

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE:
THE WAY FORWARD FOR CHRISTIANITY
AND UNDERSTANDING INCARNATION THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The three Abrahamic traditions, each in their own way, proclaim that the Almighty has spoken his Word to human beings who, in return speak their words of prayer and praise. Such is the dialogue between heaven and earth. It is entirely proper, therefore, that the members of these traditions should engage in interfaith dialogue, and not only they but also the members of non-Abrahamic traditions, who proclaim a communication between the transcendent and earthly spheres. Christianity for its part proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is the Word made flesh (Jn. 1:14), for which the theological term is ‘incarnation’.

In this article, I note that the Catholic Church now acknowledges and welcomes all that is true and holy in other religions. I then examine the four interfaith dialogues – of life, of cooperation, of theological exchange and of spiritual experience – making the point that they do not constitute a threat to Christianity, but on the contrary open up new paths and possibilities for its development, and particularly for understanding more fully the incarnation of the Word. Indeed, I propose that Christians can listen to and learn from non-Christian religions in such a way that they grasp their own tradition more clearly and assent to it more wholeheartedly. Meeting and working with others are forms of incarnation; learning from others and experiencing their religious experience are other forms of incarnation.

In this way, the unique and unparalleled enfleshment of Jesus Christ can be appreciated more fully. I also make the point that these four forms of interfaith dialogue, examined from the Christian point of view, are applicable to other faiths. I will at times recount some personal anecdotes that exemplify how my interfaith experiences have helped me better understand incarnation theology.

Keywords: Forms of dialogue, faith traditions, learning, submission, emptiness, irreducibility of experience, incarnation

INTRODUCTION

When the Buddhist monk, Lobsang Tendar, came to live at my house, bringing with him his Tibetan culture and Buddhist religion, I could not say to him, ‘Come in, but leave your heart and soul at the door.’ The act of welcome meant receiving all that he valued. He entered my house and, conversely, I had, in a profound sense, to enter into his world, his life and mind, and meet him there. I did not share all his points of view, as he probably did not share all my views, but at a deeper level we had to acknowledge what is deepest and dearest in each other. The same was true of the Swami who also came to live in my house. To be present to each other in community means taking on something of each other’s viewpoint. The more we become close, the more we identify with each other and become one body.

This attitude of mind, acknowledging and welcoming the truth that is found in other religions, represents a profound shift in the Catholic Church, which for most of its history has had a negative, even hostile view of

other religions. It is only with the Encyclical of Pope Pius XII *Evangelii Praecones* (2 June 1951) that the point of view officially changes.¹ The encyclical states,

... the Catholic Church neither despises nor rejects [*neque despexit neque respuit*] the doctrinal teachings of other peoples.²

It was a complete about-turn. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council, a remarkable event in the long history of the Church, stated in a watershed document

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. ... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons [to engage in] dialogue and collaboration ...³

In fact, the Catholic Church now promotes four forms of dialogue.⁴ In the dialogue of life, people of different faiths mingle and meet in the ordinary events of the day; in the dialogue of cooperation, we engage in shared tasks for the work of justice and peace; in the dialogue of theology we explore our various traditions in a more academic fashion; in the fourth

dialogue, that of religious experience, we come to appreciate and perhaps even experience the spiritual depths of other traditions.

I propose now to look at these four in turn, and investigate how they can be a way forward for Christianity and especially in its understanding of the fundamental Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Lessons may be learned that could apply to the interreligious dialogue that is being conducted by other traditions.

DIALOGUE OF LIFE: MEETING THE OTHER

The act of meeting is complex. It involves inter-subjectivity. The Cartesian dream of purely objective knowledge, without reference to the observer, is no longer tenable. And again, purely subjective knowledge is now held to be impossible. The German philosophers, Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) “see objectivity and subjectivity not as competing but as complementary and mutually reinforcing.”⁵ The Yoga philosophy of India had itself long taught that we cannot really know fire unless we become fire.

