

## **Catholic Dialogue with People of Other Religions**

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### **Introduction**

In his opening address to a conference on Jewish-Christian-Muslim “dialogue” held at the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute, New York, Authur Gouthro spoke of the factors, which are urging the great monotheistic faiths into conversation with each other.

These are:

- (i) the growing awareness of living in an increasing interdependent world, wherein community ignore each other and live in isolation at their peril
- (ii) a growing desire among major religions to create a more humane world order of justice and peace, which requires co-operation
- (iii) an eagerness and willingness to recognize truth, however it is experienced and wherever it is found;
- (iv) a greater understanding of the role of history in influencing ideas and culture; history gives us all –Jews, Christians and Muslims (we add Hindus, Budduists) a form for self-examination; it calls us humility and forgiveness for our past sins against one another. (Shepherd, 1981:19)

The effort to promote understanding between Christians and Non-Christian religions since *Nostra Aetate* has been well documented. Although the declaration sparked a significant turning point, dialogue between Christians and other faiths had already begun and borne fruit (Flannery 1975). Dialogue between Christians and people of other faiths has its own relevance because of the common good which most religions share.

First, is the belief in and worship of one God, Creator and Judge of humanity and history. Such a faith demands that we recognize all men and women as brothers and sisters, respecting their dignity and freedom. Second, is the belief that history has a goal. All religions work towards the ultimate coming of God's kingdom – a kingdom of justice, peace and unity. Third, all are called by God in a union with him through a particular way of life. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism for example, stress the special calling by God of Noah, Abraham and Moses – a calling, which was not only personal, but related to the whole community. However, each tradition has its own interpretation of history. In the light of the revelation stories in reference to God's calling and probable difference in the hermeneutics of calling from each tradition, there might be conflict of understanding and interpretation. Fourth, is a shared biblical love and spiritual ancestors. Such biblical stories form foundations, share symbolism and archetypal images. We may not agree with each other's interpretations, but we possess a firm basis of common knowledge and understanding.

Christians who have been involved in the ecumenical movement have also discovered that learning from each other is both necessary and possible. Many have argued, in practical terms that a position like "I am right and you ...well, I know you are in good faith but..." simply do not fit. They have accepted that differences should not get in the way and that in order to survive, we cannot continue to stay apart. We can learn much from the Christian ecumenical experience; once we have been enjoined by ecumenism to question our uniqueness in terms of our place before God or our religious community before God vis-à-vis other Christians.

Similarly, we are obligated to question our exclusive tendency in relation to non-Christian religions, which have demonstrable values.

The situation of interreligious tensions in Nigeria, the middle East or India come as a stark reminder that dialogue between people of different faiths is needed, not because it is interesting or a theological luxury, but because, if it is not attempted, the social and political consequences could be irredeemable.

With this in mind, the topic of this essay will be treated under the following headings: definition of dialogue, its principles or aims, the problems of dialogue, and a guideline for dialogue.

### **DIALOGUE: A DEFINITION**

The word dialogue comes from two Greek words, “dia” meaning “through” or “by means of” and “logos”, meaning “word”, “speech”, “reason”. In the New Webster Dictionary, the word is defined as follows: “A conversation between two persons, a formal conversation in theatrical performance; a composition in which two or more persons are presented as conversing on some topic; a frank exchange of ideas or views on a specific issue in an effect to attain mutual understanding”.

From the above definitions one can see that the word has quite a wide scope of applications, ranging from formal scientific exchange of views on a specific subject to ordinary conversation.

Dialogue literally means words exchange between two persons. In common usage, it implies the mutual exchange of views of two free persons in the presence of each other with the

courage to speak boldly and honestly what one feels and thinks about the matters that pertain to him/her, and a readiness to listen patiently and attentively to the views and reactions of the other. Such a conversation provides the opportunity for promoting the right understanding about each other, for correcting any distortions about each other's perception of matters related to each other and for enriching mutual relationships, which are indispensable for each other's growth.

In order that such exchange of experiences may be meaningful, mutually enriching and help perfect each other's religious pursuits, the atmosphere of such dialogue should be free, fearless and frank. Any pre-planned non-religious motivation on either side would certainly militate against the openness that is so need for understanding and recognizing the truth from one another's point of view and indeed, from every point of view (Manickam, 1983).

