

News: Guatemala. The Representatives of the Guatemalan Justice and Peace Committee gave an account of the situation to-day at the two meetings sponsored by the USG-UISG Justice and Peace Office and Sedos. The meetings were marked by the immediacy of the eye-witness accounts of the massacres taking place to-day in that country and of the extraordinary courage of those who face torture and death for their willingness to live and preach the values of the Kingdom.

Theology Data Bank, Rome. Proposal launched by Fr. Ralph M. Wiltgen, SVD. It is a plan for a computerized data bank for the 300 theological libraries in Rome and Vatican City making possible in seconds bibliographic searches by author, title and subject matter and indicating by code names the libraries in which the books could be found. The Pope manifested his interest in the plan during his recent visit to the Parish of Santa Marcella. The SVD Generalate, from where the idea was launched by Ralph Wiltgen, is in this parish.

Maryknoll Statement on Guatemala A joint position statement regarding Guatemala was released on December 9, 1982 by the Maryknoll Sisters, Fathers, Brothers and Lay Missioners in support of the statements of the Guatemalan Bishops and Religious. "Since the March 23, 1982 coup (of Rios Month) as many as 2600 peasants have been murdered, two hundred thousand have fled to other countries, particularly Mexico, and an estimated million displaced persons are inside Guatemala, hungry, sick and terror-stricken" says the statement, which calls for the withholding of further military assistance.

"Soeur Annuarite, Une Vie pour Dieu" Un film produit par les Editions Saint Paul Audiovisuelles de Kinshasa (B.P. 127 Kishasa - Limete), le premier long métrage en couleur (86 minutes de projection) produit au Zaïre avec les moyens de bord. Il est un reportage intéressant sur la vie religieuse Africaine. On voit vivre des religieuses, femmes du peuple, proches des leurs et qui s'occupent de choses ordinaires à travers le don d'elles-mêmes au Christ Jésus.

Ghana: Available in Sedos Documentation two Statements on "The State of the Nation", one by the Bishops Conference of Ghana, November 11, 1982, the other by the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church in Ghana.

OUR PRESENCE AMONG MUSLIMS
A PASTORAL LETTER

Bernardo G. Gremoli, O.F.M.Cap.

(La population chrétienne de l'Arabie est une petite minorité. Dans la 1ère partie de sa lettre pastorale Mgr. Gremoli souligne quelques similitudes et quelques différences fondamentales entre les religions musulmanes et chrétiennes. "L'Islam rejette les principes fondamentaux de notre foi: la Trinité, la divinité du Christ, l'Incarnation et la Rédemption, et par conséquent aussi le rôle de l'Eglise avec sa structure hiérarchique et les sacrements institués par le Christ". Cependant, de nos jours, il y a une compréhension et un accord croissant entre nos deux fois.

L'évêque cite la Déclaration de Vatican II sur les religions non chrétiennes: toutes les religions cherchent à satisfaire la recherche continue du cœur humain: il est donc recommandé d'examiner les textes sacrés de ces religions puisqu'elles reflètent un rayon de la vérité qui illumine tout homme. Il continue en citant entièrement, (comme le fait aussi l'évêque des Philippines) le passage de "Nostra Aetate" concernant les musulmans. Comme son confrère des Philippines il lance un appel au dialogue et cite Saint François d'Assise: "Evangéliser, prêcher l'Évangile à quelqu'un, cela suppose de se conduire envers autre personne de façon à ce qu'elle puisse découvrir et sentir en elle quelque chose qui est sauvé, qui est plus grand et plus noble qu'elle ne le pensait elle-même. Cette personne parvient à une nouvelle façon de se concevoir elle-même. Vous ne pouvez pas y parvenir autrement qu'en accordant à cette personne votre amitié, une amitié qui lui fasse sentir qu'elle est aimée par Dieu". N.d.l.R.).

The Attitude of the Church to Muslims

We must not be surprised, therefore, that after what has been mentioned above, many people (certainly with many exaggerations) have considered Christianity and Islam as mutually exclusive religions, as light is to darkness or goodness to evil. We also cannot be surprised if in the past relations between Islam and Christianity, on both sides, were characterised by war, intolerance and atrocities. Today, thanks to the same God in whom both Christians and Muslims believe, things have changed.

Even though Christianity and Islam are two great religions which inherently have a great drive for expansion and compete in the field of conversion of the world, there is today more understanding and agreement between these two faiths. The Church on her part has made great efforts to bring about such mutual understanding. In the declaration on

non-Christian religions Vatican Council II has brought a new emphasis to modern theology, giving birth to new ideas and initiatives for mutual relationship and understanding. The Council declared that all religions strive to satisfy the continuous searching of human hearts and that it is therefore to be recommended that we examine the Holy Books of these religions with respect. These Books often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.

