

## THE CHALLENGE OF OTHER RELIGIONS II

## The Challenge of Other Religions

Martin Alphonse

Today, as we face the challenge of other faiths to evangelism two questions must be raised: *Why are they challenging us?* and *How are they challenging us?*

**The Reasons for the Challenge**

Historically, the challenge emerged from three factors deeply rooted in the socio-political missionary context of the colonial and post-colonial eras: (a) in reaction to the colonial rule, which was mistakenly identified with Western Christianity; (b) in defense of the vigorous evangelistic activities of Christian missionaries; and (c) in response to ethical questions and criticisms raised by national Christians, as well as by devotees of other faiths who had been enlightened by Christianity.

Combined, these three factors posed a threat to the survival of other faiths in several nations. Many had anticipated the end of the colonial era would result in suspension of the evangelistic missions of the church. On the contrary, most of the national churches revived traditional evangelistic work, and some have become more vigorous than ever before. The number of converts to Christianity has continued to increase in several nations in the post-colonial era and in an unprecedented number in some cases. The escalation and influence of national missionary movements in recent decades is a power to reckon with. Some religious leaders see the Christian evangelistic endeavor as a threat to the survival of their faiths. As a result, in a counterattack, people of other faiths have thrown us some strong challenges.

**The Ways of the Challenge**

J. T. Seamands identifies two kinds of challenges of other faiths to Christianity today: *intrinsic* and *interactional*.

*Intrinsic challenges* merge from within the religions, relating to beliefs, systems, and structures and have resulted in the resurgence of non-Christian religions. This resurgence is expressed in four distinct forms:

1. *Revival of the religious spirit.* In reaction to colonial rule and continued Christian missionary enterprise, some religions, such as Hinduism, have

founded counter-missionary movements. Others have taken political coverage. For instance, Islam has been established as the state religion in Pakistan and Malaysia, two former British colonies.

2. *Reformation of religious practices.* Reform is carried out by means of "acceptance and incorporation of new ideas and practices." Organized reform movements have been effective in winning back converts from Christianity and in preventing potential aspirants from converting to Christianity.
3. *Reinterpretation of religious doctrines.* In defense against accelerated evangelistic activities of Christianity, some religions have been pressured into making radical reinterpretations of some important doctrines. In the process, the old faith acquires a new meaning, new resilience, and new vitality. In Hinduism, idol worship, myths, and caste systems are now explained in new and relevant ways. In Islam, *Jihad*, the "Holy War," is now redefined as a spiritual warfare between the faithful and the infidels. In Buddhism, *Nirvana*—whose original meaning of "blow out" or "extinguish"—is now reinterpreted as "a state of perfect bliss and contentment."
4. *Relevancy of one's own faith.* If religion is primarily a means of meeting basic, human spiritual need, especially in relation to destiny and salvation, then most people are content with what their religion offers. Hence, there is an absence of a "felt need" for replacement of their faith by Christianity. To many, religion is synonymous with the culture to which they are inseparably attached. Religion is a way of life which is biologically inherited; you are born with it, therefore, you are bound by it. For example, many educated Hindus will respond, "A Hindu is born, not born again." Christians are seen as culturally distant and alien.

There are also interactional challenges. The resurgence of these faiths has yielded desired results. Evidently, people of these faiths are confident not only about their survival, but also about their competency in being easy and effective rivals to the unique claims of Christ and Christianity. The spirit of rivalry is evident in the following criticism.

1. *They criticize our failure.*

- They cannot distinguish between true Christians and nominal ones. They point out increases in the rate of divorce, crime, and licentiousness among Christians, especially in the so-called "Christian" West.
- They are confused by the multiplicity of denominations and their competition in a small area. They are confused by our diversity.
- They accuse us of being unpatriotic. To them, Christians are too "other-worldly," too spiritual, and have no concern for people's immediate needs. Conversion is seen as an expression of arrogance. They feel it symbolizes a superiority complex and a disrespect for other religions.
- They say our lifestyle is incompatible with the gospel we preach. As E. Stanley Jones used to say when missionaries first preached the gospel to India, the Hindu intelligentsia responded saying, "What you say is not *true*." When the missionaries proved it to be true, they

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took a second defense and said, "Well, it is not *new!*" When the missionaries proved it also to be new, they are making a final defense saying, "The gospel is not in *you!*"

Brethren, let us examine our hearts. The gospel has no credibility to people of other faiths unless and until they see the gospel lived out by us visibly.

