CHRISTIAN PARAMETERS OF MULTI-FAITH WORSHIP FOR CHURCHES TOGETHER

Part 1: QUESTIONS OF PRINCIPLE

The context of the debate

Inter faith relations and multi-faith worship
The question of multi-faith worship is only one aspect of inter faith relations, but it is one of the most contentious and high-profile, and one which poses inescapable theological and practical challenges. The complexities and sensitivities of the subject are not often understood by people outside the churches and faith communities, and people of different faiths may themselves have very different views as to the possibility and desirability of multi-faith worship - as, of course, do people within the Christian churches. There is the added dimension of disagreement over which groups are included within the circle of inter faith relations. For example, the Inter Faith Network for the UK includes representatives of nine major world traditions, but local inter faith groups may include smaller religious groups, New Religious Movements, pagans, and others. Some dialogue activities also extend their scope to 'faiths and lifestances' - thus including, for example, Humanists - and naturally the question then arises about boundaries of participation in any shared worship events arising from dialogue.

Despite the high profile of this issue, reflection and writing on it has been only intermittent. Significant attention was paid to these questions in Britain in the early years of the last decade, beginning in 1991, when two thousand Anglican clergy signed an 'Open Letter' addressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury, expressing their disquiet over what they saw as a growing number of acts of multi-faith worship. They had in mind particularly the annual Commonwealth Day Observance at Westminster Abbey, and a number of cathedral multi-faith events organised by the Worldwide Fund for Nature. In 1992, the Church of England's Inter Faith Consultative Group published a report entitled 'Multi-Faith Worship?', which was followed in the following year by practical guidance issued by the House of Bishops. A number of consultations were held, pamphlets and booklets published subsequently to that, but subsequently the focus of inter faith activity moved elsewhere. It is only this year that the first major systematic study of inter-religious prayer appeared - in Gavin D'Costa's The *Meeting of Religions and* the Trinity. The Millennium celebrations in some places again raised the question of what people of different faiths could do together in the way of worship or prayer; recently people have begun to think about what a Coronation might look like in a multi-faith society. However, as in the case of ecumenical activity, it is often at local level that the most immediate opportunities and the most pressing challenges arise.

Support for multi-faith worship
Christians may support the idea of multi-faith worship, in general or in particular contexts, for several reasons. Probably the commonest motivation is simply to provide acts of worship which are as inclusive and representative as possible of every group of people in a religiously mixed community -in this case, there may also be a question of responding to the expressed hopes of some external agency such as a local authority or voluntary society. If in cases like this a pragmatic desire to respond to a situation comes before thinking through the rationale for an act of multi-faith worship, in other cases the theology may come first and find expression in multi-faith worship.

For example, some Christians see acts of multi-faith worship as natural pioneering developments following on from shared worship in intra-Christian ecumenism; some may see them as illustrations of the essential unity of all religions; others, by contrast, may value them precisely because they testify to the irreducible diversity of human religious expression. Whatever the underlying motivation, Christians participating in multi-faith worship will also often claim that it is in some sense a self-validating experience: 'it felt right, `it was a time of spiritual discovery'.

Opposition to mufti-faith worship
By contrast, and naturally enough, those opposed to multi-faith worship generally avoid direct experience of it. Again, a number of overlapping arguments may be *advanced.* It is often suggested that multi-faith worship sends mixed messages to other communities, particularly in the context of mission; it may be *added* that the idea of sharing in worship across religious boundaries is unappealing to many people of other faiths. General concerns over implied syncretism may be sharpened by reference to the particular danger of idolatry, and the worship of `false gods'; or it may be felt that an emphatically `pluralist' theological agenda is being advanced, with an abandonment of all claims to uniqueness and biblical faithfulness. A rather different criticism is that multi-faith worship cannot be worship in any meaningful sense: theologically, different faiths are so different that elements of them simply cannot be put together; and practically, what tends to emerge is a bland and uninspiring mélange in which nobody is truly worshipping. Finally, there may be a particular concern for the way in which acts of multi-faith worship are seen to compromise the position of Christians in difficult situations overseas, or of new converts to the faith in this country.

Fundamental questions
Are we doing the same thing when we worship?
Many of the same activities appear within the worship of different faiths - reading, singing, physical gesture, silence, and so on. When these are interpreted according to the frame of reference supplied by each faith, their meanings are seen to be radically different. One of the fundamental interpretative questions is whether such activities are directed towards an objectively existing reality, or are basically forms of self-expression. According to English law, a religion must involve worship directed to some such object, though this has created problems of interpretation over non-theistic religions such as Buddhism[1] Christian theology has traditionally accepted the idea of 'worship' as a given, and concentrated its attention on identifying whether or not the object of that worship is the true God.

