



Douglas Pratt

The Church and other Faiths

The World Council of Churches,
the Vatican, and Interreligious Dialogue



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This book sets out to investigate and discuss the coming-to-be, principal features, and theological themes and issues of the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue as an event of Christian ecclesial province and concern. The development and promotion of dialogical engagement through various initiatives involving the WCC, together with, since the early 1960s, similar developments undertaken by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), have been of critical importance. Thus the respective offices of the WCC and the RCC, through the Vatican, have been at the forefront of this development. The intention is to get to the heart of the matter: what has happened, why, and to what effect? Analysis is complemented with assessment, critique and comment. Models of dialogue are identified and a further, somewhat new, model suggested. The underlying hypothesis is that the structure of a theology of interfaith dialogical engagement comprises three interrelated dimensions, or dynamic ‘theological moments’; namely, theology for, in, and after (or consequent upon) dialogue.

If universally significant values, such as peaceful living and compassionate concern for others – as espoused by virtually all religions – are compromised by the recurrent juxtaposition of religious jingoism with political hegemony, the advent of a dialogical age means that, as never before, religions and their peoples have an opportunity to make good on shared values for the benefit of all. Nevertheless, as ever, wars and rumours of war abound; religiously-motivated terrorism has become a feature of our time. Religion can certainly make things worse.

Unfortunately, as we know, it is not uncommon to see religion used as a tool or a rallying point in otherwise politically motivated conflicts. Paradoxically, *that* religion can be so used is indicative of its pervasive importance in the scheme of things. However, today people of different religions, in pursuit of dialogical relationship one with another, have the possibility of transcending histories of combative clash in favour of a future marked increasingly by cooperative engagement. Religion, in this case, can make things better. At least that is the hope, even if the reality of everyday existence is yet to match.

Such hope is engendered by a profound change wrought by the dawn of an age of interfaith dialogical engagement. For the most part, other religions and their peoples are viewed today – at least formally – not so much in terms of competition and threat but as potential partner and actual neighbour. Leaders from other religions receive hospitable welcome at the Vatican; the religiously ‘other’ is received and welcomed as an honoured guest at WCC Assemblies. Where, previously, friendly and accommodating relational détente on the basis of mutual respect and regard would have been the exception, it is now the effective rule.