

Broadening the Horizons: Faith Formation in a World of Religious Diversity.

Geoffrey King

East Asian Pastoral Institute, Manila.

I suspect that I am invited here today because of the past reputation of the East Asian Pastoral Institute. Twenty five or thirty years ago the Institute (in the persons especially of Johannes Hofinger, Alfonso Nebreda and Jose Maria Calle) pioneered methods of religious education new in the Catholic Church, methods that involved beginning not with received dogmas but with reflection on experience. Today the Institute is no longer at the forefront of such a movement, but it remains committed to the same basic insight. Indeed, I believe all genuine learning comes from experience, and that we learn from experience only if we reflect on it.

If this is true, then crucial for our learning is what kind of experience we have. It follows then that part of education (or formation) is providing the “right” kinds of experiences, as well as providing the means to reflect on them. In this paper I would like to extend the Nebreda model by emphasising two kinds of experience: experience of being with poor and marginal people, and being with people of other faiths. After all, poor people are our neighbours everywhere in Asia, even in the flourishing “dragon” economies, and, certainly for a Christian, people of other faiths are everywhere our neighbours, except perhaps in some parts of the Philippines.

True I hope to the experience model, I can best proceed by talking about my own experience of being educated in faith.

A LIBERATING EDUCATION

I grew up at the end of the earth. You need only look at the world map to see that that is where southern Australia is. And in the 1940's it was a much more isolated and insular place that it now is. I grew up, moreover, in a working class family that lived in a somewhat remote part of the metropolitan area and that had little opportunity to travel. It was in so many ways a narrow world.

What education did for me was to expand those horizons, and in particular to expand my imagination. I became especially fascinated by the

study of history (and I remain at heart **a** historian), which transported me imaginatively to new worlds in both space and time. And my religious education (upbringing, if you like) played a crucial role in this. Irish Catholicism in Australia up to the late 1950s is often characterized as a ghetto, and there is plenty of justification for such a description. But paradoxically, I believe that Irish Catholic tradition also opened new horizons.

For one thing, to be a Catholic was to be not part of the establishment, and to be sceptical of the claims of narrow patriotism. It was an Irish archbishop who led the opposition to conscription in the war of 1914-18. Catholic schoolchildren did not salute the flag at the beginning of each school week. We did not get a half-holiday on “Empire Day” (the anniversary of Queen Victoria’s birthday). Instead, we were taught to identify with a world-wide body, the Roman Catholic Church (though we were suspicious of that word “Roman”). And our holidays were much more exotic—St. Patrick, St. John Baptist de La Salle, the Ascension of Jesus, the Assumption of Mary, All Saints. They transported us not merely to 5th century Ireland or 17th century France (though these journeys were important) but more importantly to mysterious realities within or beyond (we were not clear which) the immediate reality that confronted us.

We were moreover deeply immersed in the Catholic sacramental system. The system had its dangers—the temptation to magic or to empty ritualism, the psychological horrors of some practice of the sacrament of Penance. But at its best, and even at its imperfect, it speaks powerfully of the mystery at the heart of the world, of what one English poet (George Herbert) has called “heaven in ordinarie” and another (Gerard Manley Hopkins) “the dearest freshness of deep down things”. Going to Mass on Sundays brought colour into a grey existence, not merely through the exotic priestly vestments, the flowers, candles and sometimes incense, but more profoundly through taking us beyond the superficial appearances, putting us in touch with spiritual realities. And this was reinforced, albeit in sometimes quaint ways, through patron saints, guardian angels and all.

All this, and only part of it happened in school, constituted a liberal education, in an extension of its original European medieval sense as “the education of a free person”. Extended to mean the education of a liberated person, an education that broke some of the shackles of a tiny world, a narrow culture, a narrow nationalism, an absence of mystery. That breaking open of the imagination continues to affect me profoundly, and has laid the groundwork for some of the other breakings-open that have happened since.

Of course such further breakings-open are necessary. Otherwise one could remain in a world of pleasant fantasy coupled with vaguely liberal sentiments and a vaguely benevolent attitude to people of other cultures. A main danger is precisely that of fantasy—protection from the harsh realities of that wider world. Much better than lack of imagination, materialism, bigotry and racism, but still very limited.

If the first breaking-open happened by being exposed to Catholic culture, the second and third have happened through being exposed to the culture of the poor and the culture of other religions.