However, it is important to recognise that 'worship' is not an unambiguous term, either in the culture of western Christendom or in other faiths. Archaic uses of worship as an attitude related to a being less than God can be found in English usage -With my body I thee worship' in the BCP marriage service, 'addressing judges as 'Your worship', etc. More significantly, 'worship' is used in contemporary language, both in vernacular devotion ('He absolutely worships her'), and in the ways in which schools have sought to interpret the requirement for 'collective worship' in the 1988 Education Act - the emphasis being on the subjective feeling evoked rather than the object, if any, to which those feelings correspond.

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[1] In the South Place *Ethical Society* judgement (1980) it was held that 'two of the essential attributes of religion are faith and worship: faith in god and worship of that god'. The judge in that case suggested that Buddhism, which he accepted as a religion, either might be treated `as an exception' to this rule, or could be interpreted as not 'denying a supreme being'. In a judgement on the tax status of the Church of Scientology in 1983, the definition of 'religion' was broadened to include `belief in a supernatural Being, Thing or Principle'.

It is possible then to imagine how on this basis the word 'worship' could be extended to include attitudes or activities on the part of people who were quite sure that there was no 'object' to their worship. As I understand it, 'traditional' humanists have generally been reluctant to speak of 'worship', preferring to use the word 'ceremony' for their activities. However, there is also the phenomenon of 'religious humanism', growing out of the position of some Unitarians and Sea of Faith members.

In comparing worship among different faith communities, we need to recognise that there is no common concept called 'worship' differently translated in different languages and expressed in different faiths: even identifying the activities we are going to label as `worship' involves a theological judgement on the part of Christians. That said, certain ostensibly similar patterns can be discerned across faiths. In particular, in most cases it is possible to distinguish between 'a highly formalised, "official" kind of set piece' and 'a second and equally important style of worship which is more informal, fluid and commonplace' *(MFW,* §§52-53). In the case of Christianity, D'Costa (147) takes this up to suggest that, while all Christian worship is communal, some is 'cultic' and other 'non-cultic' acts of prayer. The former, he says, is 'intentionally exclusive to those who are non-Christians' as it implies 'public self-identification within the cult'; the question of multi-faith worship arises in the case of non-cultic prayer. These distinctions, though, might not be so sharp in the case of Christian traditions where the sacraments are not central.

Are we worshipping the same God?
Unlike the issue of the objectivity of worship, the question of the correct identification of the object of worship has been with Christian theology and proclamation from the beginning -Ac 17.23: 'What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you'; or, specifically in the multi-devotional context, 1 Cor 8.5: 'Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth- as in fact there are many gods and many lords - yet for us there is one God...' As Paul's words show, monotheism poses particular challenges in interpreting a proliferation of foci of worship, and various approaches have been adopted in Christian theology - e.g.:

(1) Christians worship the true God, and the so-called 'gods' worshipped by others are either illusory or demonic.
(2) Christians worship the true God, and the other 'gods' worshipped are beings subordinate to this one true God, who permits such cults.
(3) Christians worship the true God, and the other cults are addressed to the same God, imperfectly conceived or partially revealed.
(4) Christians worship the true God, and so do people in other cults, but fail to recognise his true character in a case of mistaken identity.
(5) People of other faiths worship in other ways and under other forms the God known to Christians in the face of Jesus Christ.
(6) Christians worship the true God, and are not in a position to know who is the object of worship of others.
(7) Christians truly worship God, but the meaning of 'worship' in different faiths is so different that no meaningful comparison of different 'gods' can be made.

It is also possible to make distinctions between the situation of different faiths and lifestances. For example, a common position is to draw concentric circles, according to which Judaism and possibly Islam fall into (4), other faiths into (3), and people without visible faith ('those whose faith is known to you alone') into (6). On the other hand, starting from position (1) suggests that humanists and other non-believers are actually in a less dangerous position than, say, Hindus.

Finally, a growing emphasis in some areas of Christian theology of religions is on the distinctive identity of the God worshipped by Christians - in particular, that Christianity is not an undifferentiated monotheism, but understands God as Trinity. This does not apply to position (5). For that view, the Trinitarian identity of God discerned in Jesus cannot be privileged over other ways of imaging God. In fact, John Hick - whose `Copernican revolution' represents the most elaborate statement of this position - goes further, and prefers 'Reality' to 'God' as a way of speaking of the ultimate referent of worship, so that he can accommodate Buddhism in his system; I do not know if this also embraces humanism, but it is not difficult to see how it might be so extended.

