CHAPTER 33

Transfiguring Mission: From Arabic Dallas to Interfaith Discovery

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For a number of years in the opening decade of this millennium I was a dangerous person to know. On an honorary basis and in my spare time I edited *The Reader*, the national journal for Church of England Readers and lay ministers. My friends and acquaintances soon discovered that my *modus operandi* was to approach them with a warm email or perhaps phone call inviting them, in terms that were difficult to refuse, to contribute an article to a particular issue of the magazine which was focusing on a topic on which, as I assured them fervently, they had special wisdom to share with the 10,000 plus Readers of the Church of England. I suspect that after they had agreed, a number of them probably cursed me silently on the side—though of course they were mostly gracious enough not to tell me so directly.

One of my victims was David Thomas himself. David and I first met in 1979 when my husband and I spent several months at Queens College, Birmingham, as a sort of sabbatical from our work in Lebanon. At the time David was a research student working on his doctorate from Lancaster University but because he was also completing pastoralia requirements for ordination he was resident in the College. We got to know each other a little over our shared interest in the Middle East and North Africa and our mutual commitment to Christian-Muslim relations.

However it wasn't until I began to work with NIFCON (the Network for Inter Faith Concerns of the Anglican Communion, of which David had been one of the original founders) in 2001 that I got to know David much better. By then of course David was a senior lecturer in Christian-Muslim relations at the University of Birmingham, so when, a couple of years later I needed to find contributors for an issue of *The Reader* which focused on interreligious relations, David was an obvious candidate for my attention.

David's article was characteristically thoughtful and thought-provoking. It began by telling the story of how he had first began to engage with Islam. He had gone, as a young graduate, to teach English in Sudan in the 1970s. The first Arabic word he knowingly read was 'Dallas'. As he put it at the beginning of his article:

 | DOI: 10.1163/9789004297210_035

> D–A–L–L ... Umm, try again. D–A–L–L–A–S. Dallas! Done it!' Dallas? Spelled out in blue neon squiggles above a café in a Sudanese marketplace, these letters, that made up the name of the 1970s TV soap opera, were the first Arabic word I knowingly read. I still do not know how I picked up the alphabet, though I suspect that as a volunteer school teacher I had taken them in through lists of pupils' names. However it happened, from that time the Arabic language began to interest and intrigue me, and slowly enticed me to learn it and immerse myself in the study of medieval Arabic texts in which I now find some of my most pleasurable moments.

The article, by the way, is accompanied by some delightful pictures of a much younger David Thomas, along with his Sudanese friends.[1] It is of course a question to ponder, whether such an American television show would make so prevalent a mark in Sudan these days. Somehow I rather suspect not. Times have very definitely changed. That, however, is not the focus of my reflection.

Rather, I am interested in the particular life path that David took, and how it has led him to where he is now, his life-work, and what we are celebrating in this book. David's first steps, as he described them, into the Arabic Muslim world came through his involvement with the UK government-based VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) programme, being sponsored by them to work among Muslims in Sudan. He was not a 'missionary' as such. However, when through the benefit of hindsight I read of his experiences in the Sudan coming shortly after his religious conversion while at university, I suspect a perhaps inchoate aspiration for 'mission' may have been a factor in his time in the country. I have never asked David what was his exact motivation for going to Sudan; extrapolating from my own experience and that of my husband, it may have been a combination of slightly ingenuous aspirations to share the Gospel and improve the world, a desire to explore wider horizons, and an uncertainty as to where exactly life might lead immediately after finishing university undergraduate studies.

What I find interesting, however, is how David's initial commitment in Sudan led ultimately to his involvement in interreligious concerns. In this, of course, he stands in a considerable line of Christian scholars and clergy who, begin-

1 David Thomas, 'A Journey of Faith', *The Reader* Vol. 100 No. 4, Winter 2003, pp. 10–11. The copy of the *The Reader* containing David's article is still available as a PDF on the internet at http://www.readers.cofe.anglican.org/u_d_lib_pub/m1004.pdf.

