

REPORT OF THE PANEL ON DOCTRINE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2012

The Panel's remit was "to consider from a Biblical and doctrinal viewpoint the position of the United Free Church on inter faith matters".

INTRODUCTION

This is not the first time that the General Assembly has sought to look at this matter. The question last arose out of issues surrounding the Iraq War in 1991; and in 1994 the General Assembly approved guidance offered under the aegis of the then Overseas & Inter-Church Affairs Committee which we must and will draw on. It would, however be fair to say that the faith climate within which we now find ourselves has shifted considerably; and also that even the language has shifted usage – the language of 'tolerance' in particular – and so we need to flesh out the guidance given then, and clarify our position in the light of these developments.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

General

First of all, however it would be helpful to sketch out a biblical background from both Old and New Testaments; and then to draw on the experience of the early church, because although the *expression* of multi-faith may be new to us, the *experience* is not. Israel throughout most of the Old Testament found itself surrounded by pagan nations whom they were 'not to be like.' The clearest statement is in Leviticus 18:2, 3 – "*Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices'*".¹

The church of the New Testament was born into a pagan environment and was to be marked, as the church at Thessalonica, as those who turned "*to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*"² The immediate post-apostolic church found itself in an identical position, with the increasing added pressures of the growing emperor cult, which demanded Christians choose between Jesus or Caesar as Lord.

As we draw upon these experiences we also need to remind ourselves of the continuity the Bible explicitly makes between Old Testament Israel and New Testament church. For example, 1 Peter 1:16 and Leviticus (in chapters 11, 19, 20) both draw us to the command to '*be holy, because I am holy*'; 1 Peter 2:9 and Exodus 19:6 make the cross-testamental connection of Israel and church as '*a kingdom of priests, a holy nation*'. One thing begins to become clear. The call to holiness includes a call to exclusivity of worship of the God of the Bible revelation.

Old Testament Background

The Patriarchs: The call of Abram to "*leave your own country, your people and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you*"³ together with the promise God gave him marks a new beginning. There is an exclusivity in their relationships with those who live in the land Abram enters – the experience in Egypt at one end and Lot being an extreme

¹ *The New International Version - Anglicised*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.) 1984 – all references unless otherwise stated

² 1 Thessalonians 1:9

³ Gen 12:1

example at another; but at the heart of this call is also an exclusive claim that it is through Abram/ Abraham alone that all nations shall be blessed.

Moses, the Exodus and the Law: It is in God's dealings with Israel and Moses that we begin to see this exclusive relationship marked out through the covenant. (Ex 20:1-4): '*I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me.*' The incident of the Golden Calf and its aftermath (Exodus 32) illustrates just how seriously this matter has to be taken by God's people. The same principle is reaffirmed in the passage already quoted above (Leviticus 18:2,3) and is further repeated in Deuteronomy as a reminder of the exclusive call of God on Israel.

Judges: The summary passage early in the Book of Judges states that "*the people served the Lord throughout the time of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel*" (2:7). It goes on to state that the next generation "*forsook the Lord . . . they followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them*" (2:13) and that this action '*provoked the LORD to anger*'. We see a particular example of this in Judges 10 where we are told they worshipped the gods of the Canaanites, '*the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines*' (10:6). God's attitude and response to this departure from his clear instruction is, we are told that (a) it was "evil in the eyes of the Lord" (v 6), (b) that God "became angry with them" (v 7), and (c) that, as a result, they were oppressed by the very peoples whose gods they had worshipped (vv 7-9).

Kings & Prophets: It would be true to say that much of the prophetic writing and preaching is a call to Israel to return to the terms of the covenant, and to desist from dabbling in the worship of the gods of the nations round about them. Isaiah chapters 44 & 46 contain particularly biting satire against the worthlessness of the gods of the nations; the exile for both Israel (the 10 Northern tribes) and Judah (the 2 Southern tribes) is a direct response to the idolatry of both. Though in the exile itself we are also brought to see the rule of the God of Israel over even Babylon in the book of Daniel.

In Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego we have three young Jews taken into exile by a despotic and ruthless king, but who refuse to serve or worship the king's gods or the image he had especially built for that purpose knowing that as a result they would be thrown into a blazing furnace. To give any semblance of worshipping anything or anyone other than the one true God was anathema to them.