In May 1964 Pope Paul VI instituted the Secretariat for Non-Christians, where there is a special section dealing with Islam. The main aim of this Secretariat is to promote a mutual understanding between peoples of different religions keeping in mind an objective knowledge of different spiritualities and of different ways the human mind expresses its approach to God. In particular Vatican II adopted an attitude of respect and reverence towards Islam. In the Constitution "Lumen Gentium", speaking about God's plan of Salvation, it says: "But the plan of Salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among them are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham and together with us they adore the One Merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day". (L.G.16). In the above declaration Islam is considered the first among non-biblical monotheistic religions. Secondly: it affirms that Christians and Muslims adore the same God.

The most important document and the one which throws light on the thoughts and the attitude of the Church towards Islam however is "Nostra Aetate" paragraph 3 which we quote here in its entirety:

"The Church has also a high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living, merciful and almighty, the Creator of Heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they worship Jesus as Prophet, his Virgin Mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgement and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds, and fasting. Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The Sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding: for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social Justice and moral values".

In this document are summarized all the positive aspects of Islam and all these views which are common with ours and remind us of the values of the Islamic faith and worship. This document is not only doctrinal but also practical, because it is inviting us all to mutual understanding and collaboration.

During the past thirteen centuries the history of relations between Christianity and Islam has been one of wars, of conquests, re-conquests and of bitter and injurious disputes.

After the Vatican Council II there have been many meetings between Christians and Muslims everywhere. The most famous are those of Tripoli (1976) and of Cordoba (1974 & 1977). During these meetings many topics were discussed on the subject of doctrine of each faith and on the history of mutual relations. We must honestly admit, however, that not much progress has been made. There is still a long way to go on the road to mutual understanding. We are obliged to follow this way, which is the way of the Church, even if it is a long and a difficult one. The Church invites us, as believers in the same God and in the same important values such as peace, freedom, social justice, etc... to co-operate in those specific areas.

We have to march together, side by side, in this common action of serving a humanity still tortured by violence, hatred and terrorism. Today Christians and Muslims are facing the same problems and dangers: that of materialism and atheism.

The world is divided into believers and unbelievers and this is not the time to fight each other, but instead we should meet, as believers, in a common effort to combat unbelief and materialism. In spite of some fundamental differences in matters of doctrine, as was already mentioned above (especially regarding the Nature of God and of Jesus as Messiah and Saviour) we have the basis for a common doctrine to justify being called believers in the same One and Benevolent God. We similarly have a basis for joint understanding and co-operation in achieving many human values. Commitment to fulfilling the law, respect for human dignity, preserving peace and the fundamental rights of all people are examples of this. This is the way we must prove the credibility of our faith in God.

In spite of some differences in the interpretation of historical events which took place during the past centuries affecting both Christians and Muslims, we must all try to forget and to forgive, to face the new reality for the sake of mutual respect and peace among us.

We strongly believe that the true religion is that of Jesus Christ will remain for ever "the Way, the Truth and the Life". We admit, however, that Islam contains a quantity of truth which leads to God, and some of the rules of life and of creed which, if observed with fidelity and sincerity will lead to salvation.

We recognise that our Muslim brethren have a profound respect for God, a deep sense of prayer, penance and almsgiving. We believe that also among Muslims there are persons who love God sincerely and serve Him with dedication. We expect from the Muslims the respect for our faith in Jesus Christ and our dogmas and traditions and therefore we also should respect their prophet Mohammed and everything in which

Islam believes. This attitude and the mutual respect is a far cry from the desire to reduce our respective faiths to a common denominator. It is rather a true co-existence, in the mutual acceptance of difference.

Similarities and differences between Christians and Muslims should help both sides to be truly faithful to the demands of their respective faiths.

Conclusion

In our Diocese we Christians are a small minority who live in the birthplace of Islam and where it is now very well established. We have to recognise the fact that in some areas we are accepted, in some tolerated and in yet others rejected. We are forced to admit with great regret that not all our brothers and sisters enjoy the liberty of assembly for prayer and participation in the Holy Eucharist. We also have to point out, with regret, that quite often the local press - perhaps provoked by some of our members behaviour - writes things which are offensive to our religion.

Notwithstanding all these difficulties and these facts, which often perturb us and which are the cause of our deep sorrow, I wish to implore you, my Dear Brethren, not to reciprocate with resentment, hatred or revenge. Our attitude should be always and only that which Jesus, our Divine Master taught us - forgiveness and love. Let us remember that the fundamental basis of Christianity is love. Every human person, even the one who causes us pain, deserves our love and respect for his or her beliefs. We should always remember that as guests we ought to respect beliefs, traditions and customs of those who are our hosts. Of course, we expect the Muslims to do the same in our Christian countries where they are in the minority as we are here.

