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## Editorial

*Our first contribution is a reflection by ARIJ A. ROEST CROLLIUS, SJ, professor at the Gregorian University. His study concentrates on the main intentions that should guide Interreligious dialogue and explains also the problems and difficulties which have to be faced honestly. —*

*Bro. EDMUND CHIA, FSC, works for the FABC in the department of interreligious dialogue. He evaluates the Post-Synodal Exhortation “Ecclesia in Asia” from the point of view of interreligious dialogue. On comparing “Ecclesia in Asia” with the Final Statement of the Seventh FABC Assembly, he discovers some important, different accents. —*

*Our African contribution comes from FRANÇOIS KABASELE. After a critical evaluation of the cultural and religious encounter between Europe and Africa, he shows areas where African cultures and Christianity have great possibilities to enrich each other if mutual respect is the guiding factor.*

*Fr Hilaire Valiquette, OFM, works among the Hispanics and Native Americans in New Mexico. In his biblical reflections he shows us how the martyrial elements of persecution and rejection in the mission of Jesus characterize the missionary endeavour of the Church through the ages. —*

*We are glad to be able to offer you as a concluding article a reflection on the Middle East. Fr CHRISTIAAN VAN NISPEN TOT SEVENAER, SJ, with many years of missionary experience in the Middle East, dwells on some fundamental aspects of a testimonial service of reconciliation in this conflict-ridden part of the world.*

## Brazil

### **CNBB REAFFIRMS ITS COMMITMENT TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

*The document released yesterday, entitled “Brazil: 500 Years of Dialogue and Hope”, marks the end of the 38<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB). The Catholic Bishops reaffirmed their firm commitment to the indigenous cause. The document, which seeks to rethink the past and examine current and future challenges, underscores that “for the Church to be loyal to our Lord Jesus Christ, it needs to be at the service of men and women, especially the weak, particularly when human dignity is threatened. All that which affects human beings also affects the Church”. Hence the Bishops touch on important issues such as the struggle of the poor, African Brazilians, and indigenous peoples.*

*With regard to indigenous peoples, the CNBB mentioned the wounds inflicted by colonization which enslaved and exterminated several indigenous peoples through social and cultural dismantling, wars, diseases and massacres. The role of the missionaries is underscored as the Bishops reaffirm their plea for forgiveness for the errors committed by Christians, for “all that which was objectively against the Gospel and gravely damaged the human dignity of many of our brothers and sisters”. For the CNBB, the Church’s defense of the poor and marginalized sector of society reflects its full awareness of their rights that were denied: “This poor population, along with the indigenous people and African Brazilians, is owed an immense social debt accumulated throughout the centuries as our nation was forged”.*

*The 38<sup>th</sup> Assembly approved the motion condemning the “grave and arbitrary violence” committed against indigenous people and others who took part in a peaceful protest in Santa Cruz de Cabrália, in Bahia. The Catholic Bishops expressed their commitment to support the demands set forth by the Indigenous Conference held in Coroa Vermelha from 18<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> April, especially the quick demarcation of indigenous lands and cancellation of Decree n. 1,775 /96— which regulates the administrative procedure for the demarcation of indigenous lands. They also demanded that the National Congress ratify the Statute of Indigenous Peoples and uphold the Federal Government’s responsibility to assist the indigenous cause. In this regard, the Bishops condemned the Government’s attempts to transfer to the States, municipalities, and private organizations its constitutional obligation to provide assistance, such as healthcare, to indigenous peoples.*

## Interreligious Dialogue: Can it be sincere?

### 1. The Main Intentions in Interreligious Dialogue

**B**efore getting into the core of our question: what is sincerity and how far does it reach? — we first discuss the various forms of Interreligious Dialogue.

**1.1 Practical Dialogue.** Meant is a dialogue that is praxis-oriented. The participants aim at a common action. We do not speak about any kind of participants. In an Interreligious Dialogue people with a religious inspiration and outlook are involved. And in their conceiving a joint project, they are motivated by their religious background. Moreover, in working together, and doing the job which they undertook, they find strength also in their religion.

A question: does this exclude people who do not profess any religious creed, or do not belong to an established religion? — Certainly not! Their presence and taking part can even be very healthy. It can help religiously-minded people not to consider themselves as better than others. And often, people who call themselves non-religious, or even secularist or atheist, have a great sense of honesty, commitment and fidelity. Could it be that they are perhaps less distracted by otherworldly values?

This practical dialogue has many forms. It goes from the village council in a pluri-religious setting to the collaboration of international organisations such as the Red Cross, Crescent, Star of David and Singha Lion. The common task can also vary, from garbage collecting to fund collecting. When this type of dialogue touches things such as school education, setting-up a calendar of holidays, defining the working hours, things and people can become rather touchy.

Verifying the sincerity of this kind of dialogue is not too difficult. It finds the proof of its sincerity in the result. Have you people just been talking, or have you also done something together?

It would seem that this type of Interreligious Dialogue is a very basic and essential one. We can produce a lot of words in talk and script, and our PC's help us in it with the touch of a finger. All this remains without evident value when there is not a common action. This type of dialogue is the nourishing ground of all other types. It is the humus from which mutual understanding

can grow. And only on the basis of a lived, mutual understanding can we begin to talk about such matters as peace and justice. Declarations of peace in international charters do not help very much, when people in the same town or region heartily hate each other.

**1.2 Diplomatic Dialogue.** At first sight, this seems to be a rather suspicious type of conversation. Diplomats have been stereotyped as people of mental duplicity. Moreover, agreeing to disagree appears a very meagre result of an encounter. And to this has to be added the question: in how far can participants in Interreligious Dialogue agree to disagree? Should they not object, refute, try to convince others?

First on diplomacy. Diplomacy is an ancient virtue. In the Aristotelian catalogue of virtues, it would find its place between prudence and eutrapelia. Prudence, in this context, means the ability to say the right thing at the right moment, and eutrapelia adds to this the capacity to do it in a pleasant and even playful way. This is not against sincerity. It would be a very simplistic and naïve idea of sincerity, to mean that one should always say all one has on one's mind. This would be safe only for rather empty minds.

Prudence in talking can have various motives. In an educative situation, it can be inspired by pedagogical considerations. Among friends and lovers, by a mixture of trust and thoughtfulness. In a courtroom, by fear. In Interreligious Dialogue the motive would be respect for the freedom of the others and faith in a divine will that goes beyond our short-lived, and therefore impatient plans and projects.

In the context of Interreligious Dialogue, "to agree to disagree" manifests respect for the other, for the freedom of his conscience and choice. Call it diplomacy or by any other name. Though it might be good to re-value the word and task of diplomacy. We have, today, too many technicians and specialists who do the job of hammering out agreements which, more often than not, do not work. For diplomacy, a degree of civilisation is needed, that goes beyond that of the technicians and specialists, beyond that of the *homo faber*. Something of the wisdom of the *homo sapiens* would have to appear on the scene.

**1.3 Doctrinal-scientific dialogue in order to gain a better understanding.** In the realm of Interreligious

Dialogue this is a matter of common sense, and hence a rare phenomenon. “We know who those people are, and what their religion is worth. We have done our studies, and read books. We even read their books. So, there is little use in their coming to us, and saying that they like us after all”.

“Moreover, in practically all religions that are different from our own, people use such abstruse language. They do not think in logical categories. Let them first put their ideas in an acceptable way, then we can talk”.

These and similar considerations mean that a sincere Interreligious Dialogue in order to learn from the other about his own religion is not very highly esteemed. Some think that one has to be gifted with paternalistic condescendence or with a tourist’s hunger for the exotic in order to venture on such a path. (Once I was in a drafting committee for the final declaration after a session of Interreligious Dialogue. We had written “during this meeting we have learned from each other”. This sentence was dropped by the main body of dialogists. They argued: “If we say that we have learned from each other, we imply that we do not know everything. That would be a blame on our religion”).

Secular universities are here far ahead of the specialists in religion. Progress of knowledge and understanding, also in the field of religions, is for them a matter of course. For those who engage in Interreligious Dialogue, the motivation really has to be to understand the other in his religion. But without doing it oneself, one is without religion or faith. The quest to understand the other implies also his relation to me and mine to him. This way to understand the other’s religion is a long way. How much do we understand of our own religion? Moreover, the dialogue is difficult, because we speak a different language. To force people of another religion, which has not originated and developed in Western culture, to put their ideas in the categories of occidental thought would be to impose upon them a mental alienation. This is one of the troubles with Western disciplines such as Orientalism, Islamology, Hindology, etc. However, it seems that people with few scientific hang-ups who live their religion in a sincere way are capable of this type of dialogue. (I remember conversations with people of other faiths, in countries where travelling is measured not in hours but in days. Sometimes, I learned more in a day’s travel with some chance companions than in deep studies).

**1.4 Doctrinal-assertive dialogue in order to convince the other of the validity of one’s own religion.** Here, it seems, we finally have a type of Interreligious Dialogue which appears boldly sincere, otherwise it would not exist. If this kind of sincerity

comes from both, or all sides that are involved in the dialogue, we get a show of good, old polemics. When done while observing some rules of the game, e.g. using civilised language and refraining from inflicting bodily harm on the other, then such a dialogue can even be refreshing.

This type of colloquial behaviour is very difficult indeed, since one’s own religious conviction and the preoccupation to convince the other make it an extremely arduous task to listen to what the other is saying and to make a genuine effort to understand him or her or them. Very easily, what is planned as a dialogue becomes an exchange of monologues. When this happens in meetings set-up for the occasion, these monologues can then be printed and bound together into a volume. (Not a few academic meetings of otherwise reasonable persons are conducted in this way).

**1.5 Spiritual dialogue can lead to the discovery of the dialogal character of truth.** With spiritual dialogue is meant here a conversation in which the word proceeds from the inner freedom of the person. Insofar as the inner truth is expressed, it does not any longer belong only to the one who expressed it: this truth is there also for the others. This truth exists now in order to be perceived.

When the human person manifests him/herself, it is always in dialogue with other persons. In this, the inner truth of the human being shows its dialogal nature.

In this free, inter-personal dialogue, the criterion of truth (being true or being false) is no longer uniquely found in the person who expresses him/herself, but in the movement of dialogue itself. This is not just an added characteristic of human truth, just during the time they are conversing. Truth without life, without dialogue, would be without meaning. It would be the expression of no one, perceived by no one.

Hans Urs von Balthasar remarks in this context that in this type of dialogue the inner meaning of truth reveals itself as love. Only love can justify fully the dialogal movement.

Moreover, since the word in this dialogue is a free word, it can only be perceived and admitted in freedom. No one can be forced to a dialogue where human persons meet as free persons.

This is all the more true for Interreligious Dialogue. Without mutual love and trust, all the true things that are proffered remain senseless in a dialogue that has only the appearance of it. Love is founded on the fundamental decision of seeking a greater good for the other. Trust can be found only when you give it. *Fidelem si putaveris invenies* (Seneca: If you deem someone trustworthy, you will find him to be so).

**1.6 The dialogue of friendship is a gratuitous sharing.** Though friendship can be helpful in many ways, and can facilitate collaboration that leads to

great results, it does not need any scope outside itself. The sharing of friends is just because they are friends.

This kind of gratuitousness is, I would dare to think, rare in Interreligious Dialogue. Not only because friendship is rare. Friendships vary in intensity and duration. But to enjoy an exchange on religious topics or rather, on religious experiences, in the same way one would enjoy together a symphony, a walk or a sunset, how often did we encounter that in Interreligious Dialogue? The answer is difficult to give. Normally people do not put down such an experience on paper. One finds instances of this in *Stories of the Desert Fathers*, in *Zen Stories*, in Rabbinic literature.

However rare this type of Interreligious Dialogue, it can never be authentic without at least an element of gratuitousness. And once an element, even infinitesimally small, is there, then the entire dialogue becomes gratuitous, free, and open for the infinite.

**1.7 Interreligious Dialogue is expected to be a religious dialogue.** The religious nature of such a dialogue does not consist in the number of prayers said or the professions of faith made, but in one, basic conviction. It is the awareness that the truth of our creed and religion is not our possession. That it is much greater than we are. It is an awareness of the truth and reality “which engulfs our being, and whence we take our rise, and whither our journey leads us” (NA 1).

The knowledge of standing before the majesty of a truth that is always greater than the human heart and mind makes the participants in Interreligious Dialogue modest and unpretentious. Perhaps the awareness comes to them, that they do not have to defend truth, but that truth defends them. Perhaps they discover that they do not have to seek truth, but that truth has found them.

Then all the other intentions and forms of Interreligious Dialogue, of which we have mentioned a few, come together in the hearts of the participants in such a dialogue. And without their having done much for it, they discover themselves in a new mode of being. Their very existence has become dialogue.

## 2. The Pitfalls of Insincerity

**2.1 Lack of trust, suspicion, fear.** It is not very pleasant to deal with this sort of topic. Brevity may be helpful. For the sake of clarity, however, these negative aspects have to be mentioned. This first little point is clear by itself. Suspicion and fear make any type of human conversation impossible, also Interreligious Dialogue.

**2.2 Religious indifference, scepticism, cynicism.** Also this point seems self-evident. How can someone with religious indifference engage in Interreligious Dia-

logue? However, there is a type of religious indifference which seems to make some people rather fond of Interreligious Dialogue. That is the idea that “all religions say the same. Why should they talk about differences? Let us rather go on together, on the path of the unique and only divine truth!”. This is a special form of religious indifference: the indifference toward a rational expression of religious truth. This makes a rational dialogue impossible.

Also without having recourse to an idea of the vagueness of divine truth itself, there are persons who are sceptical with regard to all human knowledge of truth. In a non-reflexive, practical way, this sceptical attitude can be called one of the social mental illnesses of today. In front of the vastness of human knowledge and experience, and the intricacy of the way things function, from atoms to stellar systems, many simply give up trying to understand it or to make sense of it. The vast stream of information in which today’s society is engulfed contributes to this indifference. This attitude has its consequences, not only on the religious level, but also in ethical behaviour. Since it so difficult to know where responsibilities are located in the complicated society, what difference does the choice of the single individual make? Is there still room for ethical behaviour? That such an attitude can lead to the autocratic behaviour of the cynics, is also clear.

Should we call this insincerity? One might rather speak of an incapacity to be sincere.

**2.3 Self-sufficiency and cultural remoteness** can cause a lack of interest in other religions and in the people who believe in other creeds. In sufficiency there is, at least, a kind of sincerity, which says: “I am not interested in you, neither in what you believe in”. But this sincerity is not very helpful for Interreligious Dialogue.

Cultural differences are a more complicated problem in Interreligious Dialogue. Above all, there is the question of language. It would seem that, in the present movement of globalisation, English is going to be the most universally spoken language. But is English helpful for Interreligious Dialogue? Most religions have their own language, often since millennia. And many hold on to it for their cultic practices and their religious studies. These religions cannot be really understood without a knowledge of their particular language.

**2.4 Aggressiveness, insecurity.** Both, normally, go together. Aggressiveness is one of the manifestations of insecurity. And insecurity is, in religious matters, often found among sects and sect-like groups, such as fundamentalists (understood here not in its specific, American sense, but in the broad sense used today for conservative movements in various reli-

gions). This attitude can lead to some polemic conversations, but what we call the art of Interreligious Dialogue will not be much helped by it.

**2.5 The absence of spiritual humanism** means here the view, and more than that, the certainty that each human being is a person, spiritual and, as such, gifted with freedom. A good measure of personalism would be helpful for Interreligious Dialogue, which, all too often, is conducted by “representatives” of a given religion, and thus wavers between legitimate, and necessary, faithfulness, and an attitude which seems rather gregarious. If, in Interreligious Dialogue, we only exchange the official tenets of our respective religions, as they are embedded in the various traditions, the conversation can be instructive, but does not get much beyond the stage of “comparing notes”. In such a context, it will be very difficult to discover the dialogal character of truth. This is only possible when we meet as persons, and when we can ask each other: “How do you live with this? What does this mean for you?”.

