The Church of England's Response to Religious Pluralism

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Abstract: Originally published as part of a Doctoral Thesis which examined the training and educational needs of Church of England Clergy ministering in a Multi Faith society. An essential part of that research involved an examination of the theological assumptions that underpinned the church's response to religious pluralism.

The Church of England was first challenged, at synodical level, to the presence of people of other Faiths in British society in 1972 over the question of the sale of church buildings to other Faith communities. While this was essentially a pastoral issue, it raised questions of a theological nature.

By this time the World Council of Churches in Geneva had already started to examine the theological issues, resulting in the publication of various documents for consideration by churches worldwide. These documents formed the background to theological reflection in Britain and subsequently within the Church of England.

The paper covers the period from 1972 until 1998 and provides an analysis of the various documents and reports that informed the debate on the Church of England's response to religious pluralism.

The Church of England's Response to Religious Pluralism

<u>Introduction</u>

The Church of England, at General Synodical level, entered the debate surrounding religious pluralism for two reasons.   The first was in 1972 in relation to the sale of church buildings to people of other Faiths.   The second was as a response to the growing amount of literature published by the World Council of Churches (WCC, 1979) and the British Council of Churches (BCC, 1981), later known as the Christian Churches in Britain and Ireland (CCBI), which was recommended to churches for consideration and comment.

Theological reflection on the theology of religions in the Church of England was very much influenced by the WCC and BCC/CCBI documents. In this paper I shall examine some of the WCC documents which led to the BCC/CCBI publishing its own papers in relation to the British context. Since the Church of England is the mother church of the Anglican Communion and is influenced by events happening in the world-wide communion, I shall make reference to the Lambeth documents which are relevant to this discussion. I shall then explore how the Church of England, at General Synodical level, used these various documents to formulate its own particular response to religious pluralism.

As an Episcopal church, which functions through a synodical structure, the Diocese of Chelmsford takes its doctrinal lead from General Synodical documents. It would therefore be helpful to examine the synodical debates and documents because these influence Diocesan theological understanding which can in turn affect policy decisions.

<u>The World Council of Churches</u>

In 1971 the Central Committee of the WCC meeting in Addis Ababa decided that the exploration and development of the concept of 'dialogue' as the "primary mode of relating to people of other faith traditions" should be undertaken. (WCC, 1979, p v) As a result of this decision a new sub-unit, 'Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies', (DFI) was set up. The aim of this sub-unit was to encourage the meeting of people of different Faiths at national, regional and international levels. The DFI was also required to support and encourage the churches by providing biblical and theological guidelines for the churches in relation to people of other Faiths.

In 1977, during a Theological Consultation in Chiang Mai, Thailand on 'Dialogue in Community', the basis of Guidelines for Dialogue was agreed. Following this, in 1979, the DFI published its first set of guidelines, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. This document, which was received by the Central Committee and sent to all the churches for "their consideration and discussion, animated testing and evaluation" (WCC, 1979, p v), covered the theological significance of religious diversity and offered guidelines to the churches for study and action.

Section 5 of the Guidelines is particularly relevant to this study and is worth quoting in part:

> In many cases Christians, utilizing the experience of dialogue, must take the initiative in education in order to restore the distorted image of the neighbours that may already exist in their communities and to advance Christian understanding of people of other living faiths and ideologies.
>
> Even in those situations where Christians do not live in close contact with people of the various religious, cultural and ideological traditions, they should take seriously the responsibility to study and to learn about these other traditions. (WCC, 1979, p 18)

And even more relevant for clergy training:

Member churches should consider what action they can take in the following educational areas:

(ii) Teaching programmes in theological seminaries and colleges to prepare Christian ministers with the training and sensitivity necessary for inter-religious dialogue.

(iii) Positive relationships with programmes in university departments and other institutes of higher learning which are concerned with the academic study of religion. (WCC, 1979, p 18)

The next publication of significance from the DFI was the study guide *My Neighbour's Faith - and Mine: Theological Discoveries through Interfaith Dialogue*, which was the culmination of three consultations and published in 1986. The study guide invited the churches to reflect upon what it means to be a Christian in a religiously plural world by studying the themes of Creation, Scripture, Jesus Christ, Salvation, Witness, Spirituality, Community, Hope and Vision. The DFI invited all those who took part in the study to respond and comment and it was the intention of the authors that an international conference would be held in 1989 to analyse and circulate the findings.

