



WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

by Rosemary Harley and Martin Goldsmith

Chapter 1: We Need To Understand

The beautiful, modern Anglican church was filled to capacity. Some six hundred eager Chinese believers had gathered for their church's missionary weekend. A few Anglo-Saxon faces stood out conspicuously in the Chinese crowds. What a contrast to the average English church in which I preach!

After the service I drove home through north London with two of my Chinese friends. We crawled through a rich variety of different areas. In one we noticed that all the people were black – this was evidently a West Indian section of the city. A few streets further on we found the colour of the faces getting paler. Many of the shop names were in Urdu. Pakistanis predominated here. Then the faces became darker again as we progressed to another part of the city. The Pakistanis gave way to the equally Muslim Bangladeshis. At Stamford Hill we passed through the middle of an ultra-orthodox Jewish community. The boys wore their hair in ringlets, the men sported black beards over their black coats. Of course some traditional English faces were also to be seen – it seemed that some of the streets firmly resisted newcomers.

Who Are 'The British'?

We know from our history books that Britain has always been a multiracial society. The early British tribes were driven into the far extremities of the land by the conquering Anglo-Saxons, so it might be said that the only true Britons are to be found in Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Cornwall! And most of those will now have some Anglo-Saxon blood in them! Before the Anglo-Saxons came, the Roman armies, together with their mercenaries from many nations. These, too, settled in England and some intermarried with the local population. From Scandinavia the fierce Norsemen visited the island each year to pillage and rape. As a result the eastern parts of England were devastated. But gradually more and more of these ferocious seafarers settled in England, farming the land and marrying into the local population.

In 1066 a new era began. The Norman invaders were already heavily involved in the life and politics of this island but the fatal arrow in King Harold's eye made significant changes inevitable. With the Norman conquest French became the language of government. Since then, in more recent centuries, all sorts of European immigrants have crossed the water. Germans, Dutch, Italians and others have merged with the already mixed blood of the British to make us what we are. But we have to notice two significant facts about all the different races which intermingled with each other to form the British people. Firstly, they were all white. Secondly, they all started with animistic tribal religions, but at some stage submitted – at least nominally – to the Christian faith. Today's immigrants are different.

Not Just White

A few years ago I was talking to a West Indian student in our college dining room. With a broad Birmingham accent she told me that she had been born in this country and had never even visited Jamaica where her forefathers originally came from. As we talked further, I realized that her family had come to Britain before mine! This came as quite a shock to me. Because I am white and English, people do not think of me as an immigrant, whereas she is always being taken for an immigrant because she has a deep black skin and curly West Indian hair. But she is, in fact, as much a native of this country as I am. Today you don't have to be white to be British, though many white people have difficulty accepting it.

Not Just Christians

Only a small number of the more recent newcomers to Britain are Christian. It is true that many West Indians, increasing numbers of Chinese and some Jews, Indians and Pakistanis are Christian, but most are not. In our resident British population we now have over a million Muslims (more than all the Methodists and Baptists put together), more than 300,000 non-Christian Jews, and about 300,000 Sikhs as well as many Hindus and Buddhists. The mosque, temple and synagogue form part of the mosaic of British life. Today you don't have to be even nominally Christian to be British.

Travel

People from all over the world have come to us here in Britain. We not only have a rich variety of people coming to settle here, but also a multitude of visitors who land on our shores each year, coming for further study, for business purposes and for sightseeing. This is of course equally true of many other countries, for fast means of travel have made the world very small. The races, cultures and religions of the world are being thrown together in an unprecedented way. It is also true that more and more British people travel abroad for long or short visits and so meet other peoples and religions on their home territory. Many of us will, at some stage, visit or work in other parts of the world: day trips to France; holidays all over the world; a year's gap between school and college that allows us to travel or work in Africa or Asia. Many firms have branches overseas or have won contracts in other countries which demand that their employees travel. Short-term mission groups like Youth With A Mission or Operation Mobilization offer young people the opportunity to work in another country for a year or two. Many of the established mission agencies also accept short-term workers, particularly if they have a professional skill to offer. The British tourist, however, knows how to make himself feel at home overseas: fish and chips with a can of beer! Frequently we make no attempt to understand or relate to local people. But visiting or working in other parts of the world can be most enriching. If we enter into another way of life and culture we can begin to see ourselves and our own background through different eyes. Other cultures have strengths which may be lacking in our own, as well as weak areas where we may be stronger. This means that we shall learn a lot - but we may also have something to contribute.