**2.6 Aloofness and coldness of heart** makes friendship impossible. In such a situation, the participants in Interreligious Dialogue will have great difficulty coming to a gratuitous sharing of experiences. Interreligious Dialogue is an adventure, and with a heart that is aloof and cold, one does not get very far on this path.

**2.7** One can know everything about a religion without having faith and faith experience. But what does one know? Not much more than the outer shell of a given religion, be it one’s own or that of others.

The Vatican Document on *Proclamation and Dialogue* makes mention of the “Dialogue of religious experience”, and depicts it as a dialogue “where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute” (n. 43d). The question is then: do we share in communicating words or do we share in a communion? Perhaps we need many words in order to reach the awareness of a communion. Communion is a matter of being, communication has to do with expressions. Being is prior to expressions in words. Faith, surely not without the help of words, can touch being. Without faith, one cannot break through the many *logoi* to the one *logos* that is the sense and meaning of our being.

This brief survey of some of the difficulties in Interreligious Dialogue makes manifest that there are some elements which are necessary for it: faith, es-

teem of the human person, and knowledge, or at least, the desire to know. Interreligious Dialogue is sincere, when it tends to make progress in these three fields, precisely by means of dialogue.

### **3. How to Live with some of the Impossibilities of Interreligious Dialogue?**

**3.1 When fundamentalisms meet** Interreligious Dialogue will not be easy, except, perhaps, in its initial, clarifying stages. It will be useful to understand the nature of today’s fundamentalist currents in the various religions.

We know that the term “Fundamentalism” was first used on American soil, in the wake of a reaction against Liberal Protestant exegesis at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The name, properly, comes from the 12 volume work *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (1910-1912). In 1919 the *World Christian Fundamental Association* was formed. The movement was characterised by a literal exegesis of the Bible; some earlier millenarian ideas still live on; it was not without antisemitism, and strongly anti-communist. Today, the movement has the name *The World Evangelical Fellowship* (since 1948). But the term “Fundamentalism” was to stay, and is now used for conservative and integralistic currents in various religions.

Fundamentalism is a complex phenomenon, but there are some recurrent features. We briefly mention them.

1. A literal reading of the Sacred Scriptures. Modern, and even less modern exegesis is rejected. The Word, as it was written in a given cultural and historical context, should be taken as it is, without interpreting it by its context.

2. The mediation of culture and history is rejected. The ideal is a return to the origins.

3. The tradition within the given religious group tends to become unchangeable scripture in its turn.

4. One cannot deny that there is often a selective reading of the Sacred Scriptures in Fundamentalist currents. But the criterion of selection is not always clear.

5. The Fundamentalist reaction has a strongly “male” character. It has been termed “The Revolution of the Patriarchs”. Power appears to be a noticeable element in it. This exercises an attraction on women, who see in it a protection of family values, and on not a few among the youth, who find an outlet for asserting their strength, even in a violent way.

6. The movement gives a “sense of belonging”, which is often lost in contemporary migratory changes and the assault of the media.

7. Dialogue, also Interreligious Dialogue, is seen

as a weakness.

However, dialogue with Fundamentalists is not impossible. Especially the first forms of Interreligious Dialogue mentioned above (collaboration, agreeing to disagree, comparison of tenets) can often be practised with fruit. After all, we live together in one village, global or not. A pragmatic approach can be helpful.

3.2 The choice between **exclusive and inclusive language** is one of the mechanisms at work in Interreligious Dialogue. In its simplest terms, this boils down to the use of “we” or “we and they”. In this latter case, “they” receive special terms: “unbelievers, pagans, heretics, the *massa damnata*, etc.”. Also here, a pragmatic approach seems to be the only way to come to a dialogue. Perhaps that, as citizens of a country, or of the world, we can do something useful together. There are even situations which require some kind of collaboration as in a time of natural or social crisis.

3.3 **The utility of logic in dialogue** can seem a superfluous statement. But it can happen that sentiments, positive or negative, obscure a logical discourse. Even with positive sentiments one has to be on one’s guard. Feelings are fugacious. One cannot build a mutual understanding on them. Interreligious Dialogue requires the hard work of trying to understand others, and also how others understand us. One can compare Interreligious Dialogue with the art of mountain climbing. Some stay in the bar at the foot of the mountain. They “feel so well together”. Others move on, on the arduous road. That is where logic and understanding enter. And still others go toward the high places, where they discover the *logos* beyond and in the many *logoi*.

3.4 The question of how we live with our **history** and histories would be a chapter in itself. But one thing is clear. In Interreligious Dialogue we have to try to understand each other’s reading of history. And where there are evident biases, we have to correct them. This can imply an urgent work of revising textbooks on history in use at our schools, and not only textbooks on religious education.

3.5 Every religion lives with a **remembrance**. It is, perhaps, very difficult to forget, even though our memory is selective. Negative memories, even if they cannot or should not be forgotten, make place for forgiveness. Forgiveness is only real when one discovers that there is nothing to be forgiven. Generations follow each other, and who can be held responsible for what?

3.6 A condition for progress in the art of dialogue

is the capacity to see things from the point of view of the other. This operates an **exchange of perspective**, and can shed a new light on the problems we deal with. Often, in order to understand what a person says, one has first to understand the person. Moreover, sincerity is not obstructed by “putting between brackets” certain conflictive points. Not all problems or misunderstandings have to be solved today, and perhaps not even in this century. That is what is called “**the art of epochè**”.

3.7 The Sage says: “There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Eccl 3:7). Dialogue, evidently, is a time to speak. But when, through the exchange of words, we touch something of the truth/reality that becomes transparent in our Interreligious Dialogue, and the words become diaphanous for the Logos that engulfs and pervades all that is, then one can be overcome with awe before the majesty of truth, and one can even be forced to silence.

Yet, with this sublime spiritual and religious perspective of the Interreligious Dialogue, and also because of it, there is one cause where silence cannot take the place of words, and where words cannot take the place of deeds. This is, when those who are engaged in dialogue become aware of human beings — companions in the pilgrimage of life — who are attacked in their dignity, deprived of their rights, forced to a life unworthy of human beings who have been called with a divine vocation. Then there is an urgency to the reality of deeds and of solidarity, of being-with-them. Perhaps then the noble efforts of reaching a deeper, mutual understanding in matters of religion and faith, by means of Interreligious Dialogue, will have to be suspended for a moment. And with this, this brief paper returns to where it started.

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## Of Fork and Spoon Or Fingers and Chopsticks: Interreligious Dialogue in *Ecclesia in Asia*

### Different Ways of Cooking

John Paul II was in for an exciting treat when he invited Archbishop Francois Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận to preach this year's Spiritual Exercises to members of the Curia. "The Lenten meditations never inspired so much interest, as this year's, from a man who spent 13 years of his life in Vietnamese prisons".<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese Archbishop used a combination of stories, personal testimonies, humour, Biblical reflections and theology to present the 22 meditations, regarded by many as 'simple but very profound'. One Cardinal who took part in the retreat said that it "was an evangelically simple talk" and that "clearly, we must continue on that road".<sup>2</sup> When commended on the originality of his presentation, Van Thuận said: "The content is always the same. But the way of cooking it is Asian. Because of this, in the Year 2000, instead of eating with a fork, we ate with chopsticks".<sup>3</sup>

Whether he realised it or not, in that last statement the Archbishop more or less summed up the crux of the difference between the Roman Curia's vision of Christianity and that of Asia's. Like Van Thuận's preaching, the content of Asia's vision of Christianity is always the same. What is different is the way in which it is expressed. In presenting the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* of Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of Asia, Cardinal Paul Shan pointed out that "the big question presently confronting us, given the religious and cultural context of Asia, is not why should we proclaim the Good News of Christ's Salvation but HOW".<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Divine Word Missionary John Prior who was the liaison with the English-speaking press during the Synod for Asia, held in Rome from April to May 1998, had this to say: "Looking again at the 191 interventions and remembering the informal conversations during the Synodical coffee breaks, I can say with absolute certainty that not a single Asian Bishop would disagree with the *who* of mission, with the subject of proclamation.... The key issue that the Bishops grapple with is the *how* of mission".<sup>5</sup> In another context, Jesuit theologian Michael Amaladoss, in discussing accusations levelled against Indian theologians, had this to say: "Reflecting on the mystery of Christ from their multireligious context they are trying to say something new. But they are not being listened to, let alone understood. This may not be due to illwill. I think that one of the

problems is methodology".<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in reviewing *Ecclesia in Asia*, it is important to bear in mind that it is not so much the *who* or the *why* of mission that is in dispute as is the *how* of mission or the methodology for theological reflection. The dispute is especially evident when one looks at how *Ecclesia in Asia* treats the subject of interreligious dialogue, which is the task of the present paper. Of course, in looking at the theme of interreligious dialogue, one also needs to look at related themes such as proclamation, evangelisation, inculturation and mission. This paper will also look at the treatment of interreligious dialogue in *Ecclesia in Asia* especially with reference to the context in which *Ecclesia in Asia* came into being. Moreover, the paper will compare the theses advanced in *Ecclesia in Asia* with other theses proposed, in connection with or in response to, the release of *Ecclesia in Asia*.

### What Dish is *Ecclesia in Asia*?

To begin, let us look at what exactly is *Ecclesia in Asia* and how it has been presented to us. In the words of Cardinal Paul Shan, *Ecclesia in Asia* is "the Magna Carta for the evangelisation of Asia in the third millennium".<sup>7</sup> Shan seems to be right on target, for that is exactly what *Ecclesia in Asia* is — a manual for the evangelisation of Asia. In fact, *Ecclesia in Asia* itself is explicit about its aims. No attempt is made to hide the fact that it "is a strong affirmation of the need for a new drive for evangelising Asia and expresses a fervent hope that Asia will turn to Christ in the third millennium".<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, *Ecclesia in Asia* begins by expressing this hope "that 'just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a *great harvest of faith* will be reaped in this vast and vital continent'" (*EA*, n. 1). It then continues by saying that the Synod of Bishops for Asia was actually part of a "programme centred on the challenges of the new evangelisation" (*EA*, n. 2). Quoting his earlier Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, John Paul II goes on to point out specifically that "the issue of the encounter of Christianity with ancient local cultures and religions is a pressing one", and that "[t]his is a great challenge for evangelisation, since religious systems such as Buddhism or Hinduism have a clearly soteriological

character” (*EA*, n. 2). He ends that section on the *Background to the Special Assembly* by indicating that the theme was carefully discerned “that the Synod might ‘illustrate and explain more fully the truth that Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world, to be clearly distinguished from the founders of other great religions’” (*EA*, n.2). In the next passage the Holy Father declares that the actual celebration of the Synod was an “encounter in dialogue of the Bishops and the Successor of Peter” (*EA*, n.3) and that through the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation he wished “to share with the Church in Asia and throughout the world the fruits of the Special Assembly” (*EA*, n.4).

All of the above, one must bear in mind, is but from the Pope’s point of view. John Paul II sees the Synod for Asia as an “encounter in dialogue” and thus looks upon *Ecclesia in Asia* as the “fruits” of this encounter. In other words, *Ecclesia in Asia* is supposed to be the voice of the Pope in dialogue with the voice of the Bishops of Asia. Upon analysing the document, John Prior cannot but disagree and asserts in no uncertain terms that *Ecclesia in Asia* is “a papal document”. It is “the Pope’s response to the voice of the Asian Bishops”.<sup>9</sup> Hence, it is more the voice of the Pope than that of the Asian Bishops. Pointing out that in *Ecclesia in Asia* John Paul II quotes himself 68 times while making “not a single direct reference to any intervention by an individual Bishop, nor to interventions by Bishops in the name of their Conferences”, nor to “regional episcopal bodies such as the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) or the Council of Oriental Patriarchs (CPCO)”, Prior suggests that “[f]or the voice of the Asian Bishops we have to look elsewhere”.<sup>10</sup> Even the *Propositiones*, quoted some 119 times, Prior suggests, cannot be regarded as the voice of the Asian Bishops for there is no way to verify the “disparity between the draft proposals from the Bishops’ groups and the resultant recommendations”. It is not surprising therefore that Amaladoss’ immediate comments, shortly after the release of *Ecclesia in Asia*, are that the “exhortation is a document for Asia. It is not an Asian document. It is not the voice of Asia. The tone and style are very un-Asian”.<sup>11</sup> However, Prior is quick to point out that reading *Ecclesia in Asia* is “like hearing one end of a telephone conversation. It is certainly worth listening to, but so too is the voice at the other end of the line!... Thus, it is important not to read *Ecclesia in Asia* in isolation, but as part of an ongoing conversation”.<sup>12</sup>

### Spaghetti and Cheese Or Rice and Curry?

Where do we turn to in order to listen to the other end of the conversation? Needless to say, it has to be

none other than Asia itself. Specifically, it will be the voice of the Bishops of Asia but also the voice of theologians and others who work and live in Asia. However, one is forewarned that after listening to this other end of the conversation, one might conclude that the two ends seem to be talking about radically different subjects. For the topic of evangelisation in Asia continues to be understood very differently, depending on one’s starting point and one’s frame of reference. The theological methodology adopted makes all the difference. The telephone conversation, then, would sound as if the persons on one end were talking about spaghetti and cheese while those on the other about rice and curry. Both, of course, have in mind that they are talking about food for nourishment. The rice and curry eaters, however, have an added advantage in that they have eaten spaghetti and cheese for many generations and so can understand what the other end is saying. That, of course, could also constitute a disadvantage as some may be inclined to prepare rice and curry the same way spaghetti and cheese is prepared. The baggage of tradition can by no means be minimised.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it was only as recent as the 1960s that rice and curry was officially recognised and allowed to be served. Even then, those who have never tasted rice and curry before may still be of the view that spaghetti and cheese is the “one and only” food for all of humanity. They do sincerely believe it to be the universal diet, the one mediator between hunger and fullness of life. And even if rice and curry is allowed, it is spaghetti and cheese which is the ordinary means of satiation. More importantly, acknowledgement of rice and curry does not in any way lessen the duty and resolve to proclaim the value of spaghetti and cheese and certainly does not thereby cancel the call to its promotion which is willed for all people.

With that in mind, let us now turn to look at the voice of Asia, beginning with the voice of Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, the President Delegate of the Synod for Asia who also delivered the closing remarks at the celebration in New Delhi, soon after *Ecclesia in Asia* was proclaimed by John Paul II. In a way, his could be regarded as the first Asian response to the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. It therefore is significant. Darmaatmadja confines his response to the central theme of *Ecclesia in Asia*, namely the “new evangelisation”. From the perspective of *Ecclesia in Asia*, this new evangelisation is essential because even “after two millennia, a major part of the human family still does not acknowledge Christ” (*EA*, n.29). Moreover, the Pope continues, it is indeed a “mystery why the Saviour of the world, born in Asia, has until now remained largely unknown to the people of the continent” (*EA*, n.2). Whereas, for Cardinal Darmaatmadja, the new evangelisation is about the Churches in Asia

taking on “the face of Asia”, so that it is “specifically characterising Asia” and “at the same time becomes the more meaningful for Asian society, particularly for the poor and underprivileged”.<sup>14</sup>

The Cardinal also makes specific reference to the other religions of Asia. His statements, however, differ from those of *Ecclesia in Asia*, which looks at the other religions as “a great challenge to evangelisation” (*EA*, n.2), and whose teachings and religious values “await their fulfilment in Jesus Christ” (*EA*, n.6). Whereas, for Darmaatmadja, the more important thing is that “the local Churches be capable of seeing the religious values and the culture they [the other religions] embody”, and that they “need to be considered specifically as partners in dialogue”.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it is the Church which must adapt itself, bend over, change and be open to learning from these other religions, so that “the new way the Church bears itself will enable these people to understand us better, enable them to come closer to us, but also enrich us in return in the way we live our Christian lives”.<sup>16</sup>

In response to *Ecclesia in Asia*’s declaration that “the Church’s unique contribution to the peoples of the continent is the proclamation of Jesus Christ” (*EA*, n.10), Darmaatmadja said emphatically that “[o]f course we are called to proclaim Jesus to the Gentiles”. But then, he was quick to follow that statement by quoting *Gaudium et Spes* which “noted that we can learn also from the world, precisely because we are faithful to Jesus; that is, we can find Jesus present in the world”. Thus, the Cardinal is suggesting that our Christian mission is really to discover Jesus who “has always been present and working in the world, including the world of Asia”,<sup>17</sup> rather than to proclaim him as if he had not been there before.

