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Éditorial

Père **Martin Sirju**, dans *The Role of Religion in a Multi-Ethnic Society*, envisage, à partir de son expérience personnelle et de sa réflexion, ce que pourrait être le rôle des religions et la collaboration entre celles-ci dans une société multi-ethnique. L'auteur se penche en particulier sur l'attitude et la manière d'agir des chrétiens, notamment des catholiques.

Nous reproduisons le texte d'une conférence donnée en novembre dernier au Centre Saint-Louis-des-Français à Rome, intitulée *En Algérie, aujourd'hui, le dialogue*, dans laquelle Mgr **Henri Teissier**, archevêque d'Alger, brossait le tableau des rapports entre chrétiens et musulmans dans ce pays. D'entrée de jeu, il affirmait qu'il y a effectivement une progression dans le dialogue en Algérie ; elle marque le débat entourant l'appartenance réelle au peuple algérien, la question de l'Islam et de son interprétation, la condition féminine et la liberté de presse.

Dans *Foi, religiosité et engagement au Paraguay*, **Christophe Héraudeau**, un ingénieur agronome bénévole, décrit ce que ses contacts et son travail avec les paysans paraguayens lui ont permis de découvrir de ce peuple, de sa religiosité, de ses croyances et de sa foi.

Plusieurs personnes sont d'avis que les différentes religions sont à la source de conflits et de guerres qui sévissent ici et là dans le monde. Frère **Edmund Chia**, dans son article *Towards an Interreligious Spirituality*, observe comment des fanatiques se servent des religions pour parvenir à leurs fins. Dénonçant cette situation, l'auteur insiste sur l'importance du dialogue et met en lumière les caractéristiques d'une spiritualité de l'interreligieux.

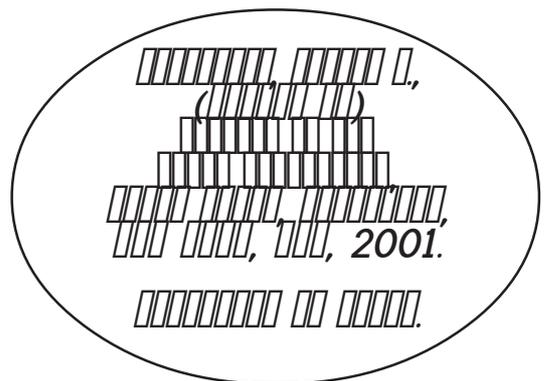
Sœur **Mary John Bosco Ebere Amakwe**, dans son article "*Thy Kingdom Come...*". *Woman and Man as Equal Partners in Building God's Community in Africa: A Woman's Perspective*, affirme qu'en Afrique la femme, sa dignité et son rôle ne sont pas reconnus à leur juste valeur. Dans son article, elle examine d'abord l'enseignement de la Bible sur la femme, puis ce qu'en disent les récents documents du Magistère.

Bonne lecture !

Bernard East, o.p.
Directeur exécutif de SEDOS

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Fr Martin Sirju

The Role of Religion in a Multi-Ethnic Society

Extract from an address given by Fr Martin Sirju, at the Conference of Religions of the New World, UWI (University of the West Indies), St. Augustine.

I am deeply honoured to deliver this paper at the behest of Dr Brinsley Samaroo of the History Department, UWI. I speak first as a priest, that is, as someone immersed in full-time religious activity over the past eleven years. My observations come from my years of encounter with people of different faiths and of none.

I grew up in a village that was marked with a high degree of inter-religious harmony. Whenever I saw fights in the village it was invariably between two Africans or two Indians but hardly ever between the two races. Maybe I lived in a glass tower but I hardly heard the words “nigger” or “coolie” while growing up; they were rarely used at school. My paternal grandfather was an Indian who spoke English, Hindi, Patois and a little Arabic and my father’s step-father was an African who spoke English, Hindi and Patois. My paternal grandmother, who was Indian, therefore had two men in her life: one African and one Indian, one Catholic and one Hindu, and the “threesome” would sit every evening to “blag”, smoke and laugh.

As a child, my paternal grandfather took me to Muslim prayer services around Eid. We drank “sawine” and ate sweet-rice — I still do on the odd occasion. I was much more familiar with Hinduism. I was a frequent bell-ringer at “pujas”, looked forward to the sweet-milk, and ate “parsad” like young people eat KFC today. We often scuttled home with two or three extra packs. I did all this as a young Catholic and saw no conflict of religion. God was everywhere. I no longer ring bells at “pujas” but I still drink the sweet-milk and continue to find well-cooked “parsad” delightful.

In my village when children got sick, including my own siblings, we were taken to the “imam”. Baby not taking bottle, vomiting or crying whole night — “jharay”; young children sick with body-pains — “jharay”; adults with mysterious illnesses (“maljo”?) — “jharay”.

