# FOUR PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE: CHRISTIAN ORIGINS – WIDER OWNERSHIP?

Okay. I would like to thank you very much for the welcome. It is lovely to be here. I know one or two people associated with the society over a number years and I have never yet been to this place which is a new addition to this building and I hope it gives a good impetus to the work that the society is involved in, the important work it's been involved in over a number of years. So, I am grateful to have the chance to share with you tonight. I've got a little bit of technology here that is hypersensitive to touch, so if it speeds beyond the slides where I want it to be, I have to slow it down but hopefully I will manage to coordinate my eye, brain, and that machine in one movement.

There are some important things about this title before we get into the thing as a whole. These four principles that I want to look at did have Christian origins, that were developed by a group of persons with dense Christian background and I am going to try and explain something of that too so you can see and understand where they come from.

But the second part of this, why the ownership is as important in my view, but so also is the question mark and that is where your discussion will come into play. So, I hope tonight will be in two parts; one, is some background that I will open up to you and some questions that I will pose about the potential value or otherwise on these principles today. But I am not presupposing an answer to that. There is a question mark there and it is not just an adornment or an accident. It is a real question mark and you need to supply the answer or the answers. So, we will see where we go to.

So, I am grateful for the invitation as a speaker of this seminar and on this occasion, to try to do so precisely about the concept and practice of dialogue, which is of course, self-embodied in the name of the society, of which I am pleased to be associated as a member of its board of advisers.

For most of my professional work in academic life, I have been engaged as professor of interreligious relations in the non-confessional study of religion (i.e., standing outside of religions and trying to understand and explain them), particularly, my area of specialism in the relationships between religion, state, and society. But before I became involved in academic policies, I was working as an ordained Christian Minister of Religion in the Baptist tradition of Christianity. And in that capacity, I was already engaged in interreligious dialogue, not only looking at it, so to speak, from the outside, but being engaged in it as myself a religious believer.

During the 1980s, I worked as a community relations officer with Greater Manchester Council of Churches with a special brief for working on issues of interfaith relations and also of issues of racial justice.

And personally, in my life, I can trace back my early awareness of what it means to engage in interfaith dialogue to the family of my best

friend at school. My best friend at school was from an orthodox Jewish background. His parents suffered greatly in Poland at the time of the Second World War and even from back in those days, I can remember two questions that my school friend's mother asked me as a young Christian, and a Christian in a quite strongly evangelical Christian tradition.

She said, "Why do the Christians bully?" And then she used the name of my friend. "Why do the Christians bully him at school? Why do they do that--the Christians?" That made me feel very uncomfortable because I was not quite sure that believing Christians would be bullying him, but then perhaps maybe it is not as simple as saying, "Well, maybe there are sometimes good Christians and sometimes not-so-good Christians" and "How is it in the Jewish communities experience Christians over the centuries, and what did it mean in that school."

She also asked me the question, "Why do you Christians call our scriptures old?" (Because Christians, when they refer to the Hebrew scriptures, call them the old testament and sometimes old in science, in some value systems, it sounds as if, "Well, it is old and back there somewhere and we are now with the new.") And in her mind, at least, the fact that Christians call their sacred scriptures perceived as the Word of God to them, leaving and addressing them as old, what will you say? Will you say, that what had come along in terms of the revelation of Christianity was new? Yes. But will we also say by new, better. Will we say that events which were old no longer matters in any sense?

Now, those were just two questions that an ordinary Jewish mother in an orthodox Jewish tradition in an ordinary conversation in a house asked me as a young teenage Christian. I could not really get a grip from them but they stayed with me ever since, and in some ways have shaped many of my understandings about those involved in interreligious dialogue because the first question, "Why do the Christians bully Leslie?" reminds me and has always reminded me of the importance of taking account of, in a sense, power relationships, and discrimination, and the effects upon interreligious relations in interfaith dialogue.

We can, at an individual level, sit down together in a room and achieve a certain level of mutual understanding. But there is a wider world around it and that wider world has a whole load of history, has a whole load of social, economic, political context, and one can't shut it all out. It comes into the individual relationship--shapes and forms of history. And that has always stayed with me just as that second question which she asked, "Why do you Christians call our scriptures old," was a challenge to my religious understanding, my theological framework, my way of framing the world in religious terms, and made me think about the implications of how I was framing things and the language that I was using when heard people from outside my religious tradition.