Also, *Ecclesia in Asia* acknowledges the issue that “Jesus is often perceived as foreign to Asia ...[and] that most Asians tend to regard Jesus — born on Asian soil — as a Western rather than an Asian figure” (*EA*, n.20). It then goes on to suggest a way to address this problem, namely by means of a “pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery” (*EA*, n.20). Whereas, for Darmaatmadja, Jesus’ perceived foreignness is on account of the Church’s foreign methods of operation. Citing *Propositiones* 3 and 5 (which, interestingly, did not appear in *Ecclesia in Asia* [at least not the aspects singled out by the Cardinal]), Darmaatmadja advocated an *immersion* of the Church as “such immersion will help the Church define her mission to the people of Asia in an intelligible and acceptable manner”.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the Cardinal sees the Church as in need of the living water that the religions and cultures in Asia alone can give (*cf. EA*, n.50). Only after such a baptism will the Church be able to minister to the peoples of Asia. In this context the

Cardinal then raised the important issue of inculturation, which means rooting the Church in the local religious culture. If for *Ecclesia in Asia* inculturation is for the purpose of understanding the “various aspects of culture” so that the Church can then “begin the dialogue of salvation” where “she can offer, respectfully but with clarity and conviction, the Good News of the Redemption to all who freely wish to listen and to respond” (*EA*, n.21), for Darmaatmadja inculturation is aimed at allowing the Church to “grow more in Asian appearance”. Indeed, he takes this to mean that the particular Churches become “deeper and deeper rooted in our own cultures and in our deepest inner aspirations as peoples of Asia”.<sup>19</sup> This is what a “new way of being Church in Asia” is all about and the Church then is “expected to become in a concrete way a Church *with* and *for* the people in order to achieve their integral human development, culminating in the fullness of life given by Our Lord Jesus Christ”.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, for Cardinal Darmaatmadja, such is the meaning and essence of the New Evangelisation in Asia. “‘Being Church in Asia’ today means ‘participating in the mission of Christ the Saviour in rendering his redemptive love and service in Asia’, so that Asian men and women can more fully achieve their integral human development, and ‘that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (Jn 10:10)”. More specifically the Cardinal speaks about “bringing the Good News into all dimensions of human life and society and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it anew”. This, he suggests, is the new way of being Church and this also is the way “to a proper New Evangelisation”.<sup>21</sup> Against this backdrop, the Cardinal ends his remarks by picking up for response the statement of John Paul II that “[t]here can be no true evangelisation without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord” (*EA*, n.19). The Cardinal’s response goes: “Yes, it is true that there is no authentic evangelisation without announcing Jesus Christ, Saviour to the whole human race. But for Asia, there will be no complete evangelisation unless there is dialogue with other religions and cultures. There is no full evangelisation if there is no answer to the deep yearnings of the peoples of Asia”.<sup>22</sup>

### Other Asian Dishes

If Cardinal Darmaatmadja’s remarks are the first Asian response to *Ecclesia in Asia*, then the deliberations of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) can be regarded as the first Asian Churches’ response to *Ecclesia in Asia*. Held less than two months after the New Delhi proclamation of *Ecclesia in Asia*, FABC VII did take as its theme a theme very similar to that of the Synod for Asia. It was a deliberate follow-up

and indeed *Ecclesia in Asia* was the starting point for reflection during the FABC Plenary Assembly.<sup>23</sup>

Of significance is Archbishop Orlando Quevedo's opening address, meant to set the tone for the entire Assembly. Drawing from Statements of previous FABC Plenary Assemblies, Quevedo very clearly articulated movements which he saw as constituting an Asian vision of a renewed Church. He spoke about a movement towards a Church of the Poor and of the Young, a movement toward a local Church, a movement toward deep interiority, a movement toward an authentic community of faith, a movement toward active integral evangelisation, a movement toward empowerment of the laity, and a movement toward generating and serving life. All of these speak to the need for renewal, updating, and learning on the part of the Church. Such a Church cannot evoke any fear, and hence the call of "Let no one fear the Church!"<sup>24</sup> will never need to be sounded. In fact, the tone of the whole Assembly, very much reflected in the Final Statement, was toward dialogue and collaboration. Much emphasis was placed on the actual mission of love and service of a renewed Church in Asia. There was discussion on what renewal means. There was discussion on the issues and challenges in the mission. Aspects of these challenges include globalisation, fundamentalism, politics, ecology, and militarisation. The other religions were by no means listed as one of these challenges. There was then discussion on the process of discernment and the pastoral concerns. Among these were the concern for youth, women, the family, indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees. The thrust of the Asian Church's response is to be in the area of formation and education. The approach suggested is that of an integrated approach. The most effective means of evangelisation listed is that of witness of life.

It is interesting to compare this Seventh FABC Assembly Final Statement with that of *Ecclesia in Asia*. Both assemblies more or less touched on the same theme, namely, the Church's mission in Asia in the new millennium. Most of the Bishops who took part in the Synod for Asia also took part in the FABC Plenary Assembly. Yet, the concerns and emphases which appear in the FABC Statement and *Ecclesia in Asia* seem radically different. Of course, one must bear in mind that the Final Statement of the FABC Plenary Assembly is the actual voice of the Bishops of Asia and not one which went through the filter of the Pope, as is *Ecclesia in Asia*. Thus, in the Final Statement of FABC VII one gets to hear the other side of the telephone line. Since the conversation topic is the same as that of the Pope's, expressed in *Ecclesia in Asia*, taking the two together will help in understanding better the "encounter in dialogue".

Firstly, it must be noted that the FABC Statement

quotes *Ecclesia in Asia* about 15 times, more than any other document it quotes. However, it also quotes quite lavishly from other FABC documents, which *Ecclesia in Asia* does not. In a way, then, the FABC VII Statement is certainly more Asian than is *Ecclesia in Asia*, in that it is more representative of Asian views. Secondly, even as the FABC Statement quotes *Ecclesia in Asia*, it does not present the Church in the superior sense as *Ecclesia in Asia* does. It certainly does not portray the other religions as waiting to be fulfilled by Christ. In fact, it asserts that "[a]s we face the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalised, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths".<sup>25</sup> It clearly operates out of a collaborative-partnership model rather than a preparation-fulfilment model. This is very typical of Asian theologies which have gone beyond the Christocentric paradigms to Theocentric and Regnocentric paradigms.<sup>26</sup>

Another thing of significance is that the FABC Statement does not view evangelisation in terms of the spreading of "the Gospel of salvation throughout the length and breadth of the human geography of Asia".<sup>27</sup> The Bishops of Asia, instead, look at it as an integral activity. It involves "the whole community, every group, and every person", and has to do with "inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the Church, justice, the option for the poor, etc."<sup>28</sup> Thus, evangelisation is an all-encompassing activity and mutually involves all other activities of the Church, including interreligious dialogue. In this context, it must be mentioned also that the FABC VII Statement has no specific section on "interreligious dialogue". In fact, a reading of the whole FABC Statement will reveal that little space is given to the theme of "interreligious dialogue". It only goes to show how much FABC has matured. While in the first few Plenary Assemblies (especially in 1970, 1974, and 1978), the Final Statements had specific paragraphs on "interreligious dialogue", this Seventh Assembly, as is the case for the Sixth, is conspicuously absent on the theme. However it notes within the Statement that "[f]or 30 years, as we have tried to re-formulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another: evangelisation, inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the Church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Today, after three decades, we no longer speak of such distinct issues. We are addressing present needs that are massive and increasingly complex. These are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service".<sup>29</sup> In other words, interreligious dialogue is a theme and activity which is to be taken for granted. It need not be spelt out, but every Christian in Asia ought to know of its import.

It is to Asian Christianity much like chilli is to Asian cuisine. It need not be spelt out in the recipe that chilli has to be added. That is taken for granted. Asian food is by nature spicy. Even if chilli is not added, there is always some on the table, alongside the salt and pepper. Likewise, from the perspectives of the Bishops of Asia, interreligious dialogue is mixed into every dish in the Asian mission of love and service.

### **Eating what the Chef himself Eats**

Our discussions thus far have looked at the encounter in dialogue between the Pope and the Bishops of Asia. As suggested, the voice of the Bishops of Asia was more clearly heard as we looked at the various responses, direct or otherwise, to *Ecclesia in Asia*, which in the main represents the voice of the Pope. However, it is also important to point out that *Ecclesia in Asia* is but just one voice of the Pope. To be sure, the voice of the Holy Father can be heard in many other contexts as well. Moreover, at times these other voices seem to contradict much of what have been discussed about his voice as expressed in *Ecclesia in Asia*. Specifically, reference is made to the numerous interreligious encounters initiated by the Pope himself. In fact, about a week before delivering *Ecclesia in Asia* in New Delhi, John Paul II had assembled together more than 200 persons from all over the world for an Interreligious Assembly in Rome. Among the religious dignitaries was the Dalai Lama. The Assembly was more or less a follow-up to the much talked about Interreligious World Day of Prayer for Peace which took place in Assisi in 1986. These were all initiatives of the Holy Father himself. To be sure, John Paul II is one Pope who has done much more than all previous Popes when it comes to interreligious dialogue. He has been instrumental for building bridges between the various and varied religious traditions. Practically all of his official visits include an interreligious event. His recent visit to Egypt saw him meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Mosque, Sayyed Tantawi. Even in New Delhi, where he came for a specifically ecclesial event, an Apostolic Visit to proclaim *Ecclesia in Asia*, included in the programme was a meeting with representatives of the other religions. There, at New Delhi's *Vigyan Bhavan* or *Hall of Wisdom*, was a demonstration of "living dialogue wherein each participant gave witness to the strength and inspiration she or he received from their respective faiths". And it was there also that Pope John Paul II joined hands with Sankaracharya Madhavananda Saraswati, to the cheers and applause of everyone present.<sup>30</sup>

There is, therefore, no denying the fact that in the present Pope the Catholic Church has advanced leaps and bounds in the area of interreligious dialogue. This is the witness of the Pope himself. He is much con-

cerned about the harmony and relationship between the Church and the other religions. His actions speak louder than his words. People are more likely to follow his practice more than his speech. In the Pope's own words, it is true that "people today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers" (*EA*, n.42). The Church in Asia, therefore, is hearing the Pope loud and clear in this his proclamation that interreligious dialogue is essential. No clearer voice needs to be heard. However, it would be interesting to find out how the Pope actually dialogues when he encounters these peoples of other religions. It is most unlikely that he would insist to Sayyed Tantawi that the fullness of salvation comes from Christ alone and that the Church community is the ordinary means of salvation (*cf. EA*, n.31). It is also unlikely that the Holy Father would preach to the Dalai Lama that the peoples of Asia need Jesus Christ and his Gospel and that Asia is thirsting for the living water that Jesus alone can give (*cf. EA*, n.50). It is probably unlikely that John Paul II will announce to Madhavananda Saraswati that the Church must be seen as the privileged place of encounter between God and man (*cf. EA*, n.24). The Church in Asia, therefore, seeks only to follow after the witness of the Holy Father. What he does, the Church in Asia will do, and what he refrains from doing, likewise, the Church in Asia will refrain from doing. In a way, the Church in Asia is more likely to trust eating what the chef himself eats, rather than what the chef cooks but does not himself eat. Thus, only if John Paul II is successful in calling to faith and baptism the Dalai Lama or Tantawi or Madhavananda Saraswati will Christians in Asia take seriously his pronouncement that this calling to faith and baptism is willed by God for all people (*cf. EA*, n.31).

### **Eating Spaghetti with Curry**

Aside from his personal witness in actual encounters of interreligious dialogue, even in *Ecclesia in Asia* one finds passages of John Paul II's voice which are exceptionally pro-dialogue. Specifically, one finds that throughout *Ecclesia in Asia* there is a sincere recognition and exultation of "the goodness of the continent's peoples, cultures, and religious vitality" (*EA*, n.1). There is also a conscious acknowledgement of the "ancient religious traditions and civilisations, the profound philosophies and the wisdom which have made Asia what it is today" (*EA*, n.4). John Paul II identifies by name the various religious traditions alive in Asia and affirms that the "Church has the deepest respect for these traditions and seeks to engage in sincere dialogue with their followers" (*EA*, n.6). He does not fail to remind the Church in Asia that "[c]ontact, dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions is a task which the Second Vati-

can Council bequeathed to the whole Church as a duty and a challenge” (EA, n.31). He then instructs the Church in Asia to “provide suitable models of interreligious dialogue — evangelisation in dialogue and dialogue for evangelisation — and suitable training for those involved” (EA, n.31). Most of all, he recounts the “memorable meeting held in Assisi, the city of Saint Francis, on 27 October 1986, between the Catholic Church and representatives of the other world religions” (EA, n.31).

Thus, one finds in the Pope a man who is very much pro-dialogue, but at the same time, one who continues to make statements regarded as not in the service of dialogue. This reflects the intra-personal tension the Holy Father goes through on account of his role as guardian of the Catholic faith and that of Shepherd of the Catholic flock. As guardian his task is to announce the privileged position of Christ and the Church, but as Shepherd his task is to encourage greater dialogue between Catholics and persons of other religions. It is an unenviable task but John Paul II has managed a balance. He has learnt to accept both as essential, necessary and complementary. It is as if he continues to desire spaghetti and cheese but at the same time realises that rice and curry has its value too. Thus, John Paul II is content with having spaghetti with curry, an adaptation he has had to make on account of his frequent contacts with persons who are more accustomed to rice and curry. This accounts for the fact that he is comfortable with proclaiming, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November in New Delhi Cathedral, at the signing of *Ecclesia in Asia*, that “Jesus Christ is the door that leads to life!”<sup>31</sup> and announce on the very next day at the New Delhi’s *Vigyan Bhavan* to the representatives of other religions that he is but a “pilgrim of peace and a fellow-traveller on the road that leads to the complete fulfilment of the deepest human longings”.<sup>32</sup>

The important lesson to draw from this is that John Paul II believes it is not an *either-or* choice, but must be a *both-and* option. He has been explicit in proclaiming that many times before. Dialogue does not exclude proclamation and proclamation must always include dialogue. Both are self involving, both are necessary and both are integral to the evangelising mission of the Church. On that score, the Asian Bishops are very much in agreement with the Pope. Theirs has always been to find means and ways to integrate the two aspects of evangelisation. Theirs has always been to find more meaningful ways to be truly Christian and authentically Asian. The preceding discussions seem to suggest it is but a matter of emphases, on account of one’s starting point and one’s theological methodology. In a way, it is a matter of taste and a matter of different cooking styles. The essence of food remains constant. No matter how we eat it, with fork and spoon (as would be done in the West), or with fingers (South Asia) and chopsticks (East Asia), it is still food that we are eating.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Zenit News Agency, Rome, 21 Mar. 2000.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> “Presentation of *Ecclesia in Asia* in New Delhi by Cardinal Paul Shan”, General Relator, Synod of Bishops for Asia in *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas*, Vol. LXXVI, No. 816, Jan-Feb 2000, p.136.

