

# LAUSANNE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE

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## Meeting the Pluralist: Reflections for missions and evangelism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by Dr Suraja Raman

*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else. (C.S. Lewis).*

*My heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. Romans 10:1.*

We read of Paul's desire and his burning passion to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

In this age of globalization, and living in a pluralistic society, there is an urgent need to prove the existence of God to those from different religious belief systems in the world. I believe this is possible by communicating the Gospel to people of other religious beliefs.

**A definition** of these terms used in society will be an asset, to believers and to the reader. Thus, the urgency of encouraging the believer to initiate a dialogue with those of other faiths.

In a **pluralistic society**, there will be a variety of cultures, religions, and life-styles. **Pluralism** believes in God, but they allow other forms of belief as well. **In Religious Pluralism**, the view of adherents is that there is no absolute truth, and rejects the Christian claim to possess absolute truth (Netland 2001: 247).

The **Pluralist** holds the position that God is vague, therefore God cannot be known. The pluralist also holds the belief that all people are engaged in a common quest for more truth. Another position held by the pluralist is that human experience is important, leading to final truth (Gnanakan 2000:53-67, Newbiggin 1989:10-14, Adeyemo 2006: 1532).

Christians believe that the **Gospel** is the ultimate truth, and that all people everywhere who hear the Gospel have the freedom to accept the gift of faith found in Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. God has revealed truth to us in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. This truth is the only way for the salvation of all people. The truth is revealed when the Word of God from Scriptures is heard (Coleman 2011:154-69). Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

The Mission of God is best defined by the **Lausanne covenant**, that *World evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world* (<http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>).

We discover in **Scripture the basis for communicating the Gospel** in a pluralistic context from both the Old and New Testaments.

In the **Old Testament context** God used His people to communicate the message of a living God in different places, on several occasions, and He gave them wisdom and skills during times of difficulties and moments of crisis. These men and women were Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Esther, Deborah, Ruth and Rahab (Wong 2006: 85,109).

Abraham, the father of a multitude. A native of Ur, receives God's call, prompted by faith, and entered a foreign land, Canaan. During a famine, Abraham goes to Egypt, another foreign land and is faced with challenges. Together with his family he returns to Canaan enriched.

Moses, spent early life of forty years in Egypt as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Then a second forty years in exile in another part of the country, in Midian. For the remaining forty years, he accepted God's call to serve as leader of Israel, went up to Sinai, and finally to Kadesh-barnea, followed by wanderings, to bring the people to the promised land.

Joseph grew up in Israel, but his brothers sold him into Egypt. Soon he gained fame in Egypt through the interpretation of dreams, and became Pharaoh's Prime Minister. A remarkable and forgiving leader.

Esther, chosen queen, a Jewess, lives in the palace of Persia. She was, told of the enemy's plot, and secured a change of edict. The lives of Jews were saved, because of Esther and her people who fasted for victory.

Deborah, was a prophetess and a judge in the days when there was no king or ruler. Together with Barak, a soldier, they defeated the enemy from Canaan.

Ruth grew up in Moab and interacted with a Jewish family. She was a loving daughter-in-law to her Jewish in-laws. Due to famine in the land, she chose to follow her mother-in-law to her home in Israel. Later she remarried a distant relative, Boaz, and is in the heritage line of Jesus Christ.

Rahab was from a pagan background. Having faith in the God of heaven and earth, she chose to follow the living God. Together with her family members, their lives were spared during the destruction of the city, Jericho. These were God's messengers living in a pluralistic society, wrestling with ungodly issues and yet remaining faithful to the living God.

In the **New Testament Context** God used His servants to preach the message of Jesus Christ through the teaching of God's Word, and their lifestyle impacted the pre-believing people living in a society that was diverse in race, language, culture and religion. As exemplary leaders, they manifested the power of the Holy Spirit in inspiring ways, and at other times by living the life (Wong 2006: 151-71).

When we live a vibrant life we are likely to be in accordance to the will of the Father (1 John 5:14). The examples of such men and women of God were clearly demonstrated in the lives of Peter, Paul, Philip, Lydia, the international community, and the church at Corinth.

Peter, a fisherman. When Peter received the call to follow Jesus, he left his fishing occupation. From the time of Pentecost onwards he was active in preaching to the Gentiles. Living in a pluralistic society, he encountered some challenges. The ministry of healing to a Greek woman, Tabitha or Dorcas, (Acts 9:36-43); and later through a message from the Lord went to the home of Cornelius, an Italian. Here he preached the Word of God powerfully resulting in mass conversion (Acts 10).