#### **PRINCIPLES OR AIMS OF DIALOGUE**

Religious dialogue is "seeking together for the truth". "Seeking" presupposes that we do not yet possess the truth, at least, in full. The truth, though an abstract term, takes many and varied forms of expression corresponding to the phenomenon of pluralism that is actually existing in the world; in the geographical, cultural, ethnic, racial, economic, political, social and linguistic contexts. The truth does not have the same connotation for all people around the world. The meaning is relative to the exigencies of various people. It is in this context of the limitation and relativity of the expression of truth, in the pluralistic contexts of culture and history that we also accept the pluralism of truth-expression in the sphere of religion.

Whatever truth people claim to possess undergoes review, renewal, and transformation in the light of recent discoveries and the law of “natural dynamics.” Humans are limited and their religious traditions need mutual enrichment by way of complementing others. Thus, there is the need and room for honest and humble exchange of our religious experiences by means of sincerely pursued dialogues. For it is a well known fact that there is nothing as opposed to dialogue as the smug of self-sufficiency by people who hold that they are fully satisfied with what they own as truth. Such people are so caught up in their claim to all truth that they are not prepared to enter into the quest for broader truth or other perspectives of truth with others.

Closely related to “seeking the truth” of one who engages in dialogue is the attitude of complete openness and respect for the faith traditions of other people. In any meaningful dialogue, there should be no “hidden agenda”, no subtle attempt to convert or proselytize. It requires willingness to listen and to learn as well as the ability to teach effectively. It also requires readiness to criticize and compare without making unnecessary value-judgment, while all the time remembering clearly where one stands, the root from which one’s own faith has grown.

There must be genuine sensitivity to each other as human beings otherwise no kind of inter-religious dialogue is possible. The ‘other’ in dialogue should always be considered precisely as a person, never as mere object for research. True dialogue takes place between living persons not just between systems of thought. To see the other as a person implies that I see in him/her

as one worthy of being respected and appreciated. If one does not respect the other partner, then there can be no dialogue.

What must underline every sincere dialogue is the aspect of giving and receiving. Each one must be willing to share with the other the totality of his beliefs. It is, therefore, a sharing not only of beliefs but of lives.

In order to be completely present to others, one must first of all be willing to share the others' lives, to psychologically and physically experience their world, while remaining faithfully to oneself and to one's faith. According to each individual's ability, each must realize this presence in the world of others, by acquiring a knowledge of the other's language and culture, both past and present, and the actual conditions in which they live along with their hopes for the future... (Borrmans, 14).

For dialogue to be possible, each partner must be willing to overcome any difficulties, particularly the difficulty of freeing oneself from the many prejudices that there are regarding the faith of others, which prevent us from seeing the others in Christ.

Dialogue may entail for some of us a complete change of attitude. Dialogue makes us look upon others in a new light. We must not consider them as enemies to overthrow, nor as disciples we have to teach or even indoctrinate, as candidates to be won over, nor as people to be interviewed and made to talk, but as companions and equals with whom we wish to share the very best there is in our common existence. We must adopt the attitude of servant. Louis Massignon says: "if we want to understand somebody, we must not try to take possession of him, but become his guest" (Borrmans, 17).

In the journey of seeking together, each partner must act with responsibility, with lucidity and tact. The situation of the partner and his degree of preparedness must be taken into account. That means that the initial dialogue should consist in the breaking down of prejudices, “in the concrete demonstration of respect and love, rather than in an explicit conversation over a particular issue of faith” (Mason: 3).

For the dialogue not to degenerate into controversy there is need for serious and profound preparation. Responsibility and respect are ways to true openness towards the other and sympathy with him or her.

But to dialogue responsibly requires the ability to listen and to try to understand the other. Listening respectfully and thoughtfully to the religious insights of the other can bear much fruit, not least the deepening of one’s own faith. The World Council of Churches has stressed this point and articulated that dialogue must allow participants to describe and witness to their faith in their own terms, for self-serving descriptions of other people’s faith are one of the roots of prejudice.

We must be ready to have our way of life questioned, for this will give us the opportunity to explain more clearly both our outward actions and the way in which we envisage truth in our minds. All religions have something to teach us or to recall to us. They all invite us to reconsider the way in which we manifest our faith by words, concepts, feelings and acts. They reveal to us new ways of being which will lead us to discover insights which we have so far been left in obscurity or not sufficiently put into practice. (Borrmans, 21-22).

