

# The Christian and Inter-Faith Relations<sup>1</sup>

Dr Roland Chia

## INTRODUCTION

Early this year, the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) invited me to write a paper on the theme, 'The Christian and Inter-Faith Relations'. The purpose of this paper, as I understand it, was to clarify the church's role in multi-religious and multi-racial Singapore. Broadly speaking, the paper was to serve as a guide that would help pastors and church leaders in Singapore to understand the theological parameters within which the church may reflect on her attitude towards and her relationship with adherents of different religions. The paper was also to provide the basis for thinking of concrete ways in which the church may work with other faith-communities. The NCCS has since set up a study group comprising of theologians and pastors to deliberate on these matters.

Recent events in the history of the world, and that of our nation have impressed upon us not just the currency of this topic, but also its urgency. The terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001, and the wide-ranging implications of America's war on terror have serious and worrying repercussions in our world. The ripples of those explosive events have reached our shores. The arrest of 13 Muslims in Singapore by ISD for suspicion of planning terrorist activities that targeted Americans working in Singapore, and the *tudung* controversy are two instances. Just when the tension appears to be abating, America announces its intention to take aggressive preemptive measures against Iraq, and is now working strenuously to achieve consensus in the UN for their approach. And, late last

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the full text of a lecture delivered at the YMCA-YWCA Day of Prayer on 10 November 2002. I am grateful to Mr Edward Ong for his kind invitation to speak at this important occasion, where the Minister of State for National Development, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, was Guest-of-Honour.

month, we witnessed a devastating bomb blast at the hitherto peaceful resort-island, Bali.

On the home front, further arrests of other members of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) group sparked worries that perhaps what we have seen so far is but the tip of the iceberg. Aware of how delicate the situation has become, the Government has set up the Inter-Religious Confidence Circle, whose purpose is to foster greater social cohesion among adherents of different religions, and among the different faith communities. In response to the Jemaah Islamiah threat, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has issued a draft-code for the practice of religious harmony. A multi-religious team, under the leadership of Mr Chan Soo Sen, has been tasked to dialogue with the various religious communities in Singapore and present the final version of the code by the first quarter of next year.

In this brief lecture, I will discuss three topics related to our theme. Firstly, I will briefly delineate a Christian theology of religion based on Scripture and Tradition. Secondly, I will discuss the attitude of the Christian towards adherents of non-Christian religions. And thirdly, I will propose some ways in which the different religious communities can work together in a religiously pluralistic society like Singapore.

#### **A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS**

We begin by reflecting on a Christian theology of religion. This is very important because our attitude and approach to the non-Christian religions and their adherents depends on the way in which we understand the religions in the light of Scripture and Tradition. We begin to sketch a Christian perspective of non-Christian religions by examining what the Bible teaches about human beings. The Bible begins by declaring that God has created human beings in his own image and likeness. This truth can be found in the first chapter of Genesis. 'And God said: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the ground"'. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them'

(Gen 1:26-27). Theologians have long debated about what constitutes the image of God and have come up with several proposals. However, it is not our purpose here to examine all the arguments. What is clear from the account of Genesis 1 and 2 is that God has created man to have fellowship and communion with him. God has invites human beings to enter into a covenant relationship with him, to be his covenant partner. We are therefore created for communion with God. Thus the fourth century church Father Augustine could say that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God.

But human beings have not obeyed God's call. They have instead rejected God and rebelled against him. Sinful human beings are estranged from God and alienated from their Creator, from the one for whom they have been made. The negative relationship that sinful human beings have with God however does not change the original purpose for which they were created. Consequently, sinful human existence is characterized by a great and irresolvable contradiction: on the one hand, man's rebellion has alienated him from God and driven him further away from the Creator, and on the other hand, man is unable to find fulfillment and satisfaction apart from God. The New Testament makes it quite clear that God has not left himself without a witness. Romans 1:20 asserts that human beings have sufficient knowledge of God through his general revelation in the created order. In that passage Paul wrote: 'since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what was made'. Thus man is without excuse. Every form of idolatry therefore presupposes some knowledge of God, however fragmented and incomplete. And every act of rebellion presupposes a prior relationship. Furthermore, the Christian Tradition holds that although sin has severely marred and distorted the image of God in man it has not totally destroyed that image. This means that even sinful human beings are still capable of that which is good and true.