<sup>5</sup> Prior, John, “Unfinished Encounter: A Note on the Voice and Tone of *Ecclesia in Asia*,” Jan. 2000 (not sure where it’s published).

<sup>6</sup> Amaladoss, Michael, “The Mystery of Christ and Other Religions: An Indian Perspective”, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 63, No. 5, May 1999, p. 327.

<sup>7</sup> Shan, Cardinal Paul, *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas*, (*op. cit.*) p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> Amaladoss, Michael, “*Ecclesia in Asia* affirms tradition, ignores Asian search”, *Asia Focus: Commentary*, 26 Nov. 1999, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Prior, John, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Amaladoss, Michael, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Prior, John, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> On the colonial baggage of Asian Christianity, see Chia, Edmund, “Asia’s Contribution to Christianity”, *Asia Focus: Commentary*, 10 March, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, “A New Way of Being Church in Asia”, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 63, No. 12, Dec. 1999, p. 888.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p. 888

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 889.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p. 888.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p. 889.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 888.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 890.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 891.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on the less “evangelical” stance which FABC took, refer to Chia, Edmund, “The ‘Absence of Jesus’ in the VIIth FABC Plenary Assembly”, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 63, No. 12, Dec. 1999, p. 892-899.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, presentation during the signing and publication of *Ecclesia in Asia*, New Delhi Cathedral, 6 Nov. 1999, No.5.

<sup>25</sup> “A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service”, Final Statement of the 7<sup>th</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Plenary Assembly, Samphan, Thailand, 3-13/1/2000.

<sup>26</sup> For a more thorough discussion on the evolution of Asian theologies of religion, see Chia, Edmund, “Interreligious Dialogue in Pursuit of Fullness of Life in Asia”, FABC Paper, n.92k, Seventh Plenary Assembly: Workshop Discussion Guide, Hong Kong, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, presentation during the signing and publication of *Ecclesia in Asia*, New Delhi Cathedral, 6 Nov.1999, n.6.

<sup>28</sup> “A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service”, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> “Editorial,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 63, No.12, Dec. 1999, p. 880.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, presentation during the signing and publication of *Ecclesia in Asia*, New Delhi Cathedral, 6 Nov. 1999, No.2.

<sup>32</sup> John Paul II, “Meeting with Representatives of other religions and other Christian Confessions”, New Delhi Vigyan Bhavan, 7 Nov. 1999, No. 1.

## Les cultures africaines et le christianisme: Peuvent-elles s'enrichir mutuellement? Si oui, à quelles conditions?

**L**e synode africain a bel et bien eu lieu à Rome. Et ses résultats ont confirmé mes inquiétudes. Le paternalisme romain s'y est manifesté dans toutes ses dimensions. D'un synode convoqué par Rome et avec un ordre du jour fixé par elle, à base de quelques réponses glanées ici et là en Afrique à un questionnaire composé à Rome, on a abouti à des propositions que la curie romaine avait reformulées et promulguées dans la forme qui lui semblait opportune et dans les perspectives du Jubilé de l'an 2000. Les vœux d'un concile africain, dans la dynamique d'Églises particulières revalorisées à Vatican II ont été noyés autour d'une question de l'identité du chrétien africain et de la manière dont il percevait sa rencontre avec Jésus Christ et avec les autres Églises. Ce qui montre bien que la préoccupation de ce synode était autre. En effet sa question principale était: "Église d'Afrique que dois-tu devenir maintenant pour que ton message soit crédible et pertinent?"<sup>1</sup> Il est regrettable qu'une rencontre si capitale pour la vie des Églises d'Afrique soit mise dans la corbeille des préparatifs du Jubilé de l'an 2000.<sup>2</sup> Pour la plupart des Africains, ce Synode africain renforce l'idée d'un concile africain à venir car tout n'a pas été mis à plat et seul un concile pourrait le permettre.

L'Afrique et le Christianisme ont connu l'aventure de la rencontre; en ont-ils profité, chacun pour l'épanouissement dans la continuation de son projet fondamental? Je voudrais tenter ici une réponse provisoire, dans le prolongement de mon livre «Le Christianisme et l'Afrique: une chance réciproque» sorti chez Karthala en 1993. Provisoire, cette réponse l'est, car l'aventure continue. Aujourd'hui, je signe encore tout ce que j'ai exposé dans cet ouvrage. Ma conviction est que le christianisme a été une chance pour l'Afrique, tout comme l'Afrique est aujourd'hui une chance pour le christianisme.

Mais pour que cette chance soit réelle, il faut que d'une part le christianisme honore les aspects des cultures africaines porteurs de foi et d'autre part que l'Afrique s'approprie un christianisme dépouillé de son habillage eurocentrique.

### Reconnaître les cultures africaines

De quelle Afrique s'agit-il? De cette Afrique noire, celle d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, dans ce qu'elle a d'assises profondes, en ce qui concerne l'homme, le monde et l'au-delà. Certes, c'est un continent et il ne faut pas

trop généraliser; mais les abus de l'histoire ne doivent pas nous jeter dans un autre abus, celui de nier toute homogénéité culturelle aux civilisations d'Afrique noire. Il y a des constantes où ces diverses civilisations se recoupent, et il faut les souligner.

L'homme noir a une conception de la personne humaine comme d'un cosmos en miniature, eau et feu, terre et air, visible et invisible, corps et esprit indissociablement; s'il sait déchiffrer l'univers, il peut se transformer en lion ou serpent, en arbre ou rocher; certains codes de la nature peuvent l'amener à canaliser les forces de la nature pour influencer sur le cours de la vie, pour conjurer la mort et faire triompher la vie. Les nombreux rites d'Afrique noire comportent ces codes auxquels n'ont accès que les seuls initiés.

La religion est pour nous une manière de vivre, de concevoir le monde, et d'entrer en relation avec les hommes, la nature et l'au-delà (Dieu, les Ancêtres, les Esprits). Les rapports avec Dieu ne sont pas les plus éloquents, mais plutôt ceux avec les Ancêtres, ces intermédiaires qui nous ont connu et qui continuent de militer à nos côtés pour le triomphe de la vie. Il n'y a pas de monde sacré et profane. L'univers tout entier est le lieu de l'irruption de l'au-delà ou du divin. La vie est le sacré par excellence.

L'univers tout entier porte le destin de l'homme. Il n'y a pas de hasard; rien ne peut échapper à main du créateur; nos actes ont une répercussion sur l'univers, de près ou de loin, tôt ou tard. La transformation du monde se fait comme une liturgie, et non comme une domination. La transformation du monde n'est qu'une des modalités d'entrer en communion avec lui, dans l'harmonie et le respect des êtres animés et inanimés, dans la recherche de tout ce qui fait vivre et le rejet de tout ce qui est allié à la mort.

L'Afrique noire est une terre d'hospitalité, c'est-à-dire, de l'accueil gracieux de l'autre différent de nous, à priori et gratuitement. Bien accueillir l'autre est un moyen de disposer en notre faveur la hiérarchie de l'univers et de se prémunir contre les éventuels mauvais desseins de nos hôtes.

Les Africains sont optimistes pour la vie quelles que soient les conditions matérielles. La vie est la valeur suprême, le don par excellence de Dieu, et qu'il faut transmettre. Vivre pour nous, c'est donner la vie. Une vie sans progéniture est une catastrophe, non seulement pour l'individu, mais surtout pour la communauté. En Afrique noire, on survit plus par solidarité et alliance, que par de puissantes organisa-

tions et de rigoureuses planifications. On cultive moins la confiance dans l'outil, la machine, dans les biens matériels, que dans l'homme et dans la relation communautaire.

Ne serait-ce pas pour cela que ce continent demeure le fief de la Parole, des civilisations qui privilégient le contact vécu, l'image et le symbole, le rythme cosmique et le rite, dans le mode de communication et l'éducation? Même si le livre est devenu indispensable, celui-ci est lu et écrit à la manière orale.

### **Le Christianisme: danger et chance**

*Danger*; l'Afrique a expérimenté le christianisme comme violence et donc danger. Elle a vécu un christianisme accompagné par la colonisation et qui l'a quelques fois servie. Celle-ci fut un mal, sur toute la ligne<sup>3</sup>, car son but et ses méthodes ont été annihilantes pour l'homme noir. Pour se justifier, la colonisation devait soutenir et convaincre les indigènes de leur infériorité anthropologique et culturelle.

Sans doute, les colons ont tracé des routes, mis en place une plate forme économique, construit des écoles, des centres de santé, combattu les campagnes esclavagistes. Mais faut-il leur en rendre "hommage"?<sup>4</sup> Non, car s'ils l'ont fait c'était en vue de leur prospérité, de l'efficacité de leurs entreprises: la main d'oeuvre locale devait être socialement encadrée, instruite, passablement saine, pour un meilleur rendement de leur oeuvre. Les missions ont profité de la colonisation pour pouvoir répandre la "bonne nouvelle"; mais l'oeuvre des missions n'avait certainement pas le même but que la colonisation.<sup>5</sup> Mettre Christianisme et colonisation dans le même sac, serait une simplification rapide,<sup>6</sup> même s'il faut admettre que les missions n'ont pas pu empêcher la colonisation de profiter d'elles pour exploiter les «indigènes». Et à cela a contribué en effet l'équation funeste entre «évangéliser et civiliser», avec la méthode de la «table rase» qui consistait à détruire tout ce qui était antérieur au christianisme, comme valeurs éthiques, philosophiques, pratiques rituelles, considérées comme porteuses de paganisme; nul n'ignore les destructions d'oeuvre d'art et l'aliénation qui s'en suivit.

*Chance*. Car par delà ces effets, le christianisme a été bien plus qu'une entreprise coloniale en fournissant aux Africains l'occasion de rencontrer Jésus Christ; et celui-ci vient porter plus haut l'expérience religieuse de l'homme africain.

Les religions traditionnelles d'Afrique noire comportent des valeurs d'amour du prochain, des prières quelques fois adressées à Dieu, mais plus souvent aux ancêtres, des rites d'offrande, des repas de communion avec les ancêtres, des rites de purification et de réconciliation, de conjuration du mal lors des intempéries ou des épidémies, des pratiques divina-

toires.... Le but de toutes ces démarches est la vie de l'homme et sa croissance; ce sont des religions "anthropocentriques". Mais si l'homme est respecté, c'est parce qu'il appartient à Dieu; la vie elle-même est considérée «sacrée», car elle vient de Dieu; il y aura une rétribution du bien et une punition du mal; le mal suprême c'est la haine, la recherche de la mort pour les autres: d'où la solidarité et l'appel constant à l'amour dans l'hospitalité et la réconciliation, comme préventifs contre le mal.

Vivre de ces valeurs, c'est assurément être dans la proximité et l'intimité de Dieu. Quelle nécessité y-avait-il alors d'adopter une autre religion? A nous Africains qui ne vivrions que de nos religions traditionnelles, il nous manquerait Jésus Christ et la révélation biblique du Père.

Les Églises chrétiennes sur le continent africain, au nom de la foi en l'incarnation de Dieu parmi les hommes, ont aujourd'hui enclenché le mouvement de l'inculturation qui réhabilite nos valeurs pour y enraciner le message du salut chrétien. Et ceci est primordial dans tout combat pour une libération: il faut commencer par reconnaître sa dignité, être fier d'être africain.

Les Églises chrétiennes se retrouvent aujourd'hui sur la ligne de front du combat pour les libertés politiques et l'instauration de la démocratie: les nombreux martyrs de ces luttes se retrouvent dans les rangs d'Églises. Que l'on se rappelle les marches des chrétiens à Kinshasa en Février 1992, la nomination des évêques pour présider aux "conférences nationales" un peu partout en Afrique centrale et Afrique de l'Ouest.

Il faudrait également mentionner que dans l'Afrique postcoloniale, les seules structures administratives fiables sont celles des Églises, et que la relève économique passe souvent par elles; ce sont elles qui encouragent et soutiennent de nombreux projets de développement, en rapport avec les organismes non gouvernementaux.

Ainsi, en dépit du paternalisme qu'exercent les Églises d'Occident sur celles d'Afrique, les Églises chrétiennes d'Afrique présentent aujourd'hui à l'homme africain un socle sûr d'organisation et une possibilité de repartir sur des bases nouvelles pour une libération de l'homme total, avec le ferment du règne de Dieu qui signifie amour, paix, libération, défense des opprimés.

Mais cette chance est suspendue à une condition de la part des Africains. Le christianisme offre à l'Afrique des potentialités pour développer son expérience du divin. Il ne faut pas que les Africains le prennent comme un modèle à reproduire tel quel, à installer tel quel; en ce moment-là ils perdraient la chance que le christianisme constitue pour eux. En d'autres termes, que la révélation chrétienne leur fasse découvrir comment Dieu avait parlé et cheminé avec leurs ancêtres; que la morale chrétienne leur fasse découvrir comment Dieu avait initié leurs ancêtres au

respect de sa volonté et à l'essentiel de la loi qui est l'amour; que la célébration chrétienne du salut les fasse progresser dans l'art de célébrer de leurs ancêtres et dans l'idée même du salut, en découvrant grâce aux sacrements chrétiens plusieurs autres sacrements de salut dans les manifestations du triomphe de la vie sur la mort en Afrique... En un mot, je dirais que le christianisme est une chance pour l'Afrique, à condition que les Africains ne se contentent pas d'installer chez eux des copies d'Églises catholiques, d'Églises protestantes, d'Églises orthodoxes, etc. mais qu'ils puisent dans toutes ces expériences partielles, des potentialités pour faire progresser l'expérience originale du divin chez leurs ancêtres.

### **Pourquoi et comment l'Afrique est une chance pour le Christianisme**

D'abord par le nombre. L'argument du nombre n'est pas à négliger; car c'est dans la mesure où le nombre représente la visibilité du corps Église qu'un rayonnement s'amorce. On sait que le maître d'oeuvre principal est l'Esprit Saint; et que c'est Dieu lui-même qui bâtit la maison. Mais l'Esprit travaille avec les hommes et les moyens dont ils disposent. L'Église est signe du salut; et la catégorie "signe" implique "visibilité". Et le nombre entre dans la constitution de cette visibilité. En outre, la jeunesse de ce nombre qui arrive est importante. Car la jeunesse d'un pays est l'espoir de son renouvellement. Les Églises-mères vieillissent. Celle d'Afrique apporte des forces jeunes, et donc susceptibles de renouveler la vie de l'Église chrétienne. N'est-ce pas là une chance?

### **Des rites nouveaux et un nouvel enjeu théologique**

Des rites inédits dans la tradition chrétienne occidentale, ont vu le jour en Afrique noire, tels la bénédiction des parents et le pacte de sang dans la consécration religieuse et dans le mariage, des rites initiatiques de passation de pouvoir dans l'ordination sacerdotale, des rites de passage dans le baptême-confirmeration des Adultes, des rites de conjuration du mal dans le sacrement des malades et dans la sanctification du temps, des rites de réconciliation dans le sacrement de pénitence et réconciliation, l'invocation et vénération des ancêtres dans la célébration eucharistique, et j'en passe.<sup>7</sup> Qu'y a-t-il de nouveau?

