

OPENING ADDRESS
TO THE HONG KONG CONFERENCE OF INTER-RELIGIO

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Not only did the Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre take upon itself the responsibility of hosting the Second Inter-Religio Conference, but its Director, Dr. Peter Lee, agreed to prepare a keynote address on the theme of the Conference. As the report printed in the previous pages of this bulletin demonstrates, that address was both foresighted in touching on many of the interests of the group assembled for the event, and a pivot around which many of the discussions revolved. We present here the text of Dr. Lee's talk in full.

I was not present at the gathering in Manila last year, but I was glad to have Mr. Sebastian Shin represent Hong Kong, on behalf of both the Catholic Commission for Non-Christian Religions and the Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre. I later listened with the keenest interest when he reported on the fellowship he enjoyed at the conference and the birth of Inter-Religio. When the first issue of *INTER-RELIGIO* came out, I could not wait to read all the reports given by the participating organizations. I was sure that the formation of the network was a significant step. What impressed me most was that these Christian organizations, all located in Asia, have rich experiences in meeting religious people outside their own faith.

Thanks to the generous gift of someone of good will and the effectiveness of friends at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, we now commence the second meeting of Inter-Religio. Tao Fong Shan considers it an honor to be the host. On behalf of Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, I bid you a warm welcome.

Now that a fellowship of Asian institutions devoted to interreligious encounter has been formed, what comes next? I suppose that is why we have this meeting.

To help us in our thinking together these few days, a theme has been chosen: "Facing Religious Pluralism in Asia: Problems, Prospects, Models." The theme confirms an obvious fact with which we are confronted: religious pluralism. And we do want to take that fact to heart.

"An obvious fact," I said. Religious pluralism is an obvious fact in that Christianity is one among a plurality of religions in the Asian settings we know

well. But the contents and meaning of that proposition are by no means self-evident.

The contents of religious pluralism vary from context to context. In one country, e.g. Japan, new religions are a lively competition to the old religions, whereas in another, Singapore, no new religions as such appear and the old religions, given equal protection under the law, seem to cling to forms only. In Indonesia it is a state policy that all citizens should believe in a Supreme Being no matter what religion they belong to, whereas the People's Republic of China, where the official ideology has no place for religious beliefs, allows the various religious groups to participate in the "United Front" (for national construction, etc.). The phenomenology of religious pluralism in the countries represented here is a fascinating field of study. We should be glad that there are several case studies at this conference.

The meaning of religious pluralism is difficult to arrive at. From what perspective do we interpret the meaning of religious pluralism in a given situation? Many of the Protestant groups in Hong Kong take an attitude of aloofness towards the non-Christian religions. Are they justified in having such an attitude? What are the implications if they simply ignore the fact that they are in a distinct minority (less than 4% of the population)? These are questions I would like to put to my fellow Protestants in Hong Kong, but, alas, very few see the point at all. I am telling you this to show that the meaning of religious pluralism is not self-evident. You who are gathered here, however, most certainly see that religious pluralism poses theological questions. We shall have ample opportunities to look into them.

I sense that not only does this group take the religiously pluralistic situations in stride, but we do not expect uniform theological answers. If it is proper to speak of setting the tone for the conference, I make bold to suggest that we shall be pluralistic in our approach to the situation of religious pluralism in Asia. It need not follow that we are so relativistic that we have nothing to say to one another; on the contrary, I expect that we have plenty to learn from one another. And, insofar as we take our Asian contexts seriously, we may even break new ground, for we need not be tied to the preoccupations of those who have never really left Western Christendom.

Allow me to adapt a biblical passage to guide us in our thinking. The text I have in mind is Matthew 6:31-33:

Do not be anxious.... But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

"DO NOT BE ANXIOUS..."

Jesus was addressing himself to those who were worried about whether they have enough to eat and to wear. These people were weighed down by their everyday concerns without putting their lives in proper perspective.

The fact that in Asia Christians find themselves surrounded by religions other than their own has created problems for some of the theologically minded brought up in the traditional mold.

One of the oldest formulae to deal with this kind of situation is to speak in terms of general and special revelations. Thus it is said that all religions besides Christianity have "general revelations," but that only Christianity has "special revelation." This formula does not tell us much, even if it may satisfy the mind's need for a neat, logical schema.

Another common tendency of the Western logical mind is to set up the issue of universalism vs. particularism. Is there any really satisfactory resolution to this issue? Except for its logical interest, is the issue valid to begin with? A work of art is always a particular creation, yet it may have universal appeal. An art critic would not trouble himself by raising the issue of universalism vs. particularism.

These are examples of what may be called "theological hang-ups" which Western-trained minds are apt to have in their confrontation with the problem of religious pluralism. There are also what I call "missiological hang-overs," which even some of the enlightened missionaries from the West cannot easily get rid of, granted they have appreciation for what they find in Asian religions.