My dear Bretheren, we must be a living community, which witnesses our love and faith in Christ. We must be deeply aware of the fact that also in this country we have a message of eternal life to reveal: the joyful news of God made Man, Jesus Christ. "And this is eternal life: to know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent". (Jn.17.3). We are called to bear witness to LOVE made man. It is not enough to live this love among ourselves or to speak about it. We must be filled with it to overflowing, till that love becomes obvious to every one around us. "My dear children - says St. John - our love is not just words or mere talk; but something real and active". (1Jn. 3:18). We can do this when we sincerely apply the Gospel of Jesus to our daily life - at home and at work.

My Dear Brethren, let us remember that our presence here requires always a firm witnessing to Jesus and His teaching. This is our message and our responsibility everywhere but especially in this Diocese.

I would like to end this pastoral letter with the words of

St. Francis of Assisi, who approached Islam with great spirit of love and understanding: "Evangelizing, preaching the Gospel to someone, it means behaving towards this man in such a way that he may feel and discover in himself something that is saved, something greater, more noble than he thought, till he comes to a new way of thinking about himself. You cannot do this any other way than by giving him your friendship, a friendship which will make him sense that he is loved by God in Jesus Christ".

May the Lord bless you all, your work, your families, your noble ideals, and give you the grace to be always a genuine witness to His Gospel. I bless you with all my heart.

Ref. Encounter. (Documents for Muslim - Christian Understanding)
No.91 January-February, 1983.

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INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER IN EASTERN ASIA

MANILA CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIAN ORGANISATIONS'

James W. Heizig

(The full report of this conference has been published in the first issue of a new bulletin entitled Inter - Religio What follows is the last third of that report which may be had on request from East Asian Pastoral Review, Box 1815, Manila. It is an account of the flow of ideas as they emerged around the free discussion of common working problems faced in the concrete organisation of interreligious dialogue).

Le texte de cette conférence a été publié en entier dans le 1er numéro d'un nouveau bulletin intitulé "Inter-Religio". Les lignes qui suivent représentent le dernier tiers de ce texte, légèrement abrégé toutefois. On peut demander ce document, si on le désire, à la revue de pastorale de l'Asie de l'Est, Box... Manille. Il rapporte les nombreuses idées qui ont surgi au cours d'une discussion à bâton rompu sur les problèmes communs à tous ceux qui s'occupent de l'organisation concrète du dialogue entre les religions.

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1. *Interreligious dialogue in Asia seems to be carried on largely by non-Asians. Not only the reports of the previous day but the very composition of the group confirms this. Is dialogue itself an Asian concept? Might it not be that the Western preference for a "choc des idées" needs to be replaced in Asia by an orientation to a "conciliatory attitude"?*

2. *Dialogue, at least in our area of Asia, seems everywhere to be the initiative of Christians. Does this mean that no need is felt outside of the Christian community? Or perhaps the need is present but not articulated? Could it be that the Christian call for dialogue is less subtle but no less aggressive imposition than the straightforward preaching of Christianity as the sole way to salvation?*

From a Christian perspective, it was agreed, dialogue is indeed a priority and one that belongs to the very nature of our belief, however long it has been ignored. One member mentioned that in professing faith in the Divine as personal we commit ourselves to an interpersonal approach to religion, whereas the impersonal Absolute common to many Asian religions does not so readily make such a demand. Others pointed out that the call to dialogue arises from sources outside of the sphere of religion, forces that are creating a global community and sweeping religions along in the process willy-nilly.

One positive aspect of the Christian initiative can be seen in Japan. For while it is true that Japan is a world leader in interreligious dialogue in the WCR¹ and elsewhere, without a Christian presence the religions of Japan seem to lack the motive to talk with one another. During the trip to Europe with the Buddhist monks, many of the monks admitted that it was the first time they were talking to members of other sects. The growth of the World Federation of Buddhism is not to be ignored, but their initiatives represent only a small part of the wider picture.

One complicating factor in assessing the role of Christians is that in lands where they are in the minority, Christians tend to belong to the middle classes which gives them a natural superiority and better base of operations for dialogue. Even if the spirit of Vatican II and The World Council of Churches (WCC) commitment to dialogue has only been weakly appropriated by Christian leaders, they are in a privileged position to assume the leadership. Another is that Christian thinkers in Asia who might be looked to for leadership have by and large been educated in the West and carry back with them a great number of interpretative models and organizational ideas foreign to the Asian reality. The result is that programs they help to staff and establish do not break free of the dependencies that have plagued Christian education in Asia these many centuries.