So, that is a little bit about me biographically that might help to explain some things that I will open up for discussion as we go on. Because often, when speaking professionally at seminars and conferences, while I always acknowledge my own religious tradition and commitment, I am usually addressing them from a non-confessional and more observational stance; outside looking in, speaking of that. But on this occasion, having

been invited by society that does have a social commitment but does not hide its religious identity and commitment, as one who, myself personally, seeks to follow Jesus of Nazareth, I try to do that in my life in an inclusive Christian way, personally, I said in the introduction, formed by the Baptist tradition of Christianity but also through marriage in family connected to the Roman Catholic tradition.

And so, as I open up these four principles, I will be drawling some things that have involved my own personal biography. And it goes back, really, these four principles to a period when I was involved in the work of the so-called 'Committee for Relations with People of other Faith' of the then Christian umbrella body and within the British Council Churches, and that is a period between 1982 and 1992.

More specifically, I will be introducing these four principles of dialogue and trace their backgrounds, their developments, and their use in a quarter of a century, and as I said, I will be inviting you to explore this question mark about how appropriate or useful these marks to be and also for people other than Christians.

So, what are these four principles of dialogue then as first articulated by the British Council of Churches? They came out first in a little booklet, and originally published in 1981. This is the slightly revised 1983 edition, "Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines for Dialogue in Britain". In those days, priced 60 pee, probably be over a pound now. But the four principles, and these are found at the left, are as follows:

1. Dialogue begins when people meet each other.

2. Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.

3. Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community.

4. And finally, dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.

Something you might notice about the four principles straight away, one or two things maybe. First of all, there is not necessarily, anything religious, actually, in language of those principles. Maybe the word "witness" sounds a little religious but much of the rest is not particularly religious. Also, it does not sound, especially Christian although again the word "witness" might have a Christian flavour although it appears in other religions in the English language. But those four principles, in many ways, have informed and guided the work that is being done by the Christian churches over last 20 to 25 years in trying to engage with people of other faiths in the UK.

But it is important to try to understand that although these principles were articulated in the UK, where they actually came from, because they came from a wider Christian international and global context before they were taken up and developed in the UK. So, in many ways, the origins of these four principles can be found in that widely global Christian community and that is not an accident because during the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing consciousness emerged of a shift in the centre of Christian

presence and activity from Europe and North America, to the countries of what I prefer to call the "two-thirds world". In some settings, notably in Latin America and in Africa, that was of majority Christian presence.

In other context, in particular, in Asia, it was a minority Christian presence and one in the setting of other ancient cultures and religions, but also at the time in the 1970s, where there were rising national movements. And especially in the context of decolonisation and nation building, minority Christian groups in different parts of the world were faced with a question of how they could both maintain their integrity as Christians, including their links with the global Christian community of which they were a part, and not excluding those from the world of the former colonizer, but at the same time, how could they be seen as being fundamentally a part of the emerging societies into independence of where they were born and they lived. How could they be seen as not alien to those re-emergent national identities of their countries of origin? How could they be both Christians of integrity and fully be seen as and accepted as belonging within the national and ethnic identity.

And this was a very big set of issues in the global Christian community and in the two-thirds world in the 1970s. And therefore, it was in the minority churches of Asia that first pushed this agenda of interreligious dialogue within the global Christian community and against the background of that kind of national emergence, independence movements and so on. And one of the key international consultations that took place in that regard happened in Chiang Mai in 1977, and the location of that was in Thailand, a predominantly Buddhist country with a small Christian minority. The theme of that consultation was "Dialogue in Community" and it led to a publication in 1977 entitled "Faith in the midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community."

So, very much, a lot of the thinking that lay behind what eventually became these four principles of dialogue, used as an educative resource among Christians in the UK, came out of the experience of minority Christian groups in the two-thirds world.

And against that background, in January of 1980, the so-called then Central Committee of the World Council of Churches commended a set of 13 specific guidelines on dialogue with people of living faiths and ideologies. Another little booklet that came out in 1979 of my collections, this one was 65 pee.

Interestingly, I noticed something, and this resonates with (indiscernible_16:14) introduction. This came out in 1979 when also there was a large fuss in the Christian community that lived in countries with communist rule and Marxist ideology as the predominant power system. So, it speaks about guidelines on dialogue with people of living faiths because it was thinking about Christian dialogue with Muslims, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, but also living faith and ideologies; because for many Christians, the ideological dialogue was as important and challenging. How could you, as a Christian, live in a society predominantly governed by Marxist idealist, and Christian-Marxist dialogue emerged in that context, both in parts of Europe under certain conditions but also in Latin and in Central America.

