

The Churches and Multi-Lateral Inter-Religious Dialogue

Section 1: An Outline of the Challenge Facing Multi-Lateral Inter Faith Bodies

Multi-lateral inter faith bodies are currently facing a significant challenge regarding their membership policies. Although the main focus of this is upon the Inter Faith Network for the UK, it was not the first to encounter such a challenge, this having been faced by the Scottish Inter Faith Council some years ago.

At the inception of many of these inter faith bodies it seemed that recognising eight or nine religions was broad and inclusive. However the religious scene has become more complex and diverse. The present context is one of increased localism, suspicion of national structures and growing fragmentation. Religious groups that once spurned inter faith dialogue now see the value of participation and newer forms of religion are emerging which are increasingly difficult to categorise or evaluate. This is even the case *within* Christianity itself with growing numbers of independent, new frontier churches that do not easily fit within traditional ecumenical structures inherited from a pre-digital age. These patterns are mirrored in some of the other faiths.

Fundamental to the issue of membership is definition of terms. “Religion” is notoriously difficult to define, but equally “inter faith” is now used in a variety of ways. “New Religious Movements”, whilst appearing to have a precise meaning,¹ may not be a definition accepted by followers of such groups, with many regarding it as a pejorative term. Nor is it accurate to regard people as belonging neatly into defined religious categories: some people might regard themselves as adhering to more than one tradition, or being inspired spiritually by a number of faiths and philosophies – what is sometimes referred to as “believing without belonging”. Furthermore there exists a tension between those who “represent” a tradition, and those who engage as an enthusiast. The existence of “inter faith ministries” raises an additional complexity.

A number of religious groups would like to join national and regional inter faith structures but fail to meet the criteria which restricts membership to a designated number of religions; in the case of the Inter Faith Network this is nine faiths (Bahai, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism). Some religious groups wish to have their own faith included in this list (eg. Pagans) whilst others would self-identify as belonging to one of the major religions but are excluded because they are regarded to be an NRM. This issue is made all the more acute as many such religious bodies are already in active membership of local inter faith groups. As such some have raised the Equalities Act of 2010 in this regard, citing religious discrimination. There is always the possibility of legal action in an area that has yet to be tested in the courts.

Some have been fearful of widening membership criteria for numerous reasons:

- (1) A concern that the more diverse the membership the more difficult it becomes to sustain focused work, leading to more diffuse agendas with the ensuing loss of credibility or the disengagement of some of the larger traditions. There are examples from local groups where this has happened.
- (2) Definition and self-definition: some religious groups currently excluded from National bodies regard themselves as belonging to a particular world religion but are not

¹ “New Religious Movement (NRM) is the name used for groups, movements or gatherings which claim to have, or appear to have, a religious character, and which fall outside the major historic world religions. Some of these groups are sometimes called ‘cults’ or ‘sects’.” (Church of England website)

recognised as such by others within that faith (eg. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Ahmadiya, Namdhari).

- (3) The growing involvement of certain larger new religious movements present other difficulties, not least in regard to their eagerness to participate and their considerable financial resources which might potentially skew the policy direction of an inter faith body.
- (4) Does the acceptance into membership of other religions and New Religious Movements currently excluded suggest that the Churches are recognising their validity? This is particularly acute when Churches have specific policies on how they engage with New Religious Movements.

This paper is an exploration of these issues. It might be helpful to state that the terms “inter faith” and “inter-religious” are used inter-changeably for pragmatic reasons, given the sometimes negative connotations that “interfaith” might have, and the unfamiliarity in some quarters with the term “inter-religious”.

Section 2: Resources

This section aims to outline a selection of the resources that may help individuals and churches come to a position on the issues outlined at the beginning of this paper. It begins with a glance backwards into selected early resources produced by the churches and then surveys publications and resources produced in the last decade for everyday use. Key concepts within these resources include: the inclusivity of inter-religious encounter; the extent to which the self-definition of people within different religious traditions should be respected; the importance of identity and ideology in inter-religious relations.

A Glance Backwards

In the mid-twentieth century, churches and ecumenical bodies in Britain and Ireland produced resources to encourage and enable inter-religious encounter. These were written with the major ‘world faiths’ in mind. However, the theological principles they offered are relevant to the issues this paper addresses. Some of these early documents, however, did not distinguish between individual and informal inter-religious encounter, and formal encounter in the public square. This was mainly because the latter developed momentum only in the 1990s.

