

# Discernment, Provocation & Retrieval

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1. 'Are there limits to diversity?' 'Can different faiths accommodate each other?'  
These are the questions I was given, but the primary issue is not primarily that of limiting diversity, but of responding to diversity; and 'accommodation' perhaps implies some sense of adjustment, even compromise – this may be practically necessary to some extent, but the key question is that of hospitality: making a welcoming space for others out of the core integrity of our faith.
2. This can be compared to the fundamental issue of 'receptive ecumenism' – how do we learn from one another, or more generally: how is our encounter with the other experienced as blessing not as threat? How transferable is such a 'receptive' approach in ecumenism to inter faith relations? The experience of the Church of England's 'Presence and Engagement' project has been that encounter with the other can lead a Christian community into new life. How does this happen? The P&E process identifies three dimensions: honouring presence; connecting energy; displaying hospitality. In the Anglican Communion theological document *Generous Love* these are linked to the three Trinitarian personae. It is crucially important that our reception of the other is from the heart of our faith, and there is no more central configuration of Christian faith than the symbol of the Triune God.
3. I want to complement this by a different three-stage approach – not of different dimensions in church's life and mission, but of different stages which apply to each of these dimensions – phases of responding to diversity within the dialectic of commonality and distinctiveness, of shared affirmation and discriminating witness.
4. This may sound rather abstract – let me give three concrete examples, to illustrate each of these three stages in turn: I shall call them discernment;

provocation; retrieval.

5. In a Jain temple in Leicester – amid beautifully carved pillars, flickering lights, rhythmic movements, haunting melodies – most of all, devotion of Jains singing the praises of the *tirthankaras* ('ford makers', enlightened souls, full of life, immortality, knowledge) – I sensed a real, deep spirit of worship – and asked: on whom was that focused? More existentially: What was I to do? How far could I follow my instinct to worship? Would this be towards God? This was a challenge of discernment.
6. Visiting a mosque, falling into conversation with holy man leading an Islamic mission – our discussion turned towards Jesus – he questioned the account of the Lord's death, and showed genuine sorrow over my belief in crucifixion – 'How could God abandon his prophet?', he asked, and wept tears of sorrow over me. I thought in a new way: 'God gave up his only son'; I came to appreciate both the nobility of the Islamic vision of loyalty, and the humbling paradox of the Christian *skandalon*. I felt this as provocation to discipleship.
7. A church group visits a *gurudwara* – they are fed in the *langar* – this is a meal for all – the Sikhs explain the meaning of *guru-dwara*; 'God's house' and all who come to God's house will be fed – this generates in the Christians a remembrance of the core value of hospitality in their own tradition – they retrieve this from their own faith.
8. **Discernment** – how do I as Christian, we as Christian community, position ourselves with regard to worship of another faith? Undergoing theological question – to whom or what is that worship addressed? I use the word 'discernment' because no automatically producible answers to that – two *loci classici* from New Testament handle this in different ways.
9. 1 Cor 8 – food offered to idols – an everyday question for Christians buying meat from market – lurking in background is ontological status of 'many gods and many lords' – Paul's strong monotheism evident, 'there is no God but one', implying unreality of idols, yet he flirts with idea of real existence – in the end, he is inconclusive with regard to ontology; his practical solution is for love and dialogue to be maintained within the Christian community.

10. Acts 17 – Paul in Athens – ‘altar to the unknown (or ‘an unknown’) god – huge literature on this – Paul uses verb *eusebeo*, elsewhere in LXX and NT only applied to true God – goes on to declare identity of the God whom Athenians unknowingly worship – implication is, this is indeed the true God even though his name is not known – later in speech, more remarkably still, he quotes from poets, equivalent of prophets in ancient Greek religious culture.
11. So discernment is necessary – in many cases, the answer to the question, ‘Are these worshippers worshipping the same god as us?’ is rather irritatingly: ‘It depends what you mean’. There is a distinctiveness to the God of Christian faith as Trinity – neither in unitarian monotheism of Judaism and Islam, nor in apparent polytheism of Hinduism, still less in transtheism of Buddhism and Jainism – yet evident there is a focus of worship addressed with great seriousness there. Discernment begins with respect for that seriousness – there are three points to be in mind in building on this.
12. Firstly, as evident in Paul’s tortured reasoning in 1 Cor 8, monotheistic logic is a key constraint on Christianity – there is only one God, so we cannot simply speak of ‘many gods’- to someone who asks, ‘Do these people worship the same god as us?’ it is fair to respond, ‘Well, how many gods do you think there are?’. The only way out is to say, ‘This is another god, in the sense of a spiritual being with real power, but not divine’, in other words an evil spirit – a position adopted by some conservative evangelicals, e.g. in booklets entitled ‘*Is God Allah?*’ [expecting the answer ‘No!], ‘*Who is this Allah?*’ – we come back to the question of discernment, of testing the spirits.
13. For most Christians, answer is likely to be not ‘No’ but ‘Yes, but’ – because of second point: we have been here before, in formative story of our identity – God of Israel worshipped by early Christians, his being understood, in gradual process, according to Trinitarian symbol – yet it remains true that (for all Christians I know) the God worshipped by Jewish people is the true God, however much we may feel unitarianism is an inadequate conception of his reality (in fact, Trinitarianism is now often presented not as an alternative to, but an intensification of, Jewish monotheism). The same applies to Islam: note that *Nostra Aetate*’s grammar implies clearly the identity of Allah with the God worshipped by Christians. Kenneth Cragg: ‘Those who say that Allah is not “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” are right if they mean that