La Pâque chrétienne est le passage de Jésus de ce monde à son Père, passage qui nous sauve, et qui rend gloire au Père. Les célébrations africaines de la Pâque donnent le même message, mais tout en soulignant la dimension initiatique de l'événement. Le baptême célébré avec du kaolin blanc, des feuilles de bananier dans le mime de la mort et résurrection, signifie toujours vie nouvelle en Christ. Mais il y a un accent que ces symboles et gestes africains mettent dans la

théologie du baptême: c'est celui de la vie comme "passage et initiation", et comme participation.

En utilisant les matières alimentaires locales pour le repas eucharistique, on proclame toujours la mort et la résurrection du Christ comme acte sauveur; mais par l'usage de ces éléments locaux, on met un accent théologique sur l'incarnation du Verbe. Dieu est le tout autre, mais il rejoint l'homme sur ses chemins comme ami et frère.

Quand on connaît la dynamique du binôme foi-rites, on comprend que toutes ces pratiques rituelles nouvelles soient susceptibles de transformer le christianisme, si pas de fond en comble, du moins en élargissant ses registres et ses voies d'accès. Ne serait-ce pas une chance pour le Christianisme?

### **Une renouveau chrétienne**

Depuis une vingtaine d'années, se multiplient des représentations du Christ, des Saints et des mystères chrétiens en traits locaux, africains. Ceci n'obéit pas seulement au besoin d'une catéchèse, mais à une théologie de l'incarnation. Comme Dieu s'est fait "homme", il fallait que dans le culte les représentations de son mystère rejoignent l'homme de toute race, de tout pays, et de tout temps. Il vaut mieux représenter Dieu et ses mystères dans les traits de toutes les races pour mieux marquer que Dieu et ses mystères ne s'identifient et ne se limitent à aucune race. Ces Christs et Vierges noirs, ne représentent pas seulement une production artistique africaine, mais toute une vie d'un pays, toute une conception du monde et de la vie, toute une manière de croire et d'être chrétien et qui enrichissent ainsi le trésor judéo-chrétien.

### **Vivre autrement en Église**

L'expérience des "communautés de base", avec à leur tête des laïcs, instaure une autre manière de vivre en église. En effet, la "paroisse" ne suffit plus à la tâche de la vie en Église; les chrétiens, au sein de leur quartier, en dehors du culte paroissial, se retrouvent pour vivre comme en famille. Leur cellule est une cellule qui est conçue pour répercuter la vie paroissiale dans les maisons et quartiers. Ce besoin n'est pas né d'une action apostolique quelconque, ni de la pénurie de prêtres, mais d'une manière africaine de vivre, telle que là où l'on habite, tous les problèmes de la vie sont reposés, et jaillissent dans le rythme de la foi. L'"église-peuple" de Dieu d'Europe, cède le pas à l'"église-famille" de Dieu en Afrique. De nouveaux ministères apparaissent, comme celui des "aînés", des "animateurs et initiateurs", des "défenseurs de la justice".

L'image de l'église-famille prône le mariage des responsables de communautés. En effet, selon les cul-

tures d'Afrique noire, un responsable de communauté, prêtre ou évêque, est un aîné et un chef, et donc quelqu'un qui entre dans le registre des ancêtres, registre de ceux qui ne mettent pas un frein au don de la vie, à la transmission de la vie. Comment être responsable d'une communauté de vie, si on n'a pas donné la vie, si on n'a pas participé, de manière pleine (spirituelle et physique), à l'expérience profonde de la transmission de la vie.

Nombreux sont les prélats africains qui soutiennent le principe du célibat sacerdotal en Afrique, simplement par mimétisme de l'Occident, comme une manière de montrer que les Africains sont tout aussi "forts", tout aussi "capables" de garder le célibat.

C'est exactement ainsi que faisaient les premiers "évolués" du temps colonial: ils faisaient une raie dans leurs cheveux crépus, pour imiter les Européens, alors que les cheveux crépus n'ont pas besoin de raie pour se maintenir... La question n'est pas dans la capacité, mais bien dans l'utilité et l'opportunité par rapport à nos cultures, qui, par ailleurs, comportent cette continence sexuelle, pour des cas particuliers et au service d'une fonction sociale de "veille".

Pour nos cultures, les célibataires sont des "veilleurs", un genre de "reclus" qui irait bien aux Religieux de toutes sortes; ces reclus remplissent certaines fonctions, en particulier en temps de guerre ou d'initiations; mais nos cultures ne leur donnent jamais la fonction du chef de la communauté; car elles jugent que l'expérience conjugale est indispensable pour celui qui guide les familles humaines et qui représente en fait les ancêtres.<sup>8</sup>

### **Une autre manière de faire la théologie**

Les différents titres donnés spontanément à Jésus Christ dans les diverses chansons composées par les communautés de base, ont tracé des perspectives d'une "christologie africaine".<sup>9</sup> Au départ, des chrétiens africains ont simplement repris des titres que, dans leurs prières traditionnelles, ils attribuaient à Dieu, pour les appliquer à Jésus Christ, selon le message de la célébration. Ainsi l'hymne au Christ, tenant lieu de l'Exultet de la nuit pascale: les images familières à la vie et à la culture de nos communautés, sont agencées dans un cadre qui fait passer le message d'un Christ vainqueur, héros, chef suprême, notre Pâques immolée...

Tous ces traits du visage africain du Christ sont des symboles qui eux-mêmes dévoilent en voilant, c'est-à-dire, ne disent pas tout du Christ, car ce dernier reste l'au-delà de tous les modèles. Aucune image, aucun mot du langage humain, ne peut épuiser la richesse du Christ; et c'est là une des chances que l'Afrique constitue pour le christianisme: elle rend compte, dans ses efforts de nommer Jésus, de l'immensité du mystère du Christ. Elle contraint le monde chrétien à dépasser le monolithisme occidental dans l'expérience du salut en Jésus Christ.

### **L'Oeucuménisme**

L'Afrique chrétienne n'avait pas connu les "guerres de religion"; aussi constitue-t-elle un terrain privilégié pour une mise en oeuvre dépassionnée de l'oecuménisme. Les expériences en cours vont dans le sens d'une communion des Églises plutôt que le retour à une "seule" Église. Il ne s'agirait donc pas d'abandonner un jour les différentes confessions. La prière du Christ "qu'ils soient un" n'est pas comprise comme une volonté de "retour à la confession catholique", mais comme une interpellation de chacune des confessions dans la vérité de son témoignage d'amour. Les différentes confessions, tout comme les différents peuples, manifestent finalement la richesse du mystère en accentuant l'un ou l'autre de son aspect. Même si le péché a été à l'origine de la séparation, de part et d'autre, Dieu a fini par triompher du péché en faisant éclore en chacune des confessions des dons particuliers dont elle doit faire profiter les autres confessions. Celles-ci sont devenues comme différentes familles d'un clan, le clan du Christ.

Il n'est pas rare de voir en Afrique noire des rassemblements qui regroupent Catholiques, Orthodoxes, Musulmans, Protestants, Kimbanguistes ... sur les mêmes bancs, dans des mêmes bâtiments. Et souvent, une même famille comporte des membres de différentes confessions, et qui se retrouvent pour les mêmes événements comme les enterrements, les mariages, les professions religieuses, les ordinations sacerdotales, les premières communions, sans chercher à faire du prosélytisme.

### **Catéchèse de l'oralité**

Il s'agit du recours aux techniques de l'oral, notamment celles qui privilégient la parole et le contact vécu, qui font appel à la mémorisation, à la monstration d'images et symboles, celles qui mettent à profit l'inépuisable trésor des contes, et qui dans l'attention au rythme cosmique, font coïncider des périodes catéchétiques aux grandes époques de l'année... Une telle catéchèse relativise le savoir écrit, ou plutôt propose d'écrire aussi avec le corps, avec la vie;<sup>10</sup> ceci est utile dans un christianisme qui s'est trop souvent appuyé sur les manuels au détriment de l'expérience de vie et de la transmission orale. Le christianisme conserve une référence fondamentale au Livre, mais les Écritures doivent être une vie, une parole vivante et non seulement une lettre historique, objet de musée.

### **Mysticisme nouveau et bourgeoisement des charismes**

Dans le catholicisme d'après Vatican II, la dimension mystique de la prière, comme union intime avec Dieu

et abandon de soi au souffle de L'esprit, s'est accentuée. Et ceci est particulièrement bénéfique parce qu'on risquait d'oublier que la prière était plus l'oeuvre de Dieu en nous, que notre propre oeuvre.

Cet enrichissement de la prière chrétienne a fait germer d'autres bourgeons en Afrique, dans la rencontre entre les courants de la religion traditionnelle et certaines veines de la religion chrétienne, développant ainsi un mysticisme des saints: ceux-ci viendraient "habiter" des fidèles vivants, pour communiquer un message, ou soigner des malades.

Dans ce mysticisme, se retrouve d'une part le courant traditionnel qui stipule que les ancêtres et l'au-delà continuent à se préoccuper de la communauté terrestre et interviennent aussi directement dans le terrestre en habitant momentanément un individu; d'autre part on y retrouve le courant séculaire de la tradition chrétienne à l'égard des saints, qui s'est développé à partir de la mémoire des martyrs jusqu'à la mémoire de tous ceux qui ont vécu l'amour du Christ et du Royaume d'une manière exemplaire. Ainsi les Saints, grâce à leur proximité et intimité avec le Tout-Puissant, viennent en aide aux vivants sur la terre.

La mystique chrétienne qui se développe en Afrique ne se rencontre pas seulement dans ces phénomènes particuliers. Elle se manifeste également dans le bourgeonnement spectaculaire des congrégations religieuses en Afrique noire. Ces congrégations ont surtout vu le jour avec l'augmentation du nombre d'évêques noirs; ceux-ci rivalisèrent dans le zèle à laisser fleurir dans leurs diocèses, de nouveaux charismes. Alors qu'en Occident, des congrégations religieuses fusionnent pour pouvoir survivre, en Afrique, elles augmentent en nombre, avec la naissance de nouvelles congrégations inspirées par l'africanité où résonne d'une manière particulière le message chrétien en terre africaine. Et en outre, les congrégations anciennes se renouvellent dans leur spiritualité, en cherchant à comprendre comment l'africanité les aide à mieux suivre un Saint François, un Saint Dominique, un Saint Jean de la Croix, etc.

## Conclusion

Le temps où l'on pensait que les cultures d'Afrique étaient un handicap pour la foi chrétienne est bel et bien révolu. On a constaté que les sociétés chrétiennes d'Europe conservent des tares telles l'intolérance, l'idolâtrie des biens matériels, le racisme, qui défigurent profondément le christianisme. Toute culture, du Nord au Sud, de l'Orient à l'Occident, demeure candidate à la conversion, et appelée à glorifier Dieu et proclamer le salut en Christ.

Avec une meilleure connaissance des traditions africaines, on comprend de mieux en mieux qu'elles con-

stituent le lieu où le christianisme peut fleurir, en se décapant des scories du temps et des espaces par lesquels il avait transité, et en assumant en Afrique les valeurs que le créateur lui avait confiées tout en faisant resplendir celles-ci du soleil de la révélation et de la foi en Christ. Une chance mutuelle s'offre ainsi dans cette rencontre.

Mais encore faut-il que l'Europe chrétienne et l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui saisissent cette chance de la rencontre. Pour l'Europe chrétienne, saisir cette chance c'est accepter l'Afrique telle qu'elle est, avec son souci primordial de la relation humaine, de la communauté, son sens de la nature, et son dynamisme de la parole. Saisir la chance de la rencontre pour l'Afrique c'est accepter l'Europe telle qu'elle est, avec ses manies d'organisation, avec son "cogito ergo sum", son attachement aux droits de propriété et de l'individu.

Une fois que l'on s'est accepté différent, tel que l'on est, le pas de la synthèse peut s'annoncer fructueux. Et le cheminement de la rencontre sera rythmé par, le respect de l'autre, l'évacuation des complexes historiques, l'attention de la présence de Dieu dans la vie et l'histoire de chacun, l'émerveillement devant cette main de Dieu qui nous a toujours précédés chez l'autre. Le christianisme n'en sera que plus riche, et les peuples qui auront cru au message du Christ plus humainement accomplis.

## Notes:

(1) Rapport introductif du Cardinal Hyacinthe THIANDOUM; in CHEZA M.,(éd.). *Le synode africain textes et histoire*. Karthala Paris, 1996, p.48

(2) C'est du moins l'orientation générale de Ecclesia in Africa, du pape, centrée sur *Vous serez mes témoins en Afrique au seuil de ce troisième millénaire*.

(3) Guy de BOSSCHERE, *Autopsie de la colonisation*, Paris, 1967

(4) TSHIBANGU WA MULUMBA, *Hommage à la colonisation*, Paris, 1980, p.90

(5) COULON P. & BRASSEUR P., Libermann, Paris, 1988, p.231

(6) Comme le soutient MABIKA KALANDA, *La remise en question base de la décolonisation mentale*, Bruxelles, 1967

(7) Nous avons consacré de nombreuses publications à ce sujet. On pourrait par exemple se reporter à *Alliances avec le Christ en Afrique*, Athènes,1987; *Pâques africaines d'aujourd'hui*, Desclée,1989;*Symbolique chrétienne et symbolique bantu* (rencontre dans la liturgie), Kinshasa, 1991

(8) Voir mon article *Pour des prêtres mariés en Afrique*, in *Lumière et vie*, n°219, 1994, pp.83-88

(9) Voir à ce sujet l'ouvrage collectif *Chemins de la christologie africaine*, Desclée, 1986.

NYAMITI Ch., *Christ as our ancestor*, Zimbabwe, 1984

(10) *Nomination africaine de Jésus Christ, quelle christologie?*, Kananga, Zaire, 1989.

Ref.: *Coopération et développement*,n.147,1999

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## “Handed over to the Gentiles”: The Centrality of Persecution for Missiology

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### The process of Jesus' ministry

The story of Jesus' ministry is a paradigm for the ministry of his disciples and a model of the process of God's kingdom, including missionary activity to outsiders. The story is as follows: 1. God anointed Jesus to proclaim the kingdom to his own people, not to outsiders. 2. His preaching (particularly his stance toward law, riches, and power) and actions (table fellowship with sinners, healing, and exorcisms) were a scandal, and he was rejected by the leaders of his people and abandoned by his disillusioned disciples. 3. He was handed over to the Gentiles and killed, but God raised him from the dead and he appeared to the disciples. 4. The Resurrection confirmed him as Messiah and Son of God, and he gave his disciples a mission to all nations.

The ministry of Jesus' disciples, then and now, should mirror that same process. 1. They are to preach the kingdom of God to their own people, bringing the Good News to the poor, to the rejected, and to those considered sinners—condemning the tyranny of law, riches, and power. 2. They will be rejected and persecuted by their own co-religionists. 3. Only then are they authorized to preach to outsiders, and to 'outaiders' in a special sense, as we shall see below.

### Rejection, the key to the question about Jesus and the Gentiles

The question of Jesus' stance toward the Gentiles in the Gospels has been a puzzle to missiologists, because most of them simply miss the issue of rejection as a necessary condition for the Gospel to be preached to the Gentiles. This is a crucial omission, because rejection is the key to the question they pose about Jesus' not preaching to the Gentiles. I will briefly discuss below several *theological issues* that must be considered together, then discuss *a few key texts in the Christian Scriptures*, and finally add some *conclusions*.

#### 1. Theological Issues

There are a number of issues that must be consid-

ered together. Treating them in isolation has led to a narrow, even wrong, view of mission to non-believers, by isolating it from mainstream ministry and theology and by creating the view that there is a 'sending Church' in control of this mission. It has also led to a wrong view of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, by isolating it from the process sketched above.

### The Kingdom of God and the Church

It is often said that the Church is not the kingdom of God but then, matters become problematic, regarding both 'Church' and kingdom.

