



การเผชิญหน้ากับความจริงที่เป็นอยู่ระหว่างศาสนา :
การเปิดทางสู่ศาสนสัมพันธ์อย่างมีความหมาย

Existential Inter-Religious Encounters :
A Prelude to Meaningful Inter-Religious Dialogue.

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- * อาจารย์ประจำคณะปรัชญาและศาสนา มหาวิทยาลัยอัสสัมชัญ

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บทคัดย่อ

ในเอกสารของพระศาสนจักร เรื่อง *Nostra Aetate* พระศาสนจักรคาทอลิกแสดงออกถึงการเปิดรับและความรู้สึกเข้าใจต่อธรรมเนียมประเพณีของศาสนาอื่นๆ ในโลกที่ไม่ใช่ศาสนาคริสต์ นี่เป็นการเปลี่ยนแปลงวิธีคิดแนวใหม่ของพระศาสนจักร เป็นเวลา 48 ปีมาแล้ว ตั้งแต่เอกสารฉบับนี้ถูกประกาศใช้ และตั้งแต่นั้นก็เกิดความพยายามอย่างเต็มกำลังที่จะปรับปรุงสถานภาพให้ดีขึ้น เพื่อสร้างความสัมพันธ์ด้วยความจริงใจระหว่างธรรมเนียมประเพณีของศาสนาต่างๆ ซึ่งโดยส่วนใหญ่พยายามที่จะเน้นความสำคัญไปที่วงการวิชาการและความรู้ ผลที่ได้รับ คือ ความพยายามของพระศาสนจักรจากการริเริ่มที่จะเป็นเพื่อนกับศาสนาอื่นๆ ไม่ประสบความสำเร็จอย่างมาก โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่ง ในระดับรากหญ้า เพราะส่วนใหญ่เป็นไปในลักษณะจากบนลงล่าง เอกสารฉบับนี้มีเป้าหมายตั้งใจเปลี่ยนทิศทางใหม่ให้เข้าใกล้วัตถุประสงค์มากขึ้นโดย “การเผชิญหน้ากับความจริงที่เป็นอยู่ระหว่างศาสนา” ซึ่งได้รับการพิสูจน์แล้วว่า มีประสิทธิผลและประสบความสำเร็จมากกว่า แต่บ่อยครั้ง ไม่ได้ให้ความใส่ใจเท่าที่ควร ด้วยการปฏิบัติให้สอดคล้องทั้งสองรูปแบบอย่างเท่าเทียมกัน คือ ทั้งแบบ “บนลงล่าง” และ “ล่างขึ้นบน” นี่จะเป็นวิธีการที่มีประสิทธิผลมากกว่าในการปรับปรุงความพยายามเรื่องศาสนสัมพันธ์

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Abstract

In her Councilar document *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church showed an openness and sensitivity to the traditions of other non-Christian religions of the world. This was a groundbreaking move on the part of the church. It has been forty-eight years since this document was pronounced and since then, efforts have been in full gear to implement its statements and establish cordial relations between religious traditions. For the most part, such efforts have been mostly focused at the intellectual and academic circles and as a result, the effects of the Church's initiatives to befriend other world religions have not been largely successful, especially at the grassroots. It has been mostly a top-down approach. This paper aims at redirecting attention to another approach, "Existential Inter-religious encounters" which have proved to be much more effective and successful but oftentimes not given the attention it deserves. Equal attention has to be accorded to both approaches, that is, a "top to down" and a "down to top" approaches. This would be a much more effective strategy in improving inter-religious dialogue efforts.

Keywords: 1) Existential
2) Inter-religious
3) Catholic

Introduction

The recent incident that happened in Egypt bears witness to the fact that a dialogue of life is currently going on amongst religions, especially between Christians and Muslims. The incident in question happened when in December of 2010, there was an attack on the Catholic Orthodox Church by Islamic extremists while the Catholics celebrated Christmas. Bombs were thrown into the Church and over 25 people were killed while scores of others were wounded. Seeing this, many in the Muslim community openly condemned the killings and even staged protests against fellow Muslims who committed the crime. Also, during the recent mass protests that toppled the Egyptian leader, many Muslims came forward to guard and watch over the Christians while they were at prayer and the Christians returned the favor by keeping guard over the Muslims while they were at prayer. Situations like these are evidences of real friend-

ship and dialogue existing among the Christian and Muslim communities in Egypt and elsewhere in the world where these two world religions co-habit side by side. More and more the world has become a global village and multiculturalism has become an existential reality in almost all countries of the world. Thus, in the effort to foster better social and cultural co-existence, the need for improved and even systematic forms of intra-religious dialogue cannot be over-emphasized.