## 2. *They challenge our claims.*

- They say that Jesus is only one way. There are many other ways, too.
- They insist that every religion is unique and complete in itself.
- They argue that traditional religions, older than Christianity, must not be dispensed with.

## 3. *They claim universality of all religions.*

- To them all religions share the same content, though they may differ in form. They argue that "all roads lead to Rome."
- They emphasize that service to humans is indeed service to God which is "true religion." Hence, missionary service is no longer the monopoly of Christians.

## 4. *They invite us to compromise and cooperate.*

- They suggest, "Let us work together to fulfill a common task—build a global society, fight paganism and secularism, and strive for peaceful coexistence."
- They proclaim "God is our Father. We are all his children. Come join the universal brotherhood."

The intensity of the challenge before us makes the task of evangelizing peoples of other faiths impossible. Yet, the commission of Jesus Christ to his church is clear: "Go and make disciples of all peoples." He meant business. He would not have told them to do something that was humanly impossible. Therefore, there must be a sure way to penetrate the impenetrable, reach the unreachable, and gain access to the inaccessible.

The Great Commission is clear. It commands us to "make disciples of all peoples," not all religions. Colin Chapman reminded us that "What we're talking, thinking, and praying about here is not other religions but other people—people of other faiths or of no faith." We are dealing with people in need—in all kinds of need. The three great elemental needs are said to be an adequate goal for character, a free and full life, and a God. Religion is believed to meet these needs squarely. To most humans, religion is inevitable. Our call is to "evangelize the inevitable."

In facing these challenges, it is not Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism that we will confront with the gospel, but people who cling to these religions for meeting their essential needs.

As E. Stanley Jones suggests,

We need not mention the non-Christian religion but speak to persons in spiritual need. Jesus Christ has met (our) needs, and he would meet theirs. It would be a head-on presentation of Christ.

How, then, do we proclaim Christ relevantly to people of other faiths who totally reject his unique claims as *the Lord, the Savior* of the world? How do we convince the Hindu who considers Jesus as only one of the 330 million *avatars* or "incarnations" of God? Or reach the Muslim who acknowledges Jesus only as a prophet and says it is blasphemous to call him the Son of God? How do we persuade a Buddhist, Jain, or Sikh who respects Jesus as nothing but a supreme guru or teacher?

Where there has been a ready and phenomenal response to Christ and his gospel, there is cause for celebration. There have been mass movements in South India in the early century, and ongoing people movements in South Korea, Indonesia, and in several nations south of the Sahara in Africa. But where there is reluctance, resistance, or rejection we need to prayerfully explore new ways and means of evangelization.

The answer is found in developing a need-oriented Christology, placing the right emphasis on the right point in the right context.

## Developing a Contextual Christology

Evangelistic proclamation should begin at a point of relevancy. As they say, the first impression is the best impression. To make our entry into the hearts of people of other faiths easy and natural, we must first decide where our emphasis should fall. The need for an appropriate entrypoint leads to the formulation of what may be called *situational accentuation*.

## The Theory of Situational Accentuation

This theory is based on certain assumptions:

1. *The gospel is multi-dimensional and wholistic in nature.* It meets not only the spiritual needs of humans, but their total needs such as emotional, moral, social, and physical.
2. *Humans differ in their basic needs.* Although every human need is wholistic, the intensity of a particular need in a given moment varies from person to person. But the gospel is able to meet the need of any human—anytime, anywhere.

The "Nazareth Manifesto" in Luke 4:19 affirms this. Christ is saying the Good News is good news to the spiritually, economically, physically, and socially disenfranchised humanity. This is a gospel which meets the total needs of the total human. Charles Taber speaks of Jesus who in a "sensitive and careful way . . . offered each person a gospel tailored to his or her own context." Thus, depending on the situation, the particular dimension of the gospel which meets that situation should be accentuated.

The theory of situational accentuation has an entrypoint and a finish line. The entrypoint is the particular felt need which Christ can meet adequately. It is the person's first encounter with Jesus Christ. At this point, Christ may be seen as a supreme deity, an affectionate mother, a cordial friend, or a venerable guru. This first encounter with Christ by an adherent of another faith must be further developed. As they get closer to Christ, they develop a deeper relationship with him, eventually leading to the finish line as they realize Christ is more than a teacher or friend. But the final realization of the fullness of Christ cannot happen except for their first encounter or experience with the Living Christ.

My father—a staunch, orthodox Hindu—was converted to Christ as a result of a miraculous healing. He had prayed to Jesus when the physicians had given up all hope.

