Recognising Barriers

Christian Mission is rooted in relationships, something we find demonstrated clearly in the life and ministry of Jesus. His own identity was grounded in his relationship with God, his Father in heaven, and he longed to bring the people he met into that relationship. While sin has separated us from God, it has also separated us from one another, and has set up barriers between individuals, peoples and nations. At the heart of the Gospel is the message that through his death on the cross, Jesus Christ has broken down the barriers that humans have erected and created a new humanity in which people of all tribes and languages can be at home together.

This applies in all our mission, but it is particularly evident with regard to our relationships with people who follow non-Christian religions. If 21st century Christians in Europe are to share in the reconciling ministry of Christ, they need to understand the barriers that exist, and how to build bridges with other religious communities. These barriers are of various kinds:

1) Historical - the Crusades, the “Christian” West, Colonialism, anti-Semitism

Scottish Christians are the heirs of Christendom, in which the church has had great power and privilege, and the state has seen itself as Christian. This has given us a Christian foundation to our society which we see reflected in democratic government, education, health care and the legal system.

People of other faiths and background have often received protection and freedom in Britain because of our Christian foundations, however such hospitality has also given incomers a sense of inferiority where they have to fit into our society as minorities, whose own beliefs and practices are tolerated rather than welcomed.

Many non-Christians (particularly those from India and Pakistan) see their faith as part of their own culture, and often see Christianity as the “white man’s religion”, assuming that all white people are Christians. Thus their negative experiences of colonialism and the secular values of modern society, which most Christians would reject, are seen as Christian.

Muslims often see their own history through the lens of the Crusades, which are seen as the first of many examples of European Christian struggles against Islam, and thus see modern wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as Christian “crusades” against their faith.

Jews, who sometimes had an important place under Muslim rule, bear the memory of much Christian persecution, dating back to the Spanish Inquisition of the 15th century.

If contemporary Christians are to communicate the Gospel effectively across religious barriers they must put themselves in the place of the other people and understand what they think and feel about Christianity. It may be helpful to show that Christianity was an eastern faith before it reached western Europe, and that the majority of Christians, who live in the Global South, are not wealthy or powerful.

2) Cultural - Beliefs, Values, Customs

Their beliefs, values and customs may be strange to westerners, but may also be closer to the cultural world of the Bible - for instance clothes, food and gender roles.
While faith and culture are not necessarily identical, many of our neighbours of other faiths have come from other parts of the world. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in particular observe cultural practices from their place of origin. Examples of these cultural practices are:

**Dress.** Women (whether Muslim, Sikh or Hindu) from North India, Pakistan and Afghanistan often wear salwar kameez (a loose tunic over baggy trousers). Many Hindu women wear saris, while Muslim men will often grow beards and wear a loose tunic, particularly in the home.

**Food.** Food reflects cultural traditions, but many religions have their own food laws. Jews follow the food laws of the Old Testament and will not eat foods such as pork or shellfish that are not “kosher”. Animals must be killed in an approved way and dairy and meat products must not be cooked or eaten together. Muslims have similar rules for halal (permitted) and haram (forbidden) food, and will not consume pork or alcohol, while many Hindus will not eat beef as the cow is sacred in Hinduism. Many Hindus and Buddhists, together with Jains, are vegetarian due to their respect for all life.

**Gender Roles.** Many married Muslim women work at home, keeping the house and looking after the children. Socially women and men often meet separately, and women will not normally shake hands with men. A woman may be welcome in mixed groups, but only if her husband or another married couple are there too.

Such cultural traditions may make Christians feel unsure about how to act in the presence of people of other faiths. However, these very differences can be a focus for shared friendship and discovery. Muslim women appreciate visits at home from their female Christian neighbours. A shared enjoyment of different foods can break down many barriers, and although you will not want to serve people foods that are forbidden to them you can always ask to find out what is acceptable.

3) **Theological**

While it’s not hard to discover similarities in religious views, these may actually disguise distinct differences and unique perspectives on life and faith.

For example: Buddhism is technically a philosophy rather than a religion, as there is no deity and no worship. Tibetan Buddhism, however, recognises gods and spirits. Other “religions” that have no god are Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism and Hinduism, both hold to samsara, the repeated cycle of life, death and reincarnation, believing that a person’s “karma” or good deeds, will determine his state or condition in the next life. They see salvation as “moksha” escaping from the endless wheel of rebirth, rather than deliverance from the guilt and power of sin.

These Eastern religions have a cyclical view of history, while the Semitic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam see history as linear, culminating in a resurrection and judgement day. This can explain why some people are unable to think or plan for the future but seem to live only for the present. Eastern religions value the “spiritual” over the “material”, claiming that ultimate truth is hidden behind the maya, or illusion, of the visible universe.

The Semitic religions of Judaism and Islam are much closer to Christianity in many ways, as all trace their origin to Abraham and many Old Testament figures are mentioned in the Quran. This means that there is common ground for discussion. However, Christians see the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ and the New Testament, while Muslims see Muhammad as the “seal” of the prophets and the Koran as superseding the Bible, which they believe has been changed since the time of Jesus. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is nonsense to Jews and anathema to Muslims, while most Muslims believe that God did not let Jesus die on the cross but took him straight to heaven and substituted someone else in his place.

These different understandings of the same events can easily lead to conflict, and while it is important to be able to give reasons for our faith, Christians need to listen and understand other views if they want to gain a hearing for their own beliefs. A good example of this is seen in Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar in John 4, where he listens to her and then shows himself as the fulfilment of her hopes and longings. Similarly the apostle Paul engaged theologically with the Athenians in Acts 17 when he referred to a temple to the Unknown God, whom he then proclaimed to them as Jesus Christ.

