Christian Claims of Uniqueness, the Problem of Violence and Interfaith Dialogue

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Christianity shares a religious identity with numerous other religions, including paganism, Taoism, Baha’i, Rastafarianism, Hinduism and Buddhism as well as the monotheistic faiths of Islam and Judaism. Following 9/11, Western governments have been concerned to constrain fundamentalists who ferment violence and to support faith groups as ‘social capital’, that contributes to peaceful communities, bonded by common purpose and grounded in ethical virtues. As such the Church finds itself undertaking mission in competition with alternative beliefs and belief systems in which their relative value seems to be based upon how far they serve the individual and society. This is not a comfortable situation for the classical Christian agapist who rejects the utilitarian ethic and seeks to promote good as an end in itself. But the Church, as the ‘body of Christ’ in the world is also concerned with justice and peace as a means to well being and so it has a strong interest in working with other faith groups to promote understanding and develop a common response to finding security against violence and terror.

The religious fundamentalist, when seeking to impose religious beliefs on others, is undertaking an implicit act of violence. To the extent that dialogue acknowledges the other’s right to believe, then interfaith dialogue is a way of countering violence. It is fundamentally reconciling and, for Christians, it offers the possibility of relatedness, implicit in the Trinitarian relationship between God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian faith makes unique claims about the nature of God, His purposes for humankind and His actions in the world. It is these claims that give shape to the Christian life, that promote an ethic of peace, yet they also have the potential to set Christianity in opposition to other faiths. This chapter argues that the claim of uniqueness cannot undermine interfaith dialogue, properly conducted as ‘dialogue’; neither can the claim to uniqueness be undermined by dialogue. Indeed, without uniqueness, it is difficult to conceive of a reason for entering into dialogue.
Religion and security

In a talk in 2005 at the opening of the Exhibit on the World’s Religions at Santa Clara University, which was prepared by the Global Ethic Foundation, Catholic theologian and scholar, Hans Kung addressed the significance of a global ethic for peace:

There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions, and there will be no serious dialogue among the religions without common ethical standards. I am even convinced there will be no survival of this globe in freedom, in justice, and in peace without global ethical standards, without a global ethic (Kung, 2005).

Kung put forward the argument that today, ‘national differences, ethnic and religious differences must no longer be misunderstood in principle as a threat but must be seen as a possible source of enrichment.’ He identified a new paradigm that avoids militarism and uses soft power, saying:

This is so because it has been proven that in the long run, national prosperity is not furthered by war but only by peace, not in a positional confrontation, but in cooperation. Because the different interests that exist are satisfied in collaboration, a policy is possible which is no longer a zero-sum game where one wins at the expense of the other, but a positive-sum game in which all win (Kung 2005).

In 2007, a letter entitled *A Common Word between Us and You* was sent by Islamic scholars to the leaders of Christian churches.1 Echoing Kung’s words, they wrote, ‘Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world.’ The authors wrote under the theme, ‘Love in the Qur’an’, devoting attention to Muslim and Christian understanding of the love of God and love of the neighbour, writing: ‘Thus also God in the Holy Qur’an confirms that the same eternal truths of the Unity of God, of the necessity for total love and devotion to God (and thus shunning false gods), and of the necessity for love of fellow human beings (and thus justice), underlie all true religion’ (Common Word 2007).

Concern for religious harmony preceded 9/11, but it intensified as a consequence of the challenge to peace presented by religious fundamentalism and terrorism. The Christian claim to uniqueness is synonymous with neither fundamentalism nor war. Yet the rise of fundamentalism experienced in Islam in the 1990s and continuing into the twenty first century is likely to reinforce the Christian tendency to assert its uniqueness over other faiths, also raising fears of a rise in Christian fundamentalism.