The entrypoint of conversion was an immediate *physical need* met by Jesus.

I was a Roman Catholic, a former Jesuit novice, and a Marxist sympathizer. I was converted to Christ when Jesus liberated me from a severe inferiority complex. The entrypoint of my conversion was an immediate *psychological need* met by Jesus.

There is a Brahmin family—father, mother, and three beautiful daughters—who are members of our church. The entire family was converted to Christ when they realized Jesus alone could grant the *shanti* or the “inner peace” they had been long searching for. The entrypoint of conversion was an immediate *emotional and spiritual need* met by Jesus.

Two days prior to leaving Madras for Lausanne II in Manila, I had the thrill of baptizing eleven Hindu converts to Christ. They live in one of the pitiable slums in Madras. They were converted to Christ when they discovered that Jesus alone could give them a true sense of identity and restore their dignity, which was being destroyed by the discriminatory caste structure of Hindu society. The entrypoint of their conversion was the immediate individual and collective *social need* met by Jesus.

Jesus Christ did not die on the cross to heal my father of an incurable sickness, or to emancipate me from an inferiority complex, or to give inner peace to a few Hindu seekers, or to liberate the socially oppressed people of India. He died on the cross to take away our sins.

Yet, the fact that he does meet physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social needs cannot be ignored or denied. Therefore, in situations of evangelistic impenetrability, the entrypoint is essential for conversion.

Evangelists have often erred by beginning their communication at the wrong point. Eddy Asirvatham suggests:

Perhaps the wise thing to do is to invite the non-Christian to accept Jesus Christ as a perfect man, a perfect teacher, and a perfect revealer of God, and to hope that as he personally comes in contact with the spirit of the living Christ, he will be led to further truth and to the acknowledgment of Jesus as his Lord and Savior. To demand that this final stage be made the initial one is to put the cart before the horse.

The theory of situational accentuation has a classic example in the ministry of Jesus in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7–42). He began with an accentuation of the human need for water. The woman’s first encounter with Jesus was at the level of an ordinary Jew. From that starting point, she gradually began to see him as a teacher, a prophet, the Messiah, and, finally, the whole community acknowledged him as the Savior of the world. The emphasis on the incarnate, immanent God in Christ who meets a particular need of a particular person in a particular moment seems to be the best entrypoint in communicating the gospel.

The task of evangelizing the people of other faiths still seems breathtakingly impossible when we think of it in statistical terms—900 million Muslims, 690 million Hindus, 320 million Buddhists, and so on. Yet, we are not going to meet millions of them at a time or in one large geographical location. We need to think in terms of organized world evangelization by local ministries, reaching a few here and a few there, eventually making the gospel spread everywhere.

This concern demands the discovery of an effective method of evangelism which will not be seen as a threat or an open onslaught on other faiths. Yet, by playing it low-key, the gospel can permeate the various spheres of other faiths in a quiet but firm way.

## Determining an Effective Method

In situations of evangelistic impenetrability, the most effective means for opening channels of communication seems to be in dialogue. Colin Chapman has argued forcefully in favor of dialogue as the most effective method of evangelism in this context. He has laid theological and biblical foundations, citing the excellent examples of dialogue our Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul held with their contemporaries. By and large, evangelicals have remained ambivalent toward the use of dialogue in evangelism. Some fear it might become a mere academic discussion rather than a persuasive proclamation of the gospel. Also, the fact that dialogue as an evangelistic method originally emerged from the conciliar circles aroused evangelical suspicions about dialogue as merely intended to foster syncretistic tendencies in religiously pluralistic societies.

Such fears are unwarranted. By dialogue, we are referring to Christocentric discussions between evangelists and non-Christians on the relevance of Christ in their lives. It is strictly an evangelistic methodology, a type of “conversational evangelism.” The goal of an evangelistic dialogue is to persuade the non-Christian participants to accept Christ as Lord and Savior. Interfaith dialogue presented in creative and dynamic ways has produced amazing results.

## The Round Table Conference of E. Stanley Jones

This method involved bringing together a group of about twenty Christians and non-Christians seated in a circle. They would share what their respective religions meant to them in personal life experience. No one would be allowed to argue, lecture, or criticize other religions—not even to compare one’s faith with others. Each person would simply state what his religion meant to him in real life. The evangelist would speak last, not preaching Christ as at other times, but, like everyone else, sharing what Christ meant to him in his personal daily life experience.