ning their work in some sense as missionaries, have gradually shifted their focus to become deeply committed to interreligious dialogue and engagement. Several names spring to mind, some of whom are part of David's own circle of friends. There is Andrew Wingate, whose work in India and ongoing theological engagement (not least in his influence on the Church of England report *The Mystery of Salvation*) exemplifies this pattern; so too does Christopher Lamb, whose missionary work in Pakistan led eventually to significant national roles in interreligious relations based in England. Colin Chapman also reflects this model; though Colin's later work was perhaps still more obviously 'missionary' in its impetus. There was also Roger Hooker whose remarkable immersion into the religious world of Varanasi is documented for us in Graham Kings' book *Christianity Connected*. All of the above—and indeed my husband Alan Amos and myself—were supported for their missionary work by CMS, the Church Missionary Society. Although based on my own experience as a woman I am quite critical of this organisation, I want nevertheless to honour the way in which in the 1970s, particularly under the leadership of John V. Taylor, it was willing to encourage long term immersion on the part of its missionaries in religiously 'other' worlds without demanding immediate 'results'. It is a great pity that this more open spirit of CMS in relation to other faiths does not seem to continue these days. Financial stringencies and creeping conservatism appear to have killed off that wider vision.

The four figures I have mentioned above are contemporaries, or near contemporaries, of David. But of course they, and many others who have travelled similar paths, stand on the shoulders of Kenneth Cragg, the doyen of Anglican interest in Christian-Muslim relations, for whose 90th birthday in 2003 David Thomas and I collaborated on a festschrift, *A Faithful Presence*.[2] Cragg notably came from a very conservative evangelical background, training for the Anglican ministry at Tyndale Hall, and travelling to Lebanon to begin his missionary career under the auspices of the interdenominational and strongly evangelical organisation, the British Syrian Mission. Cragg's remarkable life journey then took him far afield, both theologically and geographically. It was Cragg who in his later years made the insightful comment, 'Mission is not about the claims we make but the discoveries we enable' which perhaps undergirds the thesis of this present essay. In fact the pattern of movement from missionary to interfaith engagement goes back in history well beyond Kenneth Cragg and it also reaches well beyond Anglican figures. It would certainly include the

2 David Thomas with Clare Amos (eds.), *A Faithful Presence, essays for Kenneth Cragg* (London: Melisende Press, 2003).

Methodist missionary and scholar Kenneth Cracknell, as well as significant Roman Catholic figures, several of whose lives are documented in the book *Christian Lives Given to the Study of Islam*.[3] But I do believe that the Anglican ethos—in particular the weight Anglican theology gives to the doctrine of the incarnation—means that there is a particular contribution Anglicans can make in this area.

What I want to explore, therefore, in this essay is the relationship between 'mission' and 'interreligious engagement'. My argument will be that interreligious engagement can be understood in some senses as the 'transfiguration' of mission. Although prompted very specifically by my desire to contribute to this celebration for David, whose work as a scholar I admire, and whose collaboration and friendship over a number of joint projects I am grateful for, my essay also forms part of a wider process of reflection I have been pursuing over the last few years, wrestling with how far the theme of transfiguration can act as an integrating motif for theology, in particular Christian theology, and specifically Anglican theology. Accordingly, I present my thinking in three sections. First I explore what I mean by 'transfiguration'. Second, I offer some reflections on 'mission' and interreligious dialogue. And then, finally, I draw together my thinking by asking how my understanding of the motif of transfiguration may lead to the transfiguration of mission.

Transfiguration

In his book *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, A.M. Ramsey reflects on the importance of the theme of transfiguration. He sees it as lying at the heart of the New Testament.

> [The transfiguration] stands as a gateway to the saving events of the Gospel, and is as a mirror in which the Christian mystery is seen in its unity. Here we perceive that the living and the dead are one in Christ, that the old covenant and the new are inseparable, that the Cross and the glory are of one, that the age to come is already here, that our human

3 It is notable however that nature of the training of Roman Catholic missionary priests meant that even before they reached the 'mission field' they had often received the intellectual resourcing for academic interreligious engagement which in the case of Anglican or Protestant missionaries tended to be 'picked up' later on their own initiative as their interests widened.

> nature has a destiny of glory, that in Christ the final word is uttered and in Him alone the Father is well pleased. Here the diverse elements in the theology of the New Testament meet.[4]

When I speak of 'transfiguration', I speak first of the New Testament narratives of Jesus' own transfiguration. The story appears in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 17.1–9, Mark 9.2–9, Luke 9.28–36) and intriguingly it is also recounted in another New Testament book, 2 Peter 1.16–19. Admittedly, 2 Peter would hardly be considered by many as a 'core' text of the New Testament, but it is interesting to note that with the possible exception of the cross and resurrection no other event of Jesus' earthly life and ministry is 'narrated' in the New Testament outside the Gospels and Acts, and it is noteworthy that the use made of the narrative by the author of 2 Peter is specifically to confirm the apostolic teaching. At the very least it suggests that at the time and in the place where 2 Peter was written the gospel transfiguration narrative was seen as of particular importance. Motifs linked to transfiguration, and the actual verb *metamorphoomai* are also to be found at two points in Paul's letters (Romans 12.2; 2 Corinthians 3.7–4.6), and the language and imagery of transfiguration appears various points in the Gospel of John.