LIBERATION BY THE POOR

“The poor” is too huge, and too patronizing, a category. Let me narrow it down to one experience. In 1987 I was invited (the circumstances do not matter here) to live for a while in a home (in the real sense, not the institutional sense) for women who would otherwise have been homeless. Some had lived for years on the streets (as bag ladies, as they are sometimes called); all had problems with alcohol or other drugs; some had been involved in prostitution. I went there with great apprehension. How could I cope with an incontinent woman emptying her bowels on the living room floor? How could I talk to these people? What could I say to someone from such a different world? Plus a whole swag of nameless fears.

Surprisingly, it all turned out to be comparatively easy. One learns to cope with bodily wastes. And sometimes after supper I sat talking with one of the women for two hours or more. The nameless fears remained, moreover, not only anonymous, but unrealized. What began to happen was the homeless became for me not a category to be concerned about, but people with faces, names (like Cathy, Lil, Julie), and life histories (often pretty bizarre). In a real sense, they became my friends, and the death of Cathy, for instance, affected me much more deeply than would the death of an acquaintance or even a close colleague.

But that is to tell only part of the story. Between the surprisingly happy beginning and the happy ending there came the frustration and the disillusionment. These women could be very difficult to live with. They would, like children, refuse to eat their food, and a lot of good food got wasted. Some could fly into rages or paranoid episodes. They could seem totally ungrateful for what we were doing for them. They could be very nice to you one day and

literally not know you the next. They were selfish. They cheated at the least opportunity.

The frustrations of all this are not to be underestimated, I frequently wanted (and sometimes needed) to escape.

But such escapes can become a total escape. Faced with the difficulties, we are tempted to insulate ourselves, perhaps physically, probably emotionally. All this is familiar enough from studies of “culture shock”. After perhaps some initial fear of encountering people in a different culture, we pass typically through three stages—initial euphoria (“Isn’t it fascinating to be among all these new people”), subsequent disillusionment (“Why do these people act in such irritating ways?”), and then either, possibly, colonial insulation (trying to reproduce Olde England at the Polo Club) or, hopefully, integration. I say it again; one should never underestimate the difficulties of the second stage. One man here in Hong Kong told me that half-way through his Cantonese studies he started to hate (and he really meant “hate”) Chinese people. He speaks of undergoing a deep spiritual crisis. Happily, he is still here, and not in any expatriate ghetto, twenty years later.

In the case of the “poor”, what is the nature of the integration that I have suggested as the ideal? It surely includes a sense of solidarity, something of that friendship that I spoke about, a friendship that will never allow us to treat the poor as a problem, or to patronize them. It also includes a learning from the poor, a learning about values and about hope. Despite the all-too-often-succumbed-to temptation of the poor to seek the materialist values of the rich, these people do face issues of life and death almost every day. They face life-threatening forces of violence, curable disease, and accidents as everyday realities. In some places the threat of natural calamity is a frequent presence. “For all its benefits, modern middle-class culture pulls us from this struggle for life against death—to the point that we experience a kind of low-grade, permanent disorientation about what’s really important in life.” It’s a reason I think why, when I return to Australia from the Philippines, I find things so artificial, so “unreal”.

The sentence before last I have quoted from a provocative essay by Dean Brackley on “The Christian University and Liberation”.¹ On hope, I would like to quote him at greater length. While his argument is woven around images of dying and rising, of sin and grace, images central to the Christian

1. Dean Brackley “The Christian University and Liberation: The Challenge of the UCA”
Discovery No.2 (December 1992) 1-17

tradition, I believe that his point moves beyond narrow Christian boundaries.

In the First World we have an abundance of things. We even find solid Christians with faith and love. What the First World lacks is hope. In our heart of hearts we know that things are much worse in the world than we are prepared to admit. The poor bring that crashing home to us.

But then something wonderful and unexpected can occur: the realization that things are also much better than we ever expected. Sin abounds, but grace abounds even more. We experience this among the struggling survivors—sinners, yes, threatened with death, but hoping against all hope and frequently rising to heroic generosity.

Ignacio Ellacuria once said that the eyes of the whole world at times seemed to be focused on Central America. He believed that was because in these poor countries we see played out in stark terms what is the secret drama of all our lives—the dying and rising that is going on all around us. In this way God is working a revolution of love in the midst of indifference and death. The secret is that we cannot experience the rising unless we allow the dying to overwhelm us. But once we do, we are able to find God and the rising, even in the dying—not just in El Salvador, but in Newark and Appalachia too.

And of course we could add in Mindanao, in Bangladesh, in the Jaffna peninsula.