Two documents were foundational to these resources. The first was *Nostra Aetate*, a document of the Second Vatican Council. This stressed the importance of dialogue with all religions and stated:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.

The second was, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, published by the World Council of Churches in 1979. Two guidelines hold particular relevance to an analysis of the factors that can distort discernment about who should be included around the inter-religious dialogue table: ‘Partners in dialogue should be free to “define themselves”’; ‘Partners in dialogue should be aware of their ideological commitments’.² The first warned against ‘self-serving descriptions of other peoples’ faiths’. The second advised participants in dialogue to be sensitive to both ‘religious and ideological dimensions of the ongoing dialogue’.

² *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979), pp. 17-21.

The British Council of Churches summarized the WCC guidelines in four principles: Dialogue begins when people meet each other; Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust; Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community; Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.³ Individual churches and interest groups within churches then responded to these, including:

- *Shall we greet only our own family? on being a Christian in today's multi-faith society?* (London: Methodist Church Division of Social Responsibility, undated – 1980s)
- *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue* (London: Church House Publishing, 1984 – later revised and published for the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lambeth Conference of 1988)
- *A Baptist Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue* (Alcester: Joppa Publications, 1992)

All these early documents supported inclusivity in the practice of dialogue and inclusivity in theology. *Shall we greet only our own family?*, for instance, cited Matthew 25: 31-46, 1. Corinthians 14:1, I John 4:8, Acts 17: 26-27, Acts 10: 34 -35 to support this theology and declared:

We cannot approach others as though we were superiors, only as *humbly* grateful equals. This is God's world and he loves every person in it equally. Nothing will change the fact that because of His love He came in Jesus to redeem the world. He also reveals Himself in other ways to various peoples. There can be no disharmony between these revelations.⁴

In 1980, Kenneth Cracknell, who was then Secretary of the Committee for Relationships with People of Other Faiths of the British Council of Churches responded to the WCC guidelines in a pamphlet named *Why Dialogue?* He claimed that 'dialogue' was a thoroughly biblical word and used St. Paul as exemplar of a dialogue that is patient, time-consuming and inclusive, citing, for instance, I Corinthians 9: 19-23.⁵ He also tackled two biblical verses that he believed prevented Christians from engaging in positive inter-religious dialogue: John 14:6 and Acts 14: 6. He argued that neither need be interpreted in an exclusivist way if placed in context.⁶

A survey of sources in these decades would be incomplete without mention of the work of inter faith initiatives with a global reach, such as the World Congress of Faiths, the World Conference of Religions for Peace (more popularly known now as Religions for Peace), the International Association for Religious Freedom and the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions. The supporters of these organisations selected themselves. They did not represent their faiths but many sought successfully to influence them. One significant

³ *Relations with People of other Faiths: Guidelines for Dialogue in Britain* (London: British Council of Churches, 1981 – revised edition 1983)

⁴ *Shall we greet only our own family?* p.17.

⁵ Kenneth Cracknell, *Why Dialogue? a first British comment on the W.C.C. Guidelines* (London: British Council of Churches, 1980)

⁶ Both Kenneth Cracknell and Wesley Ariarajah at the World Council of Churches also wrote books that remain seminal contributions to the theology of inter-religious relations. See for instance Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faith* (London: Epworth, 1986) expanded in *Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005). The latter developed a Logos Christology, which used the Prologue to St John's gospel to argue that Jesus Christ was an embodiment of a 'logos' that had been present in the cosmos since the beginning of creation, including within faiths other than Christianity. See also Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985); *Not Without my Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Dialogue* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999); *Your God, My god, Our God: Rethinking Christian Theology for Religious Plurality* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012).

resource at this level was a document called *Towards a Global Ethic (An Initial Declaration)* presented to the Parliament of the World's Religions held in 1993 in Chicago to commemorate The Congress of Religions held at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. It was compiled by Hans Kung in consultation with people from other religious traditions and was initially endorsed by 157 participants. Its preamble declared:

We affirm that there is an irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions. There already exist ancient guidelines for human behaviour which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and which are the condition for a sustainable world order.