New Testament Background

The New Testament is equally clear on the exclusive claims upon God's people, but here it is expanded and sharpened to be the worship now of God revealed as God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. What the New Testament begins to lay out for us is that all the Bible claims for God in the Old Testament, is true for Jesus in the New – not as another form of God but as Son; and as the Nicene Creed will put it, God of God, light of light, true God of true God.

This is seen both in the way that Lordship is applied to Jesus Christ – and it would have been unthinkable for a Jew to use the phrase 'Lord' of any but God – and also in the claims that Jesus makes for Himself. To claim '*I am the way and the truth and the life*' or that '*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*'⁴ are claims only understandable as claims to divinity. Thomas acknowledged him to be "*My Lord and my God*"⁵. Paul speaks of him as

⁴ John 14:6, 9

⁵ John 20:28

“*Christ, who is God over all*”⁶. To Titus he writes of “*our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ*”⁷. The writer of Hebrews quoting Psalm 45.6, affirms: “*But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever’*”⁸.

Beyond that, it has been said of John chapter 14 that at the most crucial point of Jesus’ life with His disciples, as He begins to teach of the person and work of the Holy Spirit we are given the seedbed for the full Trinitarian view of God, and this above all now shapes the Christian faith in its unique and exclusive nature. That God is One; and that God is Three. These Trinitarian implications are worked out through the Ecumenical Councils, and thence through the Ecumenical Creeds in expressing both the person and work of God in three persons. Though their origins were in arguments internal to the church at the time, they nevertheless form the foundations of the Christian doctrine of the person God. This One-in-Three God; One God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, is alone whom we worship, and no other. So that in relationship to other faiths neither the one-ness, nor three-ness can be isolated, but are held together.

Early Church Background

Even in the apostolic age we find, for example Paul in Athens, acknowledging the ‘godliness’ of the Athenians, but also seeks to deal with their ignorance of the sole truth of Jesus crucified and risen. Very quickly the early church faced periods of severe persecution, and the demands to bow the knee to Caesar as Lord were made upon them, where no such calls were needed for those who worshipped all the other deities. But the early church’s history is of holding to the sole Lordship of Jesus Christ. Polycarp’s martyrdom (c. 155/165 AD) is famous; asked simply to burn a pinch of incense to Caesar he preferred to die at the stake for “*How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?*”

Background Summary

Despite the emphasis upon the exclusive claims in both Old and New Testaments, it must also be said that there is regularly an explicitly missionary context in the life of God’s people. In one sense the exclusivity was to model a life with the true and living God which would demonstrate the uniqueness of God, and the reality of the life of His people. In the Old Testament Israel was to be a light for the Gentiles, and peoples from other nations attach themselves to her (Rahab in Joshua 2 a clear example, who sees God through Israel’s victories); even Jonah’s preaching has a strikingly missional element.

The New Testament places the Christian and the church as both holy, but also as salt and light;⁹ as those who are to declare the praises of Him who rescued us from darkness into His glorious light;¹⁰ who give a reason for the hope that is in us;¹¹ and explicitly are commanded to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything He has commanded us.¹² We are ambassadors as the love of Christ compels us¹³ – we have something wonderful to share, and are to make the most of every opportunity.

⁶ Rom 9.5

⁷ Titus 2.13

⁸ Hebrews 1.8

⁹ Matthew 5: 13-14

¹⁰ 1 Peter 2.9

¹¹ 1 Peter 3.12

¹² Matthew 28.19, 20

¹³ 2 Corinthians 5:14, 20

INTER FAITH MATTERS TODAY

Statement of General Assembly 1994

The General Assembly of 1994 approved the following recommended guidelines from the Overseas & Inter-Church Committee.