The perception of many Muslims has been of Christians waging war on Islam, in Afghanistan and Iraq, under the banner of a ‘war on terror’. Against that background, Kung’s paradigm of a global ethic is a hope rather than a reality. Domestic and international initiatives for interfaith dialogue respond to a need, more than they affirm success. In November 2010, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution proclaiming World Interfaith Harmony Week and affirmed ‘the imperative need for dialogue among different faiths and religions to enhance mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among people’. On that basis it reaffirmed ‘that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace’; proclaimed ‘the first week of February every year the World Interfaith Harmony Week between all religions, faiths and beliefs’ and encouraged:

... all States to support, on a voluntary basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world’s churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship during that week, based on love of God and love of one’s neighbour or on love of the good and love of one’s neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions (UN Resolution 65/5).

Church and State

In the United Kingdom, the comfortable relationship between the Established Church and State was originally intended to rule out dialogue. Now, there is intense debate amongst politicians over whether the House of Lords should accommodate representatives from other faiths, even while a number of Bishops in the House of Lords are reconciled to it. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi and member of the House of Lords, in his Theos lecture in November 2009, used a musical metaphor to describe how Jews have learned to sing in a minor key, enriching society yet never dominating, presenting an example to all faiths inhabiting a pluralist world. Sacks quoted the Prophet Jeremiah who urged Jews in exile in Babylon to, ‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare’ (Jeremiah 29:7). Rabbi Sacks noted benign social and aesthetic benefits of homogenous European Christianity, but decried the authoritarianism and self-righteousness that laid claim to much of Christian history. The journalist reporting, noted that the minor key need not involve diluting faith: ‘Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and others seem to instinctively know that you can treasure your beliefs and customs, cautiously welcome serious converts, yet not throw your weight around or go out of your way to give (or take) offence. Surrounded by infidels, you treat them politely and think your own thoughts’ (Purves 2009, p.24).

The Church has been criticised in the past because of its close relationship to the state and politics. Mahatma Gandhi, who practiced non-violent resistance against
British rule in India, is said to have embraced Christ but rejected Christianity because of the gap between principle and practice. At the YMCA in Colombo, Ceylon in 1927, he said,

If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it ... I should not hesitate to say, 'Oh, yes, I am a Christian'. ... But negatively I can tell you that much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount ... I am not speaking at the moment of the Christian conduct. I am speaking of the Christian belief, of Christianity as it is understood in the West.

He elaborated in 1946 when he said, ‘Christianity became disfigured when it went to the West. It became the religion of kings’ (Fischer 1954, p.131).

The fundamentals of Christian faith are found in the Creeds that affirm that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, human and divine, and salvation is found through his death on the cross and resurrection to new life. The traditional Roman Catholic interpretation has been absolutist in the sense that it relied on Extra ecclesiam nulla salus (outside the Church, no salvation). Its Protestant missionary equivalent was: outside Christianity, no salvation (Hick 1985, p.51). This dogma influenced the context for Christian missionary activity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when a great many denominations sought Christian converts. Samuel Zwemer (1876–1952), was a typical byproduct of this era, believing that Islam was set to destroy Christianity, and active as a missionary converting Muslims to the Christian faith in the early twentieth century (Siddiqui 2008/2005, p.670).

Contemporary historian, David Kertzer, finds a connection between nineteenth and early twentieth century missionary zeal, imperial conquest, Papal collusion with the State and the rise of modern anti-semitism as a political ideology (Kertzer 2002). Interfaith dialogue requires that Christians at least be aware of their past and of the context of broken relationships. Archbishop Rowan Williams goes further, urging remorse as a necessary basis for healing memories. He writes that remorse is a way of thinking about one’s identity in a way which imagines the way in which I have become part of the representation of the other. It is to make internal to myself the way I have been seen by the other, and real in the language of the other, rather than in a privately scripted story. This necessarily means losing power, and it unsettles the assumption that change comes about through assertion and the capitulation of the will over another ‘as if change were anything else but violent’ (Williams 2000, pp.108–14).