So those guidelines on dialogue, 13 of them, first emerged in 1979 and 1980 for use among the member churches of the World Council of Churches worldwide. That is a large number of practicing Christian churches and orthodox Christian churches. The Roman Catholic Church is not part of that directly. The word towards those guidelines was prepared by what was called the "Subunit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies" that then later became known as the "Dialogue Subunit" in the World Council of Churches.

And the World Council of Churches, when they produced this said, "Okay, we'll refer these now to our member churches throughout world. Please study them. Please think about them. Please reflect on them. And please see if you can, maybe, use them in your specific context. Perhaps you need to attack them and please do some work on this." So that task was, in a sense, set from these global guidelines in dialogue. And as it is, it became for principles on dialogue.

But in the 1970s, in the UK, most of the British society probably had relatively little appreciation of the religious dimensions of the new plurality that was part of our life in Britain. Politicians, certainly, and also many people in one of public life, saw the new diversity primarily in terms of ethnicity or race and not in terms of the religious diversity that was brought about by significant migrations of people from the 50s, 60s, and 70s.

Very early on, though, some key people in the Christian community did identify the importance of faith. For example, Bishop John Taylor, as long ago as 1977 said, "This is at the existence of religious minorities, presents us with both problems and opportunities which are distinct from those that arise in the presence of racial and cultural minorities. And these issues should not be lost sight of or evaded." So, he was pointing as an early stage when there was not much awareness. Certainly, government was not talking about the importance of faith in the social life, about the importance of that.

And in that, Bishop Taylor was not kind of on his own because from as early as April 1977, the assembly of the then British Council of Churches, an umbrella body for the British Churches, declared this. They said, "The presence in Britain of significant numbers of people of faiths other than Christian is within God's gracious purposes."

Now, that was a very significant statement from the Christian church body at that time. It was saying it was not accidental in a sense, people's religious identity. And it was, in a way, a positive evaluation of that. Now, this was coming form within a majority of the faith community who could well have said, "Actually, it was a bit threatening to have people of other faiths' presence. All they could have said were, "It does not really matter" or "It's just there" but they said very positively and they said this for several years running, they repeated this motion in their--the presence of significant numbers of people of other faiths other than Christian is within God's gracious purposes.

Another word of saying there is something also to say to us as Christians by the presence of people of other faiths. Are we ready to listen

to them? It is within God's gracious purpose, you may find some things difficult and challenging but that is the primary framework within the (indiscernible_22:03).

So, all of these things are part of the backgrounds of these four principles and very interestingly, some of the key people who were involved in framing that resolution and Bishop Taylor, whom I mentioned earlier, and some of the key people who ended up writing these four principles of dialogue, originally had a role as Christian missionaries. From a superficial view of missionaries, that might seem rather paradoxical. But perhaps in many ways, it is not so surprising because missionaries, of course, however they are understood, are very well aware of the human realities of people of other faiths and beliefs in contrast to those who had only read about people of other faiths or read about beliefs in books. And, actually, Christian missionaries played a very important role in the 1970s and 80s. People who eventually became key people, for example in the World Christian-Muslim Relations, like Bishop Kenneth Cragg, wonderful books and rules of the mosque and other publications. But many of these people have originally had their role as missionaries. There is an amazing paradox that we will come back to later.

So, after all the background, came in 1980, an assembly of the British Council of Churches that welcomed these World Council of Churches guidelines and dialogue and then were given the task of developing something for use specifically in Britain. Now, the task of developing something was given to a committee, how bureaucratic, and rather strange, the committee was called the "Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths". So, it was not a committee for Christian thinking about what other people believe or about beliefs of other religions. The words were very definite and very deliberately chosen, Committee for Relations.

In other words, right from the beginning, it was not the abstracts of the things about what people might believe or not believe or just putting the sense of that word, but it was you need to develop a relationship with people. So the Committee for Relations with People was very much cantered on those who believed and how they shape and form belief in their life and practice it, not just about what they believed. The "Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths" and that name is no accident, whatsoever, and from that came this little book, the "Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines for Dialogue in Britain."

When those guidelines came out, there was then a whole process in the Christian churches in this country of again, "Will you please take these? Will you look at them? Will you start them in your church groups, in your congregations, in your bible study groups, in your societies? Will you work out with at least, have of the ring of truth about it, have an authenticity about it? Will you try and put them into practice--all the things about them you do not think were right.