4) **Communicational**

A story is told of a young female Christian student in a short dress handing out tracts and speaking to people about her faith. She approached an old bearded Muslim man, told him that he was a sinner, and that Jesus was the Son of God who died for his sins, and that he must repent and believe in Jesus on order to be saved. She may have been well intentioned, but her method of evangelism was more likely to offend and be rejected, when a little awareness of gender and age differences, of modesty, and of theological misunderstandings would have been more appropriate.

A less obvious problem of communication is in the use of words like “Christian”, “Christianity” and “Church”. These may convey meanings we don’t intend them to carry, but which confuse the Gospel message we are sharing. It is often better to use other expressions such as “Follower of Jesus” and “Community of Jesus Followers”.

For example: Buddhism is technically a philosophy rather than a religion, as there is no deity and no worship. Tibetan Buddhism, however, recognises gods and spirits. Other “religions” that have no god are Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism and Hinduism, both hold to samsara, the repeated cycle of life, death and reincarnation, believing that a person’s “karma” or good deeds, will determine his state or condition in the next life. They see salvation as “moksha” escaping from the endless wheel of rebirth, rather than deliverance from the guilt and power of sin.
Building Bridges - Models of Mission

Avoiding unnecessary barriers is vital if we want to share our Christian faith with others, but this is mostly preparation for building bridges with our non-Christian neighbours, which can take various forms.

1) Personal friendships - “Dialogue of life”
This can take place over the garden fence, at work, at the school gate or at the shops. This can lead to opportunities for home visits and shared food. There is a particular opportunity for women to visit other women in the home. Often there is no expectation of making arrangements in advance, and spontaneous visits can lead to an invitation to come in and share food. Festivals are family occasions, and sharing in a Jewish Shabbat meal, or joining Muslims when they break their fast at sunset in Ramadan, are ways of showing respect for your neighbours and their religion.

2) Church relations with mosque, temple etc. “Dialogue of experience”
Where other religious communities are represented in the community there are opportunities for churches to build relationships with them. This can lead to mutual visits, discussions, and understanding. Festivals such as Eid, Diwali, Easter and Christmas can provide good opportunities for mutual sharing and learning. A study day for members of both communities can address issues such as intermarriage or religion in schools.

3) Working together for the good of the community - “Dialogue of action”
Where faith groups share a concern for their area there is much value in addressing community needs together. These can be held in neutral venues in order to be inclusive, and can get people together to do a survey of community needs. Volunteers can work together on a joint project, such as tidying pavements, removing graffiti and taking rubbish to waste and recycling centres. A church hall might be an ideal space for a community Toddlers Group, and where good relations have been established, religious groups can support each other by taking a stand against racism or discrimination.

4) Listen, Learn and Share - “Dialogue of proclamation”
Many of the perceived “difficulties” in relationships with other religions are to do with ignorance and fear, particularly fear of the unknown and fear of causing offence. Because Christianity has been the foundation of western society and because the church has enjoyed a place of respect and privilege, many Christians are afraid to do more than engage in polite discussion with those of other religions. Furthermore, different religious traditions can treat dialogue in different ways, with some people determined to argue their own position and others reluctant to disagree with anything. However in a sympathetic environment people of all faiths can share their beliefs openly.

Some Tips

- Don’t ridicule or ‘put down’ the other faith. Be prepared to acknowledge where Christians have made mistakes.
- Ask genuine questions and listen carefully, and share your beliefs too.
- Be prepared to challenge in a loving and gentle manner.
- You don’t have to win the argument.
- Study sensitive issues together.
- Training - Prepare Christians and help them learn from their experiences.
- Acknowledge that “Church” itself can be a barrier. Some people see church buildings as threatening and exclusive, genders mixing together as immodest, and light-hearted songs as irreverent.
- Remember not all Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists etc. believe the same things.
- Islam and Buddhism are missionary religions, and their followers will respect Christians who know what they believe and stand for.
- Sikhism, Judaism and to some extent Hinduism are ethnic religions with no desire to convert anyone, and their adherents may feel threatened if they feel you want them to become a Christian.
- Remember that it is God who brings people to faith in Christ, but he will use your own life, words and witness to speak to others.
- Even when you do disagree fundamentally with someone’s beliefs, aim to show that you can still be friends and respect one another.

Practical Matters

Prayer - Pray for your friends, offer to pray for their needs, be prepared to pray with them if the opportunity arises. And expect God to answer! Nehemiah prayed to the God of heaven (Nehemiah 2:1) and spoke to King Artaxerxes of his concern for Jerusalem.

Preparation - Be sensitive to cultural and religious customs, learning and asking questions rather than criticising a different way of life. Be prepared to ask and talk about religious and spiritual matters. People from non-western cultures are often profoundly aware of the reality of the supernatural. They will be comfortable bringing religion into normal conversation.
**Procedure** - Respect the importance of others’ beliefs even when you profoundly disagree. Acknowledge common beliefs, and use the Bible to explain your own convictions. Don’t put your Bible on the floor, and let God’s Word speak to people.

**Patience** - God is not in a hurry. Give time for deep friendships to develop, and be available to answer questions at a time of opportunity or crisis.

**Perseverance** - Don’t be so afraid of making mistakes that you never become close friends. Be honest about your own spiritual life, and let God work through you as he has promised.

---

**About the author**

Rev Malcolm Duff has experience of cross-cultural mission in Scotland, Africa and Asia, and is involved in the witness of The Well: Multicultural Advice Centre as a volunteer and trustee. He holds a Master’s degree in Interfaith Studies from Glasgow University.