith like Christianity has a contribution to make to these discussions but it can only get so far. One school of Christian social ethics suggested it was as far as what it called 'middle axioms' or half-way houses and no further. One example was 'full employment' required by Christian beliefs about human beings and their dignity, which, nevertheless, could not say how it should be achieved. Another way to talk about theology's limits would be to call them important generalities such as the direction in which any social policies should lean: equality, for example, in the case of social care, or generosity, in the case of immigration, and realism, in the case of both. They take us so far but by no means all the way. Many other mediating disciplines and insights are needed, including those of economics, sociology, health care, and administration, if any policy is going to be workable and make sense. At this point, apart from the broad guidelines referred to,

Christianity has nothing to say. It has to come to terms with these largely autonomous disciplines. As a faith it does not know, for example, how best to take care of elderly people, or find the necessary funding, whether from borrowing on international markets or taxation, or how to organise a health care or immigration system, any more than it can advise a doctor on which medicines to use. Economists, sociologists, administrators, politicians, and others will have the greater say. The argument is much the same when it comes to education: at the local level, for example, where different faith communities try to organise a pre-school play group. Christianity does not know how best to run schools, even though it does so: trained educationalists do. Christianity's best contribution here may have less to do with expressing its opinions than with encouraging young people to become well-meaning and well-qualified economists, medics, and administrators!

In many ways, these limitations to what Christianity can contribute, together with the autonomy of secular disciplines and the necessary gap between theology and social policy, is helpful to interfaith co-operation on shared human issues. Faith can show the way without getting in the way. A large measure of agreement, even total agreement about a policy, can be found on grounds largely independent of 'faith'. In 2005 I looked into the practice of social theology in Christianity and Islam, admittedly in a very preliminary way (see my 'Border Crossings' The Nordenhaug Lectures 2006, International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, 55ff). It occurred to me that Islam might not be as keen on this 'gap' as I am. In Islam faith statements seem much more likely to translate directly into social action than in my Christianity. The starting point for one thing is very different: not a Galilean with no real political power but a prophet who having fled to Medina immediately set up an Islamic state with a constitution on the basis of a directly revealed message from God. Here there is apparently no distance between theology and social policy at all. Many Muslim scholars, however, accept the need for mediating disciplines, and my understanding of 'creative reasoning' in Islam or 'ijtihad' suggests there is plenty of room for different interpretations and ways of applying the guidance of faith, for example, on how to build an economy which meets the Islamic requirement of avoiding usury and offering equal opportunities for all. Once again, we are not just dialoguing with words on a page but confronting the history and circumstances and interests of those who formulated them.

I have one further consideration in conclusion. It has to do with power. Under the auspices of the WFDD and then a research programme on Religions and Development funded by DfID (Department for International Development), I worked with mixed-faith rural communities in Nigeria and Tanzania. They were involved, mainly as farmers, with their governments in dialogues (or 'consultations') over future agricultural policies: a shared human issue whatever faith they held. Not surprisingly,

they had strong opinions and were not always in agreement with government officials. Their opinions, however, were not being taken seriously because they were not able to present them in a form which officialdom regarded as acceptable. A similar situation occurred at a meeting in Tanzania I attended between IMF officials and local people, again over farming policies, where the contributions of the locals, which might be thought to be the most interesting and relevant, were dismissed as 'purely anecdotal'! As a result, in both cases, the farmers were in dialogue but without the power to be heard.

Issues of power also arose around ecumenical 'round tables' sponsored by the WCC. Faith-based NGOs from North and South sat together, supposedly as equals, to share resources, not all of them material, and discuss how best to support local projects from farming to education and health care in developing countries. Those from the North, however, held the purse strings. Even more significant was the fact that most of their money came in turn from Western governments with firm conditions as to how it should be spent and accounted for. When real differences occurred, it was the funders who finally called the tune.

To return to the farmers in Nigeria and Tanzania, this was not a matter of funding but of influencing official policy making. It was about people who were not taken seriously in the dialogue, a scenario too easily replicated nearer to home. We were able to take at least one step towards rebalancing power by helping these intelligent, knowledgeable but uneducated people to get their arguments down on paper in a sufficiently cogent way for officialdom to regard them as competent and so take note of what they had to say along with all the other 'well-presented' submissions from more articulate groups. The project was called 'Strengthening the Voice of the Poor: capacity building for Faith-based Organisations (FBO's) for Participation in Policy Processes' (See also my working paper 61, Religions and Development website, 2011).

In all shared endeavours and dialogues there can be imbalances of power from the personal to the corporate which call for awareness and, where possible, correction.

In this paper I have expressed a preference for dialogues between Christians and people of other faiths within the context of shared human issues. I have looked at some of the sensitivities that should surround those dialogues and at what Christians can and cannot contribute. I have shied away from the more traditional forms of interfaith dialogue or, to be fair, my experience of them. If I had to give further reasons for doing so I might point to how much wider and more inclusive those dialogues 'in context' then become, drawing in those from left and right of whatever faith or world view who would otherwise never take part. I might also return to the issue of power. It is most likely to raise its head when the dialogue or negotiation

touches on what really matters to the participants and affects their welfare. Since it does not seem to arise to any serious extent in exchanges of views about faith as such, I am tempted to see them as academic exercises where nothing very serious is at stake, in stark contrast to those other forms of dialogue in the worlds of diplomacy, industrial relations, and peacemaking. If interfaith dialogues do have a role to play it may be in coming to our aid when religion gets in the way of our humanity and the common good and, by increasing understanding and awareness, doing their best to move us on.

The general drift of my comments in this paper on Christians and Dialogue may well explain how much I warmed to the cry of an international Sikh leader at a WFDD Assembly, either frustrated or excited by the conversation (or both!), and have long remembered his words: 'Humanity first, religion second!.

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