To engage in dialogue is to accept the other just as he/she shows and expresses himself i.e, what he is and what he wants to be. Kenneth Cragg has nicely described this point thus:

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else, we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival. We must ask what is the authentic religious content in the experience of the others, not judging from outside his religious situation, but trying to sit, to enter sympathetically into the pains and griefs and joys of his history ... We have in a word, to be 'present' with him".  
(Cragg, 1979, 30).

The ability to listen to and learn from the other is particularly vital for any meaningful dialogue. Christians are called to tell their story and to listen to learn what others hear in it. They are also called to listen to the stories of other traditions in an attempt to discover what their understanding of salvation is, why it is linked to particular persons, events and teachings and how it can be meaningful in terms of their own experience.

Another principle is to seek together for the truth. Here, it must be pointed out that what we are seeking is not just truth-as-knowledge, truth-as-concept, but truth-as reality. The dialoguing partners come together to bring the truth of a thing, to cause truth to grow in its very being, so that the thing might respond ever more closely to what it is called to be. "A point that needs to be recognized here is our faith in the promise of Jesus Christ about the Holy Spirit of truth when he comes, he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (Jn. 16:13). The promise not only makes it necessary for us to enter into dialogue, but also to continue in it without fear, and with full



expectation and openness. It is not claimed that dialogue is the only way in this quest for truth, nor is it forgotten that discovery of truth is not inevitable. Possibilities of error, distortion and confusion are present in situation of dialogue as in any human situation (Samartha, 1971).

## **PROBLEMS OF DIALOGUE**

The changes in the attitude and outlook of Catholics towards other religions in recent times are indeed welcome. Since Vatican II the Church's attitude towards other religions has been positive, hence dialogue with people of other faiths has grown. However, it is not all smooth sailing yet. Many problems still persist, hindering effective dialogue between Catholics and other religions.

In view of the limitation of this article, two major problems will be discussed, namely: intra-religious problems and inter-religious problems.

### **A Intra-religious problems**

There are problems arising in Catholicity because the move for dialogue comes into conflict with certain aspects of core faith and tradition of the Catholic Church. For example:

- i. the uniqueness of Jesus Christ;
- ii. the uniqueness of the church
- iii. missionary vocation of the church

#### **(i) The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ**

This is the one truth, which is fundamental to the Catholic faith, a truth which is authoritatively taught in the New Testament and developed in the early centuries of the Christianity. This truth is the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus the Nazarene, the God-made-man, who

is the one mediator between God and humanity that “men [and women] can find the fullness of religious life” (*Nostra Aetate*, Art. 2). Therefore, any religious tradition of humanity can be judged and justified only in relation to Jesus Christ.

The problem is: can such belief be in harmony with present day dialogue? We have maintained that any true dialogue calls for a sincere esteem and respect for the other and recognition of his/her distinct characteristics. If the Catholic Church is to justify her move to dialogue with people of other faiths, she must accept other religions as valid means of salvation. If, on the other hand, she retains her faith in the uniqueness of Christ, should she judge and justify other religions only in relation to Jesus Christ? The crux of the matter is: how is the Catholic Church to accept the authenticity of other religions and yet retain the unique revelation and universal salvific value of Jesus Christ?

**(ii) The Uniqueness of the Church**

Closely connected with the Catholic claim to the uniqueness of Christ is her claim to the uniqueness of her nature in relation to other religions. The secretary of the Papal secretariat for dialogue recently made the following observation

Each of the parties in dialogue has the right to adhering to these absolute, of feeling basically sure of his own position. He has the right (and the duty, if he is a Christian) to think that the other is not achieving human and religious fullness as willed by God. A Christian cannot place his own faith and other religions on the same level. He cannot hold that the Holy Spirit dwells equally in the church, in Hinduism and in the Dar-es-Islam. There cannot be agreement that each party in the dialogue is equally in truth, or that different

religions are only cultural and historical experience of a transcendent.  
(Rossano, 1979, 104).

From the above it is clear that the church still claim her position of uniqueness, even though she is trying to be sincerely open to other religions and ready to grant them the same right. The tension is between the church conserving her own unique identity and her present openness to other religions.