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, coming in the near future. This kingdom is God's definitive action on behalf of the poor, the humbled remnant of his people. It is the kingdom of God, not of Jesus; Jesus is not the kingdom. The kingdom is a process, an event, involving the "end of this world/age". It is neither past nor gradual (see the comments about time and history below).

The problem about 'Church', at least in part, is that fuzzy language betrays the fuzzy theology behind it. 'Church' is the concrete, local, structured gathering of believers, not a denomination or corporate structure with such things as mission offices. So statements like "The Church sends..." or "The Church grows..." are simply unclear, because we are not clear about 'Church'. Even worse are expressions such as: "the Church possesses the means of salvation" (which is simply not true); or "being saved by joining a Church". Membership in a denominational Church does not save; only God saves, and salvation is at the end of this age.

### Jesus' Death and Resurrection

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus is the culmination of his mission. It is not part of his *work*, since it was not chosen by Jesus. Rather, he accepted rejection and death in obedience to his Father's will. The death of Jesus was not an unfortunate, avoidable tragedy, but an integral part of God's plan, *it had to happen*. The death was caused by rejection by Jesus' own

people, the covenanted people of God. That rejection also had to happen. God did not ‘arrange’ the death of Jesus; neither did Jesus cause it. Rather, the proclamation of God’s kingdom led to rejection.

The rejection of Jesus is the opening to the Gentiles, by God’s action in raising him from the dead. So, the conditioning factor (then and now) behind the opening to outsiders is rejection by those who claim to own God’s word. Divorcing the death of Jesus from rejection by his own people and opening to the Gentiles has led to wrong theologies, such as 1. describing the death of Jesus as a payment (to God, or worse, to the devil); 2. seeing the Death and Resurrection as something that happened a long time ago; our present concern is simply how to ‘apply the merits’ to believers; 3. seeing the death of Jesus as punishment for our sins, or as Jesus “taking on our sins”; and 4. saying that Jesus “suffered for us” (that is, in place of us), and that suffering therefore has been taken away. There is language in the Christian Scriptures that seems to justify all these views (for example, 1 Cor 6:20 regarding being “purchased at a [great] price), and all these passages need much more careful discussion than I can give here. Nonetheless, I argue that talk about payments, “taking the place of”, is quite secondary to a narrative, processual approach.

### Persecution and rejection

Persecution and rejection are necessary steps in the process of the coming of God’s kingdom; they are not unfortunate and temporary setbacks. Who rejects God’s kingdom? The rich, the powerful, the satisfied. It is not the ‘pagans’ who reject the Gospel; more basically, it is those who claim to own God’s word — those who use God’s word to control others by controlling the law or to gain power and riches and prestige. So there is constant conflict within the Churches as well as in the world: between the rich and the poor; between those who wield power and those who do not. Persecution is both the proof of the authenticity of the Gospel and the means by which the Gospel goes to those outside (see the comments on Acts and Galatians below). Who accepts God’s kingdom? The lepers, the poor, the sick, the rejected, those beset by demons. That is the scandal of the proclamation; it is the scandal of the Beatitudes in both Matthew and Luke.

Most treatises on missiology simply do not mention persecution, and certainly not persecution by Church authorities. The unspoken assumption is that the ‘sending Church’ does not stand in need of repentance. If that assumption is challenged, we retort, “Well, of course, we could all do a little more penance”. The assumption is not true: “all have sinned; all have missed out on God’s glory; all are shut up under disobedience” (see the comments on Galatians and Romans below).

### Jesus and the Gentiles

The problem of Jesus and the Gentiles in the Gospels can now be put in its proper context. The question is usually framed as follows: Why did Jesus not preach to the Gentiles? We referred to several answers above and found them all wanting, because they do not see rejection by Jesus’ own people as a necessary part of the process of God’s kingdom. In fact, they do not view it as a process at all, but as a static reality. Yet, only after the Good News is rejected by one’s own can it be taken to the outsiders. The Gospel, like Jesus, is literally “handed over to the Gentiles” in rejection and persecution (see, for example Mat 20:17ff). Moreover, these outsiders who receive the Gospel are not the rulers but the marginalized.

### Denominations and Mission

In denominational bodies, there are several problems connected with mission to outsiders; 1. the tenuous connection between ‘internal ministry, to members and the external ‘missionary activity’ of preaching to non-believers (especially to those of a different culture); 2. the lack of integration of missiology and wider theology; 3. the connection of missionary activity with colonization (still!); 4. the unspoken assumption that the sending Churches have no need of repentance; conversion is for the natives and 5. the question of inculturation, which simply cannot be addressed without a wider theological grounding (see below). The issue here is not only theology and mission policy. It is, just as importantly, the assumptions behind the familiar ‘begging literature’, with pictures (Americans hugging the poor natives, often portrayed as children) accompanied by stories of success, numbers, buildings, and programmes.

I have suggested above what I consider a better approach: internal and external mission are part of the same prophetic ministry. They are steps in a *process*, and rejection is the connection between them, just as Jesus’ work and glory as God’s Son are connected by rejection and death.

### Time and History

A common theological interpretation of history, usually called ‘salvation history’, assumes that the central event (the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ) is simply in the past. All that is necessary now is to proclaim that past event and its efficacy to present believers. They appropriate this salvation in an act of personal faith, and/or join a community of believers. After the Death and Resurrection of Jesus and his ascent into heaven, the Church continues his work until the end of time, when Christ will come as Judge and

Saviour. This is a straight-line view of history, and it ignores the essential *discontinuity* of God's kingdom, the 'end of the present age' (and the end of history). Emphasis on an eschatology that is far in the future makes the very same mistake, by not focusing on the present moment as the end.

I argue that the decisive event, the coming kingdom of God, is not past. It is (always) in the present and near future. It involves a discontinuity with the past. It is a present moment of passover, of death and resurrection, apparent in the rejection and death of those who proclaim the kingdom. Rather than a 'salvation history' that sees the past as over and complete, proclamation is about the present.

Does this approach endanger the centrality of the historical Jesus? Yes, it does; to centre our religion on an historical Jesus, apart from faith, is to know Jesus "according to the flesh" (2 Cor 5:6; see the comments below). Our faith is not about literal past history; that is the letter that kills. The present proclamation creates the new moment of the Spirit, of the new life of the age to come (see 2 Cor 3:6). It is not a matter of applying past merits (mentioned above); the present moment is the moment of death/resurrection for the believer.

## 2. Rejection in Christian Scriptures

I will briefly comment on Luke/Acts, Matthew, and Paul, focusing on the process sketched above.

### Acts of the Apostles

Luke's two-part work needs to be seen *as a whole*. The process outlined in the introduction above shows that thematic unity, specifically in *the parallel between Jesus and Paul*. Paul's method followed that of Jesus (compare Lk 4:15f. and Acts 17:2, in keeping with his [Jesus'] usage in keeping with Paul's usage). Paul first preached to his Jewish brothers and sisters, in Jewish synagogues. Only after he was rejected did he go to the Gentiles, and then to Gentiles of a very specific kind. For him, the experience of rejection and persecution is an integral part of the process: "It is necessary that we enter the kingdom of God [by passing] through many tests" (Acts 14:22).

*The story of Paul's activity* at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14-52) is typical of around nine such examples. We will look at the process, the content of the preaching, and the Gentiles who were involved. Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, and offered a 'word of exhortation' which was received by "many of the Jews and the devout proselytes" (Acts 13:43). The following Sabbath, many jealous Jews debated with Paul and Barnabas, who

took courage and responded, "It was necessary to speak the word of God *first* to you; since you rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of life in the [next] world, now we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46f.; see Acts 18:6). The Jews started persecution against the two Apostles, and expelled them. The (other) disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit: Their joy is directly related to the persecution and expulsion.

*The content of Paul's preaching* focuses on God's promises to the ancestors: he recounts *our* common (Jewish) story, beginning with the sojourn in Egypt. From David he turns to David's descendant, Jesus, a *Saviour for Israel* (Acts 13:23). Note the phrase: "People, brothers and sisters, children of the family of Abraham, and those of you who fear God (that is, the non-Jewish people in attendance), this word of salvation has been sent to us" (Acts 13:26). Jesus was *rejected* by those living in Jerusalem and their leaders. Jesus was raised and appeared to those who went up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. The 'good news' is that God has fulfilled the promise *to us God's children*, by raising Jesus and declaring him God's Son. "Let it be known to you, brothers and sisters, that forgiveness of sin is being proclaimed, forgiveness even of those sins which could not be forgiven under the law of Moses. Everyone who believes is delivered in this one (that is, Jesus; the theme of deliverance by faith in Romans)" (Acts 13:38-39). Then Paul adds a warning, quoting Habakkuk (1:5 Septuagint LXX); "Look, you cynics, and be amazed and then perish, because I do a work in your days, a work you will not believe even if someone explains it to you" (which Paul is doing) (Acts 13:41).

### Jesus, rejected by the Jewish leaders accepted by marginalized Gentiles

Jesus is not called Saviour of the world, but of Israel; the word is addressed to the descendants of Abraham. Jesus was rejected by the leaders at Jerusalem, but was raised by God, and appeared to Galileans (that is, to marginal Jews). Quoting Habakkuk, Paul says that the Jews will not believe; the rejection was necessary.

Who were the typical Gentiles who accepted the Good News? The 'God-fearers', that is, sympathetic Gentiles attracted to Judaism. They were not mainstream Gentiles (see comments on the Areopagus incident below), but those between cultures who were seeking God. They were, by and large, marginalized people, just like Jesus' Galilean disciples. Moreover, it is important that they were sympathetic to Judaism and familiar with the Jewish Scripture (in the Greek translation). At Corinth, this 'moving to the Gentiles'

is made concrete in Paul's moving over from the house of a Jewish couple to the house of a Gentile who revered God (that is, the God of the Jews; see Acts 18:7). Regarding those who accepted the Gospel, see also 1 Corinthians 1:26ff.

Acts ends on a similar note: Paul spoke one (final) word (to the Jewish leaders in Rome): "*The Holy Spirit rightly spoke to the ancestors through Isaiah the prophet, and said 'Go to this people and say: 'they will hear and not understand... lest they turn and I will cure them'. Let this be known to you, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen'*" (Acts 28:25-28).

The fact that this word is the final statement of Luke's whole work (Gospel and Acts) shows the centrality of the process of rejection by Jews and acceptance by Gentiles. These are not two separate steps accidentally related, but parts of one and the same process, parallel to Death and Resurrection. The abruptness of this ending provokes the reader to ponder this necessary process.

### **Paul at the Areopagus: an exception?**

The story of Paul at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34) is sometimes used in missiological texts as a counter example to the above process, or even as the ideal method of cross-cultural mission. Here Paul speaks directly to mainstream Gentiles (the Greek seems to be noticeably more formal), referring to their traditions (the unknown god) and quoting their poets. This is definitely not Paul's method (see Acts 17:2 quoted above). In my opinion, Luke is using the story precisely as an example of failure, in order to underline his theology of rejection and acceptance. The story is preceded by Paul's successes in Berea and his discussions in the synagogue with Jews and sympathetic Greeks at Athens. It is followed by the successful Corinthian proclamation and nuanced by scenarios in which partial understanding is corrected (Apollo, and the disciples who know only of John's baptism). The most telling indication that the Areopagus attempt was presented by Luke as a failure is that Paul left abruptly, and no Christian community was formed at Athens.

The Greeks of the Areopagus stumbled over Paul's talking about rising from the dead, perhaps (in Luke's theology) not so much because of their own philosophy, but precisely because there was no death (that is, rejection) preceding the resurrection. The rejected Christ is a scandal to the Jews, and makes no sense to the Greeks (see 1 Cor 1: 22ff).

### **Conclusion**

In Acts, Paul is the new Jesus, handed over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:11); he is the new Jonah, rising from

the sea to preach to the pagans. Two important questions call for further study in the light of my thesis: 1. Why the total emphasis on Paul in the second part of Acts? 2. Why is Paul's conversion story told three times, and what are the nuances involved in the different versions (presumably based on the narrative audience)? Regarding the first issue, I think it is not that Luke had no material on the other Apostles; rather, it was because Paul was the persecutor, the *rejecting* Jew, who became the vessel chosen to preach to the Gentiles, "I will show him how much he must suffer" (Acts 9:15f; see also Gal 1:11-17).

Note that all of this occurs *after* the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. So, rejection and acceptance is not a once-for-all event applying only to Jesus, but is an ongoing *typical* process, applying to his disciples as well.

A question might arise because of rightful sensitivity to the beliefs of the Jewish people: Is not this emphasis on the rejection by the Jews anti-Semitic? No, because it is the typical process, already seen in the prophets of the Hebrew Scripture. Today, this rejection and denial of the Gospel is continued by the First World Christians, by those in Church authority. The rejection is always by those who think they own God's revelation and deny their own need of repentance while calling others to conversion (that is, to become like themselves).

## **The Gospel of Luke**

### **Two key passages**

I will focus on two key passages: the opening of Jesus' ministry (Lk 4:16-30), and the end of his ministry (Lk 24:44-50). Returning to Nazareth in the power of the Spirit, Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. His method was to preach in synagogues (Lk 4:15; see Acts 17:2), that is, specifically within his Jewish situation. He reads Isaiah 61: if, regarding the Spirit, the anointing and the preaching of the good news to the poor, and says, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". The people challenge him to perform miracles; he scandalizes them with the stories of Elijah's and Elisha's ministry to non-Jews.

All the elements of Jesus' ministry are here: 1. preaching to his own people, but specifically to the poor and those in need; 2. declaring fulfillment of Scripture (see Mk 1:14f.) and creating a time of repentance; 3. being rejected by his own; and then 4. leaving to preach elsewhere. Jesus started with his own, but no prophet can be accepted in one's own country, even though that is where one must start. The saying regarding rejection of prophets is not simply a quotable one-liner but a statement of Luke's theology (see also Jn 4:44).

In the final episode of the Gospel, the disciples are enlightened to understand the meaning of the Death and Resurrection (see also Lk 24:26f). In order to fulfill all Scripture (see Lk 4:21) the Messiah had to suffer and be raised from the dead on the third day (see Lk 24:26: “suffer and enter into his glory”). Jesus is not referring to a single passage of Scripture (such as Hos 6:2), but to a general theme of Hebrew Scripture: that of rejection and acceptance (Ishmael/Isaac; Esau/Jacob; Pharaoh/Hebrews; exile/return, etc.) that is applied to his own mission. In the name of this Messiah, *metanoia* (conversion) and forgiveness of sin (in Lk 3:3, these are connected with baptism) are to be preached to all the nations. Forgiveness of whose sins? First, those of the disciples. Only after they had experienced forgiveness, could they preach it and be witnesses of this forgiveness. The preaching to all nations is to *begin* in Jerusalem; persecution will extend it.

### **Throughout Luke’s Gospel: rejection and acceptance**

The theme of rejection and acceptance occurs throughout Luke’s Gospel. It is in the song of Mary (Lk 2:5.2f.; note also the theme of fulfillment of the promises to the ancestors that we saw in Paul’s preaching and the two passages above in Luke) and in the blessings for the poor and curses for the rich (Lk 6:20ff.). In the material specific to Luke, the theme is often personified by contrasting two persons; this occurs both in narrative and in parables. A few narrative examples are as follows:

1. the woman and the Pharisee at the table (Lk 7:36ff.);
2. the rich man and Zachaeus (Lk 18:18ff.; 19:1ff.; see the material in between); and
3. the two criminals on the Cross (in Lk 23:39ff.).

The theme is equally striking in the parables, for example, 1. the two brothers (in Lk 15:11ff., the contrast seems to be between Jew and Gentile); 2. the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19ff.); 3. the widow and the judge (Lk 18:1ff); and 4. the two men in the temple (Lk 18:9ff.). The messianic banquet (Lk 14:15ff.), while not specifically Lukan, is also an example. A whole list of woman/man contrasts also fit this theme.