It continued to outline a fundamental demand – that every human being must be treated humanely – and four 'irrevocable directives: commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life; commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order; commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness; commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnerships between men and women.⁷

The document was inspired by the conviction that world peace depended on peace between religions and that this peace could be furthered if people of different religions worked together, inspired by a commonly agreed ethic.⁸ Although Kung consulted only with the major world faiths in formulating his ethic, the 1993 Parliament was not restricted to 'world religions' and those who endorsed it included people who practised African Traditional Religion, Native American traditions, theosophy, neo-paganism and Taoism in addition to those who practised within the Baha'i tradition, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism. Significant also is that subsequent Parliaments, held every five years since 1993, have never limited those who are able to attend to established 'world religions'.

Within these decades, the twin emphases, firstly on a theological basis for an inclusive dialogue with people of other religious traditions and secondly on the dangers of projecting categories from one's own faith onto others, so denying their self-definition and validity, can be transferred to the concerns of this paper.

The Twenty-First Century

By the beginning of the twenty first century, the need for inclusivity in inter-religious dialogue was being complemented, in Europe, by recognition that one of the most important issues within inter-religious dialogue was 'otherness' and difference. On one hand, Samuel Huntington had argued that the world was heading for a clash of civilizations. On the other, the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, was championing, *The Dignity of Difference*⁹. Both helped to set the tone for a new century of inter-religious encounter.

In 2003, the World Council of Churches revisited its 1979 guidelines. The resulting 'considerations' recognized the 'ambiguities of religious expression'¹⁰ and the fact that 'the potential role of religion in conflict and the growing place of religion in public life' brought

⁷ *Towards a Global Ethic (An Initial Declaration)* 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions August 28-September 3, 1993, Chicago, Illinois, USA (Chicago: Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, 1993)

⁸ For the full text of the Declaration with commentary see: Karl-Josef Kuschel & Hans Kung, *Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (Continuum, 1993)

⁹ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to avoid the clash of civilizations* (London & New York: Continuum, 2002)

¹⁰ *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions*, p.7.

urgent challenges.¹¹ Power relationships and identity politics were brought into the picture. Among the 'Guiding Principles' offered was the following:

In dialogue we grow in faith. For Christians, involvement in dialogue produces constant re-appraisal of our understanding of the biblical and theological tradition. Dialogue drives all communities into self-criticism and to re-thinking the ways in which they have interpreted their faith traditions.¹²

It is significant that the terms 'religious traditions' and 'religious communities' had replaced 'living faiths and ideologies'. An experience-driven realism informed the document. It did not address who should and who should not sit at the table of encounter but, in its recognition of the significance of religious identity and the power relationships of encounter, it pointed to factors that are relevant to any discussion about opening up the table of dialogue to groups perceived to have less power or less legitimacy in society.

Among the resources published by churches in Britain and Ireland at this time was a Methodist resource, 'Faith Meeting Faith', which offered material for group discussion on 30 frequently-asked questions on inter-religious relations. One of these was, 'Are there any religious groups that we cannot have dialogue with?' The text contained:

Dialogue is possible when all partners are able to listen to and respect what the other is saying, and to share what they want to say without aggression and coercion. If these principles are present, we should be willing to have dialogue. This should be so even when we may fear that we will not agree with much that our partners in dialogue are saying.

If these principles are not present, true dialogue is impossible. Other forms of encounter and conversation may be possible, but cannot really be called dialogue.¹³

The resource, therefore, stressed that the criteria for deciding who should sit at the table of inter-religious dialogue should be whether those being considered could agree on a code of ethics that stressed respect, sensitivity and straightforwardness. It suggested that, where this was not possible, inter faith dialogue could not really happen.

In 2005, the World Council of Churches held a 'Critical Moment in Interreligious Relations and Dialogue' conference. At the table this time, as an equal partner with Jews, Hindus and representatives from other 'world religions', was a High Priest of Yoruba Religion.¹⁴

In the last decade, three further documents have appeared that are relevant to this paper. Each offers relevant theological principles.

1. *Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the call to Dialogue: An Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations* (Anglican Consultative Council, 2008)

This began with God and placed inter faith engagement in the context of a Trinitarian understanding of God's mission, stressing, for instance, 'It is not for us to set limits on the work of God, for the energy of the Holy Spirit cannot be confined'. In line with a study submitted to the 1988 Lambeth Conference, it rejected, 'any view of Judaism which sees it

¹¹ *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2003) p. 4.

¹² *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions*, p. 9.

¹³ *Faith Meeting Faith: Ways Forward in Inter-Faith Relations* (London: Methodist Church Publishing, 2004) pp. 26-27.