On the basis of the normally accepted chronology of the writing of the New Testament, namely that the undisputed letters of Paul were written before the final composition of any of the New Testament Gospels, the references in those two letters are the earliest with respect to the theme of transfiguration in the New Testament. The more detailed—2 Corinthians—draws on the Old Testament account of the veiling of Moses' face to explore how 'all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3.18, NRSV translation). The passage seems to imply that Christ is the source of transfiguration for others, though it does not explicitly state that Christ is himself transfigured. It is interesting to consider what might be the relationship between Paul's reflection here and the Synoptic Gospel accounts of Jesus' transfiguration which obviously depends in part on one's view of the literal nature of the Gospels. However if one sees (as I do) some relationship—theological and possibly also physical—between Paul and the community/individual responsible for the Gospel of Mark, it is not

4 Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Longmans, Green & Co, 1949).

inappropriate to use Paul's reflection in 2 Corinthians as possibly influencing the presentation of the account of Jesus' transfiguration in the Gospels, and being a hermeneutical key for understanding this account.

I now turn to an exploration of the transfiguration narrative in the Gospels, focusing particularly on the Gospel of Mark. I am not attempting to give a complete exegesis, but rather I focus on aspects that lend themselves to my reflection on mission. It is noteworthy that, structurally, Mark's account of Jesus' transfiguration comes exactly half way through the Gospel. It seems designed also to act as a theological mid-point of Mark's narrative. From 'the high mountain apart' (Mark 9.2) to which Jesus leads the inner circle of his disciples, we are invited to look back and reflect on Jesus' Galilean ministry; yet we are also being required to look forward to the second half of the Gospel, the journey to Jerusalem and what will await Jesus there. That is made clear by the narrative itself as the episode concludes with Jesus' injunction 'to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.' (Mark 9.9) But there are other hints as well.

When I was privileged to live and work in the Holy Land, as Course Director at St George's College, one of the places I most enjoyed taking our students to be the top of Mount Tabor which, since the fourth Christian century, has been the location for the commemoration of the transfiguration. (In reality I suspect that the Gospel of Mark intends us to think of the transfiguration as being located in the region of Mount Hermon—but Mount Tabor was much more convenient of access for the Byzantine pilgrimage trail, as well as looking like a perfectly rounded hill: such considerations were important when holy places were being originally established.) There has been a church on the mountain commemorating the Transfiguration since the 4th century, but the present Catholic church was built in the 1920s by the Italian architect Barluzzi. It is a stunning example of doing theology in stone. For Barluzzi was also the architect of the better known Church of the Nations in Gethsemane, and he built the two churches to function as a contrasting pair. That of the Transfiguration is designed to symbolise light—reflecting the brightness of the transfiguration; the blacks and purples used in the Church of Gethsemane reinforce the darkness of Jesus' agony in the garden: 'This is your hour and the power of darkness' (Luke 22.53).

Barluzzi's architecture reflects the real connection intended by Mark's Gospel between these two lynchpin moments. On both the mountaintop of transfiguration and in the valley of the agony, the same small inner group of Jesus' disciples are privileged to enter more deeply into the heart of the mystery of faith. On the mountain-top, the divine voice had addressed them—referring to Jesus—with the words: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him' (Mark

9.7). Often, and rightly, a link is drawn between these words and those spoken to Jesus himself at his baptism (Mark 1.11). There is a deliberate echo, but with the crucial difference that 'This' has replaced 'You', and now the words are not addressed to Jesus alone. The circle is being enlarged as Peter, James and John are incorporated within it. But as well as the link BACK to Jesus' baptism there is also the connection FORWARD to the events of Gethsemane. For, in one sense, it is only there that we finally hear the words of Jesus which the disciples have been commanded to 'listen to' on the mountain-top, when, seemingly to echo deliberately the term 'Son' spoken on the mountain, Jesus prays at his time greatness vulnerability and weakness, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible: remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14.36). It is at least notable that on the mountain of transfiguration we do not hear any direct command of Jesus, or assertion by him of his power and authority. In this respect, and given the overall theme of this reflection, it is also interesting to compare and contrast the gentler tenor of the mountain of transfiguration (in both Mark and Matthew's Gospels) with the so-called 'Great Commission', also issued on a mountain-top as the conclusion to Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 28.19–20) which became for a couple of centuries at least the keystone biblical text for much western missionary activity.