One further comment. No intercultural encounter should proceed in only one direction. The non-poor may need the poor more than the poor need them. But the poor cannot solve all their problems by themselves. The victims need committed educated people to take up their struggle at their side, people who can help address the structural nature of injustice. The purpose of education is not to help students become well-to-do or politically powerful. Education ought not help the students join the rich but join the poor—to walk **with** the disinherited as committed and competent agents of social change.

I hope that the point of my introducing solidarity with the poor when talking of the growth in faith in an interreligious context will be obvious enough. Faced as we are in many parts of Asia with massive threats to a truly human existence and to the integrity of the world beyond the narrow human boundaries, religions in Asia cannot maintain their own integrity unless they confront these issues of life and death. So great, moreover, are the threats that only concerted action on the part of peoples of different faiths can confront them with any effectiveness. Above all, perhaps, the threats come because of a

loss of precisely those spiritual values which have been preserved in the different religious traditions.² Without such values we too easily fall into the worship of material prosperity, and we fail to respect the sacredness of human beings and of the universe. Hence, the special contribution of the religions.

LIBERATION BY PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

Which brings me to the further point. What I have argued about achieving solidarity with the poor can be applied with only minor modifications to achieving solidarity with people of other faiths. The same stages are there—initial hesitation and reluctance, the honeymoon period of first encounters, the realization of how different others really are and the tendency to concentrate on their faults and weaknesses, and finally the choice of retreating into our religious fortress or of achieving interreligious cooperation which is both mutually enriching and of benefit to the world beyond ourselves.

Again I can underline from my experience the difficulties of the “disillusionment” stage. I speak not so much from experience of interreligious cooperation (in which perhaps I am still in the honeymoon stage) but from experience of intra-Christian ecumenism. From 1979 to 1989 I was a teacher on the United Faculty of Theology in Melbourne, a Faculty formed by the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Uniting (formerly Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian) Churches. From 1971 to 1974 I had been a student in the same faculty. I remember well those heady days of the early 70s, a time of encountering new people and new perspectives, of fascination with Luther and Wesley and their contemporary disciples. But as the years have gone by, it has become in some ways a hard slog (not helped by increasing official intransigence in my own Church) as we have discovered the depth of differences not so much in doctrinal formulations, as we have learned how much our traditions have shaped our feelings as well as our thoughts, as we have discovered the diverse significance of social and cultural factors that are not specifically religious. And if you want to see the last-names writ large, then transpose our rather comfortable Australian situation to the violence of the north of Ireland.

I need hardly point out that each of these same potential sources of disillusionment is more potently present when we move from Christian ecumenism to interreligious cooperation. The world-views are more diverse,

2. As has been argued at eloquent length by Aloysius Pieris, in, for instance, many of the essays in *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York, 1988)

the political factors more obdurate, the history of violence even longer. Throwing up hands in despair can seem the appropriate gesture.

And yet I see in my experience in the United Faculty of Theology a great source of hope. The experience is one that has immensely enriched me. I have learned a lot from Martin Luther. My understanding of who Jesus is has been shaped in great part by a modern disciple of John Wesley. Surprisingly perhaps my understanding of sacramentality has been helped by John Calvin. And perhaps more important than all this is the amount we take for granted in our work with one another, things that would have been hardly conceivable for an Australian Catholic forty years or less ago.

So much of this, moreover, has come about not immediately through intellectual exchange, but through the forging of friendships, through seeing the simple holiness of some of these friends and through working together at common problems—whether they be so mundane as coping with endemic lack of classroom space, or so distressing as dealing with a case of sexual harassment.

I have already argued that the imperative of interreligious cooperation comes in great part not from a simple desire for greater closeness, but rather from the need to work together at common problems. In this case, not the tractable problems of running an educational institution, but the massive problems of poverty, injustice, environmental destruction. Positively put—working for peace, justice and the integrity of creation. Also I believe my point about the forging of friendships is also true here.

Just as with meeting with the poor, meeting with brothers and sisters of other faiths will (I hope) lead not simply to understanding but to new friendships. The BIRA IV/12 meeting organized by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference put this well:

True friends are best placed to stand together in confronting the great human issues and problems.

True friendship involves risk. To risk friendship is to risk rejection and misunderstanding. Hence, it is most likely to occur between people who are able to recognise and admit to each other their weakness and inadequacy, but who also recognise that they are gifted, gifted perhaps in many different ways. Such people see gifts as something to be shared—to be given, to be received, to be responded to.³

In such meetings, and especially in such friendship, we come moreover to know ourselves. It is true in both one-to-one relationships and in intercultural

3. BIRA IV/12, 4.2-4.3

contacts that we discover our identity in relationship. I think that I have a greater appreciation of Australian culture because I have lived some years in the Philippines. As well as having become more critical of aspects of Australian culture. Likewise, my ecumenical involvement has made me more appreciative of the Catholic position (and perhaps more critical of it).