In 1988 the WCC bookshop reported the sale of 6,300 copies of My Neighbour's Faith and Mine. These were in English, German, Indonesian, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, Malayalam, Tamil and Burmese with translations forthcoming in French, Swedish, Dutch, Arabic, Sinhalese, Telugu and Bengali, making a total of 16 languages, "...all of which point to an enormous interest in the study process itself" (WCC, 1988, p 39).

Despite the sales record, however, the DFI was disappointed in the lack of response from the churches:

I must confess, however, that despite the questionnaire we sent to all who ordered the booklet (in bulk of more than 5 copies) and knowing that a number of study groups have taken up the study, no reports have yet come in. There are many who have promised to report including those who have organized church-wide studies locally (United Church of Canada, Presbyterian Church of Ghana and the Lutheran Church of Norway). (WCC, 1988, p 39)

In an attempt to move dialogue from theory to practice, the DFI arranged a Multicultural Dialogue Meeting in New Delhi in 1987 in order "to engage representatives of different religions in dialogue so as to give them an experience of dialogue and also to set the process of dialogue going in a concrete form" (Cracknell, 1987, p 1). Delegates discussed conflict between different religious groups and identified "the ignorance of people and communities about their neighbours, their customs, beliefs, cultural practices, ways of life" and the "absence of self-criticism within a religious community" as possible causes (Cracknell, 1987, p 5). Other debates related to the question of minority and majority consciousness and the need for people to be able to define themselves and not be subject to labelling: "In inter-religious dialogue, as in all other forms of intra-personal relationships, people should be free to define themselves. Only then does the richness of what they have to give become accessible to us" (Cracknell, 1987, p 11). It is worth pointing out that questions of ignorance, self-identity and identity of the other can only be engaged by people becoming better informed through a process of the appropriate education.

The formal Report of that Multi-Faith Dialogue meeting in 1987 highlighted the enormous educational task:

> It will be necessary to find out new ways of enabling both ourselves and our own communities to learn to see the world from the point of view of our neighbour. This we see as a massive educational task using the skills of human scientists as well as of poets and artists. Meanwhile it is a task laid upon us to continually raise the question of how does it looks from the point of view of others, whether they be Jew or Sikh, Muslim or Hindu, or of groups like the slum-dweller or rural landless. (Cracknell, 1987, p 12)

Among its Recommendations for Practical Action the Report stated:

> We wish to call for (where they do not already exist) and to encourage and support (where they do) study centres within the world religious communities which will give sustained attention to the renewed understanding and the authentic reinterpretation of their own tradition in the light of religious pluralism. We see this as an urgent theological task for every community.

> Equally we wish to support, and to ask our communities to sustain by adequate funding, all existing study centres and departments in colleges and universities based upon interreligious commitment. (Cracknell, 1987, p 13)

In 1988, the DFI working group in Baar, Switzerland, decided to go ahead with an interim consultation in mid 1989 to "gather up the information and share experiences of people who were involved in the study process in their local situations, along with a few 'academic theologians'"(WCC, 1988, p 7). This was despite the fact that no written responses had been received to the booklet *My Neighbour's Faith and Mine*. It was also decided to invite a group of theologians to a further conference to look at specific theological questions relevant to dialogue issues:

> to formulate a theological statement on questions such as: is there salvation outside Jesus Christ/Church?
>
> to draw resources from our own faith to undergird the stance of a Christian theology of religions.
>
> As the methodology question for this consultation was not fully resolved [it was] tentatively agreed to:
>
> (a)   try to go beyond questions to look for concrete theological substance;
>
> (b)   to liberate ourselves from being captive purely to abstract philosophical/theological pre-occupations and make attempts to combine the head (intellect) and the heart (experience);
>
> (c)   to find a biblical basis for the theological stances on the Christian theology of religions. (WCC, 1988, p 7)

At this same meeting in 1988, the DFI working group discussed the forthcoming General Assembly of the WCC to be held in Canberra in 1991. It was agreed that the DFI and the Council on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) jointly design a preparatory document on Witness which "would enable Assembly participants to begin to understand the wide range of 'Issues for Further Study' developed at the Tambaram 1988 Consultation" (WCC, 1988, p 15), with the further aim of encouraging participants "to become aware and discuss at the Assembly the numerous

perspectives that are emerging out of the experience of dialogue and mission in a

pluralistic world" (WCC, 1988, p 16).