Western missionaries sent to Asia, upon becoming acquainted with the religious background of the people in their midst, discover that some data at their disposal do not square with certain missiological assumptions they inherit; yet they still feel constrained to justify the idea of mission. For example, some evangelical-minded missionaries like to think of certain affinities between Christianity and non-Christian religions in terms of preparation for evangelism. Supposing I belonged to a religion other than Christianity, I would resent the way Christian missionaries approach my religion as a preparation for evangelization. The "fulfilment theory" does not reject non-Christian religions, nor does it treat them as a means, but it in effects lords over them, and this is bound to arouse resentment.

Recent missiologies are more sophisticated than the approaches just mentioned, but as long as a mission remains in the shadow of Western expansionism, whatever rethinking is done in that context about the relationship of Christianity to other religions is caught in a bind.

Though there are Western missionaries in our midst, and even many of the Asians among us have received Western training, yet I believe that all of us have had enough exposure to Asian religions so that we can help one another shake ourselves loose from the theological hang-ups and missiological hangovers that keep us from moving forward. Let me sum up by rewording the saying of Jesus:

In encountering religious pluralism in Asia, do not be anxious about finding neat theological and missiological formulae as they are wont to do in the West.

We need to put ourselves in the proper perspective.

"SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS"

That is the perspective in which Jesus wanted his followers to put their lives. By the same token, that is the perspective in which we should see our relationship with people of other religions.

In giving the injunction, Jesus was earnest in telling his followers that seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness is their highest good; indeed Jesus himself was on hand to open the door, so to speak. By listening to him intently, we are following a distinctly Christian directive.

We prepare ourselves for entrance into the kingdom of God by attending to the teachings of Jesus Christ. At the crucial moment, repentance or a fundamental change of heart is called for. The saying of Jesus, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," is full of crucial importance.

But all the while, our humble but active seeking is a requisite. Of course at all times God, through the Holy Spirit, is at work. There will come moments when we are conscious of our communion with God. It is not just a private relationship but participation in a divine order of things.

Good and righteous is God. The righteousness of God shows His goodness not to me alone, but to all His creation, including my neighbors who have not yet heard the name of Christ. The righteousness of God is an enabling power, encompassing all of His domain.

Please excuse these clumsy words of confession. They do not adequately express the Christian confession of faith, but I do not apologize for my Christian professions, and I do not anticipate any of you will.

I rather like Fr. Yves Raguin's unbeguiling Christian viewpoint that spirituality involves attention to relationship with God, and proper relationship with fellow beings will follow (see his *Attention to the Mystery*, New York, Paulist Press, 1982). A Jesuit who has devoted a lifetime to the study of Chinese religions, Fr. Raguin is open to Chinese spirituality and sees benefits from it for Christian spirituality. He not only talks and writes that way; he lives this kind of expanded spirituality.

With due respect to the professional status of the participants as theologians and professors, what matters most here is not an academic or "objective" study of religions but an experiential approach. Unless our relationship to God is experiential, whatever we say or write is mere intellectualization with nothing alive to communicate. By the same token, if our relationship with people of other faiths is a living encounter, words, ideas, and gestures speak from heart to heart. It is not simply a person-to-person relationship, but it involves participation in what God is doing, and meeting people of other faiths is just part of the process.

When we come into contact with people of other faiths, either in the normal course of our community living or in more deliberately planned inter-

religious activities (such as dialogue meetings), we still first seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. If that is a Christian way we are following, so be it; in fact, we cannot help but do so, and our non-Christian neighbors or partners know it. Yet this need not require that we impose ourselves upon others. We have something to give to them when they are ready for it, even as we have something to receive from them if we are open to them. And there will be occasions when we are in a common effort or search. In terms of doctrinal beliefs, I would not be surprised if I found some affinities with others, but I would be equally prepared to recognize dissimilarities between my religion and theirs. What shall we do then? There is where the opportunity for dialogue in depth begins. I suspect that sooner or later we shall come up against the Christological question. It is not for me to formulate a Christology here; suffice it to say that we need a Christology which, while accounting for one's participation in the kingdom of God through Christ, enables one to relate to others in some way even if they have not heard the name of Christ or have heard echoes of it in their religious environment, *as one's life in the faith would lead one to do*. By emphasizing those final words, I mean to say that it is the life of faith that comes before a Christological formulation even if we take the centrality of Christ seriously.

I do not mean to single out Dr. Paul Clasper for merit, but because I have understood that in his presentation on theological options he will bring in new insights from modern physics by linking them up with old wisdom recalled in Taoism, I am excited by his willingness to venture into the world of natural science when we are supposed to be treading on the familiar ground of religion only. If our minds are expansive enough, our search for the kingdom of God ever urges us on to look for new horizons, including those to which modern science may lead us.