It is from these basic theological statements regarding God and the nature of man that a Christian theology of religion may be constructed. Because God has not left himself without a witness, because every form of idolatry presupposes some knowledge of God, and because the image of God in man is not utterly destroyed

although defaced, the various non-Christian religions are capable of that which is true and good. To be sure, there is much in these religions that are erroneous. But among these errors is to be found also moments of truth. There has been much discussion about whether the non-Christian religions can serve as vehicles of salvation. In other words, can these non-Christian religions save? My own position is that non-Christian religions cannot serve as vehicles of salvation because in the Christian understanding, salvation is made available only through faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who by his death and resurrection has rescued humankind from sin and death. Salvation comes only through one's embrace of Christ by faith, an embrace that is made possible by divine grace. But although non-Christian religions cannot serve as vehicles of salvation, they can manifest that which is true and good.

### **ATTITUDE TOWARDS NON-CHRISTIANS**

With this in mind, let us now direct our attention to the next question: How should we characterize the Christian's attitude towards non-Christians? For too long, the answer to this question has been summarised in the word 'tolerance'. In fact, in most of the literature on inter-faith relations, tolerance is presented almost as a virtue. While a tolerant attitude has some merit, it fails to capture fully what I believe to be the Bible's teaching on the matter. I think the attitude that Christians should adopt towards non-Christians is not just tolerance, but love. We are not called simply to tolerate our neighbour; we are called to love him or her. Love is the fundamental basis of the Christian's relationship with his neighbour. Of course, we live in a world in which love is made out to be a superficial, even flippant emotion. Love is often defined in sentimental and romantic terms. But for the Christian, 'love' must be christologically shaped. That is to say, our understanding of love must come from the Christ who laid down his life for the sins of the world. Furthermore, for the Christian, God is Love. Love is the very essence of the divine reality. Love is not merely one divine attribute among others; it is the very character of God. Christians who are being transformed into the image of God by the Holy Spirit must mirror the divine love.

The most powerful description of Christian love is found in Paul's love poem of 1 Cor 13. 'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails'. Paul in his letter to the Romans maintains that 'Love does no wrong to a neighbour' (Rom 13:10). Love is therefore more positive, more constructive, and more powerful than tolerance. In many ways, tolerance has to do with closing an eye to evil, with allowing evil and wrong liberty in the public sphere. At the very least, tolerance is the closing of an eye to that which is irritating and offensive. The Christian ethic of love, however, goes beyond this. Love, to be sure, in some sense includes tolerance. But love goes beyond tolerance to embrace truth and justice. In fact love cannot be authentic without truth and justice. So love is *like* tolerance because love does not embrace everything about everyone. But love is *unlike* tolerance because it wills the good of everyone whether everything is liked or not. Love should be the Christian's attitude towards his neighbour.

But who is the neighbour? The answer to this question is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Time does not allow for a detailed study of the parable. But the parable defines 'neighbour' as the person 'at hand'. The neighbour is therefore the person who is near you, so to speak, someone who is within your reach. This means that 'neighbour' does not only refer to someone you know – indeed, the point of the parable is that the Samaritan did not know the unfortunate Jew before he met him on the side of the road. Neighbour is someone who is 'at hand', 'within your reach'. The parable tells us that it is the responsibility of the Christian to love this 'other'. This brings us to our main consideration: the Christian's attitude towards a member of another faith community. The Christian is to love this person as he loves himself because this person is his neighbour. We must examine the implications of this understanding on the practice of evangelism. Love compels the Christian to share the Good News of God's love with his neighbour. But love also determines how the Christian should do this.

In August this year, I represented the Methodist Church of Singapore at a special dialogue organised by the 'Remaking

Singapore' Committee. This dialogue was organised by a sub-group of that committee, called 'Beyond Club'. Religious leaders from the Buddhist, Bahai, Muslim, Hindu, and Taoist communities were present at the dialogue. The Methodists and Lutherans represented the Christian church. One of the areas of concern voiced by members of the other faiths, especially the Hindus is the way in which Christians evangelise. They recognise that Christianity is a proselytizing religion, but they are concerned about the aggressive approaches adopted by some Christians and some churches. Without going into the details of my exchanges with them, I would like for our purposes here to point out that although some of their fears and concerns are unfounded, not all of them are. There are instances when the approaches to evangelism undertaken by some churches are disrespectful to members of the other faiths. I believe that it is in the interest of both church and society that these approaches be reviewed.