> Given the pluralistic world in which Christians live with ever greater
> awareness today, the preparatory document would examine how we
> see God's purpose amongst all persons, how God calls us to be
> witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ amidst
> persons of other faiths, and how we encounter the Holy Spirit moving
> in all of God's creation. Faced with the reality of witness (on the part
> of people of other faiths) to an experience and relationship with God,
> the document must seek to explore these accounts in light of a
> Trinitarian understanding of God and with the goal of seeing the unity
> and renewal of the whole human community as a purpose of the
> church's mission. It is hoped the study will enable us to develop a
> unified eschatological vision of the oikoumene while recognizing our
> differing perspectives on the universality of the salvation offered
> through Jesus Christ. (WCC, 1988, p 16)

I have spent some time looking at the WCC documents because they form the

background to much BCC/CCBI work, to which we now turn.

The British Council of Churches and the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland

The Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF) was set up by the

British Council of Churches in 1978 with the aim of "helping Christians in Britain in

the opportunities of living in a multi-faith society" (BCC, 1981). The Assembly of

the British Council of Churches passed a resolution in November 1979 reaffirming

"its conviction that the presence in Britain of people of other faiths in significant

numbers is within the gracious purposes of God" and "welcomes the Guidelines on

Dialogue commended to member churches by the Central Committee of the WCC"

(Cracknell, 1980, p ii).

In response to the Guidelines on Dialogue, the Secretary to the Committee for

Relations with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF) of the BCC, Reverend Kenneth

Cracknell, wrote the pamphlet *Why Dialogue?* a first British comment on the WCC

Guidelines.   The pamphlet was recommended to the British churches by the Chairman of CRPOF, with the caveat that "the Committee, still less the British Council of Churches, are not committed to the particular interpretations of Scripture and Christian doctrine which appear in its pages" (Cracknell, 1980, p v). Cracknell stressed that "British Christians perhaps look for guidance much more from the Bible than from tradition or theology, and it is increasingly clear that 'Biblical criteria' would be the most helpful things to suggest" (Cracknell, 1980, p 7).   While my own experience with British Christians affirms the primacy of biblical criteria, there are also many Anglicans and probably Roman Catholics who may look to tradition and theology.   Perhaps Cracknell was speaking from his own Methodist perspective and had taken less account of the other Christian traditions in Britain.

With an emphasis on the biblical material Cracknell stressed that 'dialogue' was a thoroughly biblical word. He pointed to the universal covenants of the Old Testament and St Paul's encounters in the New Testament. However, as a word of caution he quoted New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl;

> The questions facing us ... as to Dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies are hardly the questions in the minds of the biblical writers. But they are valid questions of importance... A Christian theology of religion cannot be pieced together by direct biblical quotations.   It is a new question. (Theological consultation on "Dialogue in Community", 1977, Chiang Mai, Thailand)

In his final section, headed 'Towards a Theology of Religions' Cracknell condemned what he called 'theologizing' about other religions and people of other Faiths "on the basis of total ignorance". Instead he advocated the experiential encounter "that takes place when two or more people of different religious commitment really begin to listen to each other" (Cracknell, 1980, p 23).

In 1981 CRPOF published *Relations with People of Other Faiths; Guidelines for Dialogue in Britain.*   This document was based upon the WCC Guidelines but written

for the British churches.   It was widely discussed by the churches and while some were able to give "ready assent to the main lines suggested in its pages, ... others ha[d] yet to declare their mind on the stance they would wish to take in responding to a multi-faith society" (BCC, 1981, p 1).   The General Synod of the Church of England gave support in principle to the guidelines but asked for further theological work to be done.   I shall be returning to this point later.

Once more the importance of education was highlighted and the British document quoted in full section 5 of the WCC document.

The British document also added sections on Hospital Chaplaincies and the Pastoral Care of Sick People of Other Faiths; Inter-Faith Marriages; Religious Education in the Local Authority School; Denominational Schools in a Plural Society and the question of inter-Faith services and the use of church property; all issues that are particularly relevant to British society.