In this same regard mention was made of the fact that the drive to "dialogue" is in fact quite a modern phenomenon, and naturally attracts to itself all the biases that hold verbal, systematic exchange as of greater value than actual lived experience. The fact that Westerners interested in dialogue bring an agenda that is backed up by a financial security and a strong institutional commitment cannot but have an intimidating effect all its own. But the fact remains: like

psychological tests created in Europe and applied to Asia, interreligious dialogue has not been imported to Asia as a value-free exercise in human communication. The spirit of tolerance and interpenetration and conciliation that comes most natural to the Asian may offend the Western spirit of righteousness, but it is the only base on which to found a truly Asian dialogue.

In spite of the many examples that were offered in illustration, the point kept coming back that, when all is said and done, dialogue remains a basic Christian commitment. If the Vatican Council has encouraged us to live in the context of what is truthful and valuable, wherever it may be, our failures at dialogue should not compromise this demand but rather remind us of the cultural overweight that keeps us from reaching the ideal of true Christian dialogue.

Several members spoke of the need to recognize that the root causes for current interest in dialogue are not to be found in our inherited theological apparatus but in phenomena taking place in the secularization of culture. Driven into similar predicaments of losing their once dominant cultural positions and having to survive in a pluralistic world, many religions have naturally taken to talking with one another. While this is not everywhere the case (the Muslim-dominated countries can be considered an exception), it is something that transcends differences of East and West, North and South. This is said not to cast skepticism over motivations for dialogue, but to avoid the dangers of confusing causes with effects.

Two more questions were introduced:

3. *Even with Christian domination of the dialogue, it is only a small minority in the Christian community that feel the need for dialogue at all. As had been stated several times, the Asian Bishops themselves do not as a group show a firm commitment to its importance, and at the grass-roots level there seems to be little call coming from the Churches for them to think otherwise. How deep is the need for dialogue felt within Christianity?*
4. *Is the activity in dialogue going on at present merely a passing fashion to which we might expect a backlash and then its disappearance for something else?*

Picking up the topic of religious pluralism once again, one of the group offered the sobering impression that dialogue and ecumenism, in spite of their critical facade, can easily become walls to protect religious truth from the hostilities of a secular, scientific society rather than come to grips with it. In a way, the intellectual debate that goes on among academics of various religions is the safest place to stand, but it is a standpoint reserved for a very few. The point of

allowing dialogue to filter down from its airy heights to the lived reality of religious men and women is not merely in order that the riches be shared with all, but also in order that it become a fully historical reality.

The example was brought up of liberation theology, which has often been accused of merely importing ideas from Europe after they had outlived their time in their place of birth. The fact is that these ideas were put to work in praxis in the third World, and it was this praxis that gave them their distinctive character. Something like this might as well happen with notions of dialogue imported from a Western elite and save it from becoming either a tactic of survival or a foreign imposition.

At his point the group welcomes Archbishop Mariano Gaviola, Secretary General of the FABC. He said it was first necessary for the Bishops themselves to become aware of the promise of interreligious dialogue in order that they might promote it out of conviction at all levels of Church life. He went on to note that the seeds of the Word have been scattered throughout the great religions of the world and that only honest dialogue faithful to belief in that Word can help to recover them. This may begin with common concerns of social justice and human development, but from there it must go higher, and deeper, into facing common points and differences.

This becomes more necessary in Asia because before the advent of Mao Tse-Tung Asia was calculated to have been 9 per cent Christian, while now the figure is closer to 3 percent. We need to find new ways to recover the ground we have lost, Archbishop Gaviola urged. "We do not question or condemn those who have grown at our expense, but should emulate them and take them as an example of real missionary work towards our common God and Father."

One of the Assembly was quick to pick up the problem and its relevance to our discussions, noting that the failure of the Churches to support dialogue, at least the sort of dialogue we were talking about, might be traced back to a difference in motivation: namely, their goal of continued expansion for the Churches. The WCC and the Secretariat for Non-Christians are both convinced of the enormous importance of dialogue from a global perspective. But the CCA and local Bishops' Conferences have only begun to take positive action.

As long as the goal is to "gird ourselves" for the clash with other no less aggressively oriented missionary religions, there can be no dialogue in the full sense of the word. Whether it is history that is pushing us together, and whatever word or set of theoretical explanations one may use to speak of dialogue, looking at ourselves through the eyes of other religion can only be an enrichment in the long run. But this requires of us that we lay down our arms from the

battle or size and numbers that has inspired most missionary work in Asia.