This paper is an attempt to draw attention to dialogues and relationships such as the one that happened in Egypt and to propose such encounters as the bedrock for any true interreligious dialogue. The kind of interchange between Muslims and Christians of Egypt could be called "existential inter-religious encounters." Such existential encounters between religious traditions are good starting points for any meaningful interreligious dialogue. There are many other examples of exis-



tential inter-religious encounters going on in other spheres of human life. An example is the kind spiritual dialogue taking place amongst the monastic traditions of the various world religions.

In this paper, I shall highlight the Catholic Church's position on inter-religious dialogue. This position is reflected in the document "Nostra Aetate" (NA). I shall also give a brief elaboration of what is known as the dialogue of spirituality as a prelude to explaining how this is being played out amongst the various monasteries as an example of existential inter-religious dialogue. An example of how the Christian religion in Thailand is contributing concrete inter-religious dialogue shall then follow and then a conclusion to round up the discussion.

1.1 Defining Existential Inter-religious Encounter

By "Existential Inter-religious Encounters" is meant the day to day actual interactions between peoples of different religious traditions. Such

peaceful interactions amongst people of different religions have existed for generations. Despite their obvious religious and cultural differences, people have been able to forge friendships and alliances that transcend religion. It is the patience and acceptance of people from different religions of one another. Existential inter-religious encounter is a dialogue of life that precedes actual academic inter-religious dialogues that is oftentimes more focused on matters of doctrine and faith. At the level of existential encounters, peoples of different religious traditions deal with each other as human beings first and foremost and they recognize that they all share a common existence and need to cooperate together for the good of all. In such existential encounters, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists have learnt to live together in mutual trust and cooperation to develop their community and individual lives. A conscious fostering of existential encounters between people of differing

religious traditions is indispensable for effective inter-religious dialogues since if a people cannot learn to accept each other in mutual trust, there is no way there are going to engage each other in bilateral and multilateral inter-faith discussions on sensitive doctrinal matters. The mistake often committed regarding inter-religious dialogues has been to organize seminars and conferences on inter-religious dialogue without first building real and concrete friendship across the different religious traditions.

1.2 Importance of Fostering Existential Inter-religious Encounters

As peoples of differing religious traditions learn to live together daily, they begin to experience one another as human person and learn that there might not be much that separate us after all. Friendly and neighborly ties are forged and this eventually leads to mutual trust and respect for one another at all levels. Christians learn to eat and drink with Muslims and vice-versa, Buddhist learn to live in harmony with

Muslims and Christians. The need to live together as human persons soon takes precedence over religious sentiment and doctrines.

Such existential encounters between people of different cultures and religious traditions do not necessarily lead to a watering down of any tradition's religious beliefs and practices. This has often been the fear amongst religious traditions; the fear that in mixing freely with other religious traditions, their particular belief system and religious practices might be diluted and eventually disintegrate. This kind of thinking has often led to religious fundamentalism. However, with concrete daily encounters between peoples of different religions, that fear often times fades as they soon discover that it is possible to actually live in peace and harmony with others without losing their religious and cultural heritage.

There are many ways each religious tradition could be of great help in fostering real existential encounters



and create the atmosphere and environment that promotes such interactions. The Catholic Church has blazed the trail in this regard. The next section of this paper discusses the Church's role in creating an open and trusting environment for existential inter-religious encounters.

2. The Catholic Church and Inter-religious dialogue

In her declaration on the "Right to Religious Freedom", the Second Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. By this statement, the Council made it clear that 'all human persons should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is to be forced to act against his convictions and conscience in religious matters, private or in public, alone or in association with others.' This declaration of the Council is based on the very dignity of the human person, a

fact attested to by Christian Revelation and human reason.

In a Church document, *Nostra Aetate* (NA), the Catholic Church has this exhortation for her sons: "prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture (NA 2. 1965).

This Church document recognizes the presence of truth in the other religious traditions. It also paves the way for the assimilation of these very values present in other religious traditions into the one universal heritage of the church which is always growing and acquiring new insights. A close look at Eastern Asian religions reveal the deep insights and numerous contributions they can make in the areas of mystical and ascetical theology in the life of the Church and the people of the world

in general. The concrete ways these Asian religions approach the subject of inner transformation and spirituality resonates deeply with the Catholic Church's traditions of meditation, lectio-divina, contemplation, metanoia, kenosis and inner-transformation. Inner transformation and its corresponding positive and wholesome moral and social external practices are the target of any religious tradition and the Asian religions offer a rich source for such character formation and transformation. Examples of such teachings and rich spiritual resources of the Asian traditions could be found in Bhikku Buddhadasa's Handbook For Mankind (Buddhadasa, 2005); and also, Me and Mine (Buddhadasa, 1989).

