

Mission in dialogue

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1. On the relationship between mission and dialogue

Anyone attempting to determine the relationship between mission and dialogue will soon run into one basic difficulty: both concepts are extremely complex and their semantic content is far from unambiguous.¹ The first thing we have to do is distinguish between two different semantic planes. While mission and dialogue both indicate forms of communication, dialogue implies mutual recognition of the equal status of the communicators, while mission suggests the promotion of one particular point of view. On the second semantic plane both forms of communication express a certain basic attitude. Although both semantic planes are inseparably bound up with each other, they still have to be distinguished. Both concepts have their own history, “mission” being a genuinely Christian concept used as a technical term to refer to the Christian mission in a worldwide context, while “dialogue” is a concept derived from Greek philosophy that found its way into Christian theology via a multi-phase reception process.

Dialogue as a form of communication indicates a serious and meaningful conversation between two parties on a basis of equality. A dialogue derives its vitality from the mutual nature of assertion and response. It consists of an exchange of arguments, experiences and points of view. It is aimed at understanding, clarification and consensus. A dialogue can pursue different aims: It can help people get to know each other or it can be a helpful instrument for solving social problems in a pluralistic society. However it can also be used – as in the case of inter-faith dialogue – to mean an attempt to reconcile

¹ On the relationship between mission and dialogue see Krämer, K., *Den Logos zur Sprache bringen. Untersuchungen zu einem dialogischen Verständnis von Mission*, Ostfildern, 2012. The present paper is intended to bring together the basic theses of this more comprehensive work as a contribution to the discussion.

different claims to truth by discussing them within the framework of a discourse. It is this last form of dialogue and its relationship to mission that we shall be looking at here.

Since the dawn of the modern era the concept of mission has been used as a technical term for the spreading of the Christian faith among non-Christians.² In this sense it can also be extended to comparable activities on the part of other religions. Such a phenomenological definition of the concept of mission can be reduced to five elements: (1) a planned, methodical and organised procedure; (2) an intent to win over the Other to one's own faith; (3) an attempt to persuade others to join one's own religious community; (4) a conviction of the truth of one's own faith; and (5) a conviction that acceptance is also in the objective interest of the person to be converted.

The theological discussion of the relationship between mission and dialogue began with the Second Vatican Council, which heralded a new approach to the whole concept of mission and the relationship of Christianity to other religions. The positive acknowledgement of everything that was "true and holy" in other religions³ and the recognition of the basic possibility of salvation for non-Christians, too, laid the foundations for an inter-religious dialogue, thus creating the need for a new rationale of the Church's missionary activity.⁴ Furthermore, there was a growing conviction in the second half of the 20th century that peace among nations could be substantially promoted by an earnest dialogue between the world's religions.⁵ This was because threats to world peace often emanated from fundamen-

² On the history of the term see Collet, G., "Zum Missionsverständnis der katholischen Kirche", in: Dahling-Sander, Ch., et al. (eds.), *Leitfaden ökumenische Missionstheologie*, Gütersloh, 2003, 130-135.

³ Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Die Erklärung über das Verhältnis der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen "Nostra aetate"* in Rahner, K./Vorglimmer, H., (eds.), *Kleines Konzilskompendium. Sämtliche Texte des Zweiten Vatikanums mit Einführungen und ausführlichem Sachregister*, Freiburg i. Br. 1982, 356, no. 2.

⁴ Cf. Rahner, K., "Anonymes Christentum und Missionsauftrag der Kirche", in: idem, *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. IX, Einsiedeln, 1970, 498-515.

⁵ Cf. Küng, H., *Projekt Weltethos*, Munich, 1990. For a critical treatment see the survey in the research report of Hans Jürgen Münk, "Die Weltreligionen im globalen Ethikdialog über Menschheitsfragen" in: idem / Durst, M., *Christliche Theologie und Weltreligionen*, Freiburg (Switzerland), 2003, 160-238, es 202-212.

talist tendencies in all world religions. These tendencies were frequently characterised by intolerance and a propensity to violence, thus compromising the very purpose of mission. The question of the relationship between mission and dialogue gained new relevance in the discussion of a theology of religions, especially in the context of the pluralistic theory of religion.⁶ The distinctions among an exclusivist, an inclusivist and a pluralistic model can help us in an initial attempt to schematise the relationship between mission and dialogue.