### **Conclusion**

The theme of Luke’s work is not just compassion (see Bosch 1991:98ff.), but rejection and acceptance. The Messiah had to suffer; it was not a historical accident that could have happened otherwise. This rejection is a necessary part of the dynamic of God’s plan.

### **The Gospel of Matthew**

I will discuss the question of why the Gospel portrays Jesus’ ministry as focused on his own people,

and not to the Gentiles. The ‘missionary discourse’ in Matthew 10 forbids preaching among the Gentiles or the Samaritans; Matthew 15:21ff. (the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman) shows an almost insulting aversion to serving Gentiles, even though Jesus finally gives in to her request. It has been said that Jesus’ earthly ministry is ‘exclusive’; it would be more exact to say, “focused on his own people”. Note that the disciples are sent *to the ‘lost sheep’* of the house of Israel (not simply to the *house* of Israel); that is, to the sick, the dead, the lepers, and those possessed by demons. This is the same provocative stance that Jesus himself took. They will be rejected, flogged in synagogues, and handed over to kings and governors as witnesses to the *Gentiles* (Mt 10:18). So I believe that some missiologists are simply wrong about Jesus forbidding ministry to the Gentiles in the missionary discourse. In fact, it will come after rejection and persecution, just as it did with Jesus.

The same must be said about two other texts, which do talk about preaching to the Gentiles. In Matthew 24:14, the Gospel will be preached throughout the world as a witness to all nations (see Mt 10:18), and then the end [of this world] will come. But this saying is preceded by reference to rejection and deliverance to the Gentiles in Matthew 14:9-13. The great commission (Mt 28:18ff.), of course assumes the rejection and resurrection; that is the basis for Jesus’ ‘total power’ from God. Jesus will be with his disciples until the end of [this] world (see Mt 24:14).

So all of these texts assume rejection by their own people, both in regard to Jesus *and to the disciples*. One could also cite Matthew’s version of the parable of the vineyard (Mt 21:33ff.). The turning to the Gentiles is part of a process, not a permanent policy.

### **Paul’s Epistles**

For Paul, rejection and persecution are the authentic marks of the Good News, and signs of solidarity with the rejected Jesus. Here I discuss examples from just three of Paul’s letters.

**Galatians.** Paul speaks strongly against the tyranny of the law employed by the Jews seeking to impose circumcision on the Gentiles, they want to “glory in your flesh” (Gal 6:13); they want to “make slaves of us” (Gal 2:4). They do not keep the law themselves (Gal 6:13; see 2:14); it is a matter of having power over others. Because Paul opposes this, he is persecuted by his own people, and that persecution is proof of the authentic Gospel (Gal 5:11); Paul bears the marks of Jesus (Gal 6:17).

The process of rejection/acceptance is intrinsic to the Gospel (see the discussion on Ishmael and Isaac in Gal 4:21ff). The contrast between flesh and spirit

carries the same idea (Gal 5:16ff.). The transition from flesh to spirit involves dying, being crucified with Christ (Gal 5:24; see 2:19f.). Jesus became 'accursed' by the law (Gal 3:13). Paul also died to the law (Gal 2:19). The process is: 1. the law brings death; 2. both Jesus and Paul are "killed by the law" (which includes rejection by their own people); and 3. God gives life (to the Gentiles).

There is "no difference" between Jew and Greek, etc. (Gal 3:28). This is not a general statement about human equality; it is about repentance for everybody, for God delivers all by faith (see Rom 3:22ff.; 10:12).

There is a problem in Galatians for the thesis I am presenting here: Paul's statement about being sent to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16; 2:2; 2:9) seems to contradict the methodology outlined by Luke in Acts. While his statement should be read in the light of Galatians 1:11ff., this remains problematic.

**Second Corinthians.** Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, especially chapters 2-7 is a discussion on his ministry. The theme is the parallel process between Jesus' ministry and that of his disciples. Jesus became sin (accursed by the law and rejected by those who own the law), so that we might become the righteousness of God (for others, 2 Cor 5:21). Death is at work in those who proclaim the Gospel, and they carry about the death of Jesus; but life is at work in those who hear (2 Cor 4:12; see 1 Cor 4:9ff.). The preacher is poor, but enriching many (2 Cor 6:10; see the parallel with Jesus in 2 Cor 8:9). The preacher is constantly at the point of death, constantly being persecuted. Paul is never far from thoughts of his own death in this Epistle.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus is the typical process for his followers; one died for all, so all have died (2 Cor 5:14). *Hyper panton* (for all) does not mean 'in the place of', but it means that all disciples die in the same way (go through the same process) that Jesus did. Then they can live for him and for the Good News of reconciliation (see 2 Cor 5:15). Not to share in the death of Jesus is to know him only 'according to the flesh' (2 Cor 5:16). To share in the death and resurrection is to become a new creation. It is not just the follower of Christ who has died, but the whole order has passed away. The old letter of the law kills, but the spirit, the new letter written on hearts, gives life (see 2 Cor 3:6). A metaphor for this whole discussion is Paul's earlier Letter (which frames the section; 2 Cor 2:3; 7:8) regarding the sinful man who must be punished so that he can be forgiven. So, letters condemn and punish (the law), but the same letters then lead to repentance, and are life-giving (2 Cor 2:4).

The present moment of preaching is a moment of discontinuity; it is not the past law, not even the past death of Jesus. Now is the moment of acceptance; now is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2). To look only to the past is to know Jesus according to the flesh; it is to be

a slave of the letter.

One problematic area in this discussion is Paul's call for the people to separate themselves from non-believers (2 Cor 6:14-18); it needs more study from the point of view I have presented here (and seems to contradict 1 Cor 5:9ff.).

**Romans.** Paul's Letter to the Romans is very much concerned with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. This is not an 'historical problem' that was solved in the first century; we face exactly the same painful issue today in the relationship of those within the Church and those outside. For Paul, there is no difference between the two groups; all have sinned and have fallen short of God's glory (Rom 3:23); all have been locked under disobedience (Rom 11:32). Yet there is a great advantage to being a Jew (Rom 3:1ff.; 9:4f.). And today, there is a great advantage in being a Christian; but not in the sense that one owns God's Word, or has no need of repentance. The Gospel must first be preached to the Jews, and then to the Greeks (Rom 1:16; 2:10); but God shows no partiality. "If you call yourself a Jew" [or today a Christian], but do not observe the law, then God's name is blasphemed because of you (see Rom 2:17ff.).

Romans 9-11 can be seen as the key to this discussion. Paul applies the language of rejection and acceptance to Ishmael and Isaac, to Pharaoh and the Israelites, and to the present situation of Jew and Gentile. Israel is 'hardened' until the full number of the Gentiles 'comes in', then all Israel will be saved (Rom 11:25ff.). But the Gentiles should not be arrogant. Paul clearly sees the necessity of rejection by the Jews, but he does not let it end there; God has not and cannot reject his people Israel definitively.

**Conclusion.** There is no doubt that Paul sees his own ministry as parallel to that of Jesus including, and especially, his rejection and persecution.

### 3. Conclusion

I believe I have offered an answer to the 'puzzle' of Jesus and the Gentiles; it is a puzzle only because of our assumptions. The approach suggested here integrates death/resurrection (of Jesus *and the disciples*) into a theology of the kingdom, and thus integrates missiology into a wider theology. But rejection and persecution are not intellectual issues; they make sense only in experience (see Heb 5:8), an experience of being totally in God's hands. The process of God's kingdom includes as an essential step the passion, of not being in control, of obedience. That step is consistency ignored in missiology.

### Church and Kingdom

We should not take statements, such as "the church

builds the kingdom”, or “the church serves the kingdom”, etc ... merely to mean that a simple, static relationship exists between church and kingdom. Rather, we need to see it as a *process*. Within that process, the Church is the covenant people of God; theirs are the adoption, the covenant, and the promises (Rom 3:1; 9-11). But the disciples in the Gospels are also blind, ambitious, and power-hungry, they finally deny Jesus and run (see Mk 8:31ff.; 14:27ff.). Within missiology there is too much emphasis on method and technique, on successful programmes, and, lurking in the shadow, on ownership and power. But like the Jewish leaders in Jesus’ time, Church leaders today often reject the Good News to the poor in favour of control.

The kingdom is God’s action; it is not gradual, but suddenly among us; it does not come by human observance, or by running here and there after a messiah (see Lk 17:20f.); it comes in answer to incident prayer, and it is questionable whether the Son of Man will find any faith when he comes (Lk 18:1-8). The kingdom is always now, always future; we stand on this side of the barrier (the veil in Hebrews), in the old covenant, in hope.

The tension between Jew and Gentile, between Church and kingdom is embodied in Paul, the rejecter and preacher. It is lived in his pain for his people, and is finally mystery (Rom 11:33).

### **Inculturation**

Inculturation is not the job of the preacher, as if he/she could say, “I have (control) a message to translate”. The preacher is to be submissive to every human institution (1 Pt 2:13; also 1 Pt 4), a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greek (see 1 Cor 9:19ff.). It is not the owners of the culture who accept the Gospel, but the marginalized. If the Christians could let go of their tyranny by the law (for example in regard to ceremonies, food, clothing, marriage, customs, and calendar), then the Gospel can be inculturated. But, of necessity, Christians cannot let go; the letting go comes only after they reject the Gospel and find themselves sinners just like the outsiders.

Finally, what about the individual in church; what about you and me? We know what the Lord requires: do penance; preach to the sick, the sinner, and the blind; and confront injustice (but with full recognition of our part in it; this is the ‘work’ in John’s Gospel). Then you will be rejected, persecuted, ignored, ridiculed, and possibly killed. That is the hour, the moment of the kingdom. Now God can act.

These comments are not that controversial; what would be revolutionary is a life lived like Francis of Assisi: not bitterly rebelling, not self-righteously condemning those who reject and persecute (that would be trying to control the persecution), but simply liv-

ing the Gospel. That was a scandal and would be today, but it was also the Good News of forgiveness and acceptance of everyone, the just and the unjust. The only valid missiology talks about the Good News of the kingdom of God and persecution in the same breath. The only true missionary is one who is rejected and persecuted. *“If anyone wants to follow me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it”*. (Mk 8: 34b-35).

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## Between Babel and Pentecost

### Service of Reconciliation in the Middle East today

#### History of diversity

**D**iversity as a limit and obstacle to communication, and diversity as opportunity and source of richness for the communication between human beings, were both experienced by faith-communities in holy Scripture. In the story of the tower of Babel (Gn 11:1-9) we find the description of the diversity of language communities as a divine punishment, as a curse hindering those communities from communicating with each other, and so to live together and to cooperate in building a common project. The story of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11) presents the way to overcome this curse. By the work of God's life-giving Spirit people can communicate through their differences of language and culture, thus called, in this diversity, to become one body in Christ, where diversity becomes enrichment and a means to build this body in the complementary nature of all its members.

Both experiences of diversity are present in the Middle East today in forms fashioned by history. The Middle East – considered by many in the past as the navel of the world! – is the region where the three principal monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam — were born and exist together until today. During many periods these religions lived peacefully together and built together a common human culture in which each one had its specific contribution and at the same time integrated elements of the other in each one's own identity. In that sense the region represents a history of deep inter-religious encounter. In other periods those religions lived their relations more in confrontation, reminding us more of Babel than of Pentecost.

At the same time, each of these religions also experienced within their family the formation of different communities through which it is still present in the world of today. Various schools of Judaism were formed, as well as a diversity of Christian Churches, and alongside Sunnite Islam, with its four juridical rites, different forms of Shiism, and also other minor or marginal Islamic communities. The Middle East knows the complementary character of different cultural currents within the same religion, but also the pain of mutual concurrence and even exclusion.

#### Impact of modern developments

For 200 years this same Middle East has been an area of very deep economic, social, political, cultural and religious changes, developments, tensions and antagonisms. It had been a part of the Ottoman Empire that, during these centuries, had been in a steady decline leading it to its final disintegration at the end of the First World War. This gave birth to the new, modern and secular, Republic of Turkey. It was a period of increasing impact of the West, with all the changes resulting from it, but also the reactions to that impact.

In this process the *Christians* in the Middle East had an important role: from one side Catholic and Protestant missionaries opened many schools and even universities, as well as institutions for health care and development, thereby contributing in a specific way to the modernization of the region. From the other side the different oriental Christian communities (Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant) were often the cultural hyphen between Western influences and the traditional heritage. And so it is probably not by chance that they played also an important role in the literary renaissance of the Arab world in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They played an analogous role in the Arab nationalistic movements, in which there were a number of Christian thinkers, founders and leaders. Generally the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen a significant number of Christians of the Middle East involved in political life and more generally in the economic, social and cultural developments of the different countries (varying according to the respective nature of each country). In Lebanon, where since independence the Christian community has been considered as representing a majority, the Christians by their weight in society, had a distinctive role also in the culture of the whole of the Middle East, at least until the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989).

This whole movement of Christian participation (and thereby emancipation) in the Middle East has also its impact in the different communities — in their ecclesiastical, spiritual and theological lives — even if each took different forms. The evolution of the largest, the

Coptic Orthodox Church, is typical in this sense, where a socio-cultural revival in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has led to an impressive religious and spiritual renaissance since the 1930s, even if its theological development has been rather limited.

In the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several economic, political and cultural developments in Middle-Eastern societies caused an undeniable malaise among many Christians that has led them to a certain withdrawal from public and, especially, political life. An important number of Christians emigrated to Western countries (above all to the USA, Canada, and Australia) from countries where people previously never had even thought of emigration. The phenomenon of emigration does not concern Christians only, yet even if many Muslims also emigrate, proportionally the Christian communities are much more affected by this phenomenon. In certain countries, this has led to fear for the survival of a Christian presence. The importance of the persistence of Christian communities in the Middle East is not only acknowledged by Christians themselves, but also by many Muslims, especially Muslim intellectuals. At the same time a number of Christian intellectuals have tried to express in a new way their involvement in their societies, searching also for a new expression of the meaning of “co-citizenship”.

In this whole evolution of the Christian communities during the last two centuries, we can observe how among the Christians, different tendencies are visible concerning the attitude to world, society and modernity, tendencies that sometimes coincide with certain specific church communities but in many cases span across the communities. Certain Christians continue to be above all “own-community-oriented”. Some have become very Westernized in thinking and mentality (and so easily attracted by the idea of emigration), whereas others engaged themselves very actively in the life of the national and/or Arab society. The interest of Christians in specifically Arab nationalism was surely much stronger in the past than today, where generally the Arab nationalism is to a certain extent in crisis, and is at the same time often taken over by Islamist tendencies.

In this whole process Middle-Eastern *Islam* had its own lines of development. From one side the influence of pre-modern reform-movements (which were in the line of the whole idea of reform rooted in the classical Islam and even in the Quran itself), has been very strong. But on the other hand the encounter with Western (principally European) influences – that were at first principally cultural, but later on also strongly

economic, political and social – was felt as a strong impetus to modernize Islamic society. It was even felt as a scandal, as expressed in the title of the book written by one of the modern reformers: “*Why are the Muslims behind and the non-Muslims ahead?*” (Shakib Arslan, 1938). The reason, given as an answer to the question, is that the Muslims have long been unfaithful to authentic Islam which is preeminently the religion of reason and science, a creator of culture. In giving this answer, these reformers wanted to modernize Islam without abandoning it, considering that there was no conflict at all between the real, original Islam and the modern culture of reason, science and technology. This modern reform movement is a strong reaction against traditional, “official” Islam, but also against popular Islam, especially against many of the practices of the mystical brotherhoods. They accuse traditional, “official” Islam of confining Islam in the classical schools of “Islamic theology” (Kalam), specially Asharism, the doctrinal school based on the teaching of Abu-l-Hasan al-Ash‘ari (d.935 AD), and of Islamic law (i.e., the four schools— Hanafite, Hanbalite, Malikite and Shafiite). In that way traditional Islam was considered to have killed creative thinking (*idjtihad*) and to have distorted the real image of Islam. Popular Islam is accused of betraying authentic Islam by giving associates to God (*shirk*), in the persons of “saints” and of “masters” of the brotherhoods, and by numerous superstitious practices.