Any object may appear by means of any faculty. The *yogī* who enters into the [object] by virtue of an attentiveness to the self becomes the [object].⁶

Only fire can truly know what it is to be fire. This is above all true in human relations. We can really know another person only by somehow entering into their mind and heart, appreciating their history, sensitive to what they have undergone. Entry into an interfaith relationship means in some way going beyond what is familiar and adventuring into a new space. It does not mean ceasing to be oneself, but it does mean becoming the other to some extent. Every meeting has an element of incarnation.

Abraham is a prime example. He left his land and his father’s house (Gen. 12:1) and made his home in Canaan. In that sense he became incarnate there. The story of Abraham is a pale image of the act of creation. The utterly transcendent God creates the world, but he also enters it in the sense that he communicates his word to it. The Almighty and Merciful has revealed the Qur’an. He has, so to put it, spoken the Qur’an into

¹. Laurentin, *Bilan du concile*, 297.

². Pius XII, “*Evangelii Praecones*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (1951): 497-528, at 522.

³. ‘Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions’ (*Nostra Aetate*), para.2.

⁴. ‘The Attitude of the Church towards Followers of Other Religions’, in Gioia Francesco (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue, the Official Teaching of the Catholic Church*, (1963-1995). Boston, Pauline Books, 1997. p.575-577.

⁵. Chris Mulherin. *Truth and knowing after method: A hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional approach to truth*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia, 2016), 31.

⁶. Dupuche, *Abhinavagupta: The Kula Ritual*, 259.

the world. The Christian Bible says that God had already spoken to humans through the words of the prophets. (Heb. 1:1) It further teaches that God communicated with humans fully and

entirely when his Word became fully human. God speaks most powerfully when human flesh speaks to human flesh, human heart to human heart.

In Christian teaching, Jesus is the Word of God expressed in human nature. Jesus, Christians say, is primarily the eternal Word and never ceases to be at God's side, but he becomes a Jew in order to walk among them and so fulfil the promises God had made to them. But that is not the end of the story. God wishes to communicate with all human beings, in all their circumstances, in all their living and dying. The Christian faith holds that God reveals himself most fully in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Lord.

An anecdote. While taking tea after a 'conversation' in which perhaps twenty Catholics and Muslims had taken part, Sheikh Fehmi Naji el-Imam, the Grand Mufti of Australia and highly respected, told us he felt "a word has passed between us". In fact, we felt that something profound had taken place. Had not the Word of God been heard within all the words exchanged that day? We had communed in the one Word of God. We had the impression of belonging to each other because we had shared the Word. We belonged to each other, Muslims and Christians. He who is One united us.

Incarnation is not tribalism. If we belong to a tradition, whether it be Christian, Muslim or Sikh, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist, only through a sense of tribalism, not because of our personal conviction but only because we belong to a group, we do not truly belong to our tradition. Furthermore, our supposed allegiance is on the surface and will be unable to cope with changing perspectives and customs. Tribalism inevitably leads to fear and aggression because change is seen as a threat.

The dialogue of life is a form of mutual incarnation. It helps us understand more fully what it means to say that Jesus "became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth." (Jn. 1:14) We also will live with each other in openness and sincerity of heart. In this way we will better appreciate how the incarnation of Jesus is a dialogue of life between God and humankind.

DIALOGUE OF COOPERATION

The second form of dialogue is cooperation which can take many forms. It is exemplified in the practice of international on-line conferences for which organisers come from different traditions but work together amicably and successfully. However, I would like to move quickly to the third form of dialogue.

DIALOGUE OF THEOLOGICAL EXCHANGE

The official publication of the Archdiocese of Melbourne entitled *Promoting Interfaith Relations*⁷ has the following: "Interreligious dialogue is not a debate. It does not seek to produce a sort of super-religion, ... Nor is it a clever means of proselytizing, ... it does not aim at conversion."