It always worked. On one occasion I had a belly-ache lasting some days and my father took me to the “imam”. He took one look at me, went inside to con-

sult his book and came back and told me exactly what I was suffering from and where the pain was. He prayed over me and the belly-pain disappeared. As St Paul mentions in his Letter to the Corinthians: “It is all God’s work”. Strangely enough, we never went to the Catholic priest in time of illness, but there are historical reasons for that.¹

This is the background from which I come when I speak about the role of religion in a multi-ethnic society. We have churches, temples, mandirs and mosques all over this country; we do not need anybody to tell us about God; we know Him or Her well enough. That religious sense needs to be purified and directed towards its twin goal: the realization of God and the common good.

One of the major functions of religion in a multi-ethnic society is to engender a sense of unity. Yet in a multi-ethnic society this unity is slippery, some say illusory. We remember the 1994 massacres between Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda and Burundi, two countries with over 80 per cent Catholic populations, where it was said the ties of tribe and blood were thicker than those of the waters of Baptism.

Despite Bob Marley’s “One Love”, Nelson’s “All Ah We Is One Family” and Bro. Marvin’s “Jahaji Bhai”, unity can easily be a topic of ridicule as V.S. Naipaul has so abrasively shown.

Over the past few years, political tension in the country has pitted one race, and by extension one religion, against another. Many felt if we continued like this we would soon walk the same road as Guyana, a sentiment often expressed by Prof. Ralph Premdas of UWI. At the same time, some commentators in the dailies seem to hold some perverse fascination for the attacks on Christian missionaries by Hindu fundamentalists in parts of India. Not only is this foreign to India’s history but the reprisals of fundamentalism will not create a better India nor a better Trinidad and Tobago. It is a theorem whose proof is self-evident: religious intolerance breeds disunity and violence. It is therefore part of the inalienable mission of religion, and espe-

cially so of its leaders, to preach the unity of humanity throughout the vagaries of politics and the anxieties of race. To renege on this responsibility is to err on the side of both piety and wisdom.

Closely tied to the notion of unity is equality. The *magna carter* of equality for Christians is Paul's famous corollary rooted in his theology of Baptism: "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor free man, there can be neither male nor female — for you are all one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). It is perhaps here that Christianity needs to tread most cautiously. Christianity has a celebrated record in treating others unequally. So far had we gone from the Gospel values that in 2000 the Pope had to apologize for seven ills of the Church throughout history: sins committed in the service of the truth, sins against Christian unity and charity, sins against the people of Israel, sins against minorities, sins against women and sins in relation to the fundamental rights of human beings.²

At that penitential service, Archbishop Stephen Fumio Hamao, President of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerant People, prayed that Christians would "repent of the words and attitudes caused by pride, by hatred, by the desire to dominate others, by enmity towards members of other religions and towards the weakest groups in society, such as immigrants and itinerants". The Pope confessed that Christians had "often denied the Gospel; yielding to a mentality of power". They had "violated the rights of ethnic groups and peoples, and shown contempt for their cultures and religious traditions".³ He then asked God for pardon. Similarly, Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, prayed for "women, who are too often humiliated and marginalized" and who have been discriminated against simply on account of their sex.⁴ This apology to women was received with mixed reactions by the feminist movement.

To some extent, the claims of Christianity would always present problems for other religions and appear to convey a sense of superiority or inequality. For instance, Christianity teaches that Christ is THE norm of the revelation of God in history, more fully so than in other religious traditions, and that the true Church of Christ "subsists" in the Catholic Church, which is not quite the same as equating the true Church of Christ with the Catholic Church. It was this perceived sense of superiority or inequality that occasioned the storm of protest following the publication of *Dominus Iesus* last year. It was received with great pain and disappointment by both Christians and adherents of other religions.

Problems like these cannot be easily glossed over.

Religions cannot but retain their distinctive teachings. But these distinctive teachings do not have to encourage disrespect, disunity, arrogance or contempt. As my colleague, Fr Michel de Verteuil likes to say: "We are all one in sin and grace". Even science has come to confirm this. The findings of the Human Genome Project surprised many when it revealed that it is only a tiny genetic variation that accounts for so many phenotypic differences. Human beings genetically speaking are almost constitutively the same.

The agenda of religion therefore is to foster a sense of equality which is so necessary for the preservation of justice for injustice prevails when we preach all men and women are equal in God's sight but some, whether based on colour, religion, wealth, health, gender or power, are more equal than others. Prof. Anantanand Rambachan of St Olaf's College, Minnesota, once remarked at a Ramayana held on NCIC compound that all the spiritual traditions of the major world religions are anti-sex and anti-women. I think he is quite right. The business of religion must redress, for instance, the state of inequality that still exists between men and women in the domestic, religious and secular spheres throughout the world. This would involve the deconstructing of many harmful religious myths regarding women and the reconstructing of more equitable ones. This is something Christianity must do hand in hand with Hinduism and Islam because when the stories of society change attitudes change with them.⁵

This respect for the human person based on his or her fundamental equality with others rests on sound theological and philosophical principles. Of that I think we all agree. But we need to go further. Since religion has often been at the centre of war and violence, religion has no credibility and hence no future unless it engages in inter-religious dialogue for the purposes of mutual understanding and peace-making. As the German theologian Hans Kung puts it: "There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions. There can be no dialogue among the religions without research into theological foundations".⁶

Here the Christian Churches, particularly the Catholic Church, have been at the forefront of inter-religious dialogue. The other world religions have not been as eager to engage in dialogue with Christianity, and there are historical reasons for this,⁷ but I am sure that will change in the near future. Dialogue is necessary to prevent misunderstanding and hatred but, more positively, to see ourselves as sojourners following different paths

leading to the same God. Without dialogue triumphalism results. Christianity has had the longest history among the world religions regarding triumphalism, long enough to know it does not work.