Two further questions were then posed for discussion:

5. *Given the wide variety of situations in Asia, is the need for dialogue perhaps felt more in some countries than in others? Perhaps the single greatest factor here seems to be the presence or absence of Muslims, with whom dialogue is the most difficult.*
6. *Dialogue, in spite of its high ideals, is by no means exempt from exploitation or manipulation by state or religious leaders for their own prestige or political aims. Might not the way we choose our partners for dialogue also be affected here? De facto it has been the most institutionally, economically, and theoretically established religious traditions that have attracted the attention of the Christian Churches.*

The fact that arises most immediately out of the information exchanged the previous day, it was noted, is that the choice of partners is severely limited by the facilities and structures set up for dialogue. Where the emphasis is on research, religions without a consciously developed thought structure are of interest only as objects of study.

Or again, in a situation as difficult as that faced with Muslims, one runs the risk of gathering about oneself "select dialogue friends" who have enough similar training and education to make discussion fruitful, while the overall effect would be to cut oneself off from the reality of Islam. If we leave ourselves free to choose, we invariably choose our friends. The question then becomes whether in such dialogue—and this extends beyond the Muslim question—one has really come in touch with another religion or only confirmed one's own expectations. Those who join hands for common social aims are often, in this sense, closer to real dialogue even if differences of faith are allowed to rest between the brackets of tolerance.

One of the group suggested that the way around this dilemma is not to widen our base to include dialogue at an early stage with folk religions and popular religiosity, but to deepen the contacts we already have in preparation for such encounters at a later time.

It was also pointed out that Christians engaged in dialogue feel the need to present a unified front to those of other religions who would only be confused by the seemingly minor differences that have separated us. Similarly too much emphasis on respecting the differences within Buddhism, Islam or Hinduism and so forth, from one country to another, or from one sect to another, may result in an unnecessary scattering of attention at too early a stage, and prevent anything of general significance from taking place.

Several examples were offered of the ways in which political manipulation of interreligious meetings can take place without one noticing what is going on, thus imperilling future efforts at dialogue. The main problem here was coming up with criteria. In the case of financing, for example, it was noted that there has been a rather lax attitude taken towards the help and protection of the major religions, whereas when a newer, theoretically weak, and perhaps cultish religious movement invites our participation something within us recoils and calls their money "bad". While it would be naive to suppose that financial help is value-free philanthropy, on the other hand those responsible for distributing funds and providing assistance are often possessed of information and standpoints worth careful attention.

Finally the chair turned to the question of the "institutes" for dialogue:

7. *How important are teaching and research institutes for the overall aims of interreligious encounter? What should their role be?*

To begin the discussion, it was observed that the group was composed of individuals connected with various forms of organizations, whereas actual academic institutes involving the joint efforts of those from different faiths are few. Clearly the plurality of models has to be counted as something positive, but since several of the organizations seemed clearly to be at a point of making choices for a future direction, it would seem important to assess the possibilities open.

The example of the Dansalan Research Center in Mindanao, was brought up as a model for a truly interreligiously structured institute, where not only the work but the actual administration was a shared venture. Movements in this direction were said to be taking place in Korea. One member of the group raised doubts about this form of co-sponsorship, favouring cooperation among organizations sponsored separately by the various religions or Churches.

Returning to an earlier topic, the view was expressed that if one does not represent one tradition as an institute or organization, dialogue cannot be expected to go anywhere.

The opposite opinion was then expressed that although official statements of belief and policy are not unimportant, the standpoint from which they are made is not that of dialogue but of confession of one tradition.

This does not mean however, as someone else was quick to point up, that one does not welcome the support of one's Church. "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," he went on, "a long, long way from home."

The FABC's plan to train "animators for dialogue" was questioned at this point as something artificial precisely because it attempts to melt the standpoint of dialogue into Church policy. One learns dialogue it was said, by doing it, not by being trained to do it.

It takes years to become even mildly sensitive to the feelings of those from other religions, and this is the only real training that can produce results. Here again the question was raised: What if we train ourselves legions of young leaders for dialogue while the religions we hope to dialogue with do not undergo similar training? Does this not confirm the suspicions of a new aggressivity in the Churches? Nonetheless, the FABC aim to sensitize people in the Asian Churches can be seen as something imperative to the dialogue inasmuch as it serves to counter current attitudes, to help Church leaders unlearn models of being missionary that produce interreligious friction.

The Bishops of Indonesia, it was noted, favour "exposure" or "training" at specifically Christian centers. Other examples of this were given, such as the Taizé brothers in Bangladesh who begin by living among the Muslims before they leave for more intensive training. Perhaps the most important thing here, one of the group summarized, was that any preparation for dialogue has to be wary of reducing the religion of one's partner to something that can be studied at secondhand without actually experiencing its vitality through-firsthand discipleship.

