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No Easy Answers

The Necessary Challenge of Interreligious Dialogue

James L. Fredericks

In 1995, I had the good fortune to take a stroll with Heinrich Dumoulin, the great Jesuit scholar of Buddhism, in the garden of the Jesuit residence at Sophia University in Tokyo. Dumoulin told me of a remark the historian Arnold Toynbee had made during a visit to Sophia in the 1950s.

Toynbee predicted that historians of the future would look back on the twentieth century with little interest in the Cold War, and would instead focus their attention on the dialogues going on between Buddhists and Christians in Japan. In the depths of the Cold War, the idea that religions still had a global role to play might have seemed fanciful. Yet in the ensuing half-century, Toynbee's prediction—expanded to interreligious dialogue generally—has become more plausible. Times have changed. In not a few societies, religion is “going public,” no longer content to sit quietly in the private sphere of personal belief. “Religious nationalism,” to use a phrase from Mark Juergensmeyer, is on the rise. Postcolonial diaspora communities are globalizing their religions as well. Europe, long considered by many a post-Christian secular space, is now home to part of the Muslim diaspora.

These realities frame a debate in the Catholic Church about the theology of interreligious dialogue and the proper role for a church-in-dialogue today. Although much of this debate is happening off-camera, there is still plenty to watch. In 2008, for instance, during the Easter Vigil, Pope Benedict XVI baptized Magdi Allam, the Egyptian-born deputy editor of the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*. An outspoken critic of Islam, Allam celebrated his baptism by pronouncing himself “liberated from the obscurantism of an ideology which legitimizes lies and dissimulation, violent death, which induces both murder and suicide, and blind submission to tyranny.” Given how volatile an issue apostasy is for some Muslims, one wonders: Could not this catechumen have been baptized without fanfare at his local parish?

This isn't the first time that Benedict's approach to inter-

religious relations has lacked diplomatic tact. Two years earlier, at the beginning of his pontificate, the pope set off a firestorm in a lecture he gave at the University of Regensburg, quoting a Byzantine emperor's decidedly uncomplimentary remarks about Muhammad. After noting the emperor's peppery words about Islam's prophet, the pope went on to lament the divorce of faith from reason in Western civilization, starting with the Reformation, continuing through the Enlightenment, and now visible in the clamoring of Christians eager to embrace a “cultural pluralism” that views the marriage of Christian faith and Hellenic philosophy as merely “an initial inculturation”—in effect, a local and limited European preference, not binding on the church beyond Europe's shores. Benedict rejected this view of pluralism as “not simply false,” but also “coarse and lacking in precision,” insisting that Christianity, though shaped in the churches of Syria and Egypt, took its “historically decisive” character in Europe. In return, he



MARIA KANNON: IWANAFISH

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argued further, the convergence of Christian faith and Hellenic thought “created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe.” He concluded by giving a particular, seemingly Eurocentric focus to interreligious dialogue, inviting “our partners in the dialogue of cultures” to “this great *logos*, to this breadth of reason.”

The Regensburg lecture expressed the views of a man who links the rise of fascism in his native land with the divorce of reason from faith, and who sees the need to resist the neofascisms of Jean-Marie Le Pen and Jörg Haider in Europe today. Yet the lecture also evokes a nostalgia for Europe as Christian space. Perhaps this nostalgia sheds light on Benedict’s reticence, before his election at least, to see Turkey join the European Union—and on then-Cardinal Ratzinger’s discomfort with some of the efforts of his predecessor in the dialogue of religions.

John Paul II met with Muslims more than sixty times during his long pontificate. He spoke comfortably of Jews, Christians, and Muslims as “sons of Abraham,” pointed out the injustices that motivate religious terrorism, and (in Syria in 2001) became the first pope to enter a mosque. His emphasis on the importance of reaching out to other religious traditions was longstanding. Fifteen years earlier, in the fall of 1986, he had gone to Assisi for a Day of Prayer for Peace with representatives of Eastern churches; the archbishop of Canterbury; Alan Boesak, the South African antiapartheid activist and president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches; and other Christian notables. They were joined there by Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, practitioners of African traditional religions, and Buddhists, some two hundred in all.