¹⁴ Hans Ucko (ed.), *Changing the Present, Dreaming the Future: A Critical Moment in Interreligious Dialogue* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2006)

as a living fossil, simply superceded by Christianity' and affirmed the new insights that could be gained from reading Christian scriptures alongside the sacred texts of other religions. It recognised the 'pluriformity of Anglican theological approaches to inter faith issues' and avoided prescribing one theological way forward. Instead, it stressed the need for a 'deep, strong and Christlike friendship with people of other faiths' and outlined a path of inter faith engagement that included, presence, embassy, hospitality, sending and abiding, even in places where conflict and abuses demanded discernment and courage. Maintaining a Trinitarian approach to the end, it stated:

Our pressing need to renew our relationships with people of different faiths must be grounded theologically in our understanding of the reality of the God who is Trinity. Father, Son and Spirit abide in one another in a life which is 'a dynamic, eternal and unending movement of self-giving'.¹⁵ This is expressed in a sending and a being sent by the Father of the Son and the Spirit which is eternal, yet which also reaches out into our time and space to draw us into God's life. In our meeting with people of different faiths, we are called to mirror, however imperfectly, this dynamic of sending and abiding. So our encounters lead us deeper into the very heart of God and strengthen our resolve for inter faith engagement.¹⁶

2. *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger: Fostering Respect and Mutual Understanding between religions* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2010)

3. *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct* (World Council of Churches; Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; World Evangelical Alliance)¹⁷

This did not claim to be a theological statement. Its focus was practical. Nevertheless it cited, amongst other texts, 1 Peter 3:15, Luke 4: 16-20, Acts 17: 22-28, Romans 3: 23 and John 3:8 to endorse a basis for Christian witness that was Christlike, faithful and non-coercive. It outlined 12 principles, which included: the practising of Christian virtues such as integrity, charity, compassion and humility; the rejection of violence including the abuse of power in forms of Christian witness; renouncing forms of false witness against other religions. It recommended that churches should 'build relationships of trust with people of all religions, in particular at institutional levels between churches and other religious communities', recognising that in some contexts such relationships can help in the healing of memories, reconciliation and peace-building.

In addition, throughout the last decades statements and records of dialogues on particular bilateral or trilateral relationships have been published. These offer considerable insight into the tensions and opportunities within one particular form of dialogue but do not push forward the debate on who should sit around the table in the first place.¹⁸

¹⁵ Quote taken from *The Church of the Triune God – The Cyprus Agreed Statement of the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue* (AAC, 2006) II.5.

¹⁶ Downloadable from: nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/resources/documents

¹⁷ Downloadable from: www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation

¹⁸ For example: *Christians and Jews: A New Way of Thinking: Guidelines for the Churches* (London: Church House Publishing, 1994); *Sharing one hope? The Church of England and Christian-Jewish relations: A contribution to a continuing debate.* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001); Michael Ipgrave (ed), *The Road Ahead: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Record of a seminar 'Building Bridges' held at Lambeth Palace, 17-18 January 2002* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002 – followed by further publications edited by Ipgrave on subsequent Christian-Muslim dialogues); *Bridges and Barriers to Hindu-Christian Relations: A Report by the*

Section 3: Recognition and Dialogue in the Public Space

The situations described in section one highlight some of the challenges facing churches seeking to engage in various forms of multi-lateral inter-religious dialogue. This section offers an analysis of some of the underlying issues that require further theological reflection if a considered and informed response is to be made to these challenges.

A good case can be made for individual Christians and churches engaging generously and critically in dialogue with (almost) anyone.¹⁹ The motivations, agendas and anticipated outcomes may be different in each case, but there are surely few cases in which churches would want to say they will simply not talk to a certain group; not ever; not about anything. Not every dialogue will receive the same resources or be conducted on the same basis, but many of the theological resources considered in section three will suggest an open, generous and inclusive (but not uncritical) approach to dialogue.

What, then, are the particular issues that arise in the case of multi-lateral inter-religious dialogue, specifically in relation to the questions of expanded membership of multi-faith bodies outlined in the previous section?

