

Interreligious Dialogue

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FROM THE BEGINNING of Protestant missionary activity in Japan there was an emphasis on cooperative endeavors of various kinds, including scripture translation. The early attempt to establish a Japanese church on a broad “catholic” basis rather than on a narrow denominational foundation was not successful, but there were consultations between mission boards and missionaries in an attempt to avoid duplication of efforts and to reach mutual understanding regarding areas of ministry. Organizations were established where conversation among various church traditions was encouraged and, during the war, those varied traditions were united (albeit as a result of outside pressure) into one church. After the war, as certain groups separated from the forced union, opportunities for ongoing dialogue within the Christian community were provided by the National Christian Council, missionary organizations, conferences, seminars, etc.

Recognizing the value of dialogue between Calvinists, Armenians, Lutherans and Anabaptists, between advocates of Biblical inerrancy, verbal, plenary or other concepts of inspiration as well as between those of different ethnic or educational backgrounds and of contrasting personalities, the question remains whether or not such dialogue should be carried on by Christian missionaries with believers or teachers of other religions. If so, what is the justification for such a dialogue? What is the purpose and what are the presuppositions, the dangers and benefits of interreligious dialogue? This paper will seek to

address these issues from the standpoint of a proponent of such dialogue who has been engaged in it on a limited scale for over three decades.

DEFINITION

The English word “dialogue” comes from the Greek noun *dialogismos* and is related to the verbs *dialogizomai* and *dialegomai*, all of which are combinations of “through” and “speak.” These Greek terms may denote a kind of speaking within oneself, or reasoning, a kind of “dialogue” that all thinking people regularly engage in but is more commonly used in relation to speaking between two or more persons who exchange opinions, reason together, discuss, debate or dispute. In the New Testament, it is used to signify the mental state of Mary when she heard the strange salutation of the angel (Luke 1:29), of the inner thoughts or reasonings of those seeing Jesus’ deeds (5:22; 6:8), and of the disputing of Jesus’ disciples among themselves (9:36). It is often used of Paul’s reasoning in synagogues and public places with Jews and other unbelievers (Acts 17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8f). (Incidentally, I prefer the Japanese term *mishinja*, literally, “not yet believer,” to the harsher English term “unbeliever.”)

The English word “dialogue” denotes a conversation, an exchange of ideas or opinions. Although the term is not used in relation to Jesus, his conversation with the Pharisee, Nicodemus (John 3:1ff), the Samaritan woman (4:7ff), the Roman centurion (Luke 7:2ff) and the Syrophenician

mother (Mark 7:25ff) may be considered "dialogues."

The Old Testament contains many dialogues between God and people (Abraham, Moses, psalmists and prophets, for example) and between people (Job and his friends, certain prophets and their contemporaries).

The incarnation itself manifests a concern on the part of God to speak in a very concrete way to people who may or may not be ready to listen to or perceive his Word.

Dialogue in the New Testament is not limited to the reasonings of Paul with the "not yet believing" Jews or Gentiles. Within the Christian Church itself a form of dialogue was carried on regarding the important issue of the role of the Old Testament law, with its rite of circumcision, dietary regulations and observing of holy days, in the Christian life. Such questions on which believers held very diverse opinions were not avoided but confronted and discussed. As a result factions, divisions and heresies developed and have continued until today. Some divisions are based on fundamental differences which cannot be overlooked, but others are related to quite minor matters, the result of misunderstandings or personal, emotional involvement. Until persons with their various opinions, beliefs or perspectives engage in an honest dialogue, the true character of the differences are often not grasped. Dialogue within the Christian community has been generally promoted in recent decades to the mutual enrichment of the parties involved. In the global village in which we now live and with the increased contact between formerly distant cultures and religions, an attempt to at least correctly understand those with different customs and beliefs is a pressing necessity in the sphere of religion as well as in society at large.

In a broad sense of the term, the very fact that a missionary lives among people of a different religion establishes what the Roman

Catholic Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue has called a "dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations." A second kind of dialogue is a "dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people." The "dialogue of religious experience" involves persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, sharing their respective modes of "prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the absolute." This paper, however, will focus on what is termed the "dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values."¹

PURPOSE

It is necessary from the beginning to clearly elucidate the purpose of interreligious dialogue. Dialoguers are not included in the divinely appointed offices noted in Ephesians 4, where the list includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. The Apostle Paul would probably have fit into each category, but there seemed to be a different type of ministry related to each of these offices within the church. While "building up the body of Christ" was the common aim, different methods were used in accordance with the particular "gifts" of the individuals. Christian leaders engaged in interreligious dialogue may function within the church as prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers with the aim of strengthening the church, but when they meet with leaders of other religions, they must recognize the different dimension in which they are operating. At times, indeed, they may speak as prophets or teachers, but the offices of evangelist and pastor are not appropriate here.