For other positions, though, God's identity is specifically Trinitarian. This could be used to support position (1), or possibly (4): if the Trinity is seen as an exclusive Christian identity for God, then all other names must be false or misleading. On the other hand, if we were to open up the content of the doctrine, the distinction yet inseparability of the Trinitarian Persons can be developed through considering the 'economy of the Son' compared with the 'economy of the Spirit'. On one hand, distinctiveness means that the presence of the Spirit - and response to the Spirit - is seen as unrestricted to Christianity, or even mediated through other faiths (this is one exegesis of the Vatican 11 documents), while the economy of the Son marks out a narrower but deeper access to God: pneumatology is extensive, Christology intensive. On the other hand, the inseparability of Son and Spirit means that responses to the Spirit in other faiths are already `inchoately' linked to all three Persons by virtue of the Trinitarian dynamic itself. So this provides a way in which position (3) can be aligned with position (5) by God himself, rather than by our ingenuity. This kind of approach is rooted in modern Catholic theology, and to some extent present in D'Costa himself - at the same time, it seems to be one of the theories denounced by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Dominus Iesus* (presumably the target here is Jacques Dupuis SJ).

What do we mean by 'multi-faith worship'?
The question of `intention' is central - if there is no measure of shared intentionality, it is difficult to see in what sense one could speak coherently of 'multi-faith worship'. *Multi-Faith Worship?* says a little about intention: commenting (rather dubiously) on Mal 1.1, it remarks that 'incomplete' need not mean 'misplaced'. All worship is directed towards seeking a fulfillment not yet attained; this is more marked in other faiths than in Christian worship.

Gavin D'Costa has an interesting discussion of 'intentionality' on three levels: the heart, the mind, and the act. These three are distinguishable but not separable, and together provide a holistic context for speaking of intention. At the level of the heart, where 'we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8.26), it is not difficult to see how people of different faiths or none could be reconciled in intention, whatever the explicitly stated objects of their worship. In fact, Ac 17.23, affirming that unwittingly the Athenians' worship of 'an unknown God' is worship directed to God, can be fitted into this.

The mind is more difficult, for at this level intention can be couched in propositional forms, and propositions can contradict one another. Even here, though, D'Costa points to the embedding of propositions in whole theological systems, from which they derive their interpretation; this makes it generally very difficult to lift two propositions out of two different contexts and assert that they contradict one another, as the systems are incommensurable. For example - to return to the question of the Trinity - D'Costa says that: 'while no other tradition affirms the trinity, it is not a priori clear that they deny the trinity' (156); he goes on to acknowledge that Judaism and Islam 'formally' do so 'in various historical moments', but suggests that what is being denied is not the Trinity as Christians understand it, but a misunderstood version.

I think that this may be rather optimistic, particularly in the case of Judaism; and this raises the interesting possibility that it may be hardest to create a 'space for non-contradiction' with the faiths 'closest' to Christianity - and so, for example, that 'multi-faith worship' is in one sense harder to express in the case of Christians and Jews than, say, Christians and Buddhists. In any case, whatever the details of particular faiths, D'Costa's general point is that even at the conceptual level there might be sufficient overlap to allow for 'co-intentionality', though this will always be fragmentary and imperfect, and cannot be assumed in advance.

The third level of intentionality, that of action, D'Costa addresses in terms of the living out of life - referring, for example, to the shared love of husband and wife in an inter-religious marriage. This fits with his concentration on thequestion of inter-religious prayer in general, rather than specifically worship; but it is also possible to ask about the actions of worship, and ask how - if at all - they might be patterned to express and enable some measure of co-intentionality between people of different faiths. Much of the literature here has focused on identifying three broad categories:
(1) people of one faith sharing in the worship of another faith community;
(2) people of different faiths being successively present at acts of worship belonging to each in turn;
(3) people of all faiths sharing in common worship designed in such a way that all participate fully in all parts.

The terminology for these various types varies - *Multi-Faith Worship?* Refers to (2) as 'serial multi faith services', and (3) as 'multi-faith services with an agreed common order', while D'Costa distinguishes (2) as 'multi-religious' from (3) as 'interreligious'. In practice, while the identification of these different patterns is helpful, the boundaries between them are not always clear. For example, a multi-faith 'pilgrimage' visiting successive places of worship involves a succession of (1), but can soon turn into (2); as the different 'acts' in the series of (2) become closer together the whole can merge into (3); while what is designed as (3) often in reality is better described as (1) with other faiths slotted into a pattern controlled by one faith. These practical issues need more attention; but the theological point is, that all three patterns raise in varying. modes the same question of 'co-intentionality'; and this justifies referring to all of them generically as 'multi-faith worship'.