This reform movement broke up into different, contradictory trends: one, often called “modernist”, welcomes most aspects of Western civilization, in its socio-political aspects as well as in the fields of thinking, art and culture. Another trend is alarmed by what it sees as the alienation caused by the former, and wants, simultaneously, to resist the strong grip of the Western powers on the Islamic societies by a combative affirmation of Islamic political and cultural identity. The best known expression of this last trend, often called the Islamist (or fundamentalist) trend, is the movement of the Muslim Brothers, founded in Egypt in 1928. In the last 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different, more extreme and even terrorist, groups often went beyond the movement of the Brothers. On the other hand, the Islamist trend also includes a number of adherents who have a strong modern education. They affirm that their Islamist model is not a model of return to the past, but a model that admits creativity and openness to others. If a hundred years ago reformers wanted to “modernize Islam”, these contemporaneous Islamists want to “islamize modernity.”

At the same time traditional and “official” Islam also adopted and integrated many reformist ideas while

maintaining a certain distance from both tendencies, the Islamist as well as the modernist. If popular Islam and many practices of the mystical brotherhoods are still severely criticized by the Islamists, this does not hinder their important impact on several Islamic societies in the Middle East (especially in countries such as Egypt and Syria). Certain circles of “Sufi” (i.e., mystical) Islam also adapt themselves very well to modern life. Although mystical Islam has had an enormous impact on some of the most important Middle Eastern societies, this phenomenon is much less known outside the Muslim world than the various forms of political Islam (the Islamist movements). Such ignorance is harmful to the whole way of understanding Islam, for it reduces Islam to its political aspects, forgetting that Islam is above all a religion and a way of believing, even if the importance of political aspects cannot be denied.

### Contemporaneous tensions and conflicts

If in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the confrontation with the West was felt above all through colonization. It is paradoxical that in the same period, when most of the Arab countries obtained their independence, a new form of that confrontation appeared through a confrontation with the Zionist enterprise, manifest in the State of Israel which was felt to be a creation of the West and a bastion for its interests. It was a continuous confrontation that found its most violent expression in the four wars between Israel and Arab countries (1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973). Even though now, for more than 20 years, different peace processes have been undertaken (first with Egypt, and more recently with the PLO and Jordan), this by no means indicates that an end to the period of confrontation and conflict has been reached. This conflict had tremendous consequences for the whole life of the region and has been the source of several other tensions and conflicts (as for example the Lebanese civil war, which in several aspects was closely linked with the Israeli-Arab conflict). This conflict, together with the enormous oil-interests at stake, was a principal reason for the United States increasing intervention in the affairs of the Middle East. This intervention came to a summit with the Gulf war of 1991, the consequences of which, through the embargo and hostilities against Iraq, continue until today. All this has the consequence that the United States in particular, and the whole of the West in general, is an indispensable partner, admired and envied, and at the same time disliked, mistrusted, demonized and rejected. Practically all people who emigrate permanently try to go to the West (and the USA espe-

cially), but some of them can at the same time look with contempt on the societies they have adopted as a permanent home. In this context one can understand the sympathy Khomeini’s Islamic revolution – already 12 years before the Gulf war – found as what, at least at that time, appeared as symbolic of a successful challenge to the Western powers.

During the “cold war”, the Arab States could take a certain profit from the tensions between the different blocs in order to maintain a degree of economic and political independence. At the same time the use of the oil as a political economic weapon in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict seemed to reinforce a certain economic independence. Since with the end of the “cold war” the United States became practically the only superpower, ideas (and realities!) such as the “new world order” and “globalization,” are felt by many in the region as instruments of Western domination, and therefore symbols of alienation and loss of one’s own, independent, personality. At the same time a number of countries have been confronted with growing economic hardships (including the problem of demographic growth), involving privatization and loss of guaranteed employment. Many young people do not see how they can find a secure and worthwhile future, as individuals and as communities. Accordingly, the temptation to despair is very strong for important segments of Middle Eastern societies. Such feelings of frustration and despair cause many people to withdraw into their own community, at the same time it reinforces the utopian attraction of a number of fundamentalist movements and trends. All this can result in “refusal of the ‘other’” (with the different meanings the term “other” can take in this context).

### An ideal of integration

The actual human situation of the Middle East is clearly extremely complex. It was, and continues to be, one of the regions of the world with a rich heritage of diverse historical experiences that has a positive potential, and can establish a basis for deep encounter and daily-life dialogue, where the “other” is an integral part of each one’s own cultural identity. As a symbol of this we can mention the title of a book by an Egyptian Christian (Coptic) thinker (Milad Hanna): *“The seven pillars of the Egyptian personality.”* By those “pillars”, he means the seven dimensions and components each Egyptian has in his or her own personality (whether aware of it or not), i.e., four historical and three geographical elements. The historical ones are (1) the Pharaonic, (2) the Graeco-Roman, (3) the Coptic and (4) the Islamic; the geographical

are (5) the Arabic, (6) the African, and (7) the Mediterranean. He wrote this book to show that the ideal for the human person in Egypt – and generally in the Middle East – cannot be a mono-cultural identity, excluding the “other,” but the deep integration of all those elements, that makes such a person, with other different co-citizens, capable of building a human society that can be a symbol of human richness for the whole of humankind. By this thesis he aims to prove also the importance of the existence of the Egyptian Christian (Coptic) community for the whole of the Egyptian people, for the Muslims as well as for the Christians. Many Muslims in Egypt share these ideas. The same can be said of most of the Middle Eastern countries. They can be places where God’s Holy Spirit can manifest both the grace of diversity and a true unity that does not contradict this diversity, as he did at Pentecost. I think that in some way even the religious differences (as here between Christianity and Islam, and also Judaism) that characterize the Middle East may have a legitimate place in God’s plan and in the salvation history. Thus without falling into theological relativism, I think that it is extremely important – also in Christ’s name! – to respect these differences between these communities.

At the same time, just as the Middle East may be seen as a symbol for Pentecost, where God blessed human communion in diversity, it is clear also that it contains equally all the deep human dramas of division, tension, conflict, frustration and despair — realities closer to Babel than to Pentecost. Sometimes people in the Middle East have the feeling that the world projects its conflicts by preference on this region. It is here that the importance of a real “service of reconciliation” (cf. 2 Cor 5:18) has its place.

### **Service of reconciliation**

Such a “service of reconciliation” does not concern only individuals, for it must do much more than just touch the heart. In a very clear way communities need reconciliation as much as individuals. Such a process demands the integration of all the fields of human activity : economy, technology, social relations, community development, culture (with all its different expressions in arts, philosophy and sciences), education, politics, as well as spiritual and religious life.

If we as Christians want to devote ourselves to such a “service of reconciliation”, it is essential that it be done with as much transparency as possible, without any hidden agenda and in a way that inspires total trust. Such a transparency seems to me to be a neces-

sary result of our faithfulness to Christ and his message. It is part of an authentic witness that can overcome all kinds of aggression and hostility.

Being so genuinely themselves, in transparency and openness towards others, the Christian communities in the Middle East can have an extremely important function for the whole of the society, as true agents of communion and communication. They can be these elements of “otherness” that are so important for the building of human community. Many Muslims too see their importance in this way.

### **The “other in the same house”**

Christians, then, can become the “other in the same house”, i.e., their “otherness” is not that of strangers who are accepted in the house out of kindness to a guest, but the “otherness” of people who have the same rights in the same house, and whose acceptance as such is of a deeper character than that between guest and host. It is a manifestation of the fact that to accept “otherness” makes a human being really human. Such a service of “communion throughout ‘otherness’” supposes that the Christians of our Middle Eastern region, on their part, accept this same relation, that they do not withdraw within themselves, closing themselves up in moral ghettos. It supposes that they really want to be “co-citizens” with all that this word means and accept a share in responsibility for the whole of society and not only for their own personal or communitarian interests. It means that they overcome what persists sometimes as a sort of secret nostalgia for the old *milla*-system of the Ottoman Empire, where each non-Muslim community had its own closed autonomy, guaranteeing a certain internal freedom but without interest in society as a whole and not really involved in it. A positive symbol of such a will for “co-citizenship” was the refusal of the Coptic community in Egypt to have their own proportional representation in parliament, and the will to enter parliament only as citizens and not as members of a socio-political minority. It is true that one has to recognize that for a Copt in Egypt today it is more difficult to be elected to parliament by general people’s vote than it was 60 years ago. But that is not a reason to resign and to abandon the struggle for real citizenship, together with all others – Muslims and Christians – who are convinced that that ideal is of vital importance for all. It is also very important to note that the problem is not primarily religious, but one for the whole of the society where several categories of people are in difficulty. It is the challenge of building up a society in which all kinds of “otherness” may

find a place (and thus also inside one's own community). It is on the basis of such a mutual acceptance of "otherness" that communities of real solidarity and mutual responsibility can be built.

One of the conditions for the Christian communities in the Middle East to be capable of assuming this role is a real endeavour towards ecumenism. Without such a way of accepting the "otherness" among Christians, it is not possible to be agents of communion in difference, real community-builders for the whole of society. An authentic engagement to realize Christian unity, the unity Christ wants for his disciples, is never against others (as would be a "common front"), but in favour of others (in the way Christ himself prayed for that unity). Such an ecumenical endeavour is, before everything else, a witness of real love, and in that sense an answer to the challenge expressed by the Quran (in Surat al-Mâ'ida (S. V, v. 14) where Christians were presented as involved in mutual enmity and hatred. Such an ecumenical effort helps us also to overcome our contradictions in our positions towards Muslims and Islam. At the same time we have to recognize that a number of the difficulties in Christian ecumenism in the Middle East are also the result of general problems in our societies, as there are deep cultural differences, certain deficiencies in school education (causing, for example, a lack of a real sense of history), mutual mistrust coming from unfortunate experiences in the past, political manipulation, etc. So an ecumenical effort begins with an effort of understanding.

### Positive steps

A positive step in this direction is the fact that the multiplicity of Christian communities in the Middle East now participate in the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), which includes also an association of all the seminaries and theological schools, the Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East (ATIME). A typical and very positive initiative of this council has also been the founding of an Islamo-Christian Work Group for the Middle East, where different communities of Christians and Muslims, representing most of the countries of the region, are reflecting and working together in a positive way, even attempting to struggle together for the solution of important political problems of the region, such as, for instance, the status of Jerusalem. A similar common engagement in society for the well-being of all was initiated by the Egyptian Commission "Justice and Peace", which, although under the responsibility of the Assembly of the Catholic Hierarchy of

Egypt, became totally ecumenical and at the same time in full collaboration with Muslims of very different tendencies (Islamists as well as liberals and leftists). The commission even produced a book as fruit of deep dialogue between all different trends, with the title "*National Dialogue*", an example of effective acceptance of "otherness". By such endeavours ecumenism can become a precious basis for a common building up of the society by Muslims and Christians together. This in itself is a sign of hope.

Such work for reconciliation presupposes hard work of study and research done in all the fields of life. We cannot contribute to overcoming the huge number of problems and conflicts in this region without a deep effort to understand first of all the totality of the elements composing those problems. A rigorous and even scientific analysis has to be made, as a condition for every attempt to propose specific solutions. Every endeavour to propose a real hope for the future, with all the spiritual basis of such a hope, cannot dispense itself of such an overall effort of study and analysis. (Ibn 'Atallah al-Iskandarâ, a Muslim Sufi of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, said: "Hope is what includes work; otherwise it is only wishful thinking"!.) All that is part of a "service of reconciliation".

An encounter among Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, trying together to overcome all kinds of oppositions and conflicts in society (not only the religious ones, and starting with the gap between rich and poor), and to build together a common civil society, has to find its fulfillment in the spiritual encounter between the adepts of both religions. They can achieve a genuine togetherness in the presence of God, and on that basis work together to defend humankind (persons and communities). This togetherness as believers does not deny at all their differences in belief, and the importance of them. But the living God in whom they believe and whom they all adore, is one and the same. It is God who brings them as believers together, inviting them to respect each one in his moral conscience and so to respect deeply their differences, however painful they may be. In such an attitude they can live an experience of mutual witnessing, every one of them being there with all he or she bears in the heart.

### Personal experience of "service of reconciliation"

Having been sent to the Middle East nearly 40 years ago for such a service, I have discovered from experience that an integral, transparent and respectful "service of reconciliation" is a real possibility and not an illusion. Coming as a foreigner who has tried

to enter as deeply as possible into Arab culture, to understand the complex reality of people – persons and different religious communities – and to identify himself with them without denying my own origins, I have discovered how much the condition of “stranger” (which is not identical with “foreigner”) can be a grace and a help for such a “service of reconciliation”. Is it not typical that both the Christian and Islamic tradition of faith consider the experience of being a stranger as a way to God? The Letter to the Hebrews shows Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as strangers on earth (Heb 11: 8-16). A tradition attributed to the prophet of Islam says: “Islam was born a stranger and will return a stranger as it was born. Blessed are the strangers”. It can be a unique way to bring people together, to favour overall communication, not only between persons but also – in a very modest degree – between communities. One who experiences this realizes in some way that he is a stranger everywhere and at home everywhere. It has been made possible by the fact that I have tried to understand other people, as persons but also as vessels of different thought-systems, religious and cultural. “Service of reconciliation” means also “service of understanding”, and that is not possible without trying first myself to understand the other. On the basis of such an understanding I can be of some use to help different people to know and understand each other, and from there to respect and love each other. This can create the space for sincere collaboration with each other. Thus we can arrive also to certain shared ethical principals and programmes of action.

Notwithstanding all the difficulties and sometimes also disappointments, one can see how something of a new reality can begin its life, so that we can be bearers of “good news” to the human beings in our region, in all the dimensions of their life. In truth “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

Cairo, 1 October, 1999

*personalialia*: Born in 1938 in The Netherlands (s-Hertogenbosch). Member of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuit order) since 1955. Priest since 1969. I learnt Arabic in Lebanon (1960-62) and came to Egypt in 1962 first for studying (Islamic philosophy) and then, since 1964, teaching at the Coptic Catholic Seminary in Cairo. 1966-1970: study of theology in Lyons, France. 1987 Ph.D. in Islamic thought, from the Sorbonne, Paris. Since 1970 my work is in teaching

(Philosophy and Islamic studies) but also in spiritual counseling. I am also one of the founder members and member of the board of an officially recognized group of Muslims and Christians.

And I am also a member of the Egyptian “Justice and Peace Committee” that became a really ecumenical group here and working very closely with a number of Muslims (coming from several backgrounds). By all that I am rather involved in what concerns “Islam-Christian” Relations.

Ref. *International Review of Mission*, vol.LXXXIX, n. 352, 1/2000.

**COMING EVENTS**

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**FOR YOUR AGENDA**

**SEDOS GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2000**

5 December 2000 — Morning  
Brothers of the Christian Schools  
Via Aurelia, 476,  
00165 Rome

**JOAN CHITTISTER, OSB, USA**

**A FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY FOR MEN AND WOMEN**

**TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, OP, Superior General**

**A MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY FOR A NEW WORLD**

**WORKING GROUP**

**Wednesday,**

**11 October** China Group

**15:30 hrs at SEDOS**