There are two other aspects of the Gospel transfiguration story to which I want to draw attention, before drawing my thoughts together and relating them to wider biblical and theological motifs. First those words which Peter blurts out, because 'he did not know what to say', namely: 'It is good for us to be here' (Mark 9.5). Poets and hymn writers have sometimes picked up what I think is an intended allusion here to the creation narrative of Genesis 1, which is marked by its repeated assertion about the various stages of creation 'and God saw that it was good.' So the transfiguration story recalls creation, but creation as it was always intended to be, and points us from the despoiled world of our time to the promise of a world made new. It is interesting to notice that there is what seems to be an account of the transfiguration given in a second century apocryphal text, the Apocalypse of Peter, in which the setting of the story is described as Paradise/Eden. It is also worth noting that a line can be drawn from the reference to the 'holy mountain' in the transfiguration account of 2 Peter 1.18, to the 'holy mountain of God' of Ezekiel 28.14, which is clearly seen as being a garden of creation. Neither of these proves that the expression 'it is good' of Mark 9.5 must definitely be an allusion to creation: but both suggest that there is a hint offered by Mark who led many to interpret it in this way. It is notable that the story of the transfiguration has become a significant resource, particularly in Eastern Orthodox theology, for an exploration of environmental and ecologi-

cal concerns.[5] It is of course a bitter irony that the first ever explosion in war of a nuclear bomb, which fell on Hiroshima in 1945, took place on August 6, the traditional date within the religious calendar for commemoration of the transfiguration of Christ. There is a powerful prayer which asks humanity to decide whether it wants to travel towards the death-dealing radiance of the bomb or the life-giving radiance of Christ's transfiguration.

Second, those other figures, Elijah and Moses, who appear in the transfiguration story, before floating off and leaving 'Jesus alone.' What is their significance in the tale? I think there may be a double dimension. Part of the reason may be that in Jewish tradition both of were understood to have escaped death—most famously Elijah of course, given the narrative of 2 Kings 2.1–12, but also, by the time of the New Testament there had also grown up the belief that the reason 'no one knows his [Moses'] burial place to this day' (Deuteronomy 34.6) was because there wasn't one. In some mysterious way God had preserved him from human death. The enigmatic order in which Mark places the two figures in his narrative, 'Elijah with Moses', could suggest that for this gospel writer at least that was their primary function in the story. However in the accounts of Matthew, Luke and in later Christian history the respective roles of Moses as symbolising the Law, and of Elijah as symbolising the prophets seem to have been significant as well. In other words they are seen as partial pointers to be later fulfilled in Christ before whom they will eventually disappear. I will come back to this role as 'partial pointers' later, as my thesis is that the function of 'partial pointer' is one to be played by mission vis-a-vis interreligious engagement.

What is the function of the transfiguration within the gospel story? I think it is to challenge and unsettle over-simplistic theologies and chronologies and mono-directional ways of looking at reality. The transfiguration was once famously described as a 'misplaced resurrection narrative'. If by this is meant that Mark made a mistake and accidentally and incompetently stuck the transfiguration in the middle rather than at the end of his story, then I think this comment is ludicrous. If, however, what is meant is that the biblical understanding of resurrection is to be found in the middle of life—not simply at its end—and that glorification and suffering belong together rather than one simply following on from the other, then I would heartily concur. Such tension and

5 See for example the work of Kallistos Ware e.g. Kallistos (Ware), Metropolitan. 'Safeguarding the Creation for Future Generations: Symposium on the Adriatic Sea', June 6, 2002. In *Transforming the World: Orthodox Patriarchs and Hierarchs Articulate a Theology of Creation*, ed. F. Krueger, 104 Santa Rosa, CA: The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration, 2008.

paradox is well expressed in a comment by Walter Wink, which of course also alludes to the link between transfiguration and creation:

> Transfiguration is living by vision; standing foursquare in the midst of a broken, tortured, oppressed, starving, dehumanizing reality, yet seeing the invisible, calling it to come, behaving as if it is on the way, sustained by elements of it that have come already, within and among us. In those moments when people are healed, transformed, freed from addictions, obsessions, destructiveness, self-worship, or when groups or communities or even, rarely, whole nations glimpse the light of the transcendent in their midst, there the New Creation has come upon us. The world for one brief moment is transfigured. The beyond shines in our midst—on the way to the cross.[6]

Within Eastern Christian theology the transfiguration is very important—indeed in Orthodox iconography it is traditional that the first icon 'written' by any new iconographer is that of Christ's transfiguration. This is because the story of the transfiguration, with its depiction of the divine glory shining through the human form of Jesus is fundamental to the very theology of icons, namely that the material and earthly can be a channel for the immaterial and divine. The transfiguration is the ultimate sacrament of the incarnation.