Tensions

When different races and cultures confront each other without a desire to understand one another, to love and to relate, then severe problems can arise. The local train journey into London starts with peaceful scenery. Ducks and moorhens swim peacefully together on the local lakes. Then the train moves into industrial zones. Graffiti on every wall assault our eyes. Like huge, poisonous spiders giant swastikas send shivers down every Jewish spine. West Indians and Asians will feel equally apprehensive for, next to the odious swastikas, large lettering shouts again and again, 'Wogs out'. Breakfast in the university refectory. Where should I sit when I have got my tray of food? There are several tables with nothing but white students; two tables have African students; one has Chinese. All the tables are racially divided! Sitting at them are people who later in the day will join a protest against South African racialism!

An invasion of culturally different foreigners can be very threatening to any local population. They see the traditional way of life changing before their eyes. The jobs which local people feel belong to them may go to the newcomers. They might intermarry with the local population and destroy the established patterns of family life. They might even convert some of the local people to their religion. It is no wonder that such threats to a population's identity sometimes explode in racial hatred and violence. In Britain today, racial discrimination in the search for jobs and housing is all too common. In inner city areas many blacks and Asians suffer verbal abuse, as well as physical attack in the streets or even in their homes. When I visited the Muslim country of Bangladesh, the streets of Dacca were empty of women except a few low-class workers on building sites. European tourists and world travellers stood out like city skyscrapers in a rural village. The girls were wearing shorts, publicly displaying vast areas of naked leg. I felt ashamed to be white, and shuddered at the blatant lack of cultural sensitivity which would not adjust to a foreign culture. It was offensive. No wonder many local people dislike Westerners.

But the Christian is called to love his neighbour. If we love someone we surely want to understand him. What is his background? What does he believe? What are his problems? What does he enjoy? How can we help him? Love prompts such questions. The Christian should also encourage others to love. Newcomers to Britain are often poor, needy, despised and oppressed. The Bible tells us that these people are loved by God. As his disciples, we are to be like him.

Finding An Identity

All of us need to know who we really are and to what groups of people we naturally belong. Immigrant peoples and their children face a significant problem in this respect. How far should they identify with their backgrounds? How far should they become like the people of the host nation and sink their identity in the ways of their new home country?

The Ghetto Mentality

A group of British Air Force wives once came to visit the mission centre for new missionaries, of which I was in charge, in Singapore. I showed them round and they were fascinated by the language laboratory we had put in to help missionaries gain fluency in various languages. But then the shock came. I told them how we taught these new missionaries to adjust to Asian cultures, pointing out that the very Westernized and modern city of Singapore forms an ideal bridge between life in the West and their new life in Asia.

'That's ridiculous!' exclaimed one lady. 'Why should we adjust to the way they do things out here? I'm not going to become like a foreigner! If they want to be friends with us, they can learn to do things our way.'

I tried to explain that we were actually living in *their* country and it was up to us to fit in with Asian patterns of behaviour. Otherwise we become a little foreign island, isolated by the streams of life all around us. But the ladies felt that this would threaten their very identity.

Many Jews, Pakistanis and others feel the same in Britain. They feel safe when they can speak their own language, eat their own foods, behave in their own traditional ways. The wider British world around them is very threatening. As far as possible, therefore, they shut themselves off and live huddled together in their own communities.