Paul, an extraordinary servant of the Lord with experiences from the time of conversion, leading to opportunities in preaching, teaching, and healing ministries. He went on several missionary journeys. Together with Barnabas, they made an impact resulting in both Jews and Greeks becoming believers in Iconium (Acts).

In Acts 17, we have a picture of an international community. While addressing the crowd at Athens, we see Paul's courage indeed because here was a city of unknown gods! Then in Acts 18, we see a couple, Priscilla and Aquila, co-workers with Paul, instrumental in church planting and ministering to Apollos.

The Church at Corinth, a city of Greece, where Paul labored, and which was visited by Apollos. The church experienced the presence of diverse groups of people. Here the residents were Asians, Jews and Greeks.

An extraordinary event takes place in a desert between the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip, the evangelist (Acts 8: 26-40), resulting in the conversion of the eunuch.

In Acts 16, we read of the conversion of Lydia, a businesswoman, who became a believer during a prayer meeting. This was the result of Paul's preaching at the river side. As a businesswoman, she was influential in her setting, and inspired her family members to become followers of Christ.

These men and women of God wrestled with difficulties having to live and travel in a pluralistic context, yet they obeyed God's commandments to share the Word, exemplifying Jesus Christ as the Lord of their lives and giving God the glory.

## **Meeting the Pluralist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we will meet pluralists from different walks of life. At times, we hear them expressing their beliefs during a discussion on religion. They are of different age categories, working as successful professionals in their respective careers. In their work setting they will be bold to express their convictions, and at public meetings. During an informal session, a pluralist, both male and female, will be active participants to express their beliefs.

What are the differences between a pluralist and a Christian? Knowing the differences will help us to understand a pluralist in his/her context. Knowing also regarding their beliefs and practices, will prepare the Christian to be effective witnesses to the pluralists (Netland 2001: 308-348).

## Differences between a Christian and a Pluralist

<b>CHRISTIAN</b>	<b>PLURALIST</b>
<p>1. <b>Doctrine of God:</b> Christians believe God is the Creator of the world. Genesis 1:1, ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ God is a Spirit (John 4:24). God is invincible and Christians worship God Almighty.</p>	<p>In contrast, the Pluralist worship the objects created by God, thus becoming an idolater of nature and gods.</p>
<p>2. <b>Doctrine of Jesus Christ:</b> Christians believe God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to die on the cross for their sins (John.1:1, 12). Christ rose from the dead and will come again to receive all those who believe on His Name. John 14:6 Christ said: ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.’</p>	<p>In contrast, the Pluralist look upon Christ’s death as sacrificial and insignificant. God’s Son is viewed as incidental and Christ’s miraculous resurrection is viewed as unbelievable.</p>
<p>3. <b>Doctrine of Sin:</b> Christians believe that all humans were born with sin (Romans 3:23). God’s Son took their sins upon Himself when He died on the cross (Romans 5:8). Believers are cleansed from their sins by believing on His Name.</p>	<p>In contrast, the Pluralist see the doctrine of sin as inconsistent. By praying one is cleansed from all filth and giving an offering to the gods relieves the person from guilt. Good works is a merit for the future and for eternity.</p>
<p>4. <b>Doctrine of Resurrection:</b> Christians believe that Christ rose from the dead. This is the main teaching in the Christian faith. Our faith is not in vain because there is victory in the cross.</p>	<p>In contrast, the Pluralist do not accept the resurrection of Christ. They will discredit the doctrine as a theory and view it as an act of hallucination by Christ’s followers.</p>

### Reflections on our meeting with the Pluralist:

Explore the use of a thought provoking question to initiate a discussion:  
Here is a question for an initial discussion,  
“Please could we discuss on the existence of God?”

From the discussion, list 2 or more points to support your argument.  
Follow through with one’s testimony of conversion to the Christian faith.

### Reflection on a friend who is a Pluralist

Reflect on a friend whom you know is a pluralist, plan to write an email to that individual and share your testimony.

## **A practical response towards the Pluralist**

There is a need to study the Word of God with the pluralists by inviting them to a home Bible study fellowship. Through the ministry of hospitality, the pluralist will be able to observe and be inspired by the compassion of Christians for them.

## **Inter-Faith Dialogues**

John Stott reinforces the view that the humble way of communication is the way of dialogue, (Stott 2008:90).

In the time available with the pluralist we seek the truth together, leading to openness. By engaging the mind of a Hindu, a Muslim, or a Buddhist, the believer is speaking to each of them with relevance. Thus, we are able to learn of their beliefs and the various critical responses to the Christian faith. In such times I will share my conversion experience and weave in the gospel.