Members who participated in the Group
Discussion

PHILIPPINES: Dolores Sikat, Institute of Oriental Religions and Cultures; Peter GOWING, Dansalan Research Center; Adolfo de NICOLAS East Asian Pastoral Institute; MALAYSIA: Anthony SELVANAYAGAM, Catholic Research Center; TAIWAN Yves RAGUIN, Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies Institute of East Asian Spirituality; Albert POULET-MATHIS FABC, Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs; THAILAND: Michael Seri PHONGPHIT, Thai Interreligious Commission for Development; HONGKONG: Diocesan Commission for Non-Christian Religions, Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre; KOREA: KIM Sung-Hae, Institute for Theological Research JAPAN: Raymond RENSON; Oriens Institute for Religious Research; YUKI Hideo, NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions; Thomas IMMOOS, Institute for Oriental Religions; Jan VAN BRAGT, Jan SWYNGEDOUW; James HEISIG, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture; INDONESIA: Michael SASTRAPRATEDJA, Driyarkara Institute of Philosophy.

FIRST FRANCISCAN CONFERENCE ON ISLAM

Assisi, 5-12 Oct. 1982

(Nous présentons ici une version abrégée de la lettre de la Conférence Franciscaine d'Assise, adressée à tous les membres des familles Franciscaines, dans l'espoir de donner un nouvel essor à leur présence parmi les musulmans et à leur humbles efforts à leur service. Elle se réfère à l'exemple et à l'inspiration de saint François, rendant visite au Sultan de Damiette en 1229. N.d.l.R.).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace and all Good!

Francis told us in Chapter 16 of the Rule of 1221: "the friars who are inspired by God to work as missionaries among the Saracens and other unbelievers must get permission to go from their minister, who is their servant. The minister, for his part, should give them permission and raise no objection, if he sees they are suitable; he will be held to account for it before God, if he is guilty of imprudence in this or any other matter.

The brothers who go can conduct themselves among them spiritually in two ways. One way is to avoid quarrels or disputes and be subject to every human creature for God's sake, so bearing witness to the fact they are Christians. Another way is to proclaim the word of God openly, when they see that is God's will."

"Inspired by God". Sensitive to the Word of God, Francis sees the events of his life and of his brotherhood in the light of faith. "When God gave me some brothers, there was no one to tell me what I should do, but the Most High..." "If anyone is inspired by God to live our life and comes to our brothers, they should welcome him." "... the friars who are inspired by God to work among the Saracens and other unbelievers". Today, as in the days of Francis, it is God who calls labourers into his vineyard.

... In their response to this call, friars are inspired by Francis' awareness of God's presence in all his creatures as well as in all events of history. This will lead them to a great respect for all peoples and cultures as gift of God, recognizing them as his brothers and sisters, and to a celebration of God's wonderful deeds manifest in them.

"Living among them" The same respect for persons and cultures made Francis ill at ease with the directives of the Fourth Lateran Council. The Council had announced a Crusade against the Muslims (cf. the Summa contra Gentiles, written in the same century). Francis could not recognize in this negative attitude the Spirit of Jesus.

He had come among us as a messenger of peace, and revealed to Francis the greeting: "the Lord give you peace." Francis wished therefore not to go out to the Muslims or, what is worse, against them. Rather, in the Spirit of Jesus, he wanted to go among them and bring them peace, as he admonished all his brothers to do wherever they went in the world. In this peaceful spirit, going among the Muslims, and leaving behind the Crusades and their arms, Francis was received by the Sultan with the same wish: "Assalam aleikum".

Impressed by his visit to the Sultan, Francis writes in the Rule of 1221 that the friars who wish to live among the Muslims, must avoid quarrels or disputes, apologetics, any spirit of controversy, wanting to win an argument, or power-seeking. On the contrary, as Francis admonished his brothers, not on his own authority but "in the Lord Jesus Christ", they should not judge others, but be gentle, peaceful and modest, meek and humble.

In the course of history, many friars have not in fact lived up to the ideals, and for this we are all sorry and apologize to those whom we have offended. Yet we feel encouraged too by the example of those who have lived, and continue to live, peaceably among Muslims... In this context we request those in authority to send to Muslim countries only those brothers who wish to encounter the Muslims in the respectful manner of St. Francis and have received an adequate preparation.

It is by sharing with each other who we are as believers that we can really enrich one another and stimulate each other mutually towards a continuous conversion.

"Subject to all creatures" The admonition of Francis to his brothers "to live among them" is the direct consequence of his choice to be "minor" at all times and everywhere. For this reason he rejected signs of power such as the Crusades and other ways of being "maior". In opposition to the Crusader mentality of conquering the Muslims, Francis wanted his brothers to be subject to them for the love of God, and so to bear witness that they are Christians. This witness of life in "minoritas" is very much in accordance with the exhortation of Evangelii Nuntiandi (No.21).