Another way of approaching the question of co-intentionality at the level of actions is to see 'multi-faith worship' not as an 'act' (or 'acts') of worship, but rather as a context (or contexts) where worship can happen. To some extent, this is in any case true of Christian worship. In the strict liturgical sense, for example, I may be one of that genre of Anglican priests who prepare themselves for saying mass by reading the ACS card in the sacristy which reads: 'My intention is to celebrate the Holy Eucharist according to the rites of the Catholic Church ...' Yet I will know that many of the congregation - particularly if I am 'helping out' in the next-door parish - will not share that intention at all in their understanding of Holy Communion. Within popular devotion, there has been the pattern - much decried by liturgical fundamentalists - of people saying the rosary, or otherwise occupying themselves in prayer, while the liturgy is enacted: an overall context is provided which has a flexibility sufficient to give them space for diverse expressions of worship.

These are examples from within Christianity, but perhaps this could be a pointer to the multi-faith situation also. `Collective worship' in many schools, for example, has to operate in this way: providing an overall context within which children of different faiths or none can use the opportunity to express the worship of their heart, or not as the case may be.

Although educational experience shows that this is a difficult pattern either to attain or to describe, there can be experiences where D'Costa's 'fragmentary and imperfect' overlapping of intentionality becomes a reality carried through the overall context which enables worship. It is important to recognise two things about this. First, that the co-intentionality (the praying `with one accord') [2] is located in the overall context provided by 'multi-faith worship', rather than being entirely present in each individual participant. Second, that such co-intentionality is elusive, rare and fragile in its manifestation - which means both that 'multi-faith worship' is likely to be an exceptional rather than a regular occurrence, and also that some other source of 'co-intentionality' is needed to complement it if an adequate foundation for coherent worship is to be laid. This is why 'multi--faith worship' is at its most convincing when there is some 'natural' reason already in existence for people of different faiths to gather together any way - shared grief, thanksgiving, community membership, commitment to a cause, and so on.

Can this idea of a co-intentionality carried by the context be extended beyond the 'multi-faith' situation to include people of no faith, or specifically those who consciously eschew religious faith? D'Costa's approach suggests that the answer to this from a Christian point of view will lie on whether the work of the Spirit is to be discerned within the 'lifestance' involved. I am reminded of the story of the man who would faithfully go to his parish church every Sunday, always beginning his attendance by removing his hat, and kneeling for exactly one minute before sitting - as many Anglicans do. When asked one day by the vicar with what thoughts or silent words he prayed during these times, he replied: 'I'm not sure if you call it prayer, padre, but I read the words in my hat -'Smith and Jones, Hatmakers, Bond Street, London, By Appointment' - ten times, slowly, and then I know it's time to sit on the pew. That's all.' Do we call that prayer, in the sense of a sharing in the prayer of the Church?

Some key terms in the debate
Idolatry
'Idolatry' is generally understood as the worship of something less than God in place of God, i.e. it implies the ascribing of ultimate value to the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1.25). This need not be a material object - it could be wealth, power, happiness, and so on. On the specific question, whether worship focusing on images or icons involves idolatry, there is a range of opinion in Christianity, though the strong Orthodox and Catholic tradition has been that since in the Incarnation God himself appeared in human form, it is quite proper to reverence representations of the human form as vehicles of the divine grace. A range of views is also found in most other world faiths, though the theological centre of gravity may be located at different points along the spectrum - e.g. in Islam and Judaism an-iconic views have been prevalent; in Hinduism and Buddhism images have been central. In theological terms, the controversy over 'idolatry' can be seen as a working out of the tension between divine accessibility and divine freedom - or, to put the issues in negative terms, between a God who can be improperly manipulated and a God who is hopelessly remote.

The strong biblical polemic against idolatry is directed both against representing the God of Israel in material form, and against the iconic cults of the gods of the nations; but the latter are criticised largely in so far as they serve as a temptation to the former. There is also a strong current of social justice in the prophetic denunciation of idolatry. In the New Testament and early Church, it is possible to discern two ways of thinking.

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[2] D'Costa uses this phrase to indicate co-intentionality as a requirement of coherent interreligious prayer, referring to Phil 2.2 and its liturgical echo in the so-called 'Prayer of St Chrysostom' from the Book of Common Prayer.