All across the world there is a rise in religious tension. In my country Singapore, there is a cry from religious leaders calling for more inter-faith dialogues. The recent terror attacks and sectarian strife have motivated the religious leaders to promote understanding. Apparently, some segments of society are becoming more distant from others.

One religious leader suggested that in an inter-faith dialogue all participants should avoid comparing religions. This will result in a natural death of an attempt to have a peaceful dialogue (Sim, Abdullah & Zaccheus 2016: A10).

An important point that must be reinforced is that one must never attack or criticize another religion publicly in inter-religious discussion although one should gently ask probing questions for 'clarification.'

## **Dialogue with Hindus**

Dialogue with Hindus: A mayor of the city enquired, "How could I find Christ?"

From the conversation Jones introduced the Round Table conference. In the dialogue Hindus and Christians were to communicate on their respective faith through testimonies and experiences. The atmosphere was one of reverence and respect. At the close of every extraordinary session, Christ was the Master of the situation (Jones 1928: 19-20,56).

*An anonymous convert reported: I was searching for the true God. The answers provided by families and friends did not satisfied my heart. I decided to attend a forum organized by students on the campus. The topic was very interesting and some of the issues were slanted towards questions such as: Is there a God? Did Christ rose from the dead? Why did the announcer on radio (during Gandhi's death) make this statement: "Come back to us like Jesus Christ did?" I was intrigued and hungry to learn more. This was the process as I discovered my faith in Christ, the Son of God.*

I have found sitting round the table with Hindus a practical and spontaneous approach using dialogue as the gentle answer. A school teacher gave me the Bible as a gift for my Birthday. I was curious and read the New Testament diligently. At an evangelistic meeting, I heard the Gospel and prayed to receive Christ.

Hindus become curious when they learn that I am a Christian, and not a Hindu as my name suggest. Therefore, I will have an opening to share with them my conversion to the Christian faith (Raman 2011: 10).

### **Dialogue with Muslims**

Dialogue with Muslims (The Majority World):

A thinking head as well as a compassionate heart is needed for outreach to those in the majority world. A life of prayer, self-denial, and at times risk factors are essential for evangelizing them. A demonstration of our love for Christ to those of the majority world will be a powerful factor to bring them into a personal relationship with Christ (Solomon 2007: 60-78). Some knowledge of the fundamentals of Islam including the usual Muslim objections to the Christian faith such as the Trinity, alleged corruption of verses in the Bible, and brief history of origin of Islam would be useful in a dialogue with those from the Majority World.

A convert testified: *I had regular meetings with church leaders. And I was determined to seek the truth by reading the Bible and to continue with the discussions. After four years I came to the conclusion that Jesus is the Savior of the world.*

A convert who was seeking for God wrote: *I continue my search for God by enrolling in a Bible correspondence course. But there were many unanswered questions. I needed someone to talk to and to encourage me in my search for the true faith. Finally, I found a missionary couple who taught many precious lessons from the Bible. Soon, I committed my life to Christ* (Tucker 1989: 124).

The believer needs to be discerning during the dialogue on worldviews with those from the majority world. The Bible is the guide in presenting worldviews on Christian doctrines. By staying balanced on Scriptural teachings, one is able to guard against extremism.

### **Dialogue with Buddhists**

Dialogue with Buddhists: Believers need to consider the cultural uniqueness of the person with whom they are having a dialogue, the depth of the individual's devotion to the Buddhist religion and their comprehension of spiritual concepts. Personal stories of sin, forgiveness, and of God's love are effective in conveying the good news to those seeking Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Yamamoto 1998: 82).

A convert reported: *While reading the Bible and attending the Alpha course, I was motivated to discuss on the love of God with the believers. They explained clearly from the Scriptures on the doctrines of sin, forgiveness, and God's love. After a few years, I gave my life to Christ and remain faithful as a disciple.*

Another convert testified: *I attended the weekly Bible Study sessions in my neighbourhood. The teachings on salvation and eternity were powerful factors for me to consider a decision on the true and living God, and this was Jesus Christ. Christ alone claimed that He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*

As Christian leaders we must continue to dialogue and exhibit patience. We need prayer partners and intercessors to intercede during the dialogues. Our message to those during the inter-faith dialogues is to consider Jesus (Neil 1961: 65-66,69).

## **CONCLUSION**

God has a significant task for the church in this global picture. There is an urgent call for leaders, missionaries, and the laity, to continue the Great Commission. We need to pass the baton to the next generation through the training of leaders on the Biblical mandate. How will we train our leaders towards godliness, with a sense of God's divine plan for their lives?