1. *We respect the right and freedom of other faiths to worship as they choose.*
2. *We are prepared to work alongside people of other faiths within the Community and on social concerns, welcoming every opportunity for dialogue to increase mutual understanding and to demonstrate religious tolerance.*
3. *We reaffirm our belief in the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the supreme rule of Faith and Life.*
4. *We believe that according to the teaching of the Scriptures the only way in which we can approach a Holy God is through the Lord Jesus Christ.*
5. *We believe in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and His Great Commission recorded in the Scriptures: 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'*
6. *We believe for Christians to be involved in multi-faith worship is not only to compromise, but also to deny that Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and men.*
7. *Therefore, in the light of these statements, we cannot engage in any act of inter-faith worship.*

In the light of the biblical background sketched above, we would want to flesh out these guidelines. (*The numbering hereafter corresponds to the paragraphs numbered above.*)

1. Freedom of Religion

We would want to strongly reaffirm this paragraph and yet also acknowledge that herein lies a deep problem in inter-faith relations.

The United Free Church stands as a church of the Reformation, with the Westminster Confession of Faith as its subordinate standard. Chapter 20:2 of the Confession outlines the principle of freedom of conscience, that '*God alone is Lord of the conscience*', so that no one can be bound by the conscience of another, nor be compelled to believe. This means that in evangelism we act in the conviction that in *the Gospel of the love and grace of God, wherein through Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, He freely offers to all men forgiveness and eternal life, and calls them into the fellowship and service of His kingdom.*¹⁴ There is freedom to receive or reject what God calls us to, and therefore freedom of religious belief.

But allied to that is therefore the belief that as this offer is to all, there must be the freedom to make that offer; i.e. freedom to evangelise and proclaim this kingdom of God, and the freedom to accept God's offer in Christ. One of the friction points in inter-faith matters is the freedom which Christianity gives to all to proclaim their own beliefs, but which is not matched by those of other religions towards Christians to share their own faith. In this, any inter-faith relationships in Scotland cannot simply look at our own narrow field, but must, for the sake of Christian brothers and sisters under pressure and persecuted world-wide, face up to this disparity in freedoms and speak up for this freedom to hear and believe.

¹⁴ Question 2 at the Ordination or Induction of a Minister, Licentiate or Elder. See Manual of Practice & Procedure Appendix 2 page 101f

The United Free Church can perhaps speak with particular distinctiveness here, in that we do not hold to an 'Establishment of Religion' viewpoint. This is reflected in our firm conviction that *the Lord Jesus Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, that the Church derives from Him a government distinct from civil government and that civil rulers possess no jurisdiction in her spiritual affairs.*¹⁵ This freedom of conscience, of belief and of proclamation is not divisible.

From a wider perspective, this view is reflected in the Universal Declaration Of Human Right (*hereafter UDHR*) in two articles in particular.

Article 18 Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19 Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

However Muslim countries such as Sudan, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have criticized the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for its perceived failure to take account of the cultural and religious context of Islamic countries because they claimed their governments were based on the Sharia. In 1982, the Iranian representative to the UN, said that the UDHR was "a secular understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition", which could not be implemented by Muslims without trespassing the Islamic law. On 30 June 2000, Muslim nations that are members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference officially resolved to support the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, an alternative document that says people have "freedom and right to a dignified life *in accordance with the Islamic Shari'ah*".¹⁶

We face one of the perennial issues of any inter-denominational, let alone inter-faith dialogue, that of using the same words, but meaning very different things. In this, however the first point of the 1994 guideline is clear, and with the meaning fleshed out as we have, and underpinned by the UDHR, it is one we must hold to.

2. Dialoguing and Working with those of other faiths within the community

This is perhaps one of the most fraught areas in inter-faith relationships, not simply because of the conflicts between faiths, but also because of secular pressures to view all faiths as interchangeable or indistinguishable for practical purposes.

The first thing that should be said is that dialogue is always to be encouraged. We would reaffirm our willingness to welcome 'every opportunity for dialogue to increase mutual understanding and to demonstrate religious tolerance'. Nevertheless we do not understand tolerance to mean we that we must agree with everyone, but rather the ability to discuss;

¹⁵ Ibid. Question 5

¹⁶ See for example www.religlaw.org/interdocs/docs/cairohrislam1990.htm; or oic-oci.org/English Though in for example article 18 of the Cairo Declaration we read "Everyone shall have the right to live in security for himself, his religion, his dependents, his honour and his property" even this is bound by articles 22 & 24. ARTICLE 22:(a) Everyone shall have the right to express his opinion freely in such manner as would not be contrary to the principles of the Shari'ah. Everyone shall have the right to advocate what is right, and propagate what is good, and warn against what is wrong and evil according to the norms of Islamic Shari'ah. ARTICLE 24:All the rights and freedoms stipulated in this Declaration are subject to the Islamic Shari'ah.

disagree and still live alongside one another. The only caution would be from point 1 already mentioned, the necessity of the mutual freedom of that dialogue.