Sometimes, perhaps even unbeknownst to us, we tend to adopt a secular marketing mentality in evangelism. This will bear out in some of the methods that we use and the ways in which we articulate our goals. What I think we should recognise and recover is that at the fundamental level, to evangelise means to witness for the Lord. The evangelist is first and foremost a witness. The church and individual Christians, are called to be witnesses of the love and grace of God. And we are to be witnesses in our immediate worlds – in our schools, our offices, and our homes. But how are we to witness for our Lord? We can do so in word and deed. We witness in word when we tell our friends and colleagues about what we believe to be true about God and about our world. We also witness simply by telling others about the things that God has done for us, the grace that we have received from him through his Son Jesus Christ. We witness in deed when we live our lives according to God's will – when we obey his Word. We witness in deed when we stand firm on our faith in Christ, and refuse to conform to the things of the world.

At this juncture I would like to address some misconceptions about evangelism. One such misconception has to do with the way in which the relationship between evangelism and result is understood. While we are called to be witnesses for the Lord – and we are called to be witnesses of integrity – we are not responsible for the results.

In this modern culture of ours, where everything we do is so result oriented and where we only speak of tangible goals and bottom lines, we sometimes find this very difficult to understand and appreciate. In our modern culture, success is measured by results, and results are indicated only in the tangibles – the intangibles don't count as much. But God only requires of us to be his faithful and authentic witnesses. He does not require of us to produce the results. It is the Holy Spirit who is responsible for conversion and salvation, not we, not even the church. Once we understand and accept this, our whole orientation towards evangelism will change. Integrity will become more important than results, authenticity more important than numbers. We can be witnesses for the Lord without being disrespectful to people of other faiths. We can invite them to 'come, taste and see that the Lord is good' without violating their freedom to choose and without exerting unnecessary pressure.

One of the most important aspects of modern discussions on inter-faith relations is dialogue, and I would like now to turn to it, albeit very briefly. My main comment is that dialogue must be understood at a very fundamental level as part of the social intercourse that one has with one's neighbour. Dialogue must be understood therefore in the nexus of conversation between two people. Dialogue is the natural process of interaction, of sharing, evaluation, discovery and respect that characterises every conversation between persons. In other words, for dialogue to be genuine, and indeed meaningful, the differences that obtain between two people must not be superficially and hurriedly glossed over. Although one of the results of dialogue is the recognition of common ground between two people of very different backgrounds, this cannot be the only result or goal. In fact this is not even the most basic goal of dialogue. The most basic goal of dialogue is to understand one another. In more official settings dialogue between different faith communities may be conducted at different levels and for different reasons. But regardless the goals, the most basic must be to understand each other.

Much suspicion and distrust between the different faith communities stem from their failure to understand each other. In the recent Remaking Singapore dialogue I cited an example of how Christians were misunderstood by adherents of other religions in the

second century, and I think it is worth repeating this example here. In the second century, the adherents of other religions accused Christians of cannibalism and of incest. Christians were accused of cannibalism because in their love feast they eat the flesh of Jesus Christ and drink his blood. Christians were accused of incest because they show qualms about marrying their own 'brothers and sisters', members of their own 'family'. Mistrust and suspicion in this case are founded upon ignorance. Of course this point cuts both ways: Christians too may be guilty of unfounded suspicion and prejudice due to ignorance. If only steps are taken to understand one another, much of the suspicion and mistrust will disappear.

## **INTER-FAITH RELATIONS**

Let me now turn to the third and final question: What are some of the areas in which the different faith communities can work together? I would like to explore with you four areas in which collaboration among the religions can take place: (1) Nation-Building; (2) Civil Society; (3) Public Welfare; and (4) The Quest for Peace. But before I go into them, perhaps a very brief sketch of the history and social dynamics of Singapore will help to serve as the background for the discussion.