The purpose of interreligious dialogue is not to convert, to win new believers nor to build them up in the faith. Rather the purpose is to understand the faith of another and to share one's own beliefs. Jerry Gill has contrasted apologetics with dialogue. He characterizes the apologetic approach as a one-sided presentation, whether aggressive or defensive. All religions may similarly engage in their own kind of apologetics. But the dialogical posture is to listen and share. "We must remember," he writes, "that even believers 'see through a glass darkly,' and there is no inherent contradiction between confidence and humility."²

According to John V. Taylor, dialogue "means a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the differences, the contradictions, and the mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking. The object of this dialogue is understanding and appreciation, leading to further reflection upon the implication for one's own position of the convictions and sensitivities of the other tradition."³

Along with the aim of seeking to honestly understand the faith of the other, the Christian seeks to give a faithful witness to his or her own convictions. Lesslie Newbigin has written that "the purpose with which the Christian enters into dialogue with people of other faiths" is to be an "obedient witness to Jesus Christ." He further makes clear that "this does not mean that the purpose of dialogue is to persuade the non-Christian partner to accept the Christianity of the Christian partner. Its purpose is not that Christianity should acquire one more recruit. On the contrary, obedient witness to Christ means that whenever we come with another person (Christian or not) into the presence of the Cross, we are prepared to receive judgment and correction, to find that our Christianity hides within its appearance of obedience the reality of disobedience. Each meeting with a non-

Christian partner in dialogue therefore puts my own Christianity at risk."⁴

To consider interreligious dialogue, therefore, as a means of evangelism is a confusion of categories. The aim is to learn, to understand the beliefs of another while making a lucid explanation of one's own. There is no need to water down or refrain from expressing one's genuine convictions. As John Cobb has written, "The best dialogue occurs when the partners are deeply convinced of many things. Truth is best approached not by the absence of convictions but by submitting strong convictions to the light of criticism."⁵ Those who are unsure of their position or whose convictions are based simply on dogmatic, authoritarian pronouncements have not been given the gift for interreligious dialogue, which involves humble listening, sympathetic understanding and reasoned explanation.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

Ted Peters, professor of systematic theology at Pacific Lutheran Seminary, began an article entitled "A Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue" with the following description.

It happened at a recent interreligious gathering. At the other end of the building, in the meditation room, some members of our group were learning Zen techniques while the rest of us sat in the Gothic chapel waiting for mass to begin.

Suddenly a commotion broke out in the chancel. A Catholic priest from Tibet grabbed the microphone and was shouting something about Jesus Christ being the 'only way, the truth and the life!' A couple of other priests chased him around, trying to grab the microphone. Then two men leaped out of the pews and joined the melee. I thought to myself, 'Yes, now I see that religious wars are possible.'

When the attackers found they couldn't bodily throw the interloper out without losing every sense of dignity and decorum, the presiding priest asked us all to leave and announced that mass would be held in another room.

He was hoping that the self-appointed orator would lose his audience. Most left. I stayed, and so did a dozen others. We listened to the priest's impassioned rebuke. We were selling out our Christian faith, he said. The very fact that we were conversing with 'Buddhist idolators' was evidence that we had lost our commitment to the Christ of God 'who alone can bring us out of darkness into the light.' To conclude, he bowed and prayed for our souls.

This dramatic episode reminded me of the pressing need for a coherent theology of interreligious dialogue.⁶

Dr. Peters then proceeds to present three different positions from which one might approach interreligious dialogue. The first he calls, "confessional exclusivism" which he presumes was the position of the renegade Tibetan priest. According to this view, religious insights of non-Christian religions cannot be seriously considered by one who recognizes the centrality of Jesus Christ and the absoluteness of the divinely inspired revelation in him. To those holding this view, interreligious dialogue is not only useless but positively dangerous, apt to lead participants astray by contaminating the truth with lies.

