

The Progress and Promise of Inter-religious Dialogues

By S. J. Samartha*

Inter-religious dialogues have become increasingly frequent in recent years. In some countries bilateral conversations between people of different faiths have been going on for several years and, in spite of some difficulties, friendliness, goodwill and mutual confidence have been slowly growing. This naturally affects the relationship between religious communities in society. In some cases these conversations have been multi-lateral involving people of more than two religions. This is obviously necessary in countries which are multi-cultural and multi-religious, where the attitudes of people of one community to those of the other depend, to a large extent, on the open or hidden assumptions of their respective faiths. Examples of bilateral or multilateral conversations may be given from India, Ceylon, Singapore, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Britain and several countries in Europe and in America. People of different faiths—Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Moslems, Jews and many others, including sometimes Marxists—have been involved in these conversations.

In addition to what is going on in particular countries several international gatherings have been held where men of different religions came together to consider specific issues. The Ajaltoun

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Consultation held in March 1970 brought together for the first time under the auspices of the World Council of Churches Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Moslems to consider the theme "Dialogue between Men of Living Faiths - Present Discussions and Future Possibilities." (Copies of the Memorandum of this Consultation are available on request.) The Second Spiritual Summit Conference which met in Geneva in April 1970 was sponsored by the Temple of Understanding. Its focus was on the Practical Measures for Peace. It was attended by forty-four leaders of world religions and nearly sixty other participants from different countries. The Kyoto World Conference on Religion and Peace, to be held in October 1970, will involve nearly three hundred delegates related to the religions of the world and will consider the question of peace in relation to three topics: Disarmament, Development and Human Rights.

While recognizing the progress made in inter-religious understanding one should be careful not to claim too much for what has been done so far or what may be possible in the coming years. The suspicion and distrust between religions and the memories of fanaticism, intolerance and persecution built up during centuries cannot be so quickly removed by a few conversations between individuals of different religions most of whom are academicians. The conflicts that are raging in certain parts of the world where the religious component stirs up memories of old conflicts, charges the emotions and intensifies the struggles cannot be ignored. What is happening in the Middle East between Jews, Christians and Moslems and in North Ireland between Roman Catholics and Protestants, what happens with such alarming frequency in India and Pakistan between Hindus

and Moslems—to mention just a few places—should make us much more cautious in claiming too much too soon with reference to peace. Moats of separation cannot be too quickly transformed into bridges of reconciliation. Further, a great deal of patient work has yet to be done in clarifying fundamental concepts and attitudes if inter-religious relationships should be built on a more lasting basis than a mere desire for friendliness. With tremendous differences in historical and cultural backgrounds such fundamental terms as God, religion, faith, grace, salvation etc., are liable to be understood in very different ways so that even while we may use the same terms their content, power and direction may be very different. This, of course, is not to minimise the importance of continuing dialogues between men of different faiths but merely a word of caution to note that these are, at the moment, rather fragile and tentative attempts that should be regarded as modest and experimental beginnings that need to be carefully nurtured before expecting more tangible results.

There is, however, a tremendous interest everywhere in inter-religious dialogues. The enquiries that come in about such meetings, the press coverage of international religious gatherings—not just by religious magazines but by the secular news media including the TV—, the enthusiasm with which those invited participate in the programme and the seriousness with which the reports and publications coming out of inter-religious dialogues are studied indicate that there is a certain expectation on the part of the world as to the outcome of inter-religious dialogues. Therefore, those who are involved in planning and working for such dialogues should by no means ignore the possibilities they

open up in human relations. There are several reasons why inter-religious dialogues have come into increasing prominence during recent years. The following seem to be some of the major ones:

First, in the post-colonial years political independence has brought into sharper focus the cultural plurality within the nations of Asia and Africa. In many of these countries religious values are integrally bound up with the cultural heritage and therefore cultural renaissance and religious revival are closely related. But where religions divide people into different communities and where political alignments tend to follow religious affiliations it is felt that inter-religious dialogues can help to bring people closer together.

Second, it is being increasingly recognised that in the urgent task of nation-building and social renewal there are certain human concerns which are common to all people irrespective of their religious affiliations. Inter-religious dialogues can help in this task by challenging people of different religions to bring in the perspectives of their faiths to solve some of these common problems. What is necessary at present is not competition but cooperation between men of different faiths in the task of nation building.

Third, there are many who question the assumption that secularisation has swept away religions from the high roads of modern life. The conclusion that it is only a matter of time before the rising tide of science, technology and industrialisation will make religion an obsolete category in human life is incorrect. Apart from an artificial distinction between the sacred and the secular which destroys the unity of life and a narrow notion of

religion which hardly takes into account the more comprehensive understanding of religion in certain cultures, it does not do sufficient justice to the persistent power of religions nor to the signs of the emergence of the sacred even in countries which are highly industrialised and secularised.

Japan, for example, though the most literate and most highly advanced country in Asia in science, technology and industrialisation, has seen the birth of more than 500 religions since World War II. The persistence of traditional religions in Asia and Africa and the restatement of certain religious values to meet modern needs are also points that cannot be ignored. In many countries of the West, particularly in Europe and America, there is a revival of interest in the religions of the East and a quest for the sacred. Referring to this a *Life* magazine article says, "Never before has a single society taken up such a wide range of religions and near-religious systems at once. A variety of Eastern religions have attracted individual followers and even whole congregations". (*Life* February 2/1970, "The Quest for Spiritual Survival".) People who are dissatisfied with the consequence of secularism and alarmed at the influence of technology on human life seem to be looking for signs of the sacred that are deep and mysterious, authentic, significant and persistent which can give direction to and shape the quality of human life. In this context, therefore, inter-religious dialogues involving people from the East and the West are of particular importance.