The relationship between interreligious dialogue and witness, or the proclamation of the Gospel, has been a constant theme running through all consultations, discussions and documents since the 1910 Edinburgh conference.   The central question is whether or not inter-Faith dialogue is compatible with witness to the Gospel, or whether indeed the two are mutually exclusive.   This question came to the fore at the beginning of the Decade of Evangelism and prompted the publication in 1991 of a discussion document entitled *Christian Identity, Witness and Interfaith Dialogue* by the Theological Issues Consultative Group of CRPOF. The document was only eight pages in length and drew on the WCC Guidelines and the Baar Statement of the WCC Dialogue Sub Unit 1990. It did, however, make the point that although the social context of mission had changed, there still remained a deeply rooted cultural superiority and paternalism on the part of the British churches (CCBI, 1991, p 4). The

document also pointed to Eugene Stockwell's observations at the WCC San Antonio Conference in 1989:

> Too often the church has confused proclamation with words alone, forgetting the integral witness of worship, deed and life.
>
> Too often the church has confounded witness with the imposition of a gospel wrapped in cultural trappings that obscures the living Christ. (CCBI, 1991, p 4)

In the same year, 1991, the Vatican published *Dialogue and Proclamation; Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*.   This document, comprising 49 pages, was far more comprehensive than the CRPOF document. It stated that dialogue and proclamation were two authentic, necessary forms of mission (p 206); that "proclamation has priority over every other form of the Church's activity, while dialogue is one of the integrating elements" (p 207).

Again the theme of education received special mention:

> It is also important that specific studies on the relationship between dialogue and proclamation be undertaken, taking into account each religion within its geographical area and its socio-cultural context. Episcopal Conferences could entrust such studies to the appropriate commissions and theological and pastoral institutes. In the light of the results of these studies, these institutes could also organize special courses and study sessions in order to train people for both dialogue and proclamation. Special attention is to be given to young people living in a pluralistic environment, who meet the followers of other religions at school, at work, in youth movements and other associations and even within their own families. (Vatican City, 1991, p 250)

The BCC/CCBI incorporated much of the WCC material into its own documents and guidelines but with special reference to the British context. At the same time the Roman Catholic Church has produced comprehensive documents around the question of dialogue and proclamation.   I will now turn to the Lambeth documents, which

came out of the Lambeth conferences of 1988 and 1998 and are relevant to this discussion.

<u>The Lambeth Conference</u>

Every ten years bishops representing dioceses from across the world come to England for the Lambeth Conference. The Church of England is the mother church of the Anglican Communion.   While on the one hand it functions as a national church within the context of England, it also has a very strong relationship with the Anglican Communion (ACC) that represents 500 dioceses in 164 countries of which the Archbishop of Canterbury is the Head (*Church of England Year Book*, 1998, p 261). Increasingly events occurring across the Communion are affecting the thinking of the Church of England.   This was evident at the Lambeth 1998 conference over the issue of both inter-Faith relations and human sexuality when the resolutions taken at the Conference were very much influenced by bishops from Africa and Asia.

The document *Towards a Theology for Inter-faith Dialogue* (BMU, 1984) was recommended to all the dioceses of the ACC for study and reflection in preparation for Lambeth 1988.   Lambeth 1988 also called for the establishment of a Network for Inter-Faith Concerns (NIFCON) for the purpose of sharing ideas and resources between provinces across the Communion.

During the preparation for Lambeth 1998 it became apparent that the question of inter-Faith relationships was an issue for most parts of the Communion, and particularly those countries where Christians lived as a minority in a majority Muslim country.   It was therefore decided that inter-Faith issues should be incorporated into all four Sections of the conference.   Section Three: 'Called to be a faithful Church in a plural world' looked specifically at inter-Faith relations. Under item III.11 'Religious Freedom' it passed the following resolution:

> This Conference challenges Anglicans, as servants of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour:
>
> (a) to respect the rights and freedom of all faiths to worship and practise their ways of life;
>
> (b) to work with all people of good will to extend these freedoms of worship, religious practice and conversion throughout the world;
>
> (d) to enter into dialogue with members of other faiths, to increase our mutual respect and explore the truths we hold in common and those on which we differ;
>
> (f) to equip ourselves for our witness, dialogue and service by becoming better versed in the teaching and practice of our own faith, and of at least one other faith. (ACC, 1998)

These resolutions attempted to reconcile a pastoral role; point (a), with loyalty to the uniqueness of Christ; point (b) which specifically referred to conversation.   Point (f) also emphasised the need for education, both in the Christian Faith and in one other Faith.