God is not so described by Muslims. They are wrong if they mean that Allah is other than the God of the Christian Faith.’

14. Perhaps key question, thirdly, is not ‘Is this the same God?’, but ‘Is this a different god?’ – we are not looking for replication of belief but for absence of contradiction – if ecumenical paradigms look for consonance rather than identity, here we look for resonance rather than consonance, for absence of dissonance at least – discernment sufficient for us to ground our respect for each others seriousness in a recognition that we are facing God together – or, rather, he is facing both of us.
15. Second phase is ‘**provocation**’ – as in my encounter with the Muslim preacher – probably I provoked him, certainly he provoked me – to renewed appreciation of and emphasis on distinctiveness of our own respective faiths – I came to understand more about the *skandalon* of the cross, the mystery of power in weakness – also, and at the same time, I appreciated the integrity of the Islamic vision of strength through loyalty and commitment. These issues are powerfully narrated in Kamil Hussein’s novel about Good Friday, *City of Wrong* (tr. Kenneth Cragg).
16. Note Paul’s speech on Areopagus moves from ‘discernment’ to ‘provocation’ – distinctive *kerygma* of resurrection of Jesus. For some Athenians, this leaves them cold, so they think Paul is ‘preacher of foreign divinities’ (*Jesus* and *anastasis*) – others ‘want to hear him again’ – his preaching engenders a continuing dialogue within the marketplace of ideas.
17. Why do I use the word ‘provocation’? In contemporary English, ‘provoke’ has a generally negative, somewhat insulting, connotation, ‘invite to anger’ – but still retains traces of older, broader meaning: ‘to call forth, summon, invite’ – in *The Tempest*, when Miranda asks her father, as he tells her the tale of her early years, ‘Wherefore did they not that destroy us?’, he replies: ‘Well demanded, wench: my tale *provokes* that question’ – a sense of stimulation into an appropriate response, laced with some measure of being shocked, triggered into an action which might not otherwise have happened.
18. ‘Provoked’ is taken from the witness of Louis Massignon, distinguished French Islamicist, Catholic and mystic – he described himself as ‘provoked to

holiness' by example of Islam – Massignon's view of Islam, built on discernment of authenticity of God worshipped by Muslims. Bearing in mind the claim of Islam to derive from Abraham through Ishmael, he saw it as 'the monotheism of those who have been excluded from the privileges awarded to Isaac and so to Israel and the Christian Church, and it calls these two to account for the use made of their privileges'. Note three points in this.

19. Firstly, there is an intense acknowledgement of integrity of Islam, and its spiritual power – nor is this in hostile sense: uniquely, Massignon felt he had been brought back to Catholic faith through the intercession of Muslim saints. He recognised the grandeur of God in Islam, mediated by Abraham – he had a significant influence on the teaching on Islam in *Nostra Aetate*, now part of the ecumenical heritage of all Christians.
20. Secondly, despite this, or even because of it, he was equally clear about the distinctiveness of Islam and Christianity, even of their opposition – symbolled in two brothers Isaac and Ishmael (imagery which appears also in Galatians to signify opposition of Christianity and Judaism – Massignon more accurately links Judaism with Christianity through common affiliation to Isaac). Massignon was not particularly interested in identifying 'common ground', though he was profoundly interested in unexpected points of contact; the heart of his energy was in the way Islam challenged, 'provoked', Christianity.
21. Therefore, thirdly, he saw Islam primarily as something to which Christianity was accountable, and which therefore served the spiritual health of the Church – describing aim of the *Badaliya*, a sodality of Christians with especial concern and prayer for Muslims, Massignon wrote: 'Islam exists and continues to subsist because it is of Abrahamic faith, to force the Christians to rediscover a more bare, more primitive, more simple form of sanctification, which Muslims admittedly only attain very rarely, but through our fault because we have not yet shown it to them in us, and this is what they expect from us, from Christ.'
22. Massignon was a seminal figure, but belonged to particular time and culture – yet his view of other faiths as 'provoking Christians' to holiness has been influential beyond his particular idiom. This became apparent to me at a more mundane level from the 'Presence and Engagement' project. At a sociological