The politics of recognition. The growing recognition that the contemporary situation can be described as ‘post-secular’²⁰ is a reflection of the increased significance of religion in national politics and international relations.²¹ In this context the relationship between those of different religious traditions is seen as having political significance. The authors of *A Common Word*,²² for example, see the global significance of Christians and Muslims as underpinning the value of their attempt to provide a foundation for future relations between these two traditions. Miroslav Volf makes the same point in relation to his argument that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God.²³ Recognising this common belief, he argues, is of global political significance. At the local level, at least since the Rushdie affair the religious dimension of community cohesion has been seen as important,²⁴ and whilst multiculturalism may have fallen out of political favour, the place of inter-religious dialogue and encounter in contributing to good community relations still has currency as evidenced in the government funding for the Near Neighbours scheme. Since its inception in 1987 the Inter Faith Network of the UK has been among the most influential organisations facilitating the relationship between faith-communities-in-dialogue and political structures. Any organisation that includes political engagement within its remit, whether local or national, derives its authority from the political or social significance of those it represents. Against this

Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies commissioned by the Hindu Christian Forum UK (Oxford: Centre for Hindu Studies, 2011).

¹⁹ The distinction between individual involvement in inter-faith activity and representative involvement on behalf of particular churches is important. Our concern in this paper is primarily with the latter.

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas is a prominent exponent of this view. See, for example, ‘Notes on Post-Secular Society’ in *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25.4 (2008), 17 – 29; *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), especially Chapter 5 ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’; and Jürgen Habermas et al. *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010). See also Edward Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (eds.) *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) with contributions from Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Cornel West.

²¹ For the former see Adam Dinham, Robert Furbey and Vivien Lowndes (eds.) *Faith in the Public Realm: Controversies, policies and practices* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2009) and, for more theoretical perspectives, David Herbert *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). For the latter see, for example, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29.3 (2000): this was a special issue on ‘Religion and International Relations’ of the LSE based journal.

²² See www.acommonword.org (accessed: April 2013)

²³ Miroslav Volf *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), pp.1 - 16

²⁴ See Paul Weller *A Mirror For Our Times: ‘The Rushdie Affair’ and the Future of Multiculturalism* (London & New York: Continuum, 2011) for a discussion of the contemporary significance of the Rushdie affair.

background, membership of such bodies becomes a marker of the political identity of groups that wish to self-define as 'religious' or 'faith-based': a politics of recognition thus comes into play. If religion is politically significant again, then groups that see themselves within this category will understandably seek membership in organisations that are successful in articulating in the public sphere what might be termed 'inter-faith voices', that is religious voices that speak from a context of dialogue rather than simply from their own religious perspectives.. These organisations can give voice to a range of religious perspectives, demonstrating the complexity of the religious landscape. Membership of such bodies, then, may be seen as giving a voice and in strengthening a religious identity based on recognition as well as ensuring the full complexity of religious diversity is acknowledged. In the consequent politics of recognition the questions of who recognises and on what basis then arise. Are members of inter-faith bodies or participants in inter-religious dialogues recognised as 'legitimate religions' by other religions or faith communities, or by the State? Apart from the established Churches (The Church of England and the Church of Scotland) the UK government has no means of giving formal recognition to religions and hence has no criteria for recognizing individual faith traditions. Such recognition as does occur happens piecemeal in a variety of different ways: the Prison Service recognizing Paganism (and a wide range of other traditions) as requiring chaplaincy provision and the Charity Commission granting charitable status to the Druid Network as an organization promoting religious activity. In this context, membership of an organization such as the Inter Faith Network is bound to be seen as significant for groups self-defining as religious or faith-based and seeking political influence. The simple ethical requirement to respect others, particularly those who tend to be marginalised, suggests that such political aspirations should be taken seriously.

The nature of a 'religion' or a 'faith'? This discussion of the politics of recognition in a post-secular context has raised the most difficult question that arises in these debates: the question of what criteria can be used to judge a 'legitimate religion'. The term 'religion' as used today is a contested term with a certain genealogy associated with modernity, which for some makes the very notion of 'religion' as a common ground for dialogue problematic.²⁵ On what basis can a particular group or tradition be deemed 'a religion' and therefore an appropriate partner in inter-religious dialogue?²⁶ For bi-lateral dialogues this question needn't arise: churches may choose to be in dialogue with any number of different groups without necessarily having to describe them as a 'religion' or 'faith'. In such dialogues groups are recognised in their particularity without needing to be classified. It is only in multi-lateral dialogues that this problem arises. Perhaps ironically, then, in multi-lateral inter-religious dialogues the very thing that is seen as being held in common is the cause of the problem. The difficulty is not eased by using the term 'faith' which is arguably even harder to pin down, and the debate generally seems to centre on 'religions' even though most of the bodies concerned have 'faith', whether 'inter' or 'multi', in their titles. It is notable that the Inter Faith Network itself doesn't attempt a definition of 'religion' or 'faith' to offer criteria for membership but refers to the AGM the question of whether expansion beyond the nine founding religions should be allowed.