In the exclusivist model the interlocutor feels himself to be in “exclusive and unlimited possession of the absolute truth”. This subjective certainty is itself a strong motive for undertaking the mission. In this case mission is aimed at bringing the absolute truth to other fellow human beings in as pure a form as possible. Such an attitude largely precludes a dialogue – at least as far as the substance of the faith is concerned – as even the hypothetical possibility of a modification or correction of the proselytiser’s own position would be regarded as an unacceptable relativisation. A dialogue concerning the articles of faith might at most be considered a didactic method leading to a deeper insight.

In the inclusivist model the interlocutor also feels himself pledged to the absolute truth that concerns all mankind, this truth being represented by his own religion. But he expects that traces of this truth are also to be found in other religions and cultures and that he himself can penetrate much more deeply into the truth without necessarily compromising the priority of his own claim to it. Here, too, the necessity of the mission stems from the basic obligation to make the whole truth in all its complexity accessible to all men. At the same time one can have a dialogue in which the parties get to know and mutually enrich each other. It can help one to penetrate further into the truth without the risk of it being subjected to any fundamental reformulation.

The pluralistic model assumes that none of the parties to the dialogue can claim to be in possession of the whole truth. Everyone

⁶ On the basic positions regarding the pluralistic theory of religion see Schmidt-Leukel, P., *Gott ohne Grenzen – Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen*, Gütersloh, 2005.

has a provisional, historical and cultural share in it. Dialogue helps everyone to get closer to the truth. In a sense it takes the place of mission. In this model a deliberate intent to foist one's own position on others would be regarded as an unreflective or unenlightened attitude. Although everyone has his viewpoint to contribute and is entitled to seek support for it, open-ended dialogue is the proper way to get ever closer to the all-embracing, absolute truth.

Only the inclusivist approach seriously raises the question of the relationship between mission and dialogue. For the exclusivist this question is decided in favour of a more or less uncompromising mission, for the pluralist in favour of dialogue. The discussion of the pluralistic theory of religion has clearly shown that the basic positions are ultimately decided by the Christological question: Does the Christian tradition's theological understanding of the person and significance of Jesus Christ permit any positive acknowledgement of other religions at all? The answer to this question is summed up in the proposal to replace the traditional constitutive Christology by a representative one. Paul Knitter, for example, argues that although Jesus of Nazareth may continue to be regarded as a manifestation of the universal Logos, other historical forms of the revelation of the Logos can be recognised as equally valid.⁷ However, this representative Christology approach has rightly been criticised for its willingness to give up the central tenet of the Christian faith in order to enter into a dialogue with other religions. Thus the basic Christological consensus among all Christian churches is that "the one and only God has manifested Himself in Jesus Christ only once in history, but quite conclusively and unreservedly"⁸ It is, however, questionable whether the thesis put forward by representatives of the pluralistic theology of religion – namely that holding fast to the constitutive significance of Jesus Christ for the salvation of all mankind would preclude an unprejudiced dialogue with the non-Christian religions – is strictly accurate. We shall, therefore, now examine the question as to how far the striving for an honest and genuine dialogue is enshrined at the heart of the faith itself.

⁷ Cf. Knitter, P., "Religion und Befreiung. Soteriozentrik als Antwort an die Kritiker" in: Bernhardt, R., (ed.), *Horizontüberschreitungen*, Gütersloh, 1991, 203-219.

⁸ Kasper, W., "Einzigkeit und Universalität Jesu Christi", in: Krämer, K. / Paus, A., (eds.), *Die Weite des Mysteriums. Christliche Identität in Dialog*, Freiburg, 2000, 146-157, 155.

2. Biblical and systematic foundations of a theological concept of dialogue

Our second step entails scrutinising the biblical scriptures in search of clues to a dialogical understanding of the relationship between man and God which might be crucial to communicating the faith. We shall thus be seeking a biblically well-founded and theologically sound concept of dialogue.

The narrative of Christian salvation seen as God's dialogue with man

A glance at the biblical scriptures shows that man's relationship to God does indeed have a profoundly dialogical structure. God addresses man in a given life situation, calls him out of it and sets him very specific tasks. Man talks and argues with God. He calls upon Him in time of need and turns to Him with concrete requests.