The traditional depiction of the transfiguration in iconography alerts us to some important keys to understanding the biblical story. Normally in the icon the figure of Jesus is surrounded by a mandorla, an oval or circle coloured in bright light. The circle/oval represents the world, and the message being conveyed is that the transfiguration of Christ is not finally completed until the entire world has been transfigured. How is this to happen? The Gospel narrative provides a clue. The voice which had proclaimed 'You' at Jesus' baptism now incorporates Peter and James and John by addressing them with the 'This' of the transfiguration: the disciples are being drawn into the circle. As they experience the transfiguration of Jesus, they are being invited, or rather compelled, to be transfigured themselves; to become part of the process of suffering and glorification, for others to gaze upon and be transfigured in their turn so that the circle becomes ever wider. Something of this is caught by Paul's reflection in the 2 Corinthians 3.18 passage, where the NRSV translation reads 'And all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.'

6 Walter Wink, 'Expository article on Mark 9.2–8' *Interpretation* 1982, 63–67.

It is not actually certain how the Greek word *katoptrizomai* should be translated, whether as 'seeing' or 'reflecting'—the NRSV seems to be trying to hedge its bets! However that is perhaps exactly the point: namely that unless we are prepared to 'reflect' we cannot 'see'—or at least it is too dangerous for us to do so. There is a traditional saying, repeated at significant points of the Old Testament, 'You cannot see God and live.' In the New Testament the transfiguration suggests that human beings can now see God and live—but only if they are willing themselves to be changed by the experience. One of the features of the iconography of the transfiguration is that the disciples are normally pictured 'bouleversé'—upside down—with their footwear forcibly removed from their feet. That also seems to echo the widespread tradition—common to all three Abrahamic faiths—that the correct response to meeting the divine is to take off one's shoes.

One last—but very important for our theme—aspect to notice about the transfiguration and its iconography. It is brilliantly expressed by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom in a comparison of two well-known Russian icons of the transfiguration, one by Andrei Rublev and the other by Theophan the Greek.

> The Rublev icon shows Christ in the brilliancy of his dazzling white robes which cast light on everything around. This light falls on the disciples, on the mountain and the stones, on every blade of grass. Within this light, which is the divine splendour—the divine glory, the divine light itself inseparable from God—all things acquire an intensity of being which they could not have otherwise; in it they attain to a fullness of reality which they can have only in God. The other icon is more difficult to perceive in a reproduction. The background is silvery and appears grey. The robes of Christ are silvery, with blue shades, and the rays of light falling around are also white, silvery and blue. Everything gives an impression of much less intensity. Then we discover that all these rays of light falling from the divine presence and touching the things which surround the transfigured Christ do not give relief but give transparency to things. One has the impression that these rays of light touch things and sink into them, penetrate them, touch something within them so that from the core of these things, of all things created, the same light reflects and shines back, as though the divine life quickens the capabilities, the potentialities of all things, and makes all reach out towards itself. At that moment the eschatological situation is realized, and in the words of St Paul, 'God is all in all'.[7]

7 Anthony Bloom, Metropolitan, in A.M. Allchin (ed.) *Sacrament and Image: Essays in the Christian understanding of man*: Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1967, 40.

What might this means for the transfiguration of mission?

Mission

I had not realized until I started working at the WCC in September 2011 just how hard fought the struggle to take seriously the demands of genuine inter-religious engagement had been—and in some ways still is—in the Council. I had certainly been aware of the great missionary councils of the first half of the 20th century—Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928), Tambaram (1938)—which see-sawed between a more positive and a more negative approach to other religions. But even when the WCC's office for interreligious dialogue was first established in 1971 the tension between those committed to 'dialogue' and those who felt that the priority was 'mission and evangelism' still continued. The obituary of Stanley Samartha, the first Director of the office for 'Dialogue with Living Faiths and Ideologies', published after his death in 2001, noted that

> it is not easy to appreciate the often lonely struggle in which Stanley Samartha was engaged during those early years against strong forces of resistance, fears and suspicion. The theological concerns of his opponents clustered around the fear that engaging in dialogue with people of living faiths would lead to syncretism and undermine the Christian calling to mission and evangelism.