²⁵ William Cavanaugh, for example, sees the modern concept of religion as arising in the wake of the so-called 'Wars of Religion' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. See William T. Cavanaugh *Theopolitical Imagination* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2002), especially pp. 20 – 42. Anyone subscribing to a Barthian theological critique of 'religion' will have similar difficulties on this point, albeit on different grounds.

²⁶ For the purposes of this paper the terms 'inter-religious' 'inter faith' and 'inter-faith' are used interchangeably. Paul Weller suggests that 'inter-religious' tends to refer more to 'the simple state of encounter' between religions, whereas 'inter-faith' tends to refer to a more dialogical relationship: 'How participation changes things: 'inter-faith', 'multi-faith' and a new public imaginary' in Dinham et al. (eds.) *Faith in the Public Realm*, pp.63-4. A number of authors, however, use the term 'inter-religious' to refer to a profoundly dialogical engagement: Michael Barnes, Jacques Dupuis and David Tracy, for example. Weller's article is a very helpful discussion of the growing political significance of inter-faith dialogue bodies.

The nature and purpose of dialogue. If definitions of ‘religion’ or ‘faith’ are likely to prove inconclusive at best in deciding the boundaries of multi-lateral dialogue²⁷ then it might be possible to approach the question by considering the nature and purpose of dialogue. There seems to be a feeling among some involved in multi-lateral dialogues at different levels that existing relationships of openness and trust have been developed carefully over time and should not be put at risk by expansions that might disturb these (fragile?) ecologies.²⁸ A particular concern here relates to New Religious Movements. People in long-established religious traditions often see particular value in talking to people in other long-established traditions because they can be confident that they are dealing with ideas and practices with proven longevity. The worth of trying to better understand a tradition that has shaped the lives of millions over many hundreds of years is obvious; less obvious is the worth of investing time in getting to grips with religious ideas and practices which are relatively new and may be gone tomorrow.²⁹

Whilst not concerned with questions of membership, David Ford’s advocacy of ‘Scriptural Reasoning’ as a valuable mode of inter-religious dialogue may be instructive here because of a particular understanding of the public significance of such dialogue. Scriptural reasoning is a model of dialogue in which Jews, Christians and Muslims (and sometimes others) reason together around their scriptures. Ford describes the process as generating an ‘inter-faith wisdom’³⁰ and one that has significance in the public sphere.³¹ Inter-faith wisdom, on this model, does not imply agreement between members of different religious traditions on controversial issues, although it may include that. It is much more likely, though, to refer to the generation of shared insights and ways of living with difference, ‘improving the quality of disagreement’³² to quote Ben Quash’s oft-cited description of the genius of Scriptural Reasoning. The relevance of this model (and it is not the only one that could have been used) is the emphasis placed on the building of inter-faith relationships of friendship and trust. It is from such relationships that public inter-faith wisdom may be generated, and such relationships emerge and evolve over time: groups that sustain and nurture such friendships are not primarily representative bodies but relational ones whose deepest purposes can be articulated from a Christian perspective using a theology of *koinonia* such as has been prominent in ecumenical theology.³³ From a root meaning that refers to having in common, the deepest theological sense of *koinonia* is grounded in the Trinitarian life of God and shared with the whole of creation. In the context of the Church, that which is ‘in common’ takes on more particular characteristics and these are important in ecumenical relationships. When it comes to the context of religious diversity it is clear that a recognition of what is shared is different for different inter-faith relationships as *Nostra Aetate* makes clear.³⁴ However, taking ecumenism as a model here is instructive because whilst

²⁷ It is for this reason that the task has not been attempted in any detail here.

²⁸ This rather impressionistic assertion really needs empirical research to back it up: just what are people involved in multi-lateral dialogues saying about these questions of expansion and why? There is scope for a valuable piece of qualitative research to be done in this area.