The basic dialogical structure which determines the relationship of the people of Israel to their God is made particularly clear by the story of the Exodus. God appears here as the saviour of His people whose need He recognises and whom He frees from their Egyptian captivity by hearing their call for help and helping them escape across the Red Sea. The people of Israel respond to this experience of salvation by thanking God and keeping faith with Him. According to the thoroughgoing analyses by Claus Westermann, the interplay of communicative elements – the call for help, the heeding of the call and the response of the saved – make the historical event of the rescue into a dialogical happening.⁹

The basic dialogical structure of the Exodus event has paradigmatic significance not just for the Exodus narrative, but also for the history of Israel in general. It is a recurrent theme in the texts of the Old Testament, in which YHVH repeatedly turns out to be the saviour of Israel. He reacts to the given situation appropriately, thus revealing himself as the "God of the Fathers", who never leaves his people in the lurch. Yet at the same time he acts in a quite new and unexpected manner. Thus an element of discontinuity is added to the continuity of a constantly self-renewing experience of God. YHVH reacts other than expected, leading his people into ever new situations and repeatedly bursting

⁹ Cf. Westermann, C., *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen*, Göttingen, 1978, 38.

the existing conceptual framework. The dialectic of the ever-recurring salvational acts of YHVH in the crises faced by the people of Israel and the response of the people, which always falls short of what the God of Israel expects in the way of an adequate reaction, constitutes the historicity of this dialogical relationship between YHVH and Israel and is the driving force behind the salvation narrative.

YHVH's dialogical relationship with Israel is continued and reaches its ultimate zenith in Jesus of Nazareth. The salvational acts of God through His son are His ultimate response to man's distress. The public acts of Jesus, especially the healing episodes and His concern for sinners and outcasts, follow a basic dialogical structure. His whole existence can be interpreted as God's dialogue with mankind. God reveals himself in His innermost essence in the Word of Jesus. Jesus not only imparts the Word of God, He *is* the Word of God in person: His whole existence and His fate thus become God's Word, which is addressed to all mankind, aims to elicit a response and invites a dialogue.

The whole Christ event can thus be interpreted as a comprehensive dialogue between God and man. In the incarnation of the Word God emptied Himself, expressed His essence without reservation, and gave all of Himself. By placing Himself on a level with man as His interlocutor, He takes him seriously and respects his freedom. He forgoes His divine powers in order to make His point. He does not take back the Word He has given once and for all – even a refusal to reply does not break off the dialogue! This principal feature of the relationship between God and man is illuminated in the manner in which Jesus makes His appearance and in His dealings with men, especially His disciples. He finds His final incarnation in His passion and death and in the resumption of dialogue with the Resurrection. This “dialogical” appearance of Jesus is thus an expression of His essence and His mission, in which God ultimately reveals Himself in His own innermost being.

God is in His essence dialogical

Thus dialogue becomes the distinguishing mark of the biblically founded, personal understanding of God: God is in His essence dialogical! The question remains how this dialogue is to be understood

if it is to be an appropriate category for unlocking the inner essence of God. Dialogue among men is mainly remarkable for its discursiveness. The continuing interplay of question and answer, address and response, marks the dialogue as a communication which takes place under the conditions of space and time on the horizon of historicity. It is here that we see the greatest difference between human communication and divine essence. Walter Kasper has pointed out that personalistic categories can only be applied by analogy to the Trinity. This means that any similarity has a greater dissimilarity corresponding to it: "As in God not only the unity, but also the distinctness and hence the counterpart is greater than in interpersonal relations among men, the divine persons are not less dialogical, but infinitely more dialogical than human persons. The divine persons not only take part in dialogue, they are dialogue."¹⁰

Whereas the parties to a human dialogue encounter each other in a relationship based on mutuality and constantly exchange roles in the course of the dialogue, a relationship with the divine being cannot be thought of as a relationship between two separate persons who stand facing each other: The persons who constitute a divine being are identical with the relations.

Thus within the divine being relationships are not something superadded to a person, as is the case with human beings. The relationship is rather the person itself. In its nature the person only exists as relation. "Put more concretely, the first person does not generate in the sense that the act of generating a son is added to the complete person, but the person is the act of generating, of giving itself, of streaming itself forth. It is identical with this act of devotion. One could thus define the first person as self-donation in fruitful knowledge and love; it is not the one who gives himself, in whom the act of self-donation is found, but this self-donation, pure reality of act."¹¹

If the divine persons are not primarily in dialogue with each other (as human persons are), but in a much more fundamental sense are

¹⁰ Kasper, W., *Der Gott Jesu Christi*, Mainz, 1982, 353.