"Minoritas" demands from us today that we abandon the spirit of superiority which so often leads us to place our Christian culture above

theirs. This is not really franciscan or Christian: Christ humbled Himself and came to serve, not to be served. Accordingly, we try to avoid positions of authority and prefer places of service.

"Minoritas" even affects our attitude to religious truths. It opens our hearts and minds to perceive different emphases in a commonly shared doctrine, e.g. God's transcendence in today's world, reverence for the Word, the holiness of God's Name, and to reconsider the absoluteness of our own formulations of truth. God is greater than all formulations.

"Minoritas" will also favour our fraternity in being true brothers to the Muslims: fraternity demonstrated through our love for them, our participation in sorrow and joy with them, in the events of life, and in being sensitive to whatever hurts them.

"Minoritas" also helps us to break down our ghettos and to co-operate with Muslims in common projects rather than fostering our own.

"Minoritas" helps us to choose a simple way of life: e.g. in housing, transportation, food; avoiding also whatever is offensive to them. This option in no way presents a judgement on the method and achievements of friars in the past. We do, however, think that the future is asking for a fresh approach which avoids whatever may be understood as signs of prestige contrary to our mission.

We realize, of course, that living our "minoritas" outside the Order depends upon the practice of "minoritas" among ourselves. It should also help our own Christian community, and the ex-patriate Christian workers to be sensitive and open to the Muslims.

"When it pleases God" For Francis, the witness of life is the first method of evangelisation. And so friars must at no time put aside the call to penance that comes from living as Francis did. At the same time Francis writes in the Rule of 1221 that his brothers explicitly proclaim the Gospel only when it pleases God.

We feel that, through the signs of the times, God is telling us that the "when" of Francis directive has not yet arrived. In many countries the open preaching of the Gospel is not possible; Islam is renewing itself. Do these facts not show us that, as Francis waited for God's pleasure, we have to place ourselves in God's hands?

At the same time we are convinced that God is at work. The Holy Spirit is ahead of us, and many things happen altogether outside of and apart from our activity. The plan of God moves ahead independent of us.

We adore him in it. The present-day revival of Islam could well be seen as a renewed consciousness of the word of God and man's submission to him, a thought very dear to the heart of S. Francis:

"Every creature in heaven and on earth and in the depths of the sea should give God praise and glory and honour and blessing; he has borne so much for us and has done and will do so much good to us; he is our power and our strength, and he alone is good, he alone most high, he alone all-powerful, wonderful, and glorious; he alone is holy and worthy of all praise and blessing for endless ages and ages. Amen." "Letter to all the Faithful, II, 61-62).

He wished the Church to be among the Muslims as a poor and serving Church, powerless, identifying itself with the most marginalized persons.

To live like that does not come easily to anyone. But if we remember Francis' experience of perfect joy, we may also be helped towards the kenosis as his true disciples. The guidance of the Spirit will make this a fruitful experience because it will open our eyes for positive values in Islam.

Dialogue. In fact, in our many discussion, we found that this experience is what dialogue is all about, precisely in as far as it demands the willingness to surrender oneself to the other, and accept the other as other. It is not a question, then, of disputing which religion has the truth, or to what extent. It is a question, rather, of opening oneself to the truth of the other person. In this way, we, Christians and Muslims, can hopefully discover our common concerns, our common problems ; we can learn to appreciate that we have common human values, human needs; and can seek common solutions to these, always aware that we do not possess the truth but that the truth possesses us.....

We do not want to end this letter without expressing our deeply felt sympathy for the loss of life and property which have caused untold sufferings to many Muslims and Christians, especially in the Middle East. We hope and pray that this expression of solidarity will be appreciated by all who are concerned about peace and oppose every form of violence in society.

Peace to all of you.

Ref. Letter of Fr. Mel Brady, OFM. Secretary General of the Missions, OFM. Rome, to all Franciscan brothers and sisters.

 THE PROCESS OF CONVERSION TO ISLAM

A Case Study from India

Andrew Windgate

(Voici un extrait d'une étude d'un cas de prosélytisme de l'Islam, racontant comment un village est devenu musulman dans sa totalité. Ces cas de conversions presque massives constituent un point très sensible dans l'Inde d'aujourd'hui. L'abolition des castes et la reconnaissance de l'égalité des personnes proclamées par l'Islam, rencontrent un très grand attrait parmi les Harijans qui sont toujours pratiquement les victimes des abus les plus criants, malgré la législation contraire à ces genres de discrimination.)

I was present at a later *Kallima*, and I think it is worth describing as it has a great power in itself in the context of a village like Kanday. On my arrival that day, I went first to see the Deacon. But the Muslims were very insistent that I return to their tent-mosque quickly, in time to see the arrival of the daily bus from Madurai. I saw why when I returned. The bus was full of Muslims from Madurai, many of them clearly rich. And as they got down from the bus, there was mutual embracing on all sides. This was clearly a deeply important thing for the new Muslims, as also was the prayer for the first new Muslim who had died, which preceded the *Kallima*. Here were 200 people willing to come out not only from Madurai, but from many other places, to honour a former Harijan man who had died!