The impressive interreligious ecumenism of the Assisi gathering was set on a theological foundation that had been unfolding since John Paul’s first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis* (1979). There, the young pope asserted that the Spirit operates outside the visible confines of the church, and quoted *Gaudium et spes* 22 to make clear that it is not only Christians who have been conformed into the likeness of Christ by the Spirit, but “all individuals of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly.” John Paul took the implications of this notion a step beyond where Vatican II had ventured. While the council had made clear that grace is at work in the hearts of other believers, it was more reticent about the role other religions play in the work of the Spirit. Is a Buddhist saved by means of the practice of the *dharma* or in spite of this practice?

John Paul took careful steps to answer this question. True to his training in phenomenology, he held not only that the Holy Spirit is at work in every genuine human act of transcendence, but that these acts cannot be separated from the material and social life of the human person. The Spirit is at work in our “human initiatives,” John Paul wrote in *Redemptoris missio* (1990), “including religious ones”; and though they are not Christians in any formal sense, those who follow other religious paths enjoy “a mysterious relationship to the church.” What, then, of the religions as such? John Paul II was confident in

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gathering the many religions together at Assisi because he believed that the Holy Spirit was at work not only invisibly, in the hearts of his guests, but also visibly, in their religions. The church’s work of dialogue, therefore, presupposes that other religious paths cannot be dismissed as merely the products of human genius or as admirable cultural achievements. Those religious paths have a supernatural depth imparted to them by the Holy Spirit. The belief and practice of Buddhists, for example, cannot be sharply segregated from the Spirit-filled faith of a Christian. Buddhists are touched by the Spirit in their practice of the *dharma*.

This theology of the Holy Spirit was the foundation of John Paul’s deep commitment to interreligious dialogue—a commitment that made his outreach to other religions more than simply a matter of diplomacy or hope for collaboration. Interreligious dialogue, he wrote in *Redemptoris missio*, is “demanded by the deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills.” John Paul visited Hindus and Jains in India and Buddhists in many lands; he met with native peoples; and often his greeting was followed by an apology for past sins and a promise of future dialogue. His outreach to the Jews was especially noteworthy. In 1986, six months before going to Assisi, he crossed the Tiber and prayed the Psalms with the congregation in the Jewish Synagogue in Rome. In Israel, he offered prayers at Yad Vashem and at the Western Wall. He spoke easily of Jews as “our elder brothers in the faith.” For John Paul, dialogue with Jews meant more than diplomatic outreach to a community that had suffered for centuries at the hands of the Catholic Church. Jewish-Christian dialogue was a “dialogue of salvation,” one demanding significant theological reflection on the part of all Christians. His repeated assertion that the Mosaic Law has never been revoked held significant implications for Christian theology. Perhaps most

Medieval Song

from the Middle English

Love brought me
And love wrought me
Man, to be thy fere.*

Love fed me
And love led me
And love left me here.

Love slew me
And love drew me
And laid me on my bier.

Love is my peace,
For love release
Of man I purchased dear.

For dread thee nought,
I have thee sought
To anchor near.

To haven thee
Safe in my lee,
And keep thee from fear.

**fere*: mate, companion

—Richard O'Connell

slaughtered two chickens on the altar of the Basilica of St. Clare. Ratzinger did not attend the event, but he was quoted in the Austrian press as saying “this cannot be the model” of interreligious dialogue. The proper model of dialogue for the church would be outlined two decades later by Benedict in his lecture at Regensburg: a dialogue in which Christianity, which has given birth to Western civilization by welding together biblical faith and Hellenic *logos*, engages other religions in a “dialogue of cultures.”

Is the dialogue of religions in fact a dialogue of cultures? When Christians meet with those who follow other religious paths, does the *logos* of the Christian West confront beliefs shaped by alternative rationalities or even by revelations that are untouched by reason? Or is interreligious dialogue driven by a belief in the ubiquitous working of the Holy Spirit in the religious lives of those who follow other paths? The Catholic Church today is wrestling with these two models of interreligious dialogue. Both are responses to the repositioning of religion being wrought by globalization. Much is at stake in this debate: the Asian and African churches and their theologies of inculturation; and the future role of the church in Europe, where Muslim communities are taking on a new prominence.