### **(iii) Missionary Vocation of the Church**

In addition to the Church's claim to the uniqueness of Christ is the realization of her vocation to be essentially "prophetic, missionary and evangelizing community". That is why it is said that even the "dialogue takes place only in the ambit of the evangelizing mission" (Rossano, 1979, 104). That is why the various activities of the Church such as mission, evangelization, witness, and dialogue are all said to be derived for the same vocation of the Church and that the differences among them depend on the priorities and aspects, which are underlined in the various historical context and situations.

If essentially, the Church's understanding of dialogue is as an activity connected with her evangelizing mission, the dialogic partners may be suspicious of the motives of the Church participating in dialogue. They may view it as a political or proselytizing mechanism – another dubious move toward conversion. And if the Church tries to remove such misconceptions from the minds of dialogue partners, in order to show total commitment to dialogue, her members may entertain the fears that the Church is compromising her essential missionary calling. (Push

Parajan, 1983). In either case therefore, the sincerity of the church is bound to be questioned by either the partners in dialogue or by the members of the church.

## **B Inter-religious Problems**

Catholic dialogue with other religions has problems – not only because the exercise of dialogue may be in conflict with the Church’s own claims, but also because those claims themselves come into conflict with those of other religions (Rossano, 1980). The Church’s teaching on the Trinity and the person of Christ and His special role as the only Mediator of our salvation is a case in point. One approach to this problem is for Catholics to establish good dialogic relationships with people of other religious traditions by emphasizing the areas of agreement between the Catholic Church and other religions.

All these attempts are praiseworthy, but unless the fundamental problems are solved by the Church, we cannot hope for any success. And that fundamental problem is, whether the Catholic Church can appreciate the equality of status with all major religions of the world with whom it enters into dialogue. For unless religions in dialogue are prepared to accept each other as equally authentic, there cannot be any meaningful dialogue. In addition, there is the tension that exists between openness and faithfulness, between willingness to learn and the need to preserve the Catholic identity. While the Church’s universal mission of witnessing to Christ remains at the centre, Catholics need to uphold a deep respect for other religious traditions as genuine ways of salvation.

### **Guidelines For Dialogue**

As stated above, the fundamental problem which the Catholic Church needs to significantly address in her dialogue with other religions is whether she is prepared to accept the equality of religions. If so, how? Here, one may briefly suggest some guidelines for such dialogue:

- (i) Each partner must believe that the other is speaking in good faith
- (ii) Each partner must have a clear understanding of his own faith
- (iii) Each partner must strive for clear understanding of the other. And this means that each must be willing to interpret the faith of the other in its best rather than its worst.
- (iv) Each partner should humbly accept responsibility for what his/her group has done against the goals and mission of dialogue.
- (v) Each partner must recognize that all that can be done in dialogue is to offer it up to God. Offer it to God because He alone knows and has the truth. As the search of all truth those in dialogue must seek enlightenment from Him.

Every now and then, it is necessary to realize that we do not know everything about the ways of God. Our faith, like any relationship is not perfect. It must be remembered that no religion is wholly true or wholly imperfect.

Immutability and absoluteness are categories of the other world, the divine realm. If, thus, Christianity is bound to be perfect, and is in need of growth, then it can never claim absoluteness vis-à-vis other religions. All religions are there equal in this that all have the truth but mixed with imperfections in varying degrees (Push Parajan, 1983:267).

Therefore, contact with the non-Christians may be another suitable catalyst. We all need to realize that there are “elements of revelation,” that other religions “are all impregnant with innumerable seeds of the world” (Evangeli Nuntiandi, 53) and that our understanding of Christ and the Christian life can be enriched by such contact.

## **CONCLUSION**

Anyone who engages seriously in dialogue will soon discover that he learns as much about his/her own religion as he does about that of others. But in dialogue, one is not out to convert the other, nor even to convince him/her of the coherence of one’s own position. The sincere effort of the Catholic is to share his/her faith with another person which is itself an act of witnessing to Christ. The other person is not a superstitious infidel who needs to be rescued from inevitable damnation.

The Catholic conviction is that he/she is also an object of God’s love and who knows that his/her contact and dialogue with the non-Christian may be a renewed source of God’s grace in some mysterious way, which we do not understand.

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