Jones saw two main functions of dialogue as an evangelistic method:

1. *Evangelism through personal experience.* The main challenge of dialogue was to put each faith represented to the “acid test” of authenticity, verifiable by experience in down-to-earth, day-to-day life context. Each participant was to speak for their own faith, not based on traditions and doctrines, but from first-hand life experience. This provided a unique opportunity for the evangelist to share Christ and the gospel straight from the heart. It was a spirit witnessing to another spirit—deep calling to deep. It was evangelism done at the deepest level of human personality.
2. *Establishment of the moral supremacy and spiritual uniqueness of Jesus.* The participants who had come expecting some sort of a discussion on comparative religion were much surprised and challenged. The supremacy and uniqueness of Jesus was established on the basis of his being the embodiment of true religion. When true Christianity was defined in terms of the person of Christ and what he stood for, there was little room for criticism or complaint, dispute or debate. As a result, the participants were challenged to consider the content and concern of religion in the light of Christ who stood out as morally supreme and spiritually unique. No religion had the capacity to match his personality.

This new realization of Christ introduced the participants to the inescapable influence of Christ in a short span of time. Jones recalls that there was

not a single situation where “before the close of the Round Table Conference Christ was not in moral and spiritual command of the situation. . . . At the close everything had been pushed to the edges and Christ controlled the situation.”

Jones presents a vast amount of documented evidence to prove that the evangelistic use of dialogue was extremely successful at those Round Table Conferences. Such a proven method can work in similar situations of evangelistic impenetrability anywhere.

There is a story about a young man who was jogging along a seashore. One morning, he noticed an older person involved in a sort of childlike play. The old man was rhythmically bending over, picking up a handful of objects, and flinging them into the ocean. Driven by curiosity, the young man stopped jogging and asked the old man what he was doing. The old man replied, “You see, these little creatures belong to the waters. They have been washed ashore by the rough tides of the night. If we let them lie on the sand, they all will die. By throwing them back into the sea, I am giving them life!”

The young man smiled rather sarcastically and said, “But, you see, this seashore stretches hundreds of miles. If you walk down, you will find thousands of these creatures washed ashore all along. So, by throwing a few of them back into the sea, what difference does it make to the rest of them?”

The old man looked intently into the eyes of the young man and said firmly, “What difference it makes to the rest of them, my son, I do not know. But as far as these few are concerned, it does make a difference.” Then he bent over again, picked up a handful more, and flung them into the sea.

As we reach out to a few Hindus here, and a few Muslims and Buddhists there, we may never know what difference it will make to the rest of the millions who follow these faiths. But as far as the few Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Shintoists, Taoists, Confucianists, and Baha’i are concerned, the gospel we share does and will make a difference. And as long as there are people in need—in need of an adequate goal for character, a full and free self, and a God—and as long as they are searching in their respective religions to meet these elemental needs, our job will not be over. As long as even a handful of people of other faiths are eagerly searching for the truth, we must not tire of reaching out to them. He who said “Behold I am with you to the ends of the world” is still with us. In this confidence and trust, we face the challenges of other religions with the gospel of Jesus Christ and his uniqueness of being the one and the only Lord and Savior of the world!

## THE GOSPEL AND SALVATION I

# The Gospel and Salvation

Tokunboh Adeyemo

John Newton was a notorious slave master. During the inhuman and cruel period of slave trade, he was the captain of one of the ships that transported Africans from West Africa to work in the sugarcane plantations of North America. Newton was a product of his day—brutalizing and exploiting those he regarded as nonbeings. How natural it is to be greedy, self-centered, hateful, and indifferent!

But something happened to Newton. He was confronted with the gospel and the claims of Jesus Christ. Convicted of his wickedness in the light of God’s righteousness and judgment, Newton, in repentance, submitted his life to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. What a transformation! Not only did Newton renounce his involvement in slave trade, but he spent the rest of his life fighting against it and defending the rights of slaves. He was no longer of the world once he met Jesus. Out of this experience of new life in Christ, he wrote one of the church’s favorite hymns:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

Newton’s testimony of a life that honored God confirms the words of 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

These words were born out of the experience of the writer, Saul of Tarsus, who was to become Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. A religious fanatic, arrogant, boastful, proud, and a killer of the people of the Way, this former Pharisee met Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road and was completely transformed. His life was never the same. He was translated from darkness to light, from wickedness to righteousness, from following the god of this world to following the Lord Jesus Christ. No longer of this world, he wrote, “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). From the point of his conversion Paul lived for Christ. He could write: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

It does not matter that Newton was a Gentile or that Paul was a Jew; whether ancient

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