None of these questions should be answered quickly. There are no easy answers. A Buddhist nun, who is an old friend, teases me by saying that she has searched her mind and body thoroughly and not found any Holy Spirit. More seriously, she says that my belief in the Spirit within her hinders my understanding of Buddhism. She would be happy to go to Assisi and chant for peace as Jews, Christians, and Hindus pray for peace. She is eager to challenge and deepen her practice of the *dharma* by means of a dialogue with Christians. She will not pray, however; prayer is not part of her Buddhist practice. She will enter into “the spirit of Assisi,” but on her own terms and without any need for talk about the Holy Spirit.

I wish to offer three practical suggestions.

First, we should view interreligious dialogue as an opportunity to practice what John Paul called the “virtue of solidarity.” The purpose of dialogue is not confrontation, even though a healthy apologetics is essential if a dialogue is to have any depth. Neither is the purpose to reach a shallow agreement on general matters, even though joint statements and irenic gestures are important. The true aim of interreligious dialogue is to promote “solidarity” among religious believers. This term has a specific meaning in the social encyclicals of John Paul II, one that should be applied to interreligious dialogue. John Paul recognized the moral ambiguity of interdependence in the modern world. Interdependence can be oppressive. It can also provide occasions for promoting human dignity and ensuring the common good. In *Centesimus annus* (1991), John Paul taught that solidarity is realized by means of “dialogue and opposition.” In some important respects the religions of the world are radically incompatible; yet opposition that involves honest and comprehensive di-

important of all, John Paul remained loyal to the Jewish friends of his childhood, especially Jerzy Kluger, a soccer chum from Wadowice high school. For this pope, dialogue with Jews was personal as well as theological.

Not everyone was pleased with the prayers offered at Assisi in 1986. Followers of Marcel Lefebvre distributed flyers outside the Basilica of St. Francis denouncing the pope as an apostate—and two years later, when Lefebvre went into schism, he announced he was acting to protect Catholicism from the perfidies of Vatican II and “the spirit of Assisi.” Vittorio Messori, who in 1986 had recently published a book with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, passed along a story of dubious provenance, claiming that African animists at Assisi had

alogue is actually conducive to solidarity. Speaking in Turkey in 2006, Benedict XVI took up this theme, asserting that Muslim-Christian dialogue must be “based on truth and inspired by a sincere wish to know one another better, respecting differences and recognizing what we have in common.” Such a basis, he went on, “will lead to an authentic respect for the responsible choices that each person makes, especially those pertaining to fundamental values and to personal religious convictions.”

Second, we should strive to keep interreligious dialogue a theological enterprise. Talk about the “virtue of solidarity” might imply to some that dialogue is about diplomacy or mutual cooperation only. This is to misunderstand solidarity. Diplomacy and cooperation are important. Solidarity, however, goes further. A dialogue of solidarity entails a common search for the truth. Religious beliefs are explored mutually. Solidarity also requires that those who engage in dialogue witness to their own faith. In *Redemptoris missio*, John Paul taught that the ability to witness to faith and the willingness to be transformed by the encounter are two elements of dialogue that must remain connected and yet distinct. Those who would engage in dialogue “must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions” even as they strive to understand the dialogue partner not with “pretense or closed-mindedness” but rather with “humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side.”

Let me conclude with a third suggestion. We need to commit ourselves to the fact that interreligious dialogue is indispensable to the church’s meaning today. Several official Vatican documents speak of dialogue as part of the “evangelizing mission of the church.” This unhappy phrase has been misunderstood by some of our dialogue partners to mean that the dialogue is a covert attempt to convert—and in truth, some Catholics seem to understand this language this way as well. The original intention of this phrase, however, was to recognize interreligious dialogue as an activity that goes to the heart of the church’s work. Speaking to Muslims in Cologne in 2005, Benedict insisted that “interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra [but] is in fact a vital necessity on which in large measure our future depends.”

Our dialogues, then, should be seen as ministry, a form of the church’s service to the world—and one especially appropriate to the needs of the world today. In our dialogues with Jews and Muslims, with Buddhists and Sikhs and Jains and Hindus, the church becomes what the Spirit always calls the church to be: a sign of unity and hope for the world. And so the call that we find in *Nostra aetate* to engage in dialogue with other religions should be read in terms of another groundbreaking Vatican II document, *Lumen gentium*, and its vision of the church as “like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument” of “the unity of the whole human race.” ■



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