He goes on, ‘What ‘makes good’ loss or injury will not be simply the enforcement of a claim ... but the creation of some possibility of speaking together or thinking one’s own reality through the medium of another’s history, seeing oneself in the other’ (Williams 2000, p.114).
It is sometimes said that ‘actions speak louder than words’, and amidst Europe’s shame of six million Jews perishing under Hitler’s ‘final solution’, acts of mercy have cemented friendships, moving beyond dialogue. The Kindertransport Association in New York supported child survivors from Hitler’s ‘final solution’. Ten thousand of them travelled by train, with most taken in by families in Britain. Sir Nicholas Winton, whose family converted from Judaism to the Christian faith, brought 669 Jewish children from Czechoslovakia to Britain on the eve of World War II. In an interview broadcast on Czech radio to mark the 100th birthday of Sir Nicholas, a holocaust survivor recalled his experience with a simplicity that is chilling:

My name is Peter Miles, Doctor Peter Miles, and I was on the kindertransport to England in July 1939. I was 13 years old, and my name in those days was Petr Bedrich Meisl. Meisl is a very famous name in Prague, because one of my ancestors was the financial advisor to the emperor Rudolf II, and he owned most of the Jewish quarter of Prague.

So you come from an old Prague family which found itself in a tight situation in 1939?

Well, I was lucky insofar as I had an uncle in England. So although I travelled on the kindertransport, I was received by my uncle there, so Mr Winton didn’t have to look for a parent for me in England.

I remember the journey very well. My parents said goodbye to me and more or less told me ‘you’re going on a holiday, we’ll see you soon’. And what was interesting was that one of the girls I was traveling with, a young girl, had swallowed some of the jewellery of her parents in order to bring it out at the other end, you see.

And did you see your parents again?

I studied in England, and my parents and my brother went to Terezín and to Auschwitz. My father died in Auschwitz, but my mother and my brother actually survived and in 1945 they came back. I managed to bring them out of Czechoslovakia to England and my mother then lived in Vienna with me for a while (Radio Praha 2009).

Amidst the current controversy surrounding alleged leniency towards political asylum and the 1998 Human Rights Act it is worth recalling that British attitudes to asylum are shaped by conscience and the belief that ‘blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’ (Matt 7: 5), forged out of the experience of WWII.

A great many initiatives for interfaith dialogue have come from faith groups themselves. Despite dominant secularization of the public sphere in the late twentieth century, the British Government has, through the Home Office, sponsored initiatives for interfaith dialogue since the early 1990s, through the
Faiths’ Cohesion Unit and an Inner Cities Religious Council. It continues to commit money to interfaith projects and in the week, 15–21 November 2009, a national Inter Faith Week was launched in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, with the aim of strengthening good relations between faiths. The objective of the national Inter Faith Week was set out by faith community leaders at a meeting held by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, on 16 November:

We believe that good inter faith relations are a vital part of a harmonious, just and respectful society.

We pledge today, to deepen our work to increase understanding about and between our faiths and to strengthen our cooperation on social issues.

We renew our commitment to developing effective and long term ways of dialogue and mutual learning. We shall continue to seek to understand the patterns of engagement of our faith communities – through history and today; to affirm the positive aspects of these patterns; and to heal wounds of misunderstanding where these are found.

While our great religious traditions are distinct in belief and practice, there is much that unites us. We will draw on fundamental values held in common and on the wisdom of our respective faith traditions to continue to work – as individual communities together – for the wellbeing of our society, our wider global community and the planet that is our home.

Alongside all of good will, we will work to tackle with renewed determination the challenges of poverty, ignorance, injustice, crime and violence, and social fragmentation and to help shape a society where all feel at home; all are valued and justly treated; and all have a chance to thrive (Faith Leaders 2011).

