

WE WORSHIP MANY GODS

Christian Witness in the Midst of a Global Religious Pluriformity

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I was kneeling on the rice straw mat in one of the small temples of Shimōsō-nakayama, a shinto-buddhist center at about one hour's ride from my place near Tokyo. In front of me, a couple was kneeling and praying silently to Kannon-sama, the buddhist goddess of mercy. The golden image, a real piece of antique art, smiled wordlessly. The small worship hall was very quiet. The afternoon summer breeze, caressing my face, brought along the strong fragrance of the many colorful flowers, blossoming in many colors in the little temple garden. Everything exhaled quietness and peace, accentuated by the smile of Kannon-sama. I did not utter a prayer to any god. I was just sitting there, engulfed by the Holy. My heart was at peace.

Do we know our neighbor?

The famous historian of the religion and theologian Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote once the following challenging heavily phrased statement: "The time will soon be with us when a theologian who attempts to work out his position unaware that he does so as a member of a world society in which other theologians, equally intelligent, equally devout, equally moral are buddhists, hindus, muslims, and

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unaware that his readers are likely perhaps to be buddhists or to have muslim husbands or hindu colleagues, such theologian is as out of date as is one who attempts to construct an intellectual position unaware that Aristotle has thought about the world or that existentialists have raised questions, or unaware that the earth is but a minor planet in a galaxy that is vast only by terrestrial standards."¹ In other words, do we really know our neighbors? And is this question valid not only for missionaries expatriate and native as well? What does it mean to be a shintoist, a buddhist a hindu, etc.? How does a centuries old non-christian heritage continue to feed their concrete daily lives? Modern day media demand attention for all of them and nobody can escape the influence of the many cultures, permeating the life of small communities as well of great and powerful nations.

Religious plurality on a global scale

There have always been many religions and most of them will be with us till the end of time. In this age of internationalization as well of an ever growing nationalism one cannot think about the coming about a one world culture. The fact that there is one technology, spreading throughout all countries, does not all mean that the basic distinctive features of all the peoples on earth will disappear. Which people, when accepting greedily the most recent technological acquisitions, does not emphasize at the same time with pride their own roots?

Before, religions were more or less confined within certain geographical areas. We accepted it for granted that Europe and North America were Christian continents; the Indian subcontinent was the womb of Hinduism; East and Southeast Asia gave shelter to Buddhism; subsaharan Africa and the Pacific were the home of the archaic religions; China was the confucian country par excellence and the rest of the world was dominated by Islam. In a certain sense, there existed a kind of natural historical isolationism.

But today, enormous migration processes are developing. There are millions of muslims in western Europe; we find buddhist and hinduists in the western hemisphere and even new religious sects of

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity*, (New York, Harper and Row, 1976), 9.

obscure origin and content recruit members all over the world and not without success.² It is equally true that Christianity has broken through its earlier geographical boundaries and is now present all over the world in many different forms. Curiously enough, it is weakest in Asia, the continent that has given birth to the great world religions. And just like in the case of Christianity after the great discoveries by Portugal, Spain, Holland, England, etc., we see today the growth of a renewed consciousness in the world religions that believe to have a message for the whole of mankind. They become more missionary minded than ever. This brings to the fore the necessity of a serious analysis of the task of Christianity in the post modern world.³

Centuries ago, it was Christianity that went the way from west to non-west with an unrelented enthusiasm. Today, all the religions are present at the great crossroads of the world and Christianity has to find a place for itself in the midst of the other religions. The Second Vatican Council has given expression to its concern of world mission of its presence among the many religious beliefs in many of its texts and decisions.

All this makes us, Christians, a bit more modest and, as believers of the message of Christ, we have become more attentive to what is really finding expression in this religious plurality. And this is an enormous challenge for the christian consciousness and the christian mission. The reason why is that it is not difficult to discover that the many religions, philosophies and ideologies try to give answer to what moves the human heart most: what is life all about; what is its goal; what is the final outcome of life; what is precisely the meaning of the messages of the many prophets past and present? If people of different faiths cannot always respond adequately to these questions—only theologians and priests think they can!—they feel that the answer is somewhere in their religious tradition, that are for them, like for their ancestors, avenues of faith and salvation.

² Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publ. House, 1991); A. F. Walls and Wilbert R. Schenk, eds., *Exploring New Religious Movements. Essays in Honor of Harold W. Turner*, (Elkhart, Ind., Mission Focus Publ.), 1990.

³ Hans Kung, *Christianity. Essence, History and Future*, (New York, Continuum, 1995), 773-789.

Is there a need for a renewed christian witness?

The foregoing observation brings inevitably up the question: *Is there a need for a renewed christian witness in the midst of this global religious pluriformity?* The answer is yes, of course.

Our experience, past and present, has taught us an unforgettable lesson: pitting religions against each other is the most dangerous and degrading play that one can do. Religions can be very disastrous. Even nowadays, there are not a small number of spots in the world where religion is at least one of the factors contributing to war and death. Faith and fratricide often seen to go hand in hand. We know that religion should be used otherwise. Fortunately, since about thirty years a new attitude among a good number of religions has grown up or is being born. One of the main impulses for this change in the catholic Church was Vatican II that came up, among others, with an astounding statement on the relationship of the Church with the non-christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*). It is but a sketchy outline of a new theology of religions. It has become a starting point for a renewed view of the other religions and their role in human life. It has become one of the starting points for a renewed reflection, especially of missionary activity, witness, evangelization and inter-religious dialogue. A further impulse was given through the creation of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, the Pontifical Council for a renovation of the Congregation for the Evangelization of the peoples. They have mostly subcommissions in the national bishops' conferences and have greatly stimulated the already existing research centers for mission, evangelization and interreligious dialogue and have also led to the creation of new study centers. This catholic initiative was paralleled by similar steps taken by the World Council of churches and of the central organizations of the other religions. Rome and Geneva have done a lot of work during the last thirty years and their efforts have been rewarded accordingly.

But also the other religions have to be praised for their efforts. The countries where the different religions have been working together in dialogue are in Asia certainly India and Sri Lanka, much more than for example Japan where the dialogue though rather frequent, has remained largely focusless. The reason why India and Sri Lanka have been more successful is that they seem to be very well aware where the major point is when it comes to organized religion, namely salvation.

The major point is salvation

What is the basis on which missionary activity, evangelization on interreligious dialogue, etc. can be built? Is there a fact, common to all religions, of which we can say: "From here we can start discussing and acting for concrete goal?" The seriousness of this question is unfortunately not well enough understood so that there exist a danger that people end up into a friendly but meaningless chat, heartfelt handshakes or polite bows, and worst of all, in selfish action that brings to light hidden agendas that should not be there.

It should be well understood that this basis may not be a non-existent abstract philosophical thing, because abstraction means precisely irreality. Therefore, our common human nature that we possess with people of other faiths provides no basis at all. Human nature does not exist in fact; there are only concrete buddhists, muslims, christians, hinduists, etc. who, because of their culture, religion, personal choice or social upbringing, happen to be the adherents of a specific religion or view of life. In other words, religions and cultures *inform*, built, create human beings into what they are, and without what they are, their culture, religion or ideology do not exist. Even a humanist is convinced that there is an ultimate goal or an Ultimate Reality that he/she is not yet, namely to be fully MAN or WOMAN or to be fully HUMAN with capital letters.

In our connections with others, we must always be fully aware that we are dealing with living people with a history, tradition, character and particularities. With these people we enter into a dialogue of life *the way they are and the way we are*, and what we are is based on our religious or ideological convictions. The focus of this conviction is always: "What is salvation for the buddhist, the hinduist, the muslim, the christian?" It is also clear that the answer to this question will reveal great differentiations and great similarities. To sum up the most important ones: for the muslim it is absolute obedience to Allah, the powerful and merciful; for the hindu and the buddhist it means, generally speaking, the experience of the identity of all things — including ourselves — with the all-embracing spiritual Reality (everything is f.e. Ultimate Reality) and for the christian it means participation in God's own life (called grace).⁴ These statements are rather

⁴ These similarities and differences are subtly analyzed in a recent contribu-

rough and unpolished of course and should be refined. Anyway, they bring to the fore something of the core of each religion. And what is at stake in all the religions and ideologies is without doubt *the human growth in whatever forms towards salvation*.