The second view, which he finds in the writings of John Hick and Paul Knitter, he designates "supra-confessional universalism." In this view, religions are different roads up the same mountain or to the same center. One transcendent divine reality is partially revealed under different names in both Christianity and non-Christian religions. From this philosophical perspective, Christians should abandon or tone down their claims about the uniqueness of Christ and of salvation through him alone. In order

to facilitate interreligious conversation, it is advisable to emphasize "the Godhead" rather than Christ.

Dr. Peters questions the assumption that the various religious traditions include partial revelations of the same divine reality. This cannot be affirmed, he maintains, until dialogue takes place to see if it is actually so. Furthermore, he adds, "by asking the Christian partners in the conversation to give up their confessional stance, the supra-confessionalists de-Christianize Christianity, thereby dissolving the very dialogue they wish to promote."

John Cobb would agree, for he has written: "To sacrifice belief in the incarnation for the sake of dialogue would not only impoverish us but would also take from us our most precious potential gift to the dialogue partner. But," he continues, "there is no need for such a sacrifice in order to enter dialogue."⁷

The third view presented by Dr. Peters, which he affirms (and with which I concur), he calls "confessional-universalism", which he describes as follows:

This position affirms the claims of the Christian faith but is open to the insights of other faiths. It is confessional, because it affirms the gospel of Jesus Christ as borne through history by the Christian tradition. It is universal in two ways: first, because it regards its claims as ultimate (valid for all people of all times and places); and second, because it believes that there is more truth to be learned and that dialogue has the potential for expanding our understanding.

The confessional-universalist model permits Christian conversants to remain Christian, to retain their confession of centrality of Jesus Christ. It avoids preempting the dialogue by making an appeal to an already posited divine reality, which allegedly stands behind, under or as the as yet unrecognized 'center' of

each of the distinctive historical religions.⁸

Dr. Peters' article includes four conditions for making interreligious dialogue meaningful and fruitful: (1) Each party to the dialogue should have a distinctive position to put forth; (2) participants should be genuinely disposed to listen sympathetically to the positions of others; (3) the disposition of love is required, by which we impute integrity to other participants and seek to genuinely share our own faith; and (4) time and stamina is needed to discuss matters in depth and with thoroughness.

He concludes with the observation that, as a result of dialogue, we may have to change our minds. "But there is absolutely nothing to fear on this score. If the God in whom we believe is in fact the creator and reconciler of the cosmos, then there is no truth—if it be genuine truth and not just partisan propaganda—that we could ever learn that could possibly lead us away from God."⁹

Over the centuries, Christians in general and Christian missionaries in particular have viewed non-Christian religions in various ways. At times, the beliefs of others have been completely ignored as the Christian message was proclaimed regardless of the religious or cultural milieu. When non-Christian religions are considered evil, the work of the devil, Christians feel bound to try to demolish them. Needless to say, such a self-righteous, judgmental attitude has provoked a malignant concept of the character of Christianity that many of us wish to change. The spirit of the Crusades in the tenth to twelfth centuries may find support in the Old Testament commands to exterminate the Canaanites, but it is impossible to reconcile this with the spirit of Christ.

In more recent decades, "separated brethren" within the Christian family have begun talking together and having fellowship

with one another. In some cases, the result has been a healing of divisions and a uniting or reuniting of groups that were previously considered incongruous. It was found that the gaps separating them were not unbridgeable, that differences were not always doctrinal or theological and that even when they were, the divergence was not as great as had been imagined. Earlier divisions that were based on personal, ethnic, or regional differences, on a transcendent historical situation, on different methods, or on different interpretations of certain Bible passages had become hardened and, at times, misrepresented. One result of the ecumenical movement (in which I include the International Congresses on World Evangelization that met in Lausanne and Manila) is the recognition that conversation, fellowship or dialogue with those with different beliefs, opinions, interpretations or emphases may be mutually enriching. Differing emphases need not be mutually exclusive; they can contribute to a deeper understanding of a many-faceted truth. Not only does one's understanding of the position of the other increase; one is better able to grasp more fully the meaning of one's own tradition. Movements to bring together divergent elements within the Christian Church have stimulated similar attempts to converse with believers of other religions. But if the underlying, unexpressed motivation for such conversation is simply to better understand the enemy in order to more effectively defeat him, the effort is neither honorable nor conducive to genuine dialogue.