¹¹ Ratzinger, J., "Zum Personenverständnis in der Theologie", in: idem, *Dogma und Verkuendigung*, Munich/Freiburg i. Br., 1973, 205-233, 211.

the dialogue themselves, this means addressing the basic relationships that make any genuine dialogue possible in the first place. The father imparts His entire being to the son. His is thus the perfect devotion, the self-renunciation which imparts itself to the Other in its entirety without any reservations and of which it is the perfect expression. In the father's imparting of Himself to the son the act of revelation is already rooted in the divine being itself. The one divine being finds its perfect expression in the emergence of the inner Word. The son receives the divine being from the father; he owes his whole existence to the father: He is therefore the perfect reception, in which the imparted and the self-imparted are wholly accepted, included and understood. Thus the first basic movement of perfect devotion is matched by a second of perfect and unreserved openness to the Other. From this relationship between father and son the spirit emerges as personalised love: That which happens between father and son is more than giving and taking – it has an autonomous relational quality which goes beyond father and son and in which lies a deeply dynamic and also creative element (the dynamic of love).

3. Consequences of a dialogical understanding of mission

This dialogical interpretation of intra-Trinitarian relations has far-reaching consequences. As the term “God” designates the ultimate foundation of reality, statements about the specific nature of this reality have direct relevance to the question as to how human existence can succeed at all. If this underlying foundation is dialogically formulated in the manner presented, the consummate absolute dialogue in the Trinitarian essence of God can be described in a sense as the “transcendental prerequisite” of any genuine, real dialogue.

The basic structure of Trinitarian dialogue

A genuine, real and fruitful dialogue between two persons can only take place if it corresponds to the basic Trinitarian relations. The prerequisite is that the speaker should express himself in full, adopt a position without reservations or dissimulation, and make the ultimate motives for his utterance transparent. Thus what is needed is personal credibility and authenticity, the readiness to recognise obstacles to communication which lie in his own person and might undermine his credibility and to overcome them if possible or at least

to admit to them so that they do not disturb the communicative flow. This expressive relation possesses an inner dynamic of devotion, a preparedness to submit or – ultimately – even surrender to the Other without inner reservations. Corresponding to this first basic relation is the fundamental readiness to accept and embrace the Other *in toto*. Unreserved acceptance in this context means letting the Other “be himself”, to accept his state of knowledge and development, not to lord it over him, but to recognise him as an equal, to respect him and take him seriously, even if his positions may not immediately evoke understanding and consensus. The third basic relation required for a genuine dialogue is the element of openness. Openness creates a space of freedom between the parties to the dialogue, which does not appropriate the Other or force or influence him to do anything which he is not – or not yet – ready to do of his own accord.

These basic conditions must be present for a dialogue to take place in which profound existential truths can be addressed. Such a dialogue achieves its greatest depth where the basis of reality itself can be consulted. The question which concerns us here is: what kind of dialogue do we have to have if the Logos itself is to become the Word, in which we are confronted with the claim to be the ultimate foundation of reality itself? This is where we run into a fundamental structural problem. In our previous remarks about dialogue it was naturally assumed that a dialogue is based on the fundamental equality of the parties to it, none of whom can claim a preordained superiority over the Other. On the other hand, the message of the faith, by invoking the ultimate foundation of reality, raises an unconditional claim which at first glance would appear to introduce an apparently unbridgeable gap into the relationship between the parties to the dialogue, a gap which could call in question the very possibility of conducting a genuine, open dialogue. The problem is not caused by the fact that a claim to validity is raised. That is part of the essence of a genuine dialogue that must assume the existence of clear points of view that are presented and defended by the parties, who are convinced of the rightness and claim to truth of their positions. The problem arises out of the unconditionality of a “claim to absolute validity” which by its very nature cannot be freely disposed of, as it is the ultimate foundation of reality itself that is asserted here – albeit in the form of human speech which is subject to the general rules of communication and therefore

would have to first prove the validity of the claims it raises within the framework of an ordered discourse.

Claim as witness

The key to the solution of this fundamental problem lies in the special way in which the Christian faith is conveyed. In the relationship with the interlocutor the message of the faith is asserted not only in its substance and its claim to be unconditional, but also and above all in its existential significance for the person who introduced it to the dialogue. Unconditionality is thus not just a claim that the speaker asserts on his own behalf vis-à-vis his interlocutor. Instead, he reveals in the dialogue that he has bound himself to the unconditionality of this claim. The unique feature of the Christian inter-faith dialogue consists in the fact that the unconditional claim of the faith is introduced to the dialogue in witness mode.