The category of growth can be understood in a double sense: growth of the religious consciousness of the human being and of the religions, on the one hand, and growth of the total reality, on the other hand. The first one means the development of our religious consciousness ending up in the development of the regions themselves. The second one means that the first one sets in motion the whole of creation or whole cosmos. All in all there is real growth in us, the world and Ultimate Reality that opens up in an ever greater embracing of all that is. A comparison with the theory of the expanding universe can make us understand what happens on the ontological level.

Human growth is continuity as well as development, novelty as well as transforming integration of things that were once outside but become now incorporated. This leads to the fascinating experience of what "openness to the More" of the reality surrounding us and present in the other religions implies, namely transformation and even revolution. An other fitting term would perhaps be enrichment or, when understood in a life dialogue context with people of other faiths, accepting and integrating the message of the other religions. We are part of a people with a particular history; but history is not just endless repetition but future, unfolding from what already is into what lies ahead.

Emphasizing the category of growth also means openness for the unexpected, internal and external, even for revolutionary change. Therefore, our view of life in the midst of the many religions does not exclude death of what is needed no more and includes resurrection to newness. Also that is part and parcel of ever growing salvation.⁵

tion to the buddhist (mostly Zen)-christian dialogue (the Flemish mystic Ruusbroec) of Paul Mommaerts and Jan Van Bragt, *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian, Encounters with Jan Van Ruusbroec*, (New York, Crosswood, 1995), esp. 139-207.

⁵ R. Panikkar, *The Interreligious Dialogue*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 69-73.

Religion at the crossroads of the world - the encounter of the religions

Even a superficial study of the religions brings to light that not any paraphrase and not any concept of salvation is exactly the same as we christians see it.

If one has to abandon oneself fully and unconditionally to the will of Allah, the all-powerful, what then about human responsibility? Can one all alone really contribute to building up one's own personality and society like the taoist sage would be inclined to do? If salvation means total identification with a purely spiritual Ultimate Reality, what do we do then with this world full of misery, sickness, injustice, poverty and war? If the God of Christianity was said before to make us happy only when we leave this world of imperfection and to heal us only in heaven, what then about our pilgrimage on earth with our fellowmen? Even the most encompassing view of salvation needs correction because it belongs to the sphere of the unspeakable mystery of Ultimate Reality that is openness to all sides.

Mission and interreligious dialogue will analyze critically and positively the many views of salvation and will see what can be done so that they can complement each other. In that way we are moving nearer to more complete salvation which cannot be one-sided but is multidimensional or, to put it very simply, is spiritual and material, here and in the future. Moreover, salvation is not destined solely for good or Ultimate Reality because they do not need it; they are it fully now and for ever; they *are* the essence of salvation; salvation is for human beings who are both spirit and matter.

Once this is understood, the person involved in contacts with people of other faiths, must be humble enough to accept from each other values that make salvation more complete. Hinduism and Buddhism need more respect for this inner-worldly reality but are expected to offer to Christianity the values of spirituality and interiorization. Islam is expected to defend for us Allah's powerfulness but must accept also that the Father of Jesus Christ grants freedom to his children and does not condemn them to blind obedience and fatalism. These few examples may suffice for lack of space but if we tackle with the reality in such a concrete way, the religions are not only going to meet each other at the crossroads of the world but are going to change and to transmute each other. The goal is full to the nature of each reli-

gion. The goal is to set them and their believers on the way to very concrete goals. Once we have a clearer view of salvation and of what we can offer to each other, we are all set to collaborate for justice, peace, human rights and whatever is good and praiseworthy, because we have now a solid basis to do so. The world is not asking for one faith but for common action, uniting people into one brotherhood and sisterhood.

Some theological and concrete underpinnings

We pointed already to some facts that are happening in the Church with regard to our viewpoint. Here we must write down in a very few lines something of the theological underpinnings that makes these concrete facts possible.