One holds that, since for Christians there is only one God, the Father of Jesus Christ, other so-called gods can have no real existence (1 Cor 8.4). The only question in this case is the practical pastoral issue of how to conduct oneself in a polytheistic society in such a way as not to cause `weaker brethren' to stumble. However, there is also the equation of `false gods' with `demons', based on the perception that worship of anything, however truly unreal it may be, invests it with power and domination. If the starting point is thus that the objects of other cults' worship are different from the good God known to Christians, then these two views parallel the disputes about the nature of evil - mere `privation of the good', or an actual and substantial force? However, behind this lies the prior question of whether so-called idolatrous worship might not actually have the true God as the ultimate focus of its worship.

Integrity
This was a word much used in theological arguments in the 1990s - not only about multi-faith worship, but also the reception of women priests. It expressed the element of total commitment required by the Gospel, and can be seen as safeguarding three related points: the clear definition of boundaries of acceptable Christian behaviour; the avoidance of confusion, both within the Christian community and in relation to people of other faiths; the securing of a sense of straightforwardness, honesty or `purity' within a faithful response to God. As such, emphasis on `integrity' is designed to build confidence, though it can be abused to generate a sense of defensiveness.

The theological grounding of this is in the idea of a covenant, established between God and his people; this relationship has within it an element of totality, exclusiveness, `jealousy'. D'Costa proposes the marriage relationship as the best analogy for this, and therefore asks if multi-faith worship may not be equivalent to `marital infidelity'. However, he argues that it is not, precisely because of the nature of the God who is our covenanted partner, who requires us to take risks so that we do not substitute a false image of him for his surprising reality – multi-faith worship can be preventative against idolatry.

In terms of the three ideas clustered in the quest for integrity, this distinctive Christian understanding challenges each as follows. Boundaries may be clear, but Jesus in the Gospels repeatedly transgresses them, expression of the love of God which always seeks to transcend divisions. Confusion, or at least startling paradox and baffling diversity, is a sign of the activity of the Holy Spirit, the wind blowing where he wills' (Jn 3.8). Purity is not a condition which can be guaranteed by outward circumstances, as impurity comes `from within' (Mk 7.15); conversely, faithfulness can be found through seeking the will of God in every circumstance. In other words, `integrity' is transformed by Christian faith from any simple idea of separation from possible complications: `anything which is "exclusively" true of the incarnate Lord is true of one who is precisely the most "inclusive" reality' (Lambeth 1988).

Inclusiveness
`Inclusiveness' is a popular word in secular discourse, and will often describe the motivation that leads local authorities, voluntary societies and others to request 'multi-faith worship'. While being aware of the complexities involved in responding to such requests, Christians recognise the underlying impulse to `inclusion' as a gospel value - the sign of the banquet of the Kingdom is a powerful symbol of this (Lk 13.29).

In the Gospels, though, inclusion always flows from the reaching out of the God who is shown in Jesus, and in fact the Kingdom banquet also involves the exclusion of those who will not respond to this God. It is necessary to ask of any 'inclusiveness' about its fundamental spiritual basis: who is the god who enables this?

In the case of Hick's `Copernican revolution', it could be argued that a hypothetical and explanatory theological theory has become the basis of a system of inclusion; and those who will not accept the pluralist agenda are in danger of being excluded from the dialogical party. In contexts of multi-faith worship initiated by secular initiatives, the criteria of inclusion may vary: they may appear to be purely pragmatic, but further examination should generally uncover some unexamined organising principle or assumption - which not only includes some but also excludes others. For practical reasons, it is clear to have some principles of inclusion, but two questions need to be carefully considered.

First, are the principles involved such as truly to make possible the involvement of all those whose participation is important to fulfill the event's intentionality. A multi-faith context of worship depends on some spirituality of co-intentionality, which may have powerful cultural concomitants, particularly if these are unacknowledged. The dominant ideology of our own society appears to be bourgeois consumerism, and such a theology, flavoured by a degree of post-Christianity, can easily come to dominate multi-faith worship if careful examination of the underlying principles of inclusion is not made.

Second, theologically or spiritually, once these principles are identified: who or what is the god to whose worship they ultimately belong? To revert to the earlier question of whether we are worshipping 'the same god' in multi-faith worship: is a third god being introduced at this point, over and above the Christian God and the God 'or Gods of other faiths? Or is it rather possible to base an authentic Christian inclusiveness on the Trinitarian identity of God - and if so, what would that look like?

Discussion questions:
1. What are the theological principles which inform my attitude to multi-faith worship as an individual? What are the theological principles which inform my church's approach?
2. Within our churches together, what are the points of theological consensus over multi-faith worship? What are the areas of continuing theological disagreement?