Such a ghetto community lives constantly under the shadow of cultural attack. It fears that its young people will be lost to the wider life of surrounding society. It sees that its moral values are being undermined. Young English people date whom they want and expect finally to marry the person they want – but the Bangladeshi or Pakistani parents' marriage was arranged by the wider family. And now the young peoples' parents expect to choose whom their children should marry. Asian parents expect immediate obedience from their children, but British society does not encourage it. Sex-ridden and violent films, bad language, alcoholic drink, loud and immodest behaviour – the trends of British life seem dangerous to the rather conservative newcomer. And we can imagine the family reactions if one of them is converted to the Christian faith. It is seen not just as a religious choice but as a wilful rejection of the old community and of the family. It threatens the identity of them all. No wonder Christian converts may be severely opposed.

The Chameleon Mentality

'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' Some immigrants feel it is best to become as much like those around them as possible. If in Britain, then become like the British – dress like them, eat British food, speak English, learn to enjoy British sports and music. Outwardly they become quite British. But inevitably there still remains deep within them something of their cultural background. What we learn as small children never entirely leaves us. And so the culture persists – family attitudes, sense of humour, ways of talking, moral values.

Of course, the culture of the second and third generation of such immigrants may well be totally British. They may not think of themselves at all as foreign, and may have little interest in their family's roots. At least forty per cent of people from ethnic minority groups have been born here. But if they are not accepted as being British they are landed with a real problem of cultural identity. They have not 'adopted' a British lifestyle and outlook on life; they have grown up totally British.

I was talking with the young daughter of a Jewish family. The parents had long since shrugged off their Jewish background and had become very English. The daughter was going on a school trip to Israel and would have Easter in Jerusalem. 'You'll be excited actually to be in Jerusalem,' I exclaimed; 'you must be looking forward to exploring your Jewish roots.' The girl was very surprised and didn't seem to understand what I was saying. She felt – and was – fully English; her parents' background meant nothing to her.

Families who have adapted in this way may be much more open to the Christian faith than those with the ghetto mentality. Like other young British people the children will probably incline towards irreligious materialism, but are not likely to be more opposed to Jesus Christ than other young people. If presented with a relevant and lively witness they may well be ready to listen and respond. And if their parents have also adopted British culture then they won't face heavy opposition at home.

Religion And Culture

'How can you still talk of sending missionaries to other countries? They do such damage, destroying native cultures.' Such criticisms can have a basis of truth, but are not the whole story. Not all missionaries bash their way into other cultures without understanding or sensitivity! And the Christian faith, as we shall see, discerns between that which is good in a culture, and that which is inherently evil.

Although it is not always easy in practice to distinguish between culture and religion, they are two different things. *Culture* is the way people behave, think and relate to each other. *Religion* is the relationship people have with God or with whatever spiritual beings they believe in. The difficulty is, of course, that religion actually affects many aspects of culture. And the reverse is equally true – our culture often determines how we express our religion.

Take music as an obvious example. Culture influences religion and so the church has to adapt to more modern musical tastes – old hymns are gradually replaced by modern songs. But religious and moral values also influence music. Not just the words, but also the nature of the music itself reflects the religious or irreligious worldview of the songwriters. And so comes the question: must a converted punk-lover change his musical tastes? And how far should Christians go in adopting modern music? Religion and culture interact.

The attitude of many white young people to their parents could be summed up as, 'I'm not a child any more; I can make my own decisions.' Although many Asian young people long for the freedom of their white friends they are more likely to say, 'I couldn't do that. My parents wouldn't like it.'

What does the Bible have to say about these attitudes? Must the Christian stand against one of these cultures and cause it to change? Some years ago I was invited to speak at a college of education in Asia. On arrival at the campus I was shown the way by a Chinese student who happened to be passing. He

looked a bit surprised when I told him that I was to speak at the Christian Union, so I asked him if he was a Christian. 'No,' he said rather strongly, 'I couldn't be a Christian. I am Chinese – and I believe children should obey their parents.' Somewhere along the line he had got hold of two wrong ideas. He thought Christianity was a Western religion. And then he thought the Western cultural emphasis on individualism

was Christian, even if it led to a lack of respect and obedience towards parents and other older people.