I would like to take up a point with particular reference to Zen Buddhism. Buddhism, as we all know, does not speak of God. But Fr. J. K. Kadowaki, commenting on Matthew's passage about the birds of the air just preceding the text I have chosen for this morning, sees close affinity between the spirit breathing through the passage and Zen. He is one with the sages of old who, practising "letting go of mind and body," saw great life in all living things. Fr. Kadowaki avers:

The birds of the air are the life of God; the lilies of the field are the life of God; our life and death is the life of God. What is there to worry about? To throw off mind and body and fling one's self into the kingdom of God, to put all one's might into living in whatever way the life that comes from God impels us—isn't that the very thing that Jesus is teaching us...? [*Zen and the Bible*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p.107.]

Whenever I share the same passage with, say, a Taoist with his sense of *wuwei* (nonchalant activity), or one with a touch of Zen, even if they make

no mention of God, I see how one may move back and forth with grace from Christian spirituality to other forms of spirituality.

"AND ALL THESE THINGS SHALL BE YOURS AS WELL..."

What are "all these things"? As we know, the people to whom Jesus was speaking were anxious about such things as what to eat, what to wear, etc., i.e. daily necessities. As to thoughtful Christians who are engaged in interreligious dialogue, they are concerned, as we said, about the theological and missiological understanding of religious pluralism or interreligious encounter. These are legitimate concerns, but they will reach an impasse if they are caught in categories which do not fit the context. We may add other considerations, like the social impact of interreligious encounter and contextual theology using Asian resources.

We all look forward to the presentations with theological substance and the discussions that are stimulated thereby. It is my hope that we can break away from the theological mold and the missiological framework that we have inherited from the past. Am I being naive or frivolous? In my own theological reflection, I am really not bothered by religious pluralism, but I have to readjust my mode of consciousness. Having returned to Asian soil after many years studying abroad, I now regain the Chinese appreciation for the concrete and historical, thanks to my exposure to Chinese religions and art. Actually, that makes me feel ever more at home in the Biblical world. Isn't revelation in the Bible always concrete and historical? As a matter of fact, our Christian tradition cannot but take particularistic forms. But of course our Christian faith and way of life have universal meaning. So what is so intractable about the issue of the universal and the particular, or that of unity and diversity? To be sure, if we take historical experience seriously, a lot of work needs to be done to relate history in the Third World to Church history, but that can be done. That I am now more historically oriented than ever need not keep me from appreciating the mystical. There are mystical elements in Chinese religions as well as in Christianity. Mysticism—it is not necessarily the same in all religious traditions—is still another mode of consciousness. The fact that some people are tuned into such a mode of consciousness is all to the good, for God's sake. If I have the time and ability, someday I shall write up a nice treatise that can weave all these various strands into a theological pattern. I may or may not ever really get around to doing it, but my point is that all such things as our theological concerns over the matter of religious pluralism will be amply rewarded if we let go of ourselves and throw ourselves heart and soul into the kingdom of God.

If we are concerned about contextual theology, ancient Asian religions can become rich resource materials. I think Professor Ryu has something to enlighten us with on that subject. In cooperation with the Association of Theological Education for Southeast Asia, Tao Fong Shan will hold a series of

workshops on Asian contextual theology, and next year the emphasis will be on using Asian religious sources. It is fitting that attention be given to the social impact of interreligious dialogue. What will be so helpful is that the presentations on the subject are based on actual experiments. I surmise the presenters will be modest about their achievements, for only recently have people involved in interreligious work become active in addressing themselves to social questions. But we should not minimize the significance of their experimentations, however small in scale. We all have much appreciation for the Christian-Muslim reconciliation work that is being carried on by the Dansalan Research Centre with but a small staff and modest budget.

Let me conclude. Jesus did not think of starting a new religion as such; neither did he intend to demolish an old religion, the religion of the Jewish people and the only religion he knew. Had he gone beyond the confines of the Jewish people, he would have come into contact with other religions, e.g. Greek religions and the religions of the Egyptians. Now imagine that under those circumstances Jesus had conceived of Christianity as eventually conquering the whole world... Well, that would not have been imaginable—it would have meant dismantling one civilization after another. But I can imagine that he was still announcing the coming of the kingdom of God: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness..." I believe that such would have been the right approach.

By the same token, I think that the same approach is workable for us today as we face a plurality of religions in our world. We will find elements in a given non-Christian religion very different from the religion we know. We may even find certain beliefs repelling. At the same time we shall see features familiar enough. But it is not our primary task to judge or to conquer; rather, it is first and foremost to take seriously the injunction of Jesus: seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness for ourselves as well as for the rest. Then will come the occasions, working with people of religious traditions different from Christianity, when we can argue or erase misunderstanding, when we can reflect on the meaning of the relationship between religions in God's Providence, and when we can build up humanity spiritually and materially from where the people are. There may be some new converts to the Christian faith, but then Christianity may also meet fierce opposition. What I am saying here is nothing new, but at this moment in Asia, those of us who are not tied down by traditional approaches to non-Christian religions can do something fresh, and it helps if we can strengthen one another.