Working together with those of other faiths raises its own unique problems. There are, in national terms points at which cooperation can be helpful – the Jubilee 2000 campaign to cancel debt was a good example where a campaign could cross all kinds of borders.

However given the biblical background already laid out in this Report, there is a principle which may be appropriately applied more generally. In the Old Testament we have the prophetic warnings about alliances that (e.g with Ahaz in Isaiah 7) simply brought the gods of the nations inside the doors of Israel. Likewise in the New Testament the Apostle Paul warns about being yoked with unbelievers.¹⁷ Whilst most often applied to marriage, it is not restricted to that, but more generally to alliances that the church may seek to make. Indeed in its context goes on to speak of the contrast between God and idols.

It is not easy to lay down hard and fast guidance, but one aspect must be to ask of each occasion, what statement does this make to the wider community; *and* what message does it send to the wider church. The answers to these questions will not be about being nice, cooperative people; but does it compromise or muddy the clarity and distinctiveness of the Christian gospel and church?

3. – 5. *The supremacy of the Scriptures; the unique mediatorial place of the Lord Jesus Christ; the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one with all authority who sends His disciples out with the Great Commission.*

We fully endorse these paragraphs as clearly and coherently setting out the United Free Church of Scotland's position as a part of the Reformed Church.

6. & 7. *Christians and multi-faith worship*

Here, perhaps more than any other we become aware of the significant shift in our culture since 1994, particularly in the size of the (especially) Muslim, but also Hindu populations as well as other faiths; and the likelihood that individually Christians are not only aware of those of such faiths, but know them as friends and neighbours.

We also need to distinguish carefully the actions of an individual Christian from that of one representing the wider Church.

- a) For individual Christians who may find themselves invited to a wedding; or know someone who has died, the best advice would be that laid out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8, about food sacrificed to idols, where the individual conscience becomes a touchstone. If the Christian is secure in his own faith, and desires to attend out of respect and good will, then there would be no problem. If however, attendance at a service of another religion might cause the individual to stumble in their faith then it would be foolhardy to do so. There is also the caution concerning the possible impact our own actions may have on others. In that we should not be quick to judge one another's consciences, but seek to be as loving to a fellow Christian as possible.

If attendance is chosen, then we would also wish to endorse and underline the view of the 1994 Assembly, that attendance does not imply, nor should it involve engaging

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 6.14

in worship. To do so would deny Jesus Christ as the only one through whom worship to God may acceptably be made.

- b) For the Church and those charged with representing the Church, who may find themselves in a situation of, for example, a local or national tragedy, and a combined service following, the public consequences are much more real and crucial. There may in such circumstances be a place for representatives of other faiths being present, but for participation to be acceptable any act of worship would have to be distinctively Christian. It is not merely, as has been stated above, whether it would compromise or muddy the clarity and distinctiveness of the Christian gospel and church; but that the Christian response and understanding of tragedy is itself very distinctive, and can only be understood and proclaimed in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

SUMMARY

The whole area of differing faiths and religions rubbing against each other has certainly accelerated since 1994, but we find the basic principles have not changed. Not least that we are to be a “peculiar”¹⁸ people; and the distinctiveness of our Christian faith will sometimes mean that we are viewed as precisely that – peculiar. But in faithfulness to our Lord Jesus Christ it may simply be a cross we have to bear. There is no call for an aggressive spirit, but always in reflection of our Lord, that our *conversation should be full of grace, seasoned with salt so that you may know how to answer everyone*.¹⁹

In the name of the Panel

IAN F. R. LLOYD	Convener
JOHN O. FULTON	Secretary

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY

1. The General Assembly accept the report of the Panel on Doctrine as the considered position of the United Free Church of Scotland on Inter Faith Matters.

¹⁸ 1 Peter 2:9 Authorised (King James) Version

¹⁹ Colossians 4.6