Many theologians, clergy and lay persons in the Catholic tradition, have come to appreciate these rich heritages, the moral, psychological and spiritual wisdom of Hinduism and Buddhism; in particular are the Catholic monastic communities like the Cister-

sians and the Benedictines. These monastic communities in the church have been actively and consciously engaged in intra-religious and spiritual dialogues with Buddhist monks and monasteries all across Asia and in particular, Thailand. This appreciation has been the fruit of a contemplative dimension of these monastic communities.

In recognition of this contemplative call and the contemplative dimensions in Hinduism and Buddhism, the Vatican asked the Benedictines and Cistercians in Europe to accept the responsibility of forging initiatives for dialogue with Asian religions. This has proved to be a good and wise initiative on the part of the Vatican Secretariat, that is, to have chosen to engage an already existing monastic organization that was already operative for years in giving aid to monasteries in the Third World countries for the fostering of interreligious dialogue. This organization is called Aide-Inter-Monasteres (A.I.M.) and it has its base in Paris. It established



a sub-division called Dialog-Inter-Monasteres (D.I.M.). This sub-division was established in order to implement the Vatican mandate and to focus on improving relations with other faith traditions. When Thomas Merton came to Bangkok in 1968 to attend a conference, a visit which led to his death, it was a conference organized by the American branch of A.I.M. In the United States of America, A.I.M., was founded to facilitate East-West Dialogue in 1977. It carried out its functions through publications and posting of notices on Bulletins, and by keeping its supporters informed about all relevant interreligious events and news. A.I.M and other groups like it have become more recognized as very important in promoting intra-religious dialogue.

While firmly rooted in its Christian tradition, Vatican II was quite open, very understanding and sensitive to other religious traditions. This was quite innovative and groundbreaking. This openness to other religious tradi-

tions led to the establishment of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions in May 14, 1964 during the Council and prior to the promulgation of the conciliar decree *Nostra Aetate* on October 28, 1965.

2.1 Dialogue on the mystical plane.

It is important to state at this point that, regarding existential interreligious encounters, there is a definite need to place more emphasis on personal and genuine encounters between persons rather than a discussion on purely academic levels. Interreligious dialogue should be a living phenomenon and must be located in the spiritual and cultural practices of the various religious traditions since these elements are of utmost importance to these religions. As Giuseppe Scattolin pointed out, "Dialogue, in fact, is not, in the first place, dealing with abstract systems of thought, but with concrete persons in their quest for truth, a quest in which each partner must become a

'thou' for the other" (Giuseppe Scattolin, 1996).

Over forty-seven years since the *Nostra Aetate* was proclaimed, it has become glaringly clear, especially after the failure of the academia to forge an effective interreligious dialogue at the grassroots, that it is no longer a question of academic or bilateral dialogue between the church and some other religion or religions that would lead to realistic and concretely improved relations with people of other faith traditions, but rather of an existential inter-religious dialogue, that is, an encounter and communication among persons from different religions and an encounter with the various religious questions. As Wayne Teasdale puts it is, "the relation of the Divine to the human or the world, the Godhead and Nirvana, of Saccidananda to Trinity, of compassion to love, of Christ to the Bodhisattva, and of enlightenment to salvation, to mention a few", that will facilitate genuine inter-religious dia-

logue (Teasdale, 1991). Teasdale states further that, in his view, true inter-religious dialogue cannot find resolution in the academy. The answer must be located in the depths of mystical experience and realization which comes through a process of the interior life or in contemplation itself. As Teasdale states again; "Nothing can take the place of sitting for an hour in the presence of a Buddhist, Hindu or Sufi master (Teasdale 1991)." This also applies in the Christian tradition. The depth of spirituality in a Christian contemplative will usually and quite easily relate to the similar depth of spirituality in the Hindu, Buddhist or Sufi contemplative. It is a fact of experience that dialogue is a living matter, not a formal debate divorced from the spiritual practice of human persons. This is uniquely true of mystical religion, but it is not true of mathematics, physics or biology, for instance." (Teasdale, 1991).



2.2 Inter-monastic Hospitality: An Instance of Intra-religious dialogue

As a good example of and genuine initiative at an existential and concrete inter-religious dialogue, the North American Board for East-West Dialogue and A.I.M. has carried on inter-monastic and other hospitality programs for some years already with Buddhist monks, and this has been very beneficial to both sides. As Teasdale explains, 'A.I.M. has invited Japanese Zen Buddhist monks and nuns as well as Tibetan monastics to tour European monasteries for months at a time in different years.' In the same way, the North American Board took the initiative to also invite Tibetan monks for a period of about six months at a time on various occasions. The monks spent a week or two in some of the bigger Catholic monastic communities. As a way to show reciprocity, Benedictine and Cistercian monks and nuns also travelled to large Tibetan monaster-

ies in India to spend about the same amount of time. Through such gestures of hospitality, friendships have been fostered and relations between religious traditions improved greatly. Initiatives like these are needed between different faith traditions and this would be a good compliment to the grassroots intra-religious relationships already taking place among people in both rural and urban areas.