level, Philip Jenkins (*God's Continent*) has written 'However counterintuitive this may seem, the advent of Islam might be good news for European Christianity'. But sociology is not enough: we have to ask, whether Islam in particular, other faiths in general, might not be theologically significant, i.e. ordained by God, factors in provoking the Church to greater holiness – this then in turn raises the intriguing question, might not Christianity conversely be provocation of Muslims and others to holiness?

23. 'Provocation' operates through dynamic of difference ; the third phase of reception, '**retrieval**', relies on evoking shared patterns within faiths – in the case of my *gurdwara* example, the imperative of hospitality, so integral to Christian discipleship, is retrieved through encounter with Sikh disciples – to put it in more striking terms, the Christians were 'evangelised' through encounter with Sikhs – not evangelised with a Sikh gospel, but with the gospel of Jesus Christ, who practises among us the hospitality of God.
24. This is a profoundly biblical dynamic – it offers one way of reading that strange book, the prophecy of Jonah – it is pagans (sailors who pray not to be guilty of innocent blood when they have to throw him overboard, the king and people of Nineveh who repent at his preaching) who recall the book's Israelite readers to right practice of faith, rather than the wayward and recalcitrant prophet. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, a person of another faith similarly retrieves for the lawyer the meaning of the word 'neighbour'. The Roman centurion is held up by Jesus as reminder of what true disposition of obedient faith means, and so on.
25. It is of course possible to read these parables in simply exemplary terms, but we miss the point if we do not recognise the 'other faith' dimension. Nor are they only ethical in their import – although an element of judgement is present, it does not seem to me to be the principle motif. Rather, the point is that it is the 'other' who retrieves for God's people the heart of their discipleship, by themselves practising the workings of a right relationship with God. The relationship here is not one of provocation through difference, but of retrieval through practical identity.
26. If this is right, that means the religious 'other' must have a theological significance, must be given by God not only as a stimulus to the Church, but

also as in some way themselves an instrument of God's redeeming purpose together with the Church – not in the same way as the Church, nor with the same assurance, but with no less reality of divine activity in that context.

27. We need to find theological resources to interpret this dynamic of retrieval though the presentation of divine activity in the other, as well as missiological resources to enable us to respond to it. *Generous Love* is one attempt at the missiology. Any attempts at the theological interpretation will have to go beyond the now rather tired typology of 'inclusivism/exclusivism/pluralism', which is premised on answers to a different question ('can people other than Christians be saved?'), and which does not anchor firmly into the core depths of Christian faith. However, traditional and recent theology in the ecumenical world does offer two resources, one Christological, one Pneumatological.
28. Christologically, there is the theme of *semina Verbi* (this relies originally on a Stoic conception) – elements of saving truth scattered abroad in other religions to serve as *praeparatio evangelica*, sown by the Logos in human hearts to witness to the fullness of truth revealed in Jesus Christ. A similar function is performed by the motif of *radius veritatis*, which appears within the text of *Nostra Aetate*. This theme would need developing to see the *semina* or *radius* as having not only a preparatory role, but a place in retrieval as an actual presentation of the praxis of authentic discipleship, with its own integrity.
29. The Christological motif can be complemented by the Pneumatological recognition of other religions as sites of the Spirits' operation – this is a recent development in Roman Catholic theology, e.g. John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio*: 'The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, people, cultures and religions'. N.B. This is based on *Gaudium et Spes*, but the Pope adds 'cultures and religions'. The activity of the Spirit has freedom, unpredictability, an uncovenanted nature – like the wind, it blows where it will – to complement the named, covenanted, sacramental locus of activity guaranteed by Christology.
30. Perhaps retrieval works though the Spirit generating sites of divine activity, and relating them to activity of God in Christ and Church. This is the same Spirit which leads us to discernment of God in other faiths, the same which

provokes us to holiness through encounter with them. We cannot have receptive theology of inter faith religions without a theology of the Spirit.