So, just as it began to global Christian level, and then came into the national Christian community. So, also then, there was an attempt to widen that discussion at nationally.

So, what can we say again about these four principles? I am also showing them now in relation to things that were said in the Wider World Council of Churches Principles beforehand, "Dialogue begins when people meet each other." And that picks up on something that was said in the World Council of Churches Guidelines, "Dialogue should proceed in terms of people of other faiths and ideologies rather than on theoretical impersonal systems." It is not religious belief systems that meet. It is people, who hold them, live by them, who meet; and that is where one should start. That is the principle being articulated here.

Secondly, dialogue depends upon mutual understanding, mutual trust and the particular section of the World Council of Churches Guidelines says "Dialogue can be recognized as a welcome way of obedience, commandments of the Decalogue, the Decalogue--the 10 Commandments held in common by Jews and Christians: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. How easy it is to construct the other in ways that are not true to how they are. I, as Christian, can construct of my image of the Muslim or any one as a Muslim can construct their image of what a Christian is, rather than through the way of dialogue where he tries to develop mutual understanding and mutual trust.

Guideline 3: Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to community. The relevant section of the World Council of Churches Guidelines there. Something dialogue, it said is, "…a joyful acclamation of life against chaos, and a participation with all who are allies of life in seeking the provisional goals of a better human community."

There may be differences in understanding about what people of different faiths and different traditions are ultimately aiming for, but there can be shared thoughts of the human beings, and dialogue makes it possible to share in that service to community.

Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness. And here the relevant section of the World Council of Churches Guidelines says, "As Christians enter dialogue with their commitment to Jesus Christ, time and time again, the relationship of dialogue gives opportunity for authentic witness. In other words, not charting at each other across a big divide, but because of the relationship of dialogue, really being able to explain, as Christian scriptures say, "The reason for the hope is within us," and so expect that that will be done by one's partner in life, and that is a form of witness which is authentic, not a form that is manipulative or a form that is threatening to a person of another faith but is rooted in sharing that allows the authenticity, the integrity of my faith and the integrity of yours to come together.

This emphasis on people at the centre is anything. It is not, of course, that other dimensions don't matter. Remember when I started to speak, when I told you about the questions with my Jewish friend's mother and so on. I could not just go in the world, in a little on my own, with myself and her. There was a history that came in that room with me whether I wanted it there or not, but nevertheless still important to begin when people meet each other. There is a lot more to be explored and some of it has be--some of it is very difficult to get into. But you're not likely to get there if you don't begin by meeting.

Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust. You could perhaps put that the other way around. And here is a critical question for one of these principles. Is it that way around? Does mutual understanding and mutual trust come because of dialogue? Or do you have to have some measure at least of trust, and some measure of understanding to even start to think about it. I mean, if you think somebody else is out to get you, are you likely to even start dialogue with them? So, perhaps some minimal mutual understanding and mutual trust is necessary before you can then develop dialogue which really develops a deeper mutual understanding and trust, which comes first; which is chicken, which is egg.

Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community. Again, there are some people who perhaps who still believes they are upside down. Is it dialogue that makes it possible then to do joint projects? Do you have to sit down if you like and talk with each other and plan together, and then your do the project? Or is it actually or can it be the other way around? That by sharing in of projects, of a provisional goal-timed project, not an ultimate-goal for eternity, but provisional or goal here and there, how we can make things better in the neighbourhood in which we live, and after that, we might discover that we start to dialogue with one another about what it is that motivates us to do that.

So, maybe you can look at it both ways around. Is it "Dialogue makes it possible to share in service with the community?" or is it that "Sharing and service to the community makes it possible to dialogue"? or perhaps a bit of that.

Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness. Now, this touches on a very difficult and very sensitive area in relations between people in different faiths and traditions. How is it possible to be with integrity who I am, and to allow you to be with integrity who you are, to affirm your freedom to be that and to affirm my freedom to be this. And at the same time, if one is within a faith tradition that makes a claim about truth, and not just truth for me, as an individual, the universal truth, and I think certainly Christianity in this land and make such a claim, how can you make such a claim? What are the implications of making such a claim? Because that claim probably has a challenge to the upper class. Because if you are saying that, "My faith has a universal claim significance," is it questioning the other person? And what is the implication of that and how can this tension be held together between affirming my faith, my identity, my freedom and space to be to practice who I am, and yours to be in practice who you are, but also to speak freely about what it is that we believe traditions say, not just to ask but to the world, indeed not just to the world but possibly the whole cosmos.

