

Response to G Mitchell

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1. Major points of agreement

1.1 I fully agree with Dr Mitchell that Religious Education according to the policy of Christian National Education as something imposed on everyone else by Afrikaner nationalists (and the same tendencies which he detects in the English community), is totally unacceptable. As matter of fact, I have always had problems with the concept of *Christelike Nasionalisme* (Christian Nationalism) as such, criticising it as an absolutisation of Afrikaner national and cultural values, with a thin layer of 'Christian varnish' covering it.

1.2 In as far as the current syllabi for Biblical Studies and 'Bible Education' in South African schools function as instruments of religious, cultural and even political imperialism (Deist 1991), by which a small sector of society (the one with political power), has taken upon itself the responsibility of imposing its religious ideas on everyone else, I agree that such syllabi can no longer be tolerated.

1.3 I fully accept the notion and necessity of an African Christianity which has taken root in Africa.

1.4 I also accept the necessity and importance of an African theology of liberation that includes the economic and political (and I may add social) dimensions of life, as long as such a theology is based on the interpretation of biblical material (albeit an interpretation which may differ from my own interpretation).

2. Major points of disagreement

2.1 I do not agree with the idea of religious education as dialogue between the various faiths, or multi-faith education for the sake of national unity, which has been introduced in other African countries.

2.2 I have reservations about the idea of a continuity between Christianity and African religions (or any other religion for that matter).

2.3 A difference is being made between the catechetical ministry of the church, and religious education which is said to be the responsibility of the state. But is it really the responsibility of the state to teach religion (whichever religion)? I have serious doubts about that (cf 4.3, 4.4).

3. Reasons for disagreement

3.1 If the idea of continuity between religions is applied consistently, it results in the syncretistic view that all religions are essentially equal and ultimately one, or that there is an evolutionist hierarchy (in the form of a pyramid) between religions. Then adherents of all religions could actually say to one another: 'Your God is my God.'

3.2 Rather than accepting this idea of essential equality or unity of all religions, and consequently a dialogical multi-faith religious education, I agree with Karl Barth (1960:356) that there is no such a thing as *vera religio* (true religion), but that:

Religion is niemals und nirgends als solche und in sich wahr (religion is never and nowhere as such and in itself true).

On the contrary, according to Barth (1960:324-327, 343):

Religion ist Unglaube ... Religion ist die Angelegenheit des gottlosen Menschen ... Religion ist immer ein sich selbst widersprechendes, ein in sich selbst unmögliches Unternehmen (religion is unbelief ... religion is the concern of godless men ... religion is always a self-contradicting and in itself impossible undertaking).

In this respect Earth justifiably includes even Christianity or Christian religion as an empirical phenomenon, and in this he is followed by prominent missiologists such as Hendrik Kraemer, Johannes Verkuyl and others.

3.3 These views, with which I agree (even if I might be called a fundamentalist because of that), imply that our religions or religious experiences (including our Christian religious experiences) should not be esteemed so highly that we would ardently wish to convey or teach them to people of other religions, in order to impose our religions or religious ideas on everyone else, or to convert people from one religion to another religion. Neither should we wish to share our religions in dialogue with people of other religions in an attempt to find common values or common truths (which are not to be found in religions according to Earth), or even to find a common universal religion as some protagonists of dialogue between the various religions have been hoping to find (I am not saying or even suggesting that this is what Dr Mitchell was trying to do in his paper).

3.4 Together with Karl Barth and many other theologians, I believe that God's revelation in Jesus Christ, the incarnated Word of God, is the final and absolute revelation to mankind. Thus, this revelation which is also testified in the inspired, inscripturated Word of God, is the criterion against which all religions are measured. Hendrik Kraemer, in his well-known book *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World* (1963:92, cf 61-100), refers to this final revelation of God in Jesus Christ as 'Biblical Realism'. Or, to phrase it in the words of Emil Brunner (1941:261):

Jesus Christus ist auch der Gereicht aller Religion. An ihm erweist sich alles religionstum als unwahr, unfrommen, ungläubig, ja als Gottlos' (Jesus Christ is also the criterion against which all religion is measured. In Him everything religious is proved to be untrue, unholy, unbelief, and indeed Godlessness).

4. What went wrong?

4.1 The great commission of Jesus Christ to make disciples and to teach them (Mt 28:19) was given to the church (represented by Jesus' disciples who became apostles by virtue of this commission), and not to the state.

4.2 The way in which this commission was meant to be carried out was through *marturDa* ('you will be witnesses for me ...' Acts 1:9) which implies suffering, persecution and indeed martyrdom for the sake of Jesus Christ, but definitely not through imposing religious ideas on other people. In fact, even faith in Jesus Christ cannot and should not be imposed on people in an intolerant way. The *eùaccÁlion* (Gospel) of salvation in Jesus Christ should rather be witnessed to them with love and tolerance, for them to make their own free decisions to believe in Jesus or to reject Him.

4.3 The view that religious education is the responsibility of the state was introduced as part of the *Corpus Christianum* idea in the Constantinian Era, when Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. It cannot be denied that many positive things resulting from this could still be observed in our own time. But, unfortunately, the negative notion of intolerant religious imperialism through which Christianity as a religion is imposed on people, is also a result of its becoming and remaining an official state religion which, I believe, it was never intended to be.

4.4 This, I would say, is precisely what actually went wrong, that Christianity became and remained to be an official state religion which is to be taught as compulsory subject in state schools and thus be imposed on people, instead of being what it was intended to be, namely the living testimony through word and deed by the community of believers, to the salvation and liberation in all spheres of life, which can only be obtained through faith in Jesus Christ.

5. How can it be rectified?

5.1 Although I do not agree with the idea of a dialogical multi-faith religious education, I do firmly believe in religious tolerance and religious freedom, precisely because of the nature of my faith in Jesus Christ.

5.2 I have also indicated that I do not consider Christian religious education to be the responsibility of the state.

5.3 The only remaining option would then be to leave all religious education in the hands of religious institutions.

5.4 Provision could however be made for periods during school hours, in which the religious institutions that are predominant in the particular area could be given the opportunity of teaching their adherents. This could possibly be done by willing and competent staff members representing those institutions, or by outside experts on invitation, of course without being paid for that by the state.

5.5 The above-mentioned suggestions need not apply to Biblical Studies, since it is not compulsory religious education but an optional academic subject which is not even presented in all schools. Other academic subjects of a religious nature (for

example, Science of Religion) could be presented on the same basis where a need for that exists.

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