

## **The Thin and Thick of Interreligious Dialogue**

Dialogue is no luxury; peace depends on it. The question most simply put is: How shall we live our lives together?

Years ago Pierre Teilhard de Chardin retold a story we find in Genesis. According to him, Homo Sapiens—the kind of human beings we are—originated somewhere in East Africa and swarmed from there all over the world, like the seventy or seventy-two grandsons of Noah did when he asked them to move out of his homestead. Without realizing that they were walking on a globe, they walked further and further away from each other, passed the equator and met again. It is that meeting we call in our day and age “globalization.”

Each community—Christian and Muslim, Jewish and Hindu, and all the others—had its own history, its own unique religion, and its own perspective on the shape and future of the world. Yet, while living in those different worlds, they all live nevertheless in the same world with a future that has still to be determined.

Those separate histories find their full meaning only if seen in the perspective of God’s healing with the whole of God’s people. God’s mission takes place all over the world. If so, dialogue is essential to discern the focus and shape of God’s mission.

A dialogue based on this insight participates in God’s mission. It will respect how the Spirit is at work “from within” the other, just like the Spirit is at work “from within” myself.

This dialogue is not a discussion or debate. There will be no winners and losers, though there might be conversions. There will be a mutual enrichment, an approach to God as not experienced before. “If to be human is to live in community, then to alienate ourselves from community, in monologue, is to cut ourselves from our own humanity” (Lochhead: 79). Interreligious dialogue is an imperative.

Dialogue is not only a question of listening. There is also the aspect of “speaking,” of witnessing. We would not be fair either to ourselves or to the other if we would not mention Jesus.

We, Christians have to make it clear to ourselves and to others that what we do is because we discovered in Jesus the reason for our dialogical approach.

Witness is not so much a technique to convince as an opportunity to open ourselves to the other on the reality of God in our lives. It is not so

much a question of “conversion” but one of convergence progressing together toward a full understanding of what it means to be the one family of God. It is in this context that it might be good to indicate two examples of this development. When at Vatican II the council fathers attempted to heal the Christian disunity, a shift took place from the model of a “return” to obedience to the Catholic Church to that of “cooperation” which sees the churches as communities where Christ and God’s Spirit are present.

An even more striking relationship occurred with the Jewish community. In 1982 Pope John Paul II stated, “Our common heritage is considerable. Help in understanding certain aspects of the Church’s life can be gained by taking an inventory of that heritage, but also by taking into account the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as professed and lived now as well” (as quoted in Fischer, 162). No wonder that a document of 1977, the so-called Venice Statement, widely recognized as official Vatican thinking, rejects “any action aimed at changing the religious faith of Jews” (as quoted in Schreier, 123).

As Douglas Sturm noted in his article “Crossing the Boundaries: On the Idea of Interreligious Dialogue and the Political Question,” interreligious dialogue should be much more about bringing members of religious communities into discussion with each other. He calls that a thin version of the idea. “In its thick version the idea of interreligious dialogue bears its own philosophical understanding and displays its implications for the broader political life of humankind” (19).

It is an aspect we find especially stressed in the Indian interreligious context, but in fact it is an exigency all over our world. The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) constantly stresses that a serious interreligious dialogue can only be done through solidarity and sharing with the poor.

As regard to the dialogue with the Hindu people, especially the poor, its goal is “total human development.” “We need to strive for a new society, so that all men [*sic*] may reach full human development. Our world has to be for the development of the whole person and of every person. This wholeness of the person includes not only the individual personal development, but the growth and blossoming of the whole reality on earth” (as quoted in Phan, 206).

We have still lots to talk about! And that would only be a beginning!

## REFERENCES

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*Joseph Donders, M.Afr., is chair of the Mission and Cross-Cultural Program at Washington Theological Union.*