The Resolution from the inter-Faith team, VI.1 'on relations with people of other faiths', reiterated much of the above with a special request that "(ii) the ACC consider how to resource NIFCON adequately both in personnel and finance; (ii) all the other official Anglican networks should be encouraged to recognise the interfaith dimensions to their work" (ACC, 1998).   The Anglican Communion is a consultative body and has no jurisdiction over any particular Anglican province. However, at a time of general globalisation there is an increasing awareness of the need for co-operation, support and understanding across the Communion.[1] This trend has recently been highlighted with the appointment of the new Secretary to IFCG whose revised terms of reference include networking with Lambeth Palace and other agencies within the Anglican Communion.   Such a move reinforces the partnership between the Lambeth Palace and the Archbishop of Canterbury as Head of the Anglican Communion and the Church of England as the national Church.

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[1] At the Lambeth Conference 1998 bishops called for support from their Western colleagues, particularly where Christians are facing religious persecution.

The Church of England

T.H.N. Kuin, in her article 'Perfect Partners or Uneasy Bedfellows? (Kuin, 1997,
Studies in Interreligious Dialogue 7) has provided a useful analysis of the 'Anglicans
and Religious Pluralism in the Late 20th Century' by making an in depth study of
synodical Reports of Proceedings. She claims that it was the question of the sale of
redundant church buildings to non-Christian communities that forced the question of
the relationship of the Church of England to other Faith communities onto the agenda
of the General Synod.   In July 1972 the following motion was tabled:

> That Synod take note of the following resolution passed by the
> diocesan synod of Wakefield: 'In view of the widespread interest and
> concern raised by the question of the future use of St. Mary's Church,
> Savile Town, Dewsbury, this Synod requests that the General Synod
> debate the principle of the use of consecrated building which have
> been declared redundant'. (Kuin, 1997 quoting Report of Proceedings
> (RP) 7/723/3,442)

Synod was united in the opinion that such a question could not be solved by debate
but needed an in-depth investigation into the theological, pastoral and social
implications of the future of use redundant church buildings, particularly by non-
Christian communities. However, there was clearly a division of opinion between
those who called for Christian charity; "it is a matter of urgency that an unequivocal
expression of Christian charity ... be made by Synod" (Rev Dr G F Cope, RP
7/723/3,453) and those who wished to defend the uniqueness of Christ; "how would it
in any way bring that Muslim community nearer to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus
Christ?" (Mr J W M Mullimore, RP 7/723/3, 459).

Although the British Council of Churches had produced several documents on the
subject (*The Use of Church Properties for Community Activities in Multi-Racial
Areas,* 1972; *Church Property and People*, 1973; *The Community Orientation of the
Church*, 1974; *The Use of Church Property in a Plural Society*, 1980) and General

Synod had produced Memorandum of Comment on the interim report in 1973 (GS 135) , it was not until 1996, twenty-four years after the issue was first raised, that the Church of England published *Communities and Buildings: Church of England premises and other faiths* (GS 1185). This document was long awaited and provided not only guidelines for both the disposal and use of church buildings to other Faith communities, but also stated clearly the legal situation under Canon Law.

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the other issue that brought inter-Faith issues onto the General Synod's agenda was the need for a response to the WCC documents and particularly the BCC's *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines for Dialogue* (BCC 1981). In November 1981 Synod commended the Guidelines to the dioceses and at the same time asked the Board for Mission and Unity to prepare a report on the "theological aspects of dialogue" (BMU, 1984, p 1).

In response to this request the Inter-Faith Consultative Group (IFCG) of the Board for Mission and Unity produced the report *Towards a Theology for Inter-Faith Dialogue* (BMU, 1984). Being a "new and sensitive area for Christians in England" the group were also "conscious that this was the beginning of a journey and that any theology which was written had to be provisional" (BMU, 1984, p vii).

The report, which was recommended to all the dioceses of the Anglican Communion for study and reflection in preparation for the Lambeth Conference 1988, began by outlining the changed religious context and pointed out that;

> Britain, perhaps, more than any other country, has been affected by the international changes that have taken place since the end of the Second World War. In 1945 London was still the metropolis of a vast empire, and counted as subjects of His Majesty were nearly all the Hindus in the world, all the Sikhs, a vast proportion of the Muslims and enormous numbers of Buddhists. In 1945 our great missionary societies were still at work in China, in Burma and in many other lands now closed to us. (BMU, 1984, p 3)

Using Race's typology, the report then briefly (in three pages) outlined the three paradigms under the section 'Christian Responses to Other Faiths: Exclusivism, Incluvism, and Pluralism'. Kuin suggested that this was a simplistic and unhelpful approach.