²⁹ This is particularly important where the main purpose of dialogue is described as ‘inter-religious learning’ or something similar. See, for example, Michael Barnes S.J., *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) and Francis X. Clooney S.J. *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)

³⁰ Chapter 8 ‘An inter-faith wisdom: scriptural reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims’ in David F. Ford *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007)

³¹ See, for example, Nicholas Adams ‘Making Deep Reasonings Public’, *Modern Theology* 22.3 (July 2006), 345-366; also in David F. Ford and Chad C. Pecknold (eds.) *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

³² Ben Quash, ‘Heavenly Semantics: Some Literary-Critical Approaches to Scriptural Reasoning’, *Modern Theology* 22.3 (2006), 403-420, p.412

³³ For a recent statement, see World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Faith and Order Paper 198), pp.8-9

³⁴ See section 3 for a discussion of this.

ecumenism is about partnership, this is not a partnering with those who are identical. Here Anselm Min's argument that the image of the Body of Christ is about the church modelling 'a solidarity of others', a 'solidarity of the different', not a solidarity of sameness, offers an interpretation of what *koinonia* is about.³⁵

On this basis it could be suggested that existing members of multi-faith bodies and dialogues would have responsibility for widening their circle on the basis of the existing dialogues and relationships; and in such a way as would, from the perspective of existing partners, enhance and enrich the inter-religious relationships involved and the inter-faith wisdom generated. However, where such bodies have been successful in promoting the political significance of inter-faith relations, and where local or national government has implicitly or explicitly acknowledged this success by relating to such groups and bodies as representative, membership of such bodies becomes politically desirable for groups that see themselves as religious. In this context it is difficult to see how anything other than a clear and transparent process of recognition could be considered just. An argument that gives power over inclusion or exclusion to what can now be seen as the vested interests of existing dialogues *where those dialogues have a political significance* seems dangerous. It is the public and political significance of such dialogues and organisations that raises the stakes in questions of inclusion or exclusion.

The political context of dialogue. In the light of this acknowledgement of the political significance of multi-lateral dialogue, more needs to be said about the nature of this political context. Unless they take place under Chatham House rules, inter-religious dialogues can be seen as taking place within the public sphere of civil society. There are several ways of conceiving the nature of the 'public' and the choice of language here, whether 'public square', 'public realm' or 'public reason', carries significance. The language of the 'public sphere' relates to the theoretical perspectives developed by and in dialogue with Jürgen Habermas who sees the emergence of a particular sphere of discursive activity in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.³⁶ The public sphere, for Habermas, lies in between the private and the political and is concentrated in the flourishing of the coffee houses and the emergence of newspapers as literary organs of the oral discourse of the coffee houses. The public sphere, on this understanding, develops into a discursive space that has an important place in a democratic polity. Habermas's conception of the public sphere has been widely discussed and subjected to critique³⁷ but even the critique, either explicitly or implicitly, acknowledges the helpful description of a sphere of discursive activity lying in between the personal and private on the one hand and the narrowly political (in the sense of the political administration) on the other. His later work has picked up the theme of the public sphere and responded to some of the criticisms of his earlier articulation of the concept, not least a postmodern critique that argues for the importance of counterpublics in any notion of the public sphere.³⁸ What this debate about the public sphere demonstrates is the importance of public deliberation, discussion and debate

³⁵ Anselm Kyongsuk Min *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World: A Postmodern Theology after Postmodernism* (T & T Clark International, 2004)

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans by T. Burger & F. Lawrence, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989 [1962])

³⁷ See, for example, Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Massachusetts: MIT press, 1992) and Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing / The Sociological Review, 2004).

³⁸ Nancy Fraser is illustrative of the postmodern critique and significant for her introduction of 'counterpublics'. As well as her article in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, see her 'Politics, culture, and the public sphere: toward a postmodern conception' in Linda Nicholson & Steven Seidman (eds.) *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995). See Jürgen Habermas *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. by William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), especially Chapter 8 'Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere' for the mature development of his theory of the public sphere in relation to a theory of deliberative democracy.

in a democracy and, in particular, of the opening up of such discussion to marginalised voices. But what has all this got to do with multi-lateral inter-faith dialogue? The point of this discussion of the public sphere is to indicate the public and political significance of such dialogues and the potential value of their breadth of inclusion.³⁹ If faith communities are to contribute to public debate, then contexts in which they talk to one another are potentially valuable discursive spaces that can have an important part to play in a pluralistic public sphere. On this understanding it could be argued that the more voices that are heard, the better.