Professor Leonard Swidler of Temple University, who has been engaged in interreligious dialogue for many years, has written a "Dialogue Decalogue" which he calls "Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue."¹⁰ He begins by making a clear distinction between dialogue and debate. Dialogue is not confrontational. The aim is neither to persuade nor convert but to learn,

“to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality.” Participants in dialogue must be completely honest and sincere and they must assume the complete honesty and sincerity of the other partners. They must not compare their ideals with their partner’s practice, but rather their ideals with their partner’s ideals and their practice with their partner’s practice. Here, I am reminded of the words of Robert E. Speer, whose conservative theological perspective was very influential in my early study of non-Christian religions. In his book, *The Light of the World*, written in 1911, he emphasized that any comparison between Christianity and non-Christian religions “must be absolutely just and fair. If it is not just and fair, it is not Christian, and no truly Christian result can flow from it. We must not judge any religion by standards and methods whose application to our own religion we would resent.”¹¹

Professor Swidler goes on to say that the participants in interreligious dialogue must define themselves. They are not to be defined by non-believers. “Only the Jew, for example, can define from the inside what it means to be a Jew. The rest can only describe what it looks like from the outside.” Dialogue, he maintains, can take place only between equals. If “the Muslim views Hinduism as inferior, or if the Hindu views Islam as inferior, there will be no dialogue,” he states. Mutual trust and a self-critical attitude are also important. One must be willing to humbly accept criticism of one’s own tradition and recognize its weaknesses when viewed from a different perspective.

John V. Taylor notes the difficulty of honestly recognizing and living with contradictions, whether between our beliefs and those of others or the unresolved opposites in ourselves. “Instinctively we either try to destroy what is opposed to our understanding of truth or we pretend the antithesis is unreal.”

It takes a high degree of maturity [he continues] to let the opposites co-exist without pretending that they can be made compatible. It takes the same maturity to respect an opinion that conflicts with one’s own without itching to bring about a premature and naive accommodation. I suppose this is what is entailed in loving one’s enemies. One has to appreciate the reason for their opposition, grant its integrity, and deal honestly with its challenges, without surrendering any of one’s own integrity or diminishing the content of one’s examined convictions. And there will generally have to be a great deal of that kind of loving before we can expect any genuine reconciliation of ideas and beliefs. The loving which is expressed through the attempt to listen and understand and honour, through the frank recognition and appreciation of convictions that deny one’s own, through the opening of one’s imagination to the real otherness of the other, is, in my view, the function of interfaith dialogue.¹²

DANGERS

Those who consider other religions demonic and fear contamination from engaging in serious conversation with sincere believers of those religions will, of course, refuse to participate in such dialogue. Others will, for various reasons, not be comfortable engaging in interreligious dialogue, including those who are unsure of their own faith, who have never developed their own rational understanding of the beliefs they have accepted or who are unable to intellectually articulate their convictions.

While I recognize the fears that arise in the minds of some that engaging in interreligious dialogue will result in a weakening of the evangelistic spirit and the dangers implied in such words as compromise, relativism, syncretism, heresy, apostasy, I will leave the discussion of such dangers to those who wish to raise them, but I do not

fear that a genuine (biblical) Christian faith will suffer from a dialogical encounter with believers in other religions and I would rather conclude this paper emphasizing the benefits of such an encounter.

BENEFITS

In this section, the focus changes from a theoretical emphasis, quoting from the works of others, to a more practical outworking of the theory based on personal experience. Before coming to Japan, in order to gain a basic insight into the religious or philosophical outlook of the Japanese people, I chose as the subject of my seminary thesis: “A Comparison of ‘Salvation’ in the Amida Sects of Japanese Buddhism and Christianity,” and “Marxism and Religion” for my graduate school thesis. Using only English-language reference materials, I was able to gain a preliminary understanding of the major religious (Pure Land or Jōdo Buddhism) and social (Marxism) influences in the Japan of that day. After arriving in this country, however, I recognized the need for living, personal contact and Japanese source material to attempt to understand the thinking or faith of this people.

Research for my doctoral dissertation, written in Japan and related to the so-called New Religions, included visiting the headquarters of the various religions, speaking with founders, leaders or important teachers there as well as attending meetings on the local level and talking with local leaders or lay believers. I also had limited contact with Buddhist and Shinto priests. In the process of such interreligious conversations, I became aware of the fact that many religious leaders not only had misconceptions related to Christianity but they were ill-informed about Japanese religious traditions other than their own as well. (And some were not that clear regarding their

own tradition either.) I also felt the need to consider how I would respond to the same kinds of quite direct, and sometimes embarrassing, questions regarding Christian theory or practice that I posed to them, if they were to interrogate me.