Is it possible to have dialogue as it matters a medium of authentic witness not to do with manipulating people? And what happens if in that, it is because that some people adopt a religion that was not the religion of their origin, their family, their culture, their individual history? Very sensitive, very difficult. And we know that in relations between different religions, either violence at the point of the sword, has forced conversations or manipulations through economic and other psychological

pressures and means have been used. That is authentic witness. Is there room for authentic witness?

And the possible choice of people who follow a pathway that they were not originally following, who find in that pathway a vision of truth that transforms their lives, but perhaps for whatever reason, they did not find in their original faith, original community; perhaps because of their experience within that. Maybe because some of the bad things that do go on in all of our religious traditions, because none of our religions live up to their ideals and many people cannot see beyond the banned practice of bad religion, to what it is that religion is meant to point towards, and so sometimes cannot see what the finger is pointing towards in their inherited church, but can only see it when it is eliminated from a different angle or a different perspective.

But how do we handle that? How is it possible again in a world which is not only about two people meeting respectfully in a room and sharing with one another as a deep level and affirming one another's freedom amidst seeing in the sense of what that means too, but is a world in which there are all kinds of other power influences going on that distorts our relationships with one another in a human sense. How can we handle these things together?

So, those are about these four principles--where they kind of came from, out of a global Christian community, particularly minority Christians, trying to work at how they could maintain their integrity of faith as Christians but also understand themselves and be seen by majorities in other cultures as being fully, whatever it is--fully Thai, or fully Indonesian, as well as full Christian, similar set of issues perhaps in today's contested diaspora for Muslims, and of course the west there's another way around. That is where it came from. These were then boiled down to these very "piffy" statements really. Dialogue begins, dialogue depends, dialogue makes it possible, dialogue becomes a medium of authentic witness. Language that is not particularly Christian, although you might tell me now that it is; it may be something that is not even particularly religious. It may be people of no particular religion. People might say, yes, and you might also say, "Well, yes it is, but no it is not." What do you think? Do you think these principles have any use? Are they just vague statements? Can they help us in thinking about dialogue? Let us start with the discussion and see what you think. Yeah?

Male participant: Of the four principles there, it is the last principle I am looking at of interest. When you said that perhaps might be a Christian…I can't remember the exact word you used--

Speaker: I wonder whether, is it possible, the word "witness" may itself have Christian overtones but--

Participant: The one that I think is Christian overtone is not the word "witness" but the word "authentic".

Speaker: Authentic. Okay.

Participant:        Because that is the word that disturbs me about the last one, the idea of the authentic witness. Because it depends at times, what you mean by the definition of authentic. I would assume that the Council of Churches who wrote this perhaps mean that the authentic witness is the witness who looks at the authenticity of the theological entrances behind Christianity rather than the authentic witness of any other religion.

Speaker:        Okay. I can see why you might have picked up on that. I think the intention of that word was, you might have replaced it with "ethical", that was the intention of that word. So, it is talking about style of bearing witness to that which you believe. If as a community, you believe you have been given, as Christians, Muslims, and Jews, a revelation from God, that's something given to you in trust and to which therefore you have an obligation to bear witness to that. You can do that, today it's a language, and remember it is just after the 60s and early 70s, authentic/authenticity was a big kind of word. They used that word, but I think what they were really trying to talk about is that there are ethical and unethical ways of going about that, and what they wanted to say was dialogue is the mode in which it is possible or ethically to bear witness. That is what, I think, their intention was, but it is how you are responding to.

Participant:        Well, it is still a matter of semantics, I think. The interesting part is perhaps when you are saying, if I am correct, on the student, the one you were talking, that when perhaps someone of one faith changes to another faith, and is that then the result of the authentic witness, if you understand my drift?

Speaker:        Yes. I do understand your drift. I think the principles are not saying anything about that. The principles are not seeking the end of what you call a conversation of some faith, rather emphasizing; but what is important is the bearing witness and doing that in an ethical way. Then it is not human business to determine the outcome of that. And that when humans get too interested in the outcome of that, humans, being what they are, and religious communities and groups being what they are, which is more than the religious inspiration, also starts to use other things, and other thing factors come into play, including manipulation and (indiscernible_42:43). Therefore, what this was trying to say in a sense is-- yes, bear witness because that is what you are called to do as a Christian, and probably what you are called to do as a Muslim, it is probably what you are called to do as Jew. You need to be faithful in doing that but faithful in doing that means doing it ethically which means in the sense having done it, that is your duty, not manipulating or trying to cause an…