The same publication quotes Pope John Paul II, who speaks of a spirituality of communion. He says,

A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly but also as a 'gift for me'.⁸

Incarnation is not 'cannibalism.' There is no devouring of other religious traditions, reducing them to our own point of view. We respect them, not trying to filter them through the lens of our own tradition but

⁷. Revised edition. The first edition of these Guidelines was officially launched by Archbishop Denis J. Hart, August 21st, 2007. This revised edition was approved by the Archbishop on 12th October 2009.

⁸. Pope John Paul II. 'At the Beginning of the New Millennium' (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*), par. 43.

admitting their distinctive truth and power. We do not appropriate each other's riches but respect them as a sacred and inviolable witness.

I have experienced this very thing. After much searching and through much trial and error, I came across Kashmir Shaivism, one of the many great traditions of Hinduism. On reading a sentence or even a word, I felt a reverberation, a great resounding from the depths. It was because at last I had discovered the words that gave expression to my own experience. Here is an example which still impacts on me.

Beholding ... every object in every direction at every moment while still abiding peacefully at the heart of them all, like a golden pillar, you are the very foundation of the universe.⁹

This gave me a sense both of stability in myself and incarnation in the ever-changing diversity of the world. It was very exciting. I did not cease to be a Christian. The truths of India did not destroy the truths of my own upbringing. Truth does not destroy truth. *God does not contradict himself. But Hinduism enabled me to discover resources in the Christian tradition which I needed and which had lain unnoticed.*

The Muslim teaching on submission also had an impact on me. From among the many possible verses from the Holy Qur'an,¹⁰ here are two:

True Religion, in God's eyes, is *islam*: [devotion to Him alone].¹¹

Verily (it is) the guidance of Allah which is the (true) guidance, and we are commanded to submit to the Lord of the worlds.¹²

Verses such as these made me appreciate better the episode in the Gospel narrative when, just before his crucifixion, Jesus goes with his disciples to the Mount Olives. He falls to the ground and prays, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." (Mk. 14:36) Jesus submits fully to the will of the One who sent him. The centrality of submission in Islam allowed me to appreciate more fully a passage from the Letter to the Hebrews.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission He learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. (Heb. 5:7-9)

Some Christians focus excessively on the person of Jesus. Their attention is drawn away from the One who sent him. The teaching of Islam is a corrective. It reminds Christians that their principal prayer, called 'The Lord's Prayer,' is addressed to God and asks first of all that '[His] will be done' before asking for daily bread and forgiveness. The prayer pleads in three different ways that God's will be done before asking anything for ourselves. In this way, the prayer underscores the primacy of God's will.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us;

⁹. Kṣemarāja. *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam, The Secret of Self Recognition*. Jaideva Singh (ed.) Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982. p. 98.

¹⁰. In this article, quotations from the Qur'an, except where otherwise noted, are taken from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹¹. *Sura Al-'Imran*, 19.

¹². *Sura Al-'An'am*, 71. <https://quran.com>

and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. (Mat. 6:9-13)¹³

Islam can help Christians rediscover the incarnation, namely the teaching that Jesus is God's Word made flesh sent into the world to bring all things into union with the Almighty who is beyond all sight and definition.

I am speaking from the Christian point of view. I feel confident that Muslims could likewise appreciate their tradition more fully by hearing the teaching of Christianity. However, I can only tell you what Hinduism and Islam have done for me; it is not for me to tell Muslims or members of other faiths what advantage they might find in learning from Christianity. I only give witness to the joy and the wisdom I have found in learning from other traditions.

DIALOGUE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The fourth form of dialogue is that of religious experience. My friends in India don't ask me what I think but what I have experienced. Their question is demanding and challenging. What have I really experienced?