Vatican II has taken up again the centuries old position of the early Church Fathers and Apologists who wrote that the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is present in our hearts. Also the Bible says that God reveals himself to all men through nature, the prophets and Jesus who appeared among us in time and history. This tiny theological core of the early Church, has been rekindled during Vatican II, notwithstanding many theological setbacks during many centuries. The present day reveals himself in the heart of everybody, in every religion and culture. And this provides the church with more than enough reasons to approach people of other faiths.

This theological statement has been translated by the Church on the structural level in the following way. The Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Pontifical Council for Culture function on the level of the universal Church in Rome. One who is more or less familiar with for example the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue cannot be but amazed to hear and see in how many activities with non-christians it is involved. There is an ever growing contact, official and non-official, among persons belonging to different religions who visit its offices. And more generally, a number of representatives of the Church are always on their way to meetings, invited by all kind of religious organizations.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has, among other branches, to name only one, the very active Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) since 1979. It has organized numer-

ous meetings and symposia to sensitivize Asian Bishops for Interreligious dialogue. The final statement of its second meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1979 is very typical. "The Church is particularly concerned with man's religious experience, the motivating and leavening agent of his culture. This means that the Church must be constantly involved in dialogue with men of other religions. The christian finds himself continuously evangelizing and being evangelized by his partners in dialogue." This is of course a far-reaching statement but it comes back in recent papal documents. John Paul II states for example indeed that, because of God's redeeming activity in the other religions, the Church — and every christian — becomes an evangelizer who receives the message of the other religions. This means that in recognizing and accepting the values of the other religions, the Church herself becomes enriched the way she developed through the first centuries. It means equally that, when proclaiming the values of the gospel, she herself is committed to her true task, namely the evangelization of the world. One can hardly imagine thirty years ago that christians could become evangelized by the values of the non-christian religions. This theology was indeed unacceptable at a time when the Church was considered to be the Kingdom of God in this world, perfect in herself, who had nothing to receive from this word and its religions.⁶

Mission, Evangelization and Interreligious Dialogue in reference to witness

A connection among these four cannot be omitted. For sure, this connection constitutes a big challenge.

The right to be a Buddhist, a Christian, a Muslim or Hindu cannot be contested. We should honestly admit that the christian faith commitment is only one among several possible commitments. Mission, evangelization and interreligious dialogue without witness to our respective faith commitment lack tension and is impossible. Everyone understands that witness to our Christian faith does not mean sheer proselythism but must be a honest attitude through which

⁶ A good expression of this viewpoint is the recent Study: Roberto Papini & Vincenzo Buonomo, eds., *Religions, Development and Liberation in Asia*, eds., Manila, New City Press, 1993.

people of different faiths really come forward with their deepest convictions. Good participants in their contacts with non-christians expect to learn and to receive. The same is valid for the non-christian participant. We all have to learn from and to give to each other what most deeply moves our hearts.

Christians must not hide that they are motivated by the Kingdom of God manifesting itself in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ and around whose risen person they gather as a community called Church. Vice versa, it is not enough to hear from others that we share a common humanity. The others are expected to teach us what they themselves stand for because of the message of the Buddha, the hindu sages, Mohammed, etc.⁷

We are confronted with an attempt to understand and to express our own particularity not just in terms of our heritage but also in relation to the spiritual heritage of people of other faiths. Therefore, witness is but natural. Moreover, one may not forget that also a verbal exchange of faith experience is needed. It is bound up with language in all its possibilities and limitations. Language is one of the many vehicles expressing faith. Also in thus respect we cannot do without witness.

Finally, Christians do not enter into contact with each other and with people of other faiths as manipulators but as genuine pilgrim fellows to speak with others of what they believe to God to have done in Jesus Christ and whom they expect to meet again in the others. There is no question of a reduction of living faiths and ideologies to a lowest common denominator like our common human nature. It is a quest for Ultimate Reality that is only found at the deepest level of human experience, variously symbolized and conceptualized in different faiths. Our worships of many gods, does not prevent us from bringing witness to what we are and believe in. □

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⁷ S. J. Samartha, ed., *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals. Salvation and World Religions*, (New York, Orbis Books, 1974).