But the characteristic feature of witness consists in the fact that the person bearing witness is not asserting his own claim, but the claim of another. He sees himself as legitimised by his special relationship with Jesus Christ, which has an auto-dialogical character. This means that it is not a “personal claim”, although it does have a “personal character”. It is not asserted “in isolation” from the person. It is not a “neutral” message that just has to be “delivered”. The disciple is not just a messenger who, as a person, can efface himself completely behind the message. He is rather a witness who personally stands by the message with his whole existence. In bearing witness the speaker makes what he himself has experienced transparent, what defines his innermost identity, what has touched him, what he thrives on, what his mission is, and what he recognises as the meaning of his life. Bearing witness means making a stand, uncovering the claim to which the witness has freely bound himself, revealing the reasons which moved him to do so and thus opening up to his interlocutor – in complete freedom – a space which he can enter in order to discover whether he can make these reasons his own.

By expressing everything he himself has received from his dialogical relationship with Jesus Christ, the witness in a sense takes the place of Christ – in him the person of Christ becomes transparent and hence present. What is important is that the Christ-like nature

of bearing witness is not an essential quality of the witness, but a real relationship in which he finds himself and which he expresses in perfect transparency to his interlocutor.

Crucial in this connection is the “free space” which the witness opens up between the two interlocutors. The addressee must not have his freedom restricted. The message is purely an offer which cannot be imposed from without. Only in the openness of this intermediate space of freedom can a real encounter with God take place, which essentially consists in the fact that, as a result of the dialogue, a direct relationship is forged between the interlocutor and Christ. This does not mean that the interlocutor “adopts” the faith in the sense of witness or that his relationship with Jesus Christ is permanently mediated via that of the witness. Instead he develops his own independent relationship with Christ through the mediation of the witness.

The consequence of this insight is a basic posture of openness which, although it does not place the basic decisions in question, does permit adjustments – even substantial and far-reaching ones. It is an attitude that expects new and deeper insights to be possible in dialogue with the Other, and that the dialogue itself can be extended. The openness required for a genuine dialogue also includes the readiness of the witness to take the witness of his counterpart so seriously and absorb it into his innermost self to such an extent that the dialogue can become a place of encountering Christ and deepening his understanding of his own faith too. Thus the mutuality of basic relationships fundamental to all dialogues acquires decisive significance here.

On the relationship between mission and dialogue

As a result of the considerations assembled here we find that mission and dialogue do not stand in contradiction to each other. Rather dialogue is based on the salvific gesture of God towards us mortals. This means that the basic affirmation of dialogue is not a form of relativism that would surrender the Christian faith's claim to truth. It is true, however, that we are dealing here with ‘relatio’ in the sense of the relationship that God adopts to us mortals in the course of the narrative of Christian salvation. In a way this approach of God to man – whom He takes seriously as a free agent and addresses in the depths of his existence through His salvation-granting Word – is the model

for how the mission to the world is to be perceived. This means that we have every reason to speak not only of a dialogical understanding of mission, but even of a “mission to dialogue”.

A dialogically perceived mission must oppose any form of religious fundamentalism. Hostile aloofness from those with dissenting views is as little reconcilable with a basic dialogical attitude as aggressive missionary methods or the use of force to convert others. Despite all legitimate differences and the basic right of each individual to have his conviction of his religion’s higher claim to truth respected, there must be no destructive and disrespectful divisions between religions, no violence against dissenters, no one-sided exploitation of a *de facto* position of power vis-à-vis minorities, no underhand methods at the expense of other religions, and above all no improper instrumentalisation of religious feelings.

On the other hand, there is no contradiction between an honest dialogue and a basic desire to convince others of the rightness of one’s own faith. Here, too, the principle applies that, while one has to reckon with the “truth of other religions”, one is not obliged to assert that all religions are “equally true”. What is needed here is a frank recognition of the fact that we can only experience certainty in our existential rootedness in our own faith – without having to reject or disparage others out of hand. To take part in a dialogue we have to recognise the need to have our own point of view and arguments to back it up with. As a dialogue cannot be conducted on a meta-level, it is not possible to “stand above the fray” or adopt an a-religious standpoint. A fruitful dialogue can only come about if the parties confront each other on the basis of their respective existential roots in the absolute. However, the unconditionality of this rootedness does not mean denying the Other his relation to ultimate reality. “Absoluteness” can only ever refer to the individual’s submission of his own free will. It is expressed in faith as the total self-dedication to the absolute, all-determining reality which grants the Other the freedom to choose which faith he is going to submit to, while at the same time inviting and encouraging him to follow one’s own example.

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Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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