It is important in any discussion of inter-faith dialogue to recognize that it is a theological activity when it relates to transcendence and salvation, but it is also secular, as an ecclesial, social and political activity (Milbank 2006/1990, pp.250–3). An analysis of the impact of Christian claims to uniqueness on interfaith dialogue must consider not only the theological content, but also the ecclesial, social and political context for those claims. Today, dialogue is encouraged to enhance security, with particular focus on the prevention of the alienation of minority communities. Against that, the distinction between dialogue that interrogates, informs and listens, and dialogue which seeks to impose or force belief on the other is crucial.
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Approaches to Dialogue: Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism

Christian understanding of salvation ranges from exclusivism and inclusivism to pluralism (D’Costa). Exclusivism rests on the assumption that only those who hear the gospel proclaimed and explicitly confess Christ are saved. John Milbank is close to this position, proposing that the Church, by interpreting the whole of history through the divine Logos, ‘reads’ all other history as most fundamentally anticipation or sinful refusal of, salvation.’ He goes on:

If one takes one’s salvation from the Church, if one identifies oneself primarily as a member of the body of Christ, then inevitably one offers the most ultimate explanations of socio-historical processes in terms of the embracing or refusal of the specifically Christian virtues. Not to embrace such a metanarrative, or to ascribe to it a merely partial interpretative power, would undo the logic of incarnation (Milbank 2006/1990, p.250).

The Roman Catholic Church today allows that non-Christians can be saved at the same time as asserting that non-Christian religions cannot have salvific structures. Salvation is for those who do not know the gospel of Christ and the non-culpably ignorant who have not arrived at a knowledge of God but who strive to live a good life, thanks to his grace, conscience and the natural law that is written in the hearts of all and is part of the created order (D’Costa 2000, pp.101–04).

Inclusivist theologians view Christ as the normative revelation of God, believing that salvation is possible outside of the explicit Christian church, but this salvation is always from Christ. Martin Buber offers another perspective, defining inclusion, not by empathy, or an entry into the other or the ability to transpose oneself into another situation. Rather, it is the extension of oneself. Its elements are relation; an event experienced in common; and the fact that ‘this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other’ (Buber 1947, p.97).

By that definition, Karl Barth was an inclusivist even though there was an imperialist quality to his doctrine. Barth’s absolute certainty in the revelation of Christ, meant he saw that no refusal, ‘on the part of non-Christians will be strong enough to resist the fulfillment of the promise of the Spirit which is pronounced over them … or to hinder the overthrow of their ignorance of Christ (CDIV/3, p.355) (Webster 2000, pp.254–5).

Barth saw the Church’s task as being a ‘watchman’ in humanity, not apart from it (McGrath, 1996, p.46). He wrote, ‘There is no private Christianity – the Church is entrusted with His witnessing and thus His affairs in the world’ (CD 2/1, p.491). That meant participating in politics. But he was resistant to exclusion wrought by humankind in any form. Barth affirmed that he wanted to separate the action of the Spirit from ‘the arbitrary exaltation and self-glorification of the Christian in relation to other men, of the Church in relation to other institutions, or of Christianity in
Barth connected ethics and the doctrine of God through Christ’s injunction to ‘love one another’ (John 13:34), demanding that God’s grace requires action. Barth rejected the Lutheran idea that we can:

... play off against the decisive significance of love for the neighbour and brother either grace, or the Holy Spirit, or faith in the remission of sins. To do so is to overlook or forget or deny the second (and therefore the first!) dimension of the history of salvation, in which there must necessarily be, in the light and power of the first, an action of man not only in relation to God but also to the fellow-man who is also participant in it, to the one who is a neighbour and brother (CD IV/2, p.817).

For Barth, grace ‘demands’ brotherly love. In that Christian sense, it is impossible to reject a dialogue partner through claims of uniqueness.

Pluralist theologians hold that all religions are equal and valid paths to the one divine reality and that Christ is one revelation among many equally important revelations (D’Costa 2005, p.627). According to Hicks, more contemporary interpretations of the Incarnation no longer lay claim to the unique superiority of Christianity to the extent that ‘the life of Christ is viewed as a supreme instance of the fusion of divine grace and creaturely freedom that occurs in all authentic human response and obedience to God, leaving open the question of its relationship to other instances of divine inspiration in other religions’ (Hicks 1985, pp.62–3).