And in getting to know others, in having our fears confronted, our imaginations expand, our horizons broadened, we come in contact with the mystery of the Divine. Three writers who have helped in my appreciation of this are Karl Rahner, Martin Buber and Nicholas Lash. Let me quote from each of them.

First Rahner, at least in part taking up the observation that people (ourselves included) are more mysterious the more we get to know them. “The infinite horizon of human questioning is experienced as a horizon which recedes further and further the more answers I can discover.”⁴

And Lash with Buber:

“The relation to a human being is the proper metaphor for the relation to God” (Buber). There is no way of *getting to know* another human being except through the risk of relationship; except through that cumulative discipline of practical, mundane and often painful dispossession in which “information” surpasses itself and becomes true knowledge as the fruit, and, not merely the precondition, of love. This is how we come to know each other (not only in domestic friendship, but also in social solidarity) and in the measure that we come to know each other in this way we may come, in that knowledge, to know the mystery of God himself.⁵

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR FORMATION IN FAITH

What then does all this say about education or formation in faith? I cannot suggest answers in the form of programmes of instruction, but simply want to offer a few thoughts about the shape of any programme. Happily, I might add, some of my Jesuit confreres and their co-workers have worked out a more detailed model in the *Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm*, a document which forms the basis for a series of training programmes.⁶

First, I believe that education should not be so much liberal as liberating—liberating from the confines of our own place, culture, religious tradition,

4. Karl Rahner *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 32

5. Nicholas Lash *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London:SCM, 1988) 275

6. I have also found much that is helpful (despite the limitations of a largely Western context) in Michael Paul Gallagher *Free to Believe: Ten Steps to Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987)

and hence, from our own prejudices, and also from our own fears of the unknown and of the other.

Second, I believe that even education specifically in a religious tradition—information about its beliefs, initiation into its rituals, growing up in its ethos—can be to a degree liberating. I simply recall my own experience of growing up as an Australian Catholic.

My third point concerns not so much education of children but late adolescents and young adults. It must include the opportunity to meet poor or marginal people and people of other faiths, to share somewhat in their lives, hopefully to form friendships with some of them. Such a process is likely to go through the stages I have already described—hesitancy, honeymoon, disillusionment, integration (hopefully). This can only proceed fruitfully if those being educated are able to reflect on their experience, and this means that they must be accompanied by educators.

In most of our countries, of course, meeting with people of other faiths is simply inevitable. It will surely happen at school or college. But what I am suggesting is a meeting that goes beyond being in the same classroom or going to the disco together (not that these are to be despised). The sort of meeting that involves confronting the important realities in life. It might mean visiting each other's place of worship. But more likely, it can happen in confronting problematic social realities. In particular, if it occurs in together meeting poor and marginal people, it may develop into more profound friendship. The two kinds of meeting that I am suggesting in fact come together.

All this is to suggest that the kind of experience on which our knowledge of God is based is not "religious experience" in the narrow sense of the term. Rather, it is the experience of somehow working for the attainment of dignity and freedom, the fashioning of patterns of personal relationship in which no group or individual is reduced to the status of an object. Indeed, it is the working for any growth in relationship, in self-understanding, and in true knowledge of each other.⁷

To conclude I cite one story from the early Christian tradition which is about meeting a needy foreigner from a different religious tradition and learning from her, having one's horizons expanded by her, being taken by her beyond some deep and harshly expressed prejudices to a new way of service. Unfortunately the point of the story has often been clouded by a lopsided belief

7. See Lash *Easter in Ordinary* passim and especially 291-2

in Jesus' perfection, but forget about that belief and the point is clear.

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then an Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, sir, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a

demon." But he did not answer her at all. All his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him saying, "Sir, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, sir, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Poem for the Birth of Christ

Liam Fitzpatrick

*To the child born among animals, serenity?
Rank breathing of ox and donkey
no deliverance from suffocating reality,
or freedom from trash, earthly and heavy,
the heart overburdened with gravity
and the agonized endurance of divinity.
We spurned His transcendence of humanity
and animals, we, called for death in depravity.*

*Even this was foreseen by sublime premonition:
our glittering garments of destitution,
the toxic carnival, inebriation,
satellite skies gone black with transmission
that leave no room for beatific vision,
and we, luxurious beasts, have we made provision
for redemption, reflection, regeneration?
Shown, to the child among animals, contrition?*

*O you who built this city, grinning and golden,
He is born among you still. Behold him.*