There are no easy solutions to the dilemmas involved in these debates. Given the problems of defining religion and faith, a radical proposal might be to argue that multi-lateral inter-religious dialogue sets up a false and unsustainable dichotomy between religious and non-religious and should therefore be abandoned altogether. That, however, would be to lose much that has been gained through such dialogues in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. So the question is how to manage the development of such groups. Neither an approach which welcomes anyone and everyone to the inter-religious table, nor a simple defence of the status quo will serve the related causes *either* of inter-religious dialogue *or* of the enrichment of the public sphere. However, in the light of the discussion above it could be argued that if the primary focus of a particular multilateral dialogue is the strengthening and deepening of inter-religious relationships and the generation of inter-faith wisdom then the argument that recognises the delicate ecologies of such dialogues and the importance of relationships of respect built over time may take priority; but if the main concern is with the enhancement of a polyphonic public sphere in which religious voices are heard alongside and in dialogue with other voices, including those that tend to be marginalized, then inclusivity is likely to predominate.

On-going Challenges

The fluid and diverse nature of the religious landscape, as we have seen, presents a number of challenges for churches as they seek to engage with religious pluralism. We might summarise these in the following way:

- Christianity is a faith compelled to engage with the world. *Oikoumene* has always had a double meaning: ecumenism concerned with the search for Christian unity (often expressed in terms of “visible unity”), and the wider sense of seeking of the greater unity of the whole created universe, with implied search for reconciliation and justice. Thus the engagement of the church with the world has no “stopping place” beyond which it cannot go.
- In inter-religious terms this means there is no case for engaging with some aspects of religious otherness and not others.
- Yet we cannot assume that all religion and spirituality is beneficial, wholesome or benign, and consequently there is a fear that naïve inter-religious engagement might compromise Christian self-understanding and even work

³⁹ Another way of understanding the social and political significance of this sort of dialogue is in terms of Robert Putnam’s conception of ‘bridging capital’ as an example of ‘social capital’. See Robert D. Putnam *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Bridging capital is described by Putnam as ‘sociological WD-40’ in contrast to the ‘superglue’ of bonding capital. The latter ‘by creating strong in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism’ (p.23), whereas the former, which includes ‘ecumenical religious organizations’ refers to networks that are ‘outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages’ (p.22). Putnam is writing about the American context but his work has been used in thinking about the British situation: see, for example, Weller, ‘How participation changes things’, p.72.

against the aims of *Oikoumene* rather than towards them. In some cases churches have spoken of having to deal with pastoral issues relating to individuals who may have suffered through involvement with certain types of New Religious Movements.

- At the same time churches might be either tempted to develop policies that determine the kind of religions with which they will engage bi-laterally, or will be anxious not to appear to be discriminatory.
- Finally, there may be the anxiety that any engagement – multi or bi-laterally – with certain forms of religion/belief systems might imply official recognition or a degree of ‘approval’.

However, in the light of this paper we might want to distinguish between bi-lateral and multi-lateral engagement. Bi-lateral dialogue is concerned with building good relationships and more particularly exploring areas of common ground. Participants in bilateral dialogue often speak of their spiritual transformation in sharing their faith with someone of a different faith. On-going bi-lateral dialogue therefore assumes a recognition of a degree of ‘value’, even ‘truth’ in ‘the other’, otherwise the only value in such dialogue would be to correct error and presumably ‘convert’. But more particularly, the bi-lateral takes place in a different ‘space’ to the multi-lateral which, according to section 3, is the ‘public sphere’. The ‘public sphere’ is where people of all faiths and none engage with one another. The multi-lateral inter faith organisation is clearly an aspect of the ‘public square’ where different religions encounter one another. It is not expected of them that they recognise each other’s own self-understanding, nor to accept that they necessarily hold beliefs that should be accepted or approved of, although such acceptance or recognition might well be present, at least in part. The multi-lateral inter faith body is therefore merely the space in which different faiths and belief systems engage with one another in the public sphere. The bi-lateral conversation is taking those conversations beyond that public sphere into a deeper engagement.

In practical terms this means that the inter faith body needs to be an appropriate ‘space’ whereby different faiths can engage with confidence and without fear that they are obliged in some way to compromise aspects of their own identity and self-understanding. This suggests that appropriate terms of engagement and codes of conduct need to be established if the multi-lateral space is to be one that can be trusted.

This document was prepared by the Inter Faith Theologian Advisory Group within Churches Together in Britain and Ireland