The pluralist position is held by people of diverse faith traditions. Gandhi was an iconic pluralist, occasionally describing himself as a Christian, a Hindu, a Moslem and a Jew. He doubted that only the sacred Hindu Vedas was the revealed word of God, asking, ‘Why not the Bible and the Koran?’ (Fischer 1954: 130). The thirteenth century Persian and Muslim Sufi mystic, Rumi, taught that ‘Muslims, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians should be viewed with the same eye’ and it is said that people from five faith backgrounds followed his funeral bier (Rumi 2009).

However, pluralism holds an implicit risk of assimilation and dialogue is not always appropriate if we remember how Nazi dialogue with the Protestant Church in Germany muzzled Christian protest. Alfred Rosenberg’s and Heinrich Himmler’s determination to squeeze Christ out of Christmas celebrations led to carols that praised German mothers for making babies for the Führer, in place of worshipping the Jewish baby Jesus and to the celebration of a winter solstice of light and oneness with nature, drawing on pagan tradition. The star on the top of the tree was replaced with a sun, to ensure that it could not be interpreted as a Star of David, and ‘fir’ trees were decorated with glittering swastikas and toy grenades (Gordon Smith 2009).

D’Costa argues that pluralism has its own ‘intolerant, illiberal, exclusivist logic’ as a ‘form of secular agnosticism, reducing all religion to private confession, controlling the public sphere with its own implicit ideology’ (D’Costa 2005, p.638).

It is the contention here that it is not claims to uniqueness nor exclusivism, inclusivism or even pluralism that are a barrier to interfaith dialogue. The danger in interfaith dialogue comes from attempts to convert, impose belief and eradicate the identity of the other, where implicit violence causes the breakdown of dialogue.
Modelling Interfaith Dialogue

Dialogue accepts the unique and exclusive nature of identity and includes other identities in conversation. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37), did not tell of the virtues of one of his disciples, but of someone whose identity was viewed negatively within his own society. The Samaritan’s response to the stranger that took no account of personal gain, what Christians call agapic or self sacrificing love, is repeated in scriptural principles and rules (Deut 6: 4–5, Lev 19: 17–18; Matt 5: 43–48; Matt 22: 39; Mk 12: 28–31); and narrative (Rth; Jnh; Mk 15: 39–45; Lk 7: 3–6). Christian neighbourliness originates from the Jewish tradition and many of the stories are familiar to Muslims. Other faith traditions coming from India and China have an ethic of care. Despite and because of this commonality, Christian claims to uniqueness are essential prerequisites for inter-faith dialogue, rather than an impediment to it. If Christians are to engage in inter-faith dialogue in a way that not only affirms Christian beliefs, but tells of what God has done for humankind, they will be thinking about how God acts through Jesus Christ and what that means at a personal and community level, and not just who Jesus is. Then dialogue can be an invitation to people of other religions and ideologies to work together for God’s future (Moltmann 1999/97, pp.239–40).

That does not mean abandoning the centrality of Christ to Christian faith but, as Moltmann reasons, the mission to which God sends us is to life, ‘to the affirmation of life, the protection of life, to shared life and to eternal life’. Different cultures and other religions can become a charisma of God’s spirit if called by Christ to begin to love life and work for the kingdom of God (Moltmann 1999/97, p.242). Moltmann notes that Christ did not bring a new religion into the world, nor ecclesial rule over the nations; he brought life (1 John 1: 1–2) that leads to the healing of the sick, the forgiveness of sins, the acceptance of the marginalized. That may be inclusivist, but critically, it matches God’s purposes (telos) through Christ with considerations of ethical Christian action (praxis) and self understanding (ethos), taking the promise of a universal future into the present in the service of love.