As a result, I began a “Religion/Culture Discussion Group” (*Shūkyō Bunka o Kangaeru Kai*) that has met monthly for almost thirteen years. (The April meeting this year was number 136.) The stated purpose of this group is: “to gain deeper understanding of each other’s viewpoints through honestly expressing one’s beliefs without trying to force them onto others, through respectfully listening to the views of others and through mutual discussion.” The meetings are listed in the meeting column of local newspapers and regular attenders receive postcard notices. There are always a variety of religious or non-religious backgrounds represented. It is our custom to have a speaker, whether from within the group or an invited guest, give a talk for about one hour and then have a discussion period of a little more than an hour. Over the years, speakers have included Buddhist priests from Jōdo, Jōdo Shin, Nichiren and Sōtō sects, Shinto priests, Christian pastors or priests, leaders or believers in Tenrikyō, Ōmoto, Risshō Kōseikai, Islam and other smaller religious groups, as well as avowed atheists.

And what have been the benefits? I have come to a deeper understanding of people, of the thinking and faith of Japanese, who due to their culture, education, or social surroundings have come to view life and the world in an entirely different way than I do. I have also come to a deeper understanding of myself and my own faith as I have interacted with those with different beliefs. I have discarded some of my stereotypes related to the beliefs, practices and believers

in other religions. Various aspects of my own traditional, conservative, westernized, provincial, "logical", comfortable theology have had to be altered as a result of this interaction on a personal level. My understanding of God has been enlarged and deepened and new facets of Truth have been revealed. I have also been provided with a regular opportunity to give a clear presentation of my Christian faith to those present, many of whom would never enter a church and whose impressions of Christianity and Christian methods have been very negative. I have been given the opportunity to speak at gatherings of other religious groups and to contribute articles to periodicals of other religions.

Some participants in this dialogue have manifested an earnest, honest, open spirit, a humble willingness to learn. Others display the narrow, dogmatic attitude of a closed mind. I have been forced to recognize the difficulty for most people of combining genuine tolerance with firm conviction. Those with the seemingly strong conviction tend to close their ears while others speak and only seek to convince others of their higher truth, while some of the so-called "tolerant" souls have no conviction of their own, so they agree with whatever is said. I have also been embarrassed to discover in the attitudes of believers in other religions a more Christian spirit than I myself manifest at times, and I have been forced to consider whether the heart of the Christian faith is related to a verbal, propositional statement or a certain spirit that is communicated by life.

I am thankful that, while engaged in this interreligious dialogue, I have not been able to retreat to an "ivory tower." As the pastor of a Japanese church, I am forced to keep my feet on the ground by preparing sermons, Bible studies and other talks for a small, provincial, very common congregation. Certainly my messages and methods have been influenced by the contact with the "not-yet believers", but I believe that they are

more in keeping with the spirit of Christ as a result.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I will reiterate that God has seen fit to bestow certain gifts upon certain people to enable them to effectively accomplish the particular work given them to do. All Christians do not possess the gifts to be prophets, teachers, pastors or evangelists or to engage in interreligious dialogue in a formal sense. It is well for us to recognize our own gifts and limitations and to work accordingly, without condemning others for pursuing a different type of ministry in line with their gifts. We need to remember what group of people received the sternest rebuke of Jesus and why. It was not the believers of other religions but the religious leaders of God's chosen people who were so sure of their own theology and biblical interpretation that they missed the Truth himself.

NOTES

¹ "Dialogue and Proclamation (Excerpts)," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* vol. 16, no. 2 (April 1992), p. 84.

² Jerry Gill, *Faith in Dialogue, A Christian Apologetic* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), p. 12.

³ John V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue" in *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), p. 212.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Lutheran Church in America, 1975), p. 11.

⁵ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 45.

⁶ Ted Peters, "A Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue," *The Christian Century* October 15, 1986, p. 883.

⁷ Cobb, op. cit., p. 45.

⁸ Peters, op. cit., p. 884.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 885.

¹⁰ Leonard Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), pp. 13–16.

¹¹ Robert E. Speer, *The Light of the World: A*

Brief Comparative Study of Christianity and Non-Christian Religions (Boston: The Central Committee on the United Study of Missions, 1911), p. 305.

¹² Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 213.