> The 'exclusivism' section is entirely theology-based, referring to truth, revelation and salvation. There is no suggestion of a sympathetic approach to other faiths, only the stark portrait of rigid particularism. 'Inclusivism' is a mixture of theology and attitude: or perhaps a restatement of a theology formed by experience. 'Pluralism' is treated in much the same way, although the conclusions reached on the key issues of salvation, revelation and truth are different. The impression is that it is the 'inclusivists' and 'pluralists' who have the right attitude to other faiths; indeed, that it is not possible to hold an 'exclusivist' position and be hospitable to and interested in other faiths...It is not surprising that many 'exclusivists' who had lived and worked with other faiths rejected the threefold model. (Kuin, 1997, p 189)

This section was followed by the 'Bible as source of authoritative guidance' and 'the Biblical process'. The largest section of the report, 'Biblical pointers', referred to (i) the creating God, (ii) the covenanting God, (iii) the electing God, (iv) the Incarnate God, (v) God as Spirit, (vi) the Saving and Judging God. It is interesting to note that the biblical theme of creation, reflecting the WCC guidelines (WCC, 1979), was chosen by the authors as a starting point. It is important to note that the authors, in their Final Reflections, claimed to have "found a consensus" for theological understanding. "It can be described as being inclusivist with an exclusivist loyalty to Jesus Christ" (BMU, 1984, p 35).

Kuin suggested that "the starting point chosen by the IFCG, creation rather than the fall, emphasised the universal rather than the particular nature of the atonement" and reflected the particular 'prejudice' of the committee (Kuin, 1997, p 187).

> This was not what the 'exclusivists' had anticipated when they had called for "further investigation into the theological aspects of dialogue." When the report came to be debated, the reaction was hostile. Race's model was disliked by those who felt "compartmentalized" by it (RP 7/8415/2,791, 801). The report was criticised as being far too one-sided: "an inclusivist manifesto,"

> "unbalanced" and "narcotic in its sweet reasonableness" (RP 7/8415/2,806, 811, 793) (Kuin, 1997, p 188)

During the debate on the report there were attempts to replace the word "commend" to the theological colleges by the word "submit" and also reinforce an emphasis upon the "uniqueness of Christ". However, these moves were defeated and the

> the report was passed and commended for use in churches and theological colleges by 138 votes to 117. Few reports are passed with so narrow a margin... the length of debate, number of amendments and necessity for a counted vote, register the displeasure of the 'exclusivists'. It appeared that in passing the report, Synod had given its first explicit backing to an articulated 'inclusivist' approach to religious pluralism. (Kuin, 1997, pages 188-189)

Unease over the report was also reflected at the sixth meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC-6) held in Nigeria in 1984:

> We thought the book needed a greater emphasis on the doctrine of redemption, and we questioned some of its biblical exegesis, as well as the selectivity of biblical texts. People from non-Western societies, especially found the approach too academic and cerebral, and thus it was classified as largely irrelevant to them. (ACC-6, 1984. report Bonds of Affection. pp. 84-86)

The next report of significance, in relation to people of other Faiths, to come from the Church of England was the report of the Doctrine Commission *The Mystery of Salvation* (MS 1995). This was the third in a series of three; the others being *We Believe in God* (1987) and *We Believe in the Holy Spirit* (1991).   They were all published under the authority of the House of Bishops and commended by the House to the Church for study.   Chapter 7 of *The Mystery of Salvation*, 'Christ and the world faiths' addressed "the ways in which Christian understanding of salvation bears upon other faiths". The authors admitted that this was one of the subjects "at which we had to work the hardest"(MS, 1995, p xi).

Although Race's typology was once more referred to, there was an attempt to move beyond these paradigms, which had proved unhelpful in earlier debates, towards 'an

open and generous exclusivism', 'a Christocentric inclusivism', or a 'trinitarian pluralism' (MS, 1995 p 171). Reference was also made to D'Costa's 'Trinitarian Christology' (MS, 1995, p 177).   But these were all brief references with no attempt at any in-depth analysis. However, the report was well received by Synod in July 1996 and carried with the following motion:

> That the Doctrine Commission report The Mystery of Salvation be warmly commended for study and use especially by the teaching institutions of the Church, and that it be recognised as a substantial contribution to the Church. (Prof. Anthony Thiselton, in RP 7/9627/2,453) (Kuin, 1997, p 196)