3. Existential Inter-religious Encounters between Christians and Muslims in Egypt

What happened recently in Egypt when the people of Egypt stood together in mass rallies to oust president Hosni Mubarak was a clear instance and evidence of the fact that grassroots and concrete inter-religious relationships had already been taking place amongst the people of various religions in the country, particularly between the Christian and Muslim religions. The incident in question hap-

pened when, as a sign of friendship and unity, Christians locked hands together and formed a ring around Muslim friends and countrymen while they were at prayer. The Muslims also returned the favor. This show of friendship between the Christian and Muslim religions have been somewhat downplayed when it ought to have been given greater publicity by the media and even used to form the basis for constant media attention and propaganda for inter-religious dialogue. It is to the greater good of the multicultural world communities that such instances of cooperation and friendship should be really played up and promoted.

This initiative in concrete inter-religious interactions and encounters, to my mind, while not solving all the areas of disagreement between Muslims and Christians, has the potential to strengthen relationships between peoples of both religions.

4. The Thai Church's Contribution to Concrete and Existential Inter-faith Encounter – A Dialogue of Life

As a result of the persecution being experienced by Christians and moderate Muslims in Pakistan, many have had to escape in order to save their lives and that of their families. Some of such people have become asylum seekers and refugees in Thailand. The same is true of some Sri-Lankan Tamils who had to leave their country to escape government persecution. Most of such people are not Christians; there are many Muslims and Hindus amongst them. Since arriving in Thailand, most of these people visit Christian Churches to solicit for food and means of livelihood. Some of these Christian Churches offer weekly and bi-monthly food outreach programs that cater to the needs of these asylum seekers and refugees. As an instance of an existential inter-religious dialogue, it has been observed that when these migrants come for their weekly food and mon-



ey ration, they are dealt with them on equal basis and treated as human beings and never on the basis of religion. Each person's religion and religious sensibilities and traditions are respected and preserved. This sensitivity to the religious traditions and psychology of the Muslim and Hindu asylum seekers has fostered trust and mutual respect between them and the Catholic social workers. This friendship that exists between the three religions could only have been possible because of the openness with which the Catholic social workers treated the Muslim and Hindu migrants.

5. Conclusion

There has to be a movement from an intellectual and academic discourse to a focus on concrete existential inter-faith encounters if there is to be any meaningful dialogue between various religious persuasions. Beginning at the top of the pyramid regarding interreligious dialogue has never

really helped the course of improving relations between religions over the years. As Teasdale rightly notes, "When all is said and done, however, it is the experiential factor that is crucial and decisive. No amount of talk, no matter how wise, learned and eloquent, no amount of study can substitute for a life of contemplative depth" (Teasdale, 1991). Most of the religions of the world share a common value and aim of inner transformation and the corresponding external moral practice as reflected in their monastic and contemplative lifestyles. The aim of these contemplatives in these religious traditions has been to attain mystical wisdom and spiritual transformation. This, in turn, ought to lead to a more just, loving and compassionate way of life. It has been the purpose of this paper to focus more attention to the importance of concrete existential inter-religious encounters as prelude to any kind of genuine inter-religious dialogue. This is important because

such existential inter-religious encounters create a more trusting and friendly environment. Through such concrete inter-religious relationships, people of different religions begin to go beyond just the mere externals of their various religions to make connection with their common humanity and through contemplative encounters make connections at the level of their shared contemplative experiences and their common values of love and compassion which is the heritage of most religious and contemplative tradition.

Existential inter-religious encounters have positive effects on the community and acts as the framework upon which inter-religious dialogues could be held on different levels. For one, such interactions lead to greater acceptance, tolerance and mutual cooperation amongst believers of the different faiths. *Living together becomes natural and normal.* Even inter-marriages occur and this leads to a breaking down of barriers that separated people. When

there are areas of conflicts, these are identified easily and because of the already existing collaboration and mutual trust and acceptance, such conflicts are quickly dealt with. Through concrete existential interactions and through observation as a result of living together, peoples of different religious traditions living together as a community, come to know and understand each other's religions, psychological sensitivities, religious beliefs and practices and also learn to respect the things that the other holds as sacred and important. Such mutual respect creates an atmosphere of trust and forms the basis for realistic and meaningful inter-religious dialogue. While existential inter-religious interactions have been going on at mostly unconscious levels, it has to become a more conscious and goal-oriented enterprise given the urgent need for greater cooperation and understanding between differing faith traditions today.



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