In both these assumptions the Chinese student was wrong – although one can understand why he got these ideas. The Christian faith has Jewish roots and is therefore Middle Eastern in its original character. Jesus and the apostles were all Jews. Christianity *has* been adapted to fit a European context, but it can equally well be applied in any other culture. And the Bible has much to teach us about our attitudes to parents and to older people.

Conversion to Jesus Christ does not mean that we all have to adapt to a European way of life and culture. Many churches are thinking about how to relate the Christian faith to other cultures and are asking such questions as: what good things in a culture can be continued and perfected? What bad things need to be attacked and how can they be replaced by something better? In what ways can our worship and the architecture of our churches be fitted to people of different backgrounds? If an African or Asian reads the Bible, does he see things differently from a European? Does the Christian faith need to be expressed in a different way when we relate to people of other cultural or religious backgrounds?

The Christian And Other Religions

Demonic Deception

'I hate Islam; it's demonic', a former missionary in a Muslim country said to me recently. As he spoke I pictured in my mind some Christian books which have been published with striking pictures of an aggressive Khomeini or of massive demonstrations by shouting Muslim mobs. I get the impression that some Christians are so frightened of Islam that they can only kick out at it in self-defence.

But is it true that non-Christian religions are satanic lies, the Devil's instruments to deceive people and lead them to damnation? Satan, the father of lies, has played his part in inspiring the development of all religious systems which deny the good news of Jesus Christ and prevent people from following him. But we have also to say that some truth and goodness can be found in every faith.

Other Religions And Truth

Last weekend I was speaking in a church and afterwards talked with a young man who had studied Islam at university. He was a keen Christian, but was fascinated by the beauty of the Qur'an, by the apparent simple piety of Muslim worship and by Islamic culture and art. 'There is so much that is true and beautiful in Islam,' he told me. 'Somehow it seems a shame to encourage people to leave all that and become Christians.'

So are there elements of truth in other religions? Religion is like human nature, a great mixture of good and bad, of truth and error. That is not surprising if we reckon that religion reflects fallen man's search for God. The underlying question is to what extent fallen man can know God. To the extent that he can, his religion will contain elements of truth about the character of God and about what he requires of us. What then is man like? Some people have a very negative view of human nature, reckoning it to be completely depraved and sinful, incapable of recognising or living by the truth. Others react against such pessimism and affirm that man is fundamentally good, but perhaps sometimes a little weak. The Bible, however, sees that we are created in God's image and likeness, but that this image is corrupted at every point. So while there is something of God's nature in us, it is sin that reigns in us. In practice that means that while we may partially recognise truth, we cannot actually live in line with it. Paul makes this point in Romans 2:12–16 and again in Romans 3:10–12, when he writes that although God will only judge people on the basis of the 'light' that has been given them, no one manages to live up to the standards that 'light' reveals to them.

So when people are converted from another religion and become followers of Jesus Christ, they bring with them some truths which can carry into their new Christian life. They will also have lovely aspects of their traditional culture which their new faith will not want to negate. But some of their values and beliefs will need to be purified from demonic influences; others will need to be corrected by biblical teaching. For example, the eastern religious emphasis on meditation and deep spirituality has great value in the Christian life, but the practice of self-emptying will need to be replaced by a positive love

for Jesus Christ. The mixture of positive and negative within a culture may also be seen in the close-knit extended families of India. These give great support and security, but may rob the individual of personal freedom.

We have all seen reports on TV which tell us that, after months of fear, the police have caught the brutal rapist or murderer. Then his wife is interviewed on the programme and says, 'It can't be him. He's just not that sort of person. He loves me and our small children – and you should see him with our pet cat.' But the evidence is overwhelming. Bestial crime and loving gentleness fit together into the jigsaw of the man's character.