It seems that the office for interreligious dialogue had a particularly rough rite of passage at the 1975 Nairobi Assembly of the WCC—the first Assembly following the office's establishment. For a while, its continued existence and future was in doubt. In fact I found my own experience of the 10th Assembly of the WCC, held in Busan Korea in October–November 2013, quite eye-opening. During the whole period of the Assembly, every day, there were demonstrations outside the conference hall, often quite large and threatening in character, orchestrated by conservative Korean Christians, whose continual chant was 'WCC go-home'. What was interesting was that the primary target for their anger was the WCC's supposed commitment to interreligious dialogue, about which leaflets and pamphlets were distributed. Sometimes, their disapproval of what they understood to be the WCC's position on issues of sexuality also got factored in to the demonstration, but it was certainly the case that interreligious dialogue was top of their hit list. Of course, the demonstrators were Christians who belonged to churches which are *not* members of the WCC, but inevitably their attitudes rubbed off on the more mainstream Korean churches which are

members, and there was a definite nervousness about interreligious dialogue throughout the period of the Assembly, with what felt like a determination to ensure that it was not too high profile. One of the results of this personal experience has been to want to reflect further on the dynamics of the relationship between mission and interreligious dialogue, as I am seeking to do here.

In a foundational article for on Interfaith Dialogue for the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* Wesley Ariarajah, has noted:

> A WCC conference in Kandy, Sri Lanka, in 1967, proved to be a landmark both as the beginning of serious interest in interfaith dialogue as such in the WCC, and as the first involvement in the ecumenical discussion of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians. In Kandy Kenneth Cragg challenged in a fundamental way the Barth-Kraemer attitude to religions that had so dominated Protestant thinking during the previous decades.[8]

I am grateful to Ariarajah for drawing my attention to the contribution of Cragg at that critical juncture (although Ariarajah's comment is slightly misleading, as Cragg was not actually present at the Kandy meeting, but rather sent a paper which was used as a resource document at it). My instinct—which proved correct—was that Cragg's paper would be worth re-reading. I duly did, and in fact ensured that it was re-published in issue number 54 of *Current Dialogue* (appeared July 2013) partly as a tribute to Cragg himself who had died a few months earlier. Although the paper had been circulated in a WCC in-house publication in the late 1960s it had not received the attention I believe it deserved. Some of Cragg's comments—though now feeling slightly dated in their expression—are still valuable. I quote a few extracts from it, chosen partly because I believe that they express key resources for the 'transfiguration of mission'. Given David's and my previous joint commitment to honouring the work of Kenneth Cragg through our editing of his festschrift, it seems appropriate to give Cragg special space in this essay also.

– Is there not a sense in which much missionary theology is drifting or steering towards a view of the Christian task in the world that insufficiently cares for the scruples, the doubts, of the other party, that does not satisfactorily reckon

8 http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/ecumenical-dictionary-interfaith-dialogue.

with the credibility of Christianity? … Missionary theology, in its proper awareness of the 'givenness' of the faith and a concern for its 'uniqueness', has tended to high-handed and distant attitudes in presenting it.
– The Incarnation may be defined as truth undertaking whatever its comprehensibility requires.
– The essential persuasiveness of the Gospel is not rightly dismissed by considerations of 'uniqueness' or 'distinctiveness'. … For they cannot feasibly or finally be matters of assertion and claim … They are only discoverable in the wake of recognition.
– There is no significant Exodus where there is no significant 'ecology'. God is not in the Exile, if He is not evermore in the harvest and the seasons. God is not in the Incarnation if He is not within the mystery of the natural order.
– It is a plea for the closer attention to the theology of nature and of the incarnation, to human experience as all men know, question and interpret it, for a Christian care to think cooperatively with other creeds and their wistfulness and thus to serve the Gospel of Christ in the sort of commitment to men's ideas and needs which the incarnation itself exemplifies. It was not after all, by a Word reverberating from high heaven that God redeemed us, but by the Word made flesh, housing its glory in the common world and freely awaiting recognition as its only pledge of truth.
– We love and serve the incredible creed of a Babe in a manger and a Man on the Cross as the point and the power of the Lord of the universe … Let us not cloud that sublime mystery with assertive, belligerent or insensitive postures of our own.[9]