Most of the cities are like Corinth today. We learned in Acts 17 that Paul proclaimed Christ! How can we be single-minded in a pluralistic society?

Let's encourage and remind each other through networking and prayer that the heart of the gospel (Coleman 2011: 12) is essential for missions and evangelism in a pluralistic society. I believe this is the greatest challenge for the 21st century.

## **Questions for Discussion:**

1. What are some creative ways to present the gospel to friends of different faiths, and to a group of religious leaders?
2. What is the position of the Christian community with the pluralist on the task of evangelizing through home visitation and Bible Study discussion?
3. Singapore experiences stability because religions are treated equally, said an expert on inter-religious understanding during a symposium in January 2016. What is the role of missions in a pluralistic society such as Asia?
4. How do we enter inter-faith dialogues to help the different religious communities understand the Christian faith without some sense of discomfort or lack of confidence?
5. A religious leader commented that Different religions preach the same positive values such as peace, love, unity, and tolerance. How do we communicate the message that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

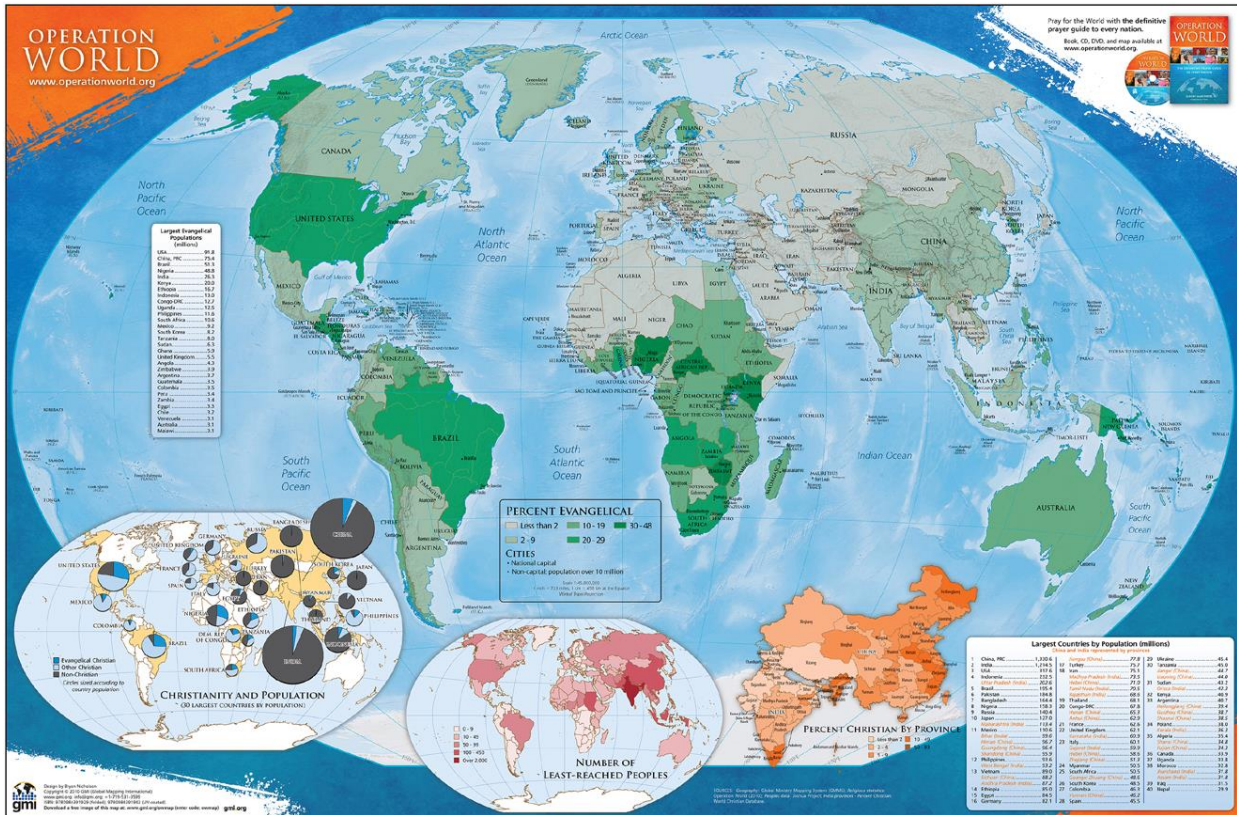
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# I. APPENDIX:



Map: The Spread of Religion in the World & the Urgency of Missions in a Pluralistic Society.