The three Abrahamic faiths have in common a belief in God as a God of justice, love, mercy, and peace. Belief in resurrection is not exclusive to Christianity (Averroes 2005/01, p.14). Nevertheless, Christian praxis, ethos and telos are unique, because they are grounded in the unique revelation of Jesus Christ. The claim to uniqueness is supported by Bonhoeffer’s insight that the Christological question is fundamentally an ontological question (1966/1933, p.3) and by Aristotle who defined praxis as implied action towards an end (telos), that cannot be separated from a person’s essential being (ethos). On that basis, this analysis seeks to model a way of respecting Christian claims to uniqueness, whilst enabling interfaith dialogue. On the assumption that dialogue must be two-way, the model insists that the claims of religious dialogue partners to uniqueness are respected too.

A model must reflect not just the fact of religious pluralism in the West, in which Christianity shares common space with other religions, but should set a standard for theocratic states that refuse dialogue with alternative religions (Moltmann 1999/1997, pp.228–29). Hence, with a confident exclusivist assertion of faith in
Jesus Christ, Son of God, human and divine (Davis 2006, p.99), Christians can seek to model a way of entering into inclusive dialogue in a pluralist context without denying the possibilities for transformation understood through another religious framework, as a result of reciprocal dialogue.

The following model represents the dialectical and dialogical relationship between various religions’ self understanding (ethos), actions (praxis) and purposes (telos) for the purposes of developing a global ethic that lends itself to peace.

Interfaith dialogue involves an interior process of searching for truth as well as external seeking so that, as Moltmann has argued, ‘it is from the other that we become aware of what we ourselves are, and sure of our identity’ (Moltmann 1999/97, p.228).

In this model, intrafaith dialogue and interrogation are integral to the process of interfaith dialogue. Figure 3.1 represents potential faith traditions as separate triangles in blue. The corners represent three critical aspects of religious identity in respect of God’s purposes, self understanding and ethical action that are in dialectic with each other, as much as they are in dialogue with the telos, ethos and praxis of neighbouring faiths. The image is centripetal, with the telos, ethos and praxis of faith traditions finding harmony through dialogue, under the authority of God, with all things reconciled in God, represented in the centre. The atheist might wish to substitute God with absolute good. The triangles have the possibility of expanding and contracting in size, as they grow in internal coherence and integrity and ethos, praxis and telos are orientated towards a global ethic of peace, justice and love. They can each rotate to find different meeting points for dialogue so that there is always a relationship under divine authority. To avoid violence to or violation of each other’s identity and integrity, they do not intersect, except by being drawn into closer reconciliation with God.

![Figure 3.1 A model of interfaith dialogue](image-url)
Shared talk about God’s purposes provides a good starting point for dialogue but the diagram illustrates that talk of God’s purposes cannot be separated from religious ethos and praxis.

Subjecting faith to the critical challenge of interfaith dialogue can be risky (Peterson et al. 2007/1996, p.129) because it can expose gaps between telos, ethos and praxis and holds out the possibility of change. However, there can be little interest in engaging with dialogue on religious grounds unless there is something new to witness, learn and share. As D’Costa has argued, ‘If Christianity is not able to see itself as distinct and unique in any sense at all, it will probably be assimilated and absorbed by traditions that do feel they have a special vision for the world. People are not particularly interested and challenged by nothing at all!’ (D’Costa 2005, p.638).

Dialogue is best undertaken in what Martin Buber describes as ‘speech from certainty to certainty … from one open hearted person to another open-hearted person’ (Buber 1947, p.24). Interfaith dialogue is about sharing experiences of God and unique revelation, not about breaking up faith communities. It is about healing wounds between faith communities and sowing the seeds of peace, not abandoning tradition, history and identity to embrace others that are not our own. If anything, interfaith dialogue is about becoming aware of a shared identity and obligations born of repeated encounter over time (Moltmann 1999/97, p.228).

Here is a model that shows respect for the claims of Christian uniqueness, but respect also for the claims of other faith traditions. It provides natural boundaries to dialogue, indicating when the invitation to talk should be withdrawn. Importantly, it affirms that the act of forcing faith or belief systems on another is not what brings the faiths closer together, but rather, the act of moving closer to God.