One of the main concerns of the Singapore Government is to develop nationhood by fostering social cohesion and inculcating the sense of shared history that makes a collectivity a nation. Singapore came into existence under the aegis of British colonialism, and was forced by circumstance to become an independent political entity within the short period of one and a half centuries. One might say that Singapore was born into modernity, and therefore her experience with modernity is unique, and profoundly different from that of Western countries and even her Asian neighbours. There are no protracted step by step battles with modernity so common in Western countries, and, unlike other Asian countries like China, Japan, or even Thailand, Singapore did not have the benefit of a single cultural nucleus firmly entrenched in more than 1,000 years of history. This, together with the fact that Singapore is a multi-religious and multi-racial community with very little sense of shared history makes her

struggle with modernity very complex. The inculcation of a sense of nationhood is very important for Singapore. Yet in her formative years, the efforts of the Government were understandably directed to the very urgent need of establishing political stability in order for the economy to develop. After thirty-seven years of independence, Singapore has indeed come a long way, and made significant leaps in developing its infrastructure and economy. But, as recent events have reminded us, social cohesion in the nation-state remains fragile.

With this in mind, let us examine the four areas of collaboration.

The first is nation building. The church and other faith communities can and should support the government's effort in nation-building insofar as this is in line with God's intention for human society as revealed in God's Word. Thus the church should make every effort to work with other faith communities in promoting peace, stability, and harmony. The church and the other faith communities can also work together to promote human potential and prevent or restrain evil and all that dehumanises individuals and disrupts society. Of course the church must always do this with theological integrity. That is to say, the church must always be careful never to promote nationalism for its own sake, but first and foremost – and always – for the sake of God. I have advocated in my NCCS paper the concept of *critical patriotism* as the proper posture that the church should take regarding nationalism and nation-building. Critical patriotism in the first place means that the Christian's loyalty to the nation cannot be blind and mindless. It must be a loyalty that is shaped by theological integrity and moral judgement. Critical patriotism implies that the Christian's loyalty to the state must always be subservient to his loyalty to God. Critical patriotism implies that the church's involvement in nation building must always be characterised by the creative tension between moral judgement and political or national allegiance. This does not mean that genuine loyalty to the nation is impossible or impaired. In fact, only when the church does not waver from her loyalty to God is she able to truly serve the nation.

The second area is civil society. Christians can work closely with members of other faith communities to develop civil society in Singapore. The challenge of civil society in a pluralistic and multi-racial nation like Singapore is still immense, despite the efforts of the

government. There is a sense in which the government's past interventions have the unfortunate result to retarding this development. The church and other faith institutions can contribute to developing civic consciousness in society at large by inculcating civility among their own members and by working together to multiply and extend arenas for meaningful and effective civic action. When this occurs, civil society will be established from the bottom up, instead of from the top down.

The third area is public welfare. Here the church can work together with members of other faith communities to help the needy: the poor, the lonely, the sick, and the destitute. This has always been part of the church's ministry to society, for the church understands that she is commanded by God to love and serve her neighbour, the one who is at hand. There is no discrimination in this service because every human being is created in the image of God, and is therefore precious in God's eyes. Accordingly, the Christian tradition maintains that every human being must be treated with dignity and respect. The church can use her financial, professional and manpower resources to help those in need. She can collaborate with other faith communities towards this end as well.

The fourth and final area is what I call the quest for peace. By peace, I am referring to inter-racial peace, and peace among the adherents of the different religions. I believe that peaceful co-existence among the different faith communities in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore cannot simply happen. It must be worked at. The peace that is established by simply different enclaves to mushroom and by keeping a certain distance from one another is weak, and will evaporate in the face of severe crisis. The peace that is fostered by understanding one another and by collaborating with each other in the interest of the common good will be more resilient to cultural and geo-political storms. We must remember that Singapore does not exist as an isolated entity, cocooned and insulated from the world. World events do affect us, and sometimes they affect us profoundly, as evidenced in recent times.

## CONCLUSION

The title of my talk – ‘The Christian and Inter-Faith Relations’ – may give the impression that its subject is rather abstract and academic. But it is not. The title of my NCCS paper captures the essence of our topic: ‘On Being a Neighbour’. The call to be a neighbour to another is nothing less than a call to Christian discipleship. This call is powerfully expressed in the words of a document of the Second Vatican Council entitled ‘Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World’. Let me read the opening words of this document:

The joy and the hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.

The call to be a neighbour is a call that compels us to transcend all psychological, cultural and social distances between other people and ourselves. This is a call to discipleship. It is a call to follow Jesus Christ our Lord who came not to be served but to serve. It is a call to love our neighbour. It is a call to allow all that is truly human to echo in the recesses of our hearts.

***Dr Roland Chia*** is lecturer in Systematic and Historical Theology in Trinity Theological College. He is also the Director of the Centre for Development of Christian Ministry at TTC and Editor of *Church & Society*.