And it is equally true of the people we admire and look up to; they too have clay feet. All of us are an amazing combination of beauty and ugliness. Even our highest and best activities are shot through with sin. For example, our loveliest times of prayer and worship contain mixed motives of pride and selfishness – we worship partly because it makes us feel good, for our own benefit rather than for God's pleasure.

'God is great! God is great! God is great!' shouts a militant crowd of fanatical Muslims. The Christian shudders. It's a little like the crusades of earlier Christian times, though that's all past history. But what about some of our current Christian songs which militantly declare that we are 'marching through the land' with the power of God? And isn't it true that God is great? Surely the Bible clearly agrees with these Muslims about God's greatness. Yes, but! What the Muslim believes about God's greatness is not entirely what the New Testament reveals concerning the glorious might and power of God.

Likewise the Muslim creed strongly affirms, 'There is no god but God', but in Islam the doctrine of the oneness of God means an utter rejection of Jesus as the Son of God. The Trinity, which is basic to everything in the Christian faith, is abhorrent to the Muslim – God is one, not three in one. So the Christian's 'Amen' to the Muslim creed can be only partial. Like all religions Islam is a mixture of truth and error.

Involvement With People Of Other Faiths

We will sometimes find ourselves sharing values with those of other faiths, particularly with Jews and Muslims. It can be difficult to know how far to identify with them in social action, whether local or national, and in campaigns over certain moral issues. Often our concerns will be the same as theirs and we can happily participate in action to combat, say, racial attacks.

We cannot, however, go so far as to participate in the worship of other religions. The Bible is clear that God alone is to be worshipped and that our worship of him is acceptable only when offered through Christ.

Christian Witness

Dialogue

Everyone uses the word dialogue these days, but sometimes we do not really think what it means. It has a double meaning.

Firstly, dialogue is distinguished from monologue. The Christian should not preach at others without listening to them. There are good and true things in non-Christian people and faiths, and we need to hear these as they may provide bridges for the gospel. We also need to be aware of the other person's thoughts and feelings, or our witness will be irrelevant. It is also a basic mark of respect for others to listen to, and discuss with them rather than just preach at them. Secondly, dialogue is sometimes wrongly used to imply that all we do is listen to the others and learn from them, but do not aim to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ. If we look at the New Testament the word dialogue is closely linked to a witness that proclaims the message of Jesus Christ and desires that people be converted. So in Acts 17:2 Paul 'dialogued' (RSV translates it as 'argued') with the people in the synagogue and 17:3

shows that he tried to prove the necessity of the cross and resurrection. He proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, with the result that some were persuaded and turned to Jesus. There was also fierce opposition and uproar (17:5) – how different from some so-called dialogue sessions today!

In true dialogue we will discuss and listen, but our aim will always be to argue the case for the good news of Jesus Christ. We will believe that the best possible thing that could happen to those we talk with is that they should be converted and find salvation and new life in Christ.

Life And Word

In the Old Testament, Israel was called to witness to the surrounding Gentile nations by her life as the people of God. Not only the individual Jew, but also the whole community together would show God's reality, glory and holiness by their worship, obedience to God's law and their relationships together. The idea was that Israel's life would then attract the people of other nations to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus sent his disciples out to preach (Mark 3:13). Although the church would still attract people in by its life of holiness, love and worship, now it was also to go out to the world to proclaim verbally the good news of Jesus Christ.

We witness by life and by word. We attract people in and we move out into all the world. Our witness to people of all backgrounds and religious faiths has this double character.

Discussion Starters

1. 'Britain for the British!' How do you feel about this statement, and why?
2. How do ethnic minorities react to being different from the majority around them? How can we best help them?
3. What problems do the children and grandchildren of immigrant families face as they grow up in their own country of Britain?
4. What should our attitude be to other religions and their followers?
5. How do we recognise what is true in other religions and what is false?
6. 'Life and word' – how do these two relate to each other in our witness?
7. How would you have replied to the student of Islam who said, 'Somehow it seems a shame to encourage people to leave all that and become Christians'?