This model is a reminder that religious telos, praxis and ethos are in a dialogical as well as dialectical relationship. The impulse for peace and reconciliation strengthens the impulse towards dialogue and promotes harmony and peace. Despite differences between faiths, and claims to uniqueness, the impulse for dialogue born of a desire for peace should be grasped by Christians because it contributes to the developing consensus in modern society on ethical life, out of which political communities emerge and within which Christian communities can thrive. Rawls asserts that beyond Hobbesian survival of the fittest, where force rules, there is the possibility of ‘a modus vivendi’ between religions ... because one cannot prevail over another.’ He speaks of stability, ‘not because common agreement on justice meaning fairness, for example, is rooted in plural liberalism, but because it is rooted in thick moral principles deeply embedded in faith traditions’ (Storrar and Morton 2004, p.166).

Conclusion

The Church is the ‘body of Christ’ in the world, whose being is love, whose actions are just and whose purposes are to unite all things in heaven and earth. Love, justice and peace in unity are a natural and possibly more productive starting point for
interfaith dialogue, from a Christian perspective, than contested issues of politics. Interfaith dialogue opens up possibilities for discovery of other perspectives on the nature of God and His purposes, and in the understanding of religious ethos and praxis under the authority of God.

Positions that assert the primacy of Christ may seem less sustainable in a religiously pluralist world where truth is provisional, according to what we know and what God chooses to reveal. But we must be careful not to assume that Christian claims of uniqueness necessarily undermine interfaith dialogue. Christian self understanding is that it is unique, and true dialogue should respect that. Where another faith tramples on aspects of Christian self-understanding, reinterpreting it, criticizing it, dismissing it, or even pretending that the faiths are the same, then dialogue has an aggressive agenda, more akin to annexation or obliteration. Positions are more likely to become entrenched and defensive. A Muslim’s expression of disbelief at Christian faith in the divinity of Christ, if it is for the purposes of conversion, can close down dialogue, but if it is for a real engagement with why a Christian has that belief, then it is an opportunity for dialogue. Fundamentalism that elevates the Bible or the Qur’an into the infallible divine word and forbids critical reading of or engagement with sacred text will make it difficult to get beyond the transmission of propaganda.

This chapter finds that Christian claims to uniqueness vary in the degree to which they intend to exclude, but that we must be open to the possibility that any Christian claim to uniqueness contains an element of exclusion. An exclusivist might deliberately evade dialogue, undermining the enterprise. But the biggest factor undermining interfaith dialogue is not likely to be claims of uniqueness, no matter how exclusionary, but rather the approach to and style of dialogue. The use of force and the enforced imposition of ideas will undermine dialogue, whereas shared listening and learning strengthens it.

The conclusion is that dialogue involves not only exterior seeking but interior searching, in the dialogical process that engages religious telos, praxis and ethos, moving to an ever closer correlation and union with God. That theological enterprise needs to happen not only within the Church but with other religions in dialogue, if the Church is truly to be the body of Christ that is the ‘light of the world’. This chapter finds, also, that interfaith dialogue is not simply a theological exercise. It is also an ecclesial, political and social enterprise that should not be separated from the theological, if society is to be founded upon a firm ethical base. This linkage affirms yet again the significance of maintaining a Christian distinctiveness, even uniqueness and exclusiveness, on the Christian understanding that salvation is available to all, but it demands certain responses, not least remorse and the willingness to receive God’s love and offer it to each other.

As a social and political phenomenon, religious claims of uniqueness might be viewed as threatening, when espoused by fundamentalist sects intent on excluding, converting and eliminating outsiders, but claims to uniqueness are also the necessary foundation for dialogue. The process of dialogue is open to empirical study but the underlying norms and values underpinning it will be significant in the prediction of outcomes. The Christian tradition, alongside other faiths, is
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much less homogenous than is often assumed, particularly in claims to uniqueness. Exclusiveness stands in tension with the religious desire to be in relationship with humanity, under God. This tension acts as a natural break on exclusiveness, over and above any political or social factor. In the study of religion, security and international relations, human relationships, as much as the commitment to peace, will influence the success of inter-faith dialogue.

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