What I understand Kenneth Cragg is seeking to suggest is that a proper understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation requires Christians also to take seriously the resources of natural theology through which a respectful engagement with the riches of other faiths can be facilitated. Perhaps it is worth reinforcing this by turning to another WCC document which, though framing the question in a different way to that proposed by Cragg, seems to me to come to a similar conclusion. The CWME (the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism) conference held in San Antonio in 1989 eloquently stated: 'We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God … we appreciate this tension, and do

9 All these quotes come from a tribute to Kenneth Cragg authored by myself in *Current Dialogue* No. 54 (July 2013), 83–90, and which also incorporated Cragg's original paper sent as a resource for the 1967 conference in Kandy.

not attempt to resolve it.' As David Bosch has observed, at the conclusion of the section in his magisterial *Transforming Mission* which is devoted to the question of interreligious engagement.

> Such language boils down to an admission that we do not have all the answers and are prepared to live within the framework of penultimate knowledge, that we regard our involvement in dialogue and mission as an adventure, are prepared to take risks, and are anticipating surprises as the Spirit guides us into fuller understanding. This is not opting for agnosticism, but for humility. It is however a bold humility—or a humble boldness.[10]

Transfiguration, Mission and Presence

In my earlier reflection on the Gospel account of the transfiguration I did not, deliberately, explore the word *skene* which appears in Peter's comment 'Let us make three dwellings (*skene*), one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah'. The NRSV footnote suggests the alternative translation of 'tents' for *skene*, implicitly implying that *skene* is theologically loaded language. As indeed it is. In its verbal form it appears as the climax to the Prologue of John 1.14, 'And the Word became flesh and lived (*eskenosen*) among us' … It also makes an appearance as both verb and noun near the close of Revelation: 'See the home (*skene*) of God is among mortals. He will dwell (*skenosei*) with them …' (Rev. 21.3). In all these references, including its appearance in the transfiguration story, I think that the root 'sken-' is intended to allude in a special way to God's presence with humanity and creation, in a manner that hints (or more) at incarnation. The symbol of *skene* of course also reminds us of the imagery of the Feast of Tabernacles (*skenopegia*) which celebrated God's presence with people in the wilderness as a foretaste of God's more complete presence in the eschatological era. The allusion is strengthened by the fact that through a fortuitous linguistic accident the same three consonants, s, k, n, in the Greek root *sken-* make up the Hebrew word *Shekinah* which was regularly used in post-biblical Judaism to speak of the divine presence.

Of course, in the transfiguration story Peter's offer to build those three 'tents' is implicitly rejected. That is because in the theology of the Gospel writers

10 David J. Bosch *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 489.

the divine presence now no longer needs to be kept in ritual safety but can be perceived in the transfiguring presence of a vulnerable human body. It is fascinating to explore for a moment what each of the three potential recipients of Peter's offer might reveal to us about mission. First, those two 'partial pointers'—Elijah and Moses. Elijah was certainly fervent, and undoubtedly fervency and excitement are a necessary part of mission. But the flaw of Elijah, it might be said, was that his fervency became rather overly fervent: hardly a proponent of interreligious dialogue. Certainly, that was not how he was experienced by the 400 prophets of Baal (1Kings 18)! Although one hopes that few Christians in mission today would want to follow in Elijah's footsteps in their dealing with those of other faiths, one has to acknowledge that there have been times in Christian history when Elijah's vision of the religious other has been the norm. We also—sadly—need to note that the intolerant spirit of Elijah seems to be becoming a paradigm which Christians, certainly in the Middle East, are today increasingly suffering as recipients themselves. As regards Moses—in what sense is he a partial pointer for mission? Perhaps Moses takes us too far the path of ordering and organization and control: at least in so far as he is identified with the biblical law corpus which has traditionally been given his name. Mission needs both fervency and organization, but it cannot stop there. It needs to break through all sorts of barriers, and permit itself to be surprised by uncontrollable joy. Otherwise it will find itself floating off the mountain-top rather than allowing God's presence to be embedded incarnationally in the lives of human beings. It is notable that the next event in the Gospels immediately after Jesus' transfiguration as he sets off bodily towards his passion is his engagement on the plain with the human messiness of a sick child and the suffering that has brought to the child's family. And perhaps mission which takes seriously the incarnation—the real presence of God with humanity—can find itself tip-toeing towards an openness towards other faiths. Could it be that the focus on the incarnation in much Anglican theology and practice can actually provide a resource to facilitate constructive engagement with our multireligious world?