Fourth, there is a further factor to which dialogue draws a much needed attention. This is the area of personal relationships in which people meet. The phenomenological study of religion concentrates on religious concepts and too often, the

adequacy of a religion is judged by a theoretical consideration of its ideas. But a religion is much more than its creeds formulated in particular categories. There can be no dialogue between religions; dialogue can only be between people of living faiths. This does not minimise the need for careful theological discussion of religious concepts nor ignore the different levels in which dialogues may be conducted. But one of the most important lessons those who have participated in dialogues have learnt is that it is within the context of personal relationships that dialogues can most profitably be carried out. Dialogue, surely, is much more than just a talking activity; it involves larger relationships of living together and working together. Informed understanding, critical appreciation and balanced judgement—these cannot arise except where people meet in friendliness and trust, in openness and commitment. Faster means of communication, rapid means of transportation and the possibilities open to people, particularly young people, to break through the middle walls of partition open up fresh opportunities for dialogue on the world level.

It is likely that in the coming years there will be more and more attempts both at the national and the international level to promote dialogues between people of different faiths. It is therefore important that in the light of experience gained so far we should avoid those lines which are liable to lead to confusion but strengthen those which are likely to be more creative. It would be most unwise and disastrous to build up a common religious front against the forces of materialism. That should not be the open or hidden purpose of dialogue. One should not forget that institutional religions themselves have vested

interests and have become and can become instruments of oppression and intolerance. Great care should be taken lest religions are used as tools for further dividing people. Too often, religions have allied themselves with existing political structures, economic systems and social patterns and have resisted change in the name of tradition. Prophetic criticism of unjust social structures has seldom come from institutionalised religions that have petrified in their traditions. Further, inter-religious dialogues should not lead to syncretism which may be described as a kind of fruit-salad type of religion with little nutritional value. Syncretism is an uncritical mixture of different religions. It leads to spiritual impoverishment, theological confusion and ethical impotence. To eliminate fundamental differences between religions in the interests of a shallow friendliness would be foolish. Therefore, the desire to come together in dialogue should not obscure the integrity of particular faiths. Moreover, inter-religious dialogues should not be used by any of the participants as a subtle tool for mission, that is to promote the interests of one particular faith to the detriment of others. This does not mean that the partners should hide the essential demands of their particular faiths, for that would go against genuine openness. It would be wrong, for example, to ignore that Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are all deeply involved in mission which is integral to these faiths. Now Hinduism also is involved in mission. To deny or to ignore this would be to take the oil out of their lamps. But what is of critical importance today is how men, committed to each of these faiths, could practice mission in a multi-religious world without destroying the very peace which they all seek to promote through

dialogue.

What are some of the positive guidelines that may be suggested for inter-religious dialogues that may happen with increasing frequency in the coming years? The following may be considered as some tentative suggestions:

1. The basis of inter-religious dialogue is the commitment of all partners to their respective faiths and their openness to the insights of the others. The integrity of particular religions must be recognised.

2. The objective of dialogue is not a superficial consensus or the finding of the most acceptable common factor. It should not lead to the dilution of all convictions for the sake of false harmony. It must lead to the enrichment of all in the discovery of new dimensions of Truth.

3. Dialogue should not be limited to mere academic discussions on religious matters. It may begin among specially delegated people within a limited compass and later on spread into wider circles involving a larger number of people. Living together in dialogue should help communities—particularly in multi-religious societies—to shed their fear and distrust of each other and to build up mutual trust and confidence.

4. It is important to emphasise that dialogue should be much wider than academic discussion of religious ideas. It is much more than verbal communication. Therefore other aspects of religion—the meaning of ritual, the significance of symbols and the experiences of devotion—should not be ignored. Respectful attendance at one another's worship may open up new and deeper levels of communication undreamt of before.

5. With reference to strengthening the efforts for peace the

following points may be noted:

- (a) People of different religious persuasions should be brought together to consider common human concerns in which all are involved irrespective of their religious affiliations. These may be different in different countries and social situations.
- (b) In the interest of justice and peace it is necessary for world religions to come out more openly on the side of the poor, the powerless and the oppressed. Mere quoting of Scriptures is not enough; it should be matched by deeds. Religious values that cannot be translated into social virtues are worse than useless where human needs are urgent. Inter-religious dialogues should promote deliberation and action on such common concerns.
- (c) World religious organisations should manifest greater concern to work for peace in particular situations where there are conflicts. Statements on international situations may be of less value than some "symbolic actions" by inter-religious groups in particular countries.

6. Inter-religious dialogues should also stress the need to study fundamental questions in the religious dimension of life. Religions are man's responses to the mystery of existence and quests for meaning in the midst of confusion. World religious organisations should support the long-range study of the deeper questions which today ought to be taken up not just separately by individuals of each religion, but also together in the larger interests of mankind.

I wish to conclude by quoting what I said in my report on the Ajaltoun Consultation in which people of four living faiths were involved and which to all participants was a new and rewarding experience in such dialogues on an international level. "It was not a group session of jelly-fishes where the line of demarcation is so blurred that it is difficult to see where one ends and the other begins. Nor was it a battle between porcupines rushing out of their caves to push some quills into the bodies of the opponents, with painful consequences to all concerned. It was a meeting

of people who were deeply committed to their respective faiths but who were also ready to enter into dialogue with others. For dialogue is more than just an encounter of commitments. Commitment involves both an assent and a question within oneself. The area between the 'I' and the 'thou', between 'we' and 'they', is an area of personal relationship between people sharing the burden and joy of existence where genuine dialogue demands humility and love. Dialogue therefore is both an expression of faith and a sign of hope."