At Bodh Gaya in the Indian State of Bihar, a great peepal tree spreads its branches over the site where the Buddha attained enlightenment. The sacred place consists of a bare platform, nothing more. Nevertheless, people from the world come in great numbers to sit close to it in the stillness of meditation. Their devotion and the bareness of the platform have helped me experience the liberating truth of the Buddhist teaching on emptiness. And again, the unadorned platform reminded me of the empty tomb where Jesus had been buried. When his disciples ran to it on Easter morning, they found it empty. Only then did they understand the teaching of Scripture that he must rise from the dead (Jn. 20:8-9). They realised that Jesus was not there; indeed, that he is nowhere on earth and that his bones do not lie hidden in some forgotten place in the Middle East. The Holy Qur'an also speaks of Jesus being raised beyond this earthly dimension.

God raised him up to Himself. God has the power to decide.¹⁴

If the disciples had understood the Scripture they would have realised that Jesus must rise from the dead, but they are slow to understand the mind of God and need the sight of the

empty tomb if they are to believe. The empty site at Bodh Gaya made me appreciate the impact of the empty tomb and the teaching that Jesus rises beyond any temporal and visible dimension. Jesus' incarnation is complete when he has gone beyond all mortal form and has taken his followers with him.

This sort of impact can go both ways. Is it possible, perhaps, that Buddhists might be struck by the Christian teaching that Jesus emptied himself when he took on the lowliness of human form, dwelling on earth in order to lead to the One who is the origin and goal of all? On appreciating the significance of this teaching, Buddhists might see more clearly that their own experience of the void is an experience not only of absence, but also of fullest Presence. A great Geshe, at the time of his death, said to his closest disciple, 'We shall meet in the void'. The Geshe was giving his grieving disciple the great hope that they would again be in each other's presence. He was also reminding his disciple of the need to be rid of all illusion and craving. One must be empty of oneself in order to meet the other. But the 'voids' cannot be reduced one to the other. The void (*śūnyatā*) in Buddhism is not the same as self-emptying (*kenōsis*) in Christianity, nor is it the same as the *fana* of Islam. The Qur'an teaches:

¹³. See the article noting the similarities and differences between the Lord's Prayer and the al-Fatiha. John Dupuche, Fred Morgan, Fatih Tuncer. 'Three prayers in dialogue: the Shema, the Lord's Prayer and the al-Fatiha', in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 2017, pp. 587-609.

¹⁴. *Sura Al-Nisa'*, 158.

Do not call out to any other god beside God, for there is no god but Him. Everything will perish except His Face.¹⁵

Everyone on earth perishes, all that remains is the Face of your Lord.¹⁶

There is an inviolability of experience. This inviolability establishes the dignity not only of the tradition but also the members within that tradition. Thus, we can learn from the Jewish tradition but we can never make it obsolete. The People of the Covenant have something that no other group can have. They have a unique value that cannot be replaced.

Just as the doctrinal systems of the different faith traditions cannot be reduced one to the other, so too the experiences that pertain to the various traditions cannot be assimilated one to the other. The diversity is a fact. It also serves a purpose, for diversity with its irreconcilable variety invites us to go beyond mind and discover the One who stands at the source of all our human experiences. The irreducibility of one experience to another can help us know the Infinite God more truly and more personally. We stand in awe and humility before each other, but we are not excluded from each other. On the contrary, our

interfaith dialogue reaches its apogee in silence and wonder. We are taken beyond our own limited experience to the origin of every spiritual experience. We commune in the One.

Thomas Merton OCSO (1915–1968), the great teacher and a significant figure in interfaith dialogue, puts it well, “[T]he deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless.”¹⁷

¹⁵. *Sura Al-Qasas*, 88.

¹⁶. *Sura Al-Rahman*, 26-28.

¹⁷. Quoted from Mitchell, Donald W., and James Wiseman 2010, *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, New York: Lantern Books. p. xv. Quoted in Fabrice Blee, *The Third Desert: the Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, translated by William Skudlarek with Mary Grady, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011, p. 142.