When David and I edited the festschrift for Kenneth Cragg our deliberate choice for the book's title was *A Faithful Presence*. The title was selected partly to honour Cragg's own spirit of faithfulness over many decades both to developing Christian and Muslim mutual understanding and to the support for the Church in the Middle East. But the title was also selected because the theme of 'presence' was a key motif in much of Cragg's (and other Anglican) thinking about interreligious engagement. The motif of presence has been expressed particularly powerfully in the preface written by Max Warren for the 'Christian Presence' series which he edited, published by SCM between 1959–1966.

Appropriately it appears therefore in the book which Cragg himself wrote for that series in 1959, *Sandals at the Mosque*:

> When we approach the man [*sic*] of another faith than our own it will be in a spirit of expectancy to find how God has been speaking to him and what new understandings of the grace and love of God we may ourselves discover in this encounter.
>
> Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival. We have, then, to ask what is the authentic religious content in the experience of the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist, or whoever he may be. We may, if we have asked humbly and respectfully, still reach the conclusion that our brothers have started from a false premise and reached a faulty conclusion. But we must not arrive at our judgement from outside their religious situation. We have to try to sit where they sit, to enter sympathetically into their pains and griefs and joys of their history and see how those pains and griefs and joys have determined the premises of their argument. We have, in a word, to be 'present' with them.[11]

The motif of presence also resonates with that group of Anglican mission practitioners cum-interfaith specialists whom I referred to earlier. Several of them, including David himself, worked with me and others (especially Michael Ipgrave who also spent time in a missionary context in Japan) to produce the Anglican Communion report on interreligious relations *Generous Love: the Truth of the Gospel and the call to Dialogue*. Within the Trinitarian framework of the report, the figure of Christ was explored in terms of incarnational presence as follows:

> Our commitment to be a stable presence in each place, to sanctify the life of the local community through prayer and witness, and in so doing to learn to value more deeply and share more widely the treasure entrusted to us, is a response to the incarnational logic that lies at the heart of the Christian story. The presence which we are living is that of the Body of Christ: the presence of the God who expresses himself in our midst in body language, by living a life, dying a death, and rising to a new life.

11 Kenneth Cragg, *Sandals at the Mosque*, SCM, 1959, 9–10.

> Through his cross and resurrection, Jesus gives us forgiveness, healing and new life, and shapes us into a community which offers these blessings to our neighbours in a pattern of gracious and generous discipleship. Most particularly, as we worship one who was rich but for our sake became poor, emptying himself to take the form of a slave, we remember that Jesus is present not only in the ministry and the sacraments of his Church but also in the persons of the poor, the hungry and the oppressed. Our presence among them must be one of service, advocacy and empowerment, whatever their faith. We believe that in Christ God has come among us as a human living among humans, and as one who in his humanity crossed the boundaries which separated people of different groups from one another.

Seeking to sum up why I believe that the theme of transfiguration can be a gateway through mission into interreligious encounter, I would want to say the following: The transfiguration summarises and expresses the ultimate meaning of incarnation, so that in St Irenaeus' dictum, 'The glory of God is humanity alive, and the life of humanity is the vision of God.' That incarnation requires us to take seriously the possibility of the presence of the boundary-crossing God in other religions. That (as in the icon of Theophan the Greek) transfiguration can quicken the divine light which is already present in us and all people. That we who are witnesses to transfiguration cannot be left unchanged by it. That it is through our listening rather than our speaking that we can have a small part in helping to transfigure the world. That the transfiguration indeed forces us to take off our shoes as we stand before what is holy to us and to others. That the God of transfiguration is a generous God whose generosity is shown not simply in the particularities of history but also through the universal glory and beauty of creation in which all can rejoice.

In the article that David Thomas wrote for *The Reader*, he reflected on the austere majesty of Islam which he found both challenging and worthy of admiration. And then he concludes with the following:

> The journey into the world of Islam and attempted empathy with its towering intellects and spiritual treasure-stores is both stimulating and disturbing. But there is then the journey home. I have never (at least not yet) not wanted to make that return, coming back with questions, lessons learnt and challenges to meet. It is, after all, the generosity that I see in the faith to which I belong that takes me out to this related religion. This generosity that is reflected from the God of Christianity has always been enough. There is no better elsewhere.

Thank you, David, for those words of yours which provide such a splendid conclusion to my contribution to your festscrift. You have said it here so well. It is the very generosity which we both cherish in our own Christian faith which transfigures our understanding and requires us to take most seriously the endeavour of interreligious engagement.