The report looked at the theology of salvation and the " 'exclusivists' hoped that their desire for dogmatic theology would be satisfied by the Doctrine Commission. However, in recognition of the 'privileges and responsibilities' of being a National Church, the report is once again set in the context of pastoral realities"(Kuin, 1997, p 193). This tension between orthodoxy and pastoralia prevails throughout the theology of religions debate, and particularly so for the Church of England as a national church with a pastoral responsibility for the wider community.   Dealing with this tension creates ambiguity. For example, the report stated that:

> a) God will save ultimately those who are willing to be saved, by their penitence and acceptance of the love which stretches out to them, in the way that it meets them in their lives and within their traditions. (MS, 1995, pp 193-184)

This statement, which acknowledges the grace of God within the lives and traditions of people of other Faiths, shows a pastoral awareness which is reflected by a pluralist/universalist theological stance.

> b) There is only one way, but that way is one that is without barbed wire or boundary fences, so that all may join this way. (MS, 1995, p 184)

This is an inclusivist approach affirming the theology of 'one way' but allowing that all may be included in this way.   It mirrors the consensus arrived at by the authors of

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Towards a Theology for Inter-faith Dialogue that "it can be described as being inclusivist with an exclusivist loyalty to Jesus Christ" (BMU, 1984).

> c) We believe that God has chosen to provide the fullest revelation of himself in Christ, and the fullest revelation of his love for all humanity in the cross and resurrection. Hence we naturally pray that God will bring all people, including those of other faiths, to explicit faith in Christ and membership of his Church. (MS, 1995, p 184)

This statement reflected a more explicit exclusivist theology with no recognition of the salvific value of other Faith traditions.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to examine the theological response of the Church of England to religious pluralism. In order to do this it was necessary to go back to the WCC and BCC/CCBI documents because these formed the foundation to the Church of England's thinking.

Although theological questions in relation to mission and people of other Faiths had been on the agenda of the ecumenical mission bodies since Edinburgh 1910, the impetus for an explicit theology of religions began with the establishment in 1971 of the Dialogue with People of Other Faiths and Ideologies (DFI) sub-unit of the WCC in Geneva.   This was followed, in Britain, by the establishment in 1978 of the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF). The Church of England's Board of Mission established the Inter-Faith Consultative Group in 1980 and the Roman Catholic church had established a similar body, the Pontifical Council for Interreligous Dialogue following Vatican II in 1965.

The role of all of these bodies was similar: a) to encourage dialogue with people of other Faiths and ideologies, b) to provide guidelines for dialogue and living and working with people of other Faiths and ideologies and c) to resource and encourage theological reflection.   The original guidelines published by the WCC in 1979 were

received by the BCC and the BCC guidelines subsequently commended by the General Synod of the Church of England in 1981.

While the Church of England commended the BCC guidelines to the churches, in view of earlier heated debates over the issue of church buildings, it called for further reflection on the theological issues of religious pluralism.   This resulted in the document Towards a Theology for Inter-faith dialogue (BMU 1984).   The Synodical debates following this document highlighted the inadequacy of Race's three-fold typology and the discomfort of many with the idea of 'labelling'. According to Kuin;

> ...'exclusivism' was defined solely in terms of dogmatic theology, while 'inclusivsm' was a mixture of theology and experience.   In practice, the Church of England wanted to re-state the exclusive nature of its faith in the context of its responsibility to the non-Christian citizens in Britain. (Kuin, 1997, p 197)

This tension between dogmatic theology, or orthodoxy, and pastoral responsibility and experience runs through all the debates and documents that we have examined, resulting in theological ambiguity and at times a reluctance to give authority to the document.

There has been no follow-up document to *Towards a Theology for Inter-faith Dialogue* and no call from Synod for further theological reflection, which led to that document, since 1979.[2] 'Open and generous exclusivism' and 'Christocentric inclusivism' among other concepts have been mentioned as alternatives to the three paradigms of 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism' but these "are concepts which need rigorous theological investigation and cannot, in their present form offer an alternative systematic approach to the questions raised by religious pluralism" (Kuin, 1997, p 198).   In the meantime Synod, clergy and ordinands in theological colleges still work with the Race model.   While this model was a useful tool with which to

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[2] This was confirmed by the Secretary to IFCG on 11 October 1998

begin the debate in the early 1980s, it now appears to be less helpful because the

theoretical paradigms just do not match people's experience.

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