The main ceremony then began with an evangelical sermon, preached by one of the leaders of the Muslim Centre in Madurai. This was for the benefit of the new converts and those who might be attracted in Kanday itself and also for a small group of observers who had come from another village, also a Pallar village. The sermon was very clear, with three points - one theological, one social and one economic. If they joined Islam, they must put away all other gods and idols, Allah alone would be their God. If they joined Islam, they must forget their previous caste. They would be no longer Pallars, but Muslims. If they joined Islam, they should not expect any economic miracles, or believe any stories about Arab money pouring in for them. They should see the houses of the people who had joined earlier; they had received no economic benefit. They can come up in the future only by hard work and discipline. The sermon ended with examples of how the whole world was turning to Islam these days; various rich and educated Tamils were mentioned and also one or two examples from overseas. So

many people were learning the real truth. But no one was forcing them to join; they must accept the implications, and if so they were free to come.

There then followed the *Kallima* itself. There is a resident mullah in the village, but it is interesting that, unlike a Christian pastor, he did not take the major part. He merely supplied the list of names. Each new Muslim was admitted by a different old Muslim. He repeated a statement of faith, was then given a name, which he repeated till he knew it. The congregation then greeted him with the new name, not in a ritualist way, but speaking up from here and there. Then he was given his new hat (*kulla*), he put it on with a mixture of embarrassment and pride, and stood up. He was then embraced by a number of old Muslims from here and there among the congregation. The process was then repeated for the next man (at the same time, *Kallima* for women was going on somewhere else in the village).

This then complete, combined worship is held, in the normal Friday pattern, followed by a common fellowship meal. Old and new Muslims, and visitors like myself are separated from each other. As I sit down, my neighbour gives me some food from his plate with his hand, and I do the same for him. How powerful are all these things for the new convert, as symbols of breaking the social bonds, which we have described earlier. Things end with the women coming along, newly admitted, shyly walking with their saris firmly fixed over their heads.

Only after this ceremony does the process of training begin. There is no pretence of giving any training before admission. The desire to be a Muslim alone is enough. But afterwards, the training is taken very seriously. The Mullah was sent to the village at the time of the first conversions, and lived for some time in a convert's house, until a house was arranged. The Mullah in this village is Hebraim, and is himself a convert, of about 10 years standing. His wife is an old Muslim, and they are a living witness to the villagers that such marriages are possible. He teaches the men and boys, his wife the women. He is a gentle person, and very open to our enquiries. He is also eager to know more of Christianity and ready to listen. He has done a good job of teaching the basic methods of prayer and practice. These are given more importance than doctrine of theology. Here, a few basic points seem to have been hammered home again and again. On Fridays an outsider often comes to help in this; the Islamic Centre in Madurai sends someone sometimes. Besides this, a number of youth have been sent away to the Muslim College in Vellore, for four months. One has already returned, and he leads the worship when the Mullah is away. We heard him do it well. And the Mullah teaches small boys parts of the Koran in Arabic; they proudly recite it to us, though of course they do not know the meaning.

Washing is done very carefully, and outsiders remark how the new Muslims stop for prayer in the middle of their *kuli* work. They tell me that if they cannot manage to pray five times a day, twice will be enough. I ask here and elsewhere whether they find such regulations burdensome. They say no very emphatically, they like the discipline. They certainly seem to respond to a real demand on them which they have not found in Hinduism or in Christianity. As regards their relationship with their relatives of other faiths too, the Mullah has instructed them. In this interim period they may eat with them, since many are living in divided families. But they should not eat mutton with non-Muslims, and of course not pig. They expect the divisions to grow gradually stronger, as families fall into line.

They are also taught in the first few months the basic tenets of Islam, something about Mohammad, and also, for those who are ex-Christians amongst them, some simple arguments against Christianity, showing where Islam differs for the better. In this village of Kanday I was able to get at the real reasons for conversion, as I was able to meet people at a very early stage, some of them even before conversion.

.... I think the discipline, cleanliness, care in teaching of the Mullahs, the way they mingle with the people, and the clarity of their dogmatic teaching, does have an attraction, at least at first for these village people. So too does the sight of a new congregation bowing in unison and silence, to Allah, in the open view of all in the village, in a tent-mosque.

Ref. Religion and Society. Bulletin of The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. Vol XXVIII, No.4
Excerpt from A Study of Conversion from Christianity to Islam in two Tamil Villages, Tamil Nadu, by Andrew Wingate.

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