It is because of dialogue that Catholicism turned with a converted heart towards people of other faiths: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men".⁸ The triumphalism that ensues in the absence of dialogue can be clearly seen in comparing the Good Friday prayers for the Church and world before and after the Second Vatican Council. Before the 1970s we read: "For the Conversion of Infidels":

"Let us also pray Almighty God to dispel all wickedness from the hearts of pagans that, abandoning their idols, they may be converted to the living and true God and to His only Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and God/Almighty and Eternal God, Who constantly seekest not the destruction but the salvation of sinners: mercifully hear our prayer and deliver all pagans from the worship of idols, and give them membership of Thy Holy Church for the praise and glory of Thy name".

After the 1970s we read: "For those who do not believe in Christ":

"Let us pray for those who do not believe in Christ, that the light of the Holy Spirit may show them the way to salvation/Almighty and eternal God, enable those who do not acknowledge Christ to find truth as they walk before you in sincerity of heart. Help us to grow in love for one another, to grasp more fully the mystery of your Godhead, and to become more perfect witnesses of your love in the sight of men".

I have noticed over the past ten years a strong revivalism in Hinduism and Islam which I think is a positive development. At the same time, there have been temptations to Hindu and, to a lesser extent, Islamic triumphalism. Neither of these will serve the good of the nation and religious leaders will do well to convince their flock that this route always ends in inter-religious hostility and persecution.

Let me now turn to a sore point in devotional religion. One can well leave a conference of this kind with a feeling that the length and breath of religion is its devotional character, its rituals and feasts. However, all religion has its prophetic element. This prophetic element gives it a subversive character and is the

counterpoise to Marx's opiate of the people. It is this prophetic, subversive character that accounts for martyrs in the Christian tradition and I am sure in other religious traditions as well. The enemy of this prophetic element in religion is ritualism which is not to be equated with taking part in ritual. Ritualism is a reduction of true religion, a stifling of its arteries, an impermanent solace in the externals of religion that gains for its practitioners the veneer of respectability.

The classic Christian text is Mt 23:1-7. Then addressing the crowds and his disciples Jesus said: "The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do what they tell you, but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practise what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they! Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader phylacteries and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honour at banquets and front seats in the synagogues, being greeted obsequiously in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi" or Father, or Pundit Ji, or Imam. Ritualism also compartmentalizes life i.e. breaks it up into neat little compartments all unrelated to the other. So my religious life is separate from my professional life, my recreational life and my domestic life.

Not only that but the sins of these other aspects of life are summarily cast into oblivion through ritualism. Nowhere is this more rampant than when it comes to public morality. Here Christian, Muslim and Hindu professionals have been equally guilty, if not heartless. Politicians in particular seem to merrily neglect this social dimension of their faith, appealing to the dictum that politics has its own morality. But some sins are not forgiven simply by going to confession, performing a 'puja', making a 'haj' or "mourning". Charity is never a fair exchange for social evil. All aspects of one's life must form a "seamless garment" that glorifies God and contribute to the establishment of a just and peaceful society.⁹ It is the prophetic element, with its instinct for pointing out inconsistencies and its distaste for glaring injustices, that keeps religion alive and relevant. Religious leaders must therefore ensure that the practice of religion helps secure the common good by reminding its adherents that if God's highest virtue is mercy then justice comes next.

Let me in conclusion refer to our present context. We live in difficult times with many competing influences all vying for attention. Not only science has seen a paradigm shift but religion as well. Religion is just one competing influence vying for attention in a world now dominated by the attractive products of compu-

ter technology and globalization. Religion is more a choice today than a given. Many people have abandoned institutional religion preferring to call themselves “spiritual” rather than “religious”. Many people have opted for a buffet of spiritualities rather than one particular brand. Is it any wonder young people today find it difficult to be religious?

Yet in spite of all this our religious traditions have survived. This is because they are still viable and one cannot root out the religious sense so deeply ingrained in Caribbean peoples. Conferences like these are necessary since they help us to understand each other better and so we become less insecure and defensive. Yet it must not stop there. The eminent theologian, Karl Rahner, once said: “The best theology is done on your knees”. It is also true of inter-religious dialogue and research. The people who have contributed most to inter-religious dialogue and research are not dispassionate observers or researchers of religion but those who have done so from within. There are insights that will be grasped and problems that will be solved only on the level of contemplation, meditation or prayer, whichever term we prefer. The slogan: “The family that prays together stays together” needs to be amplified and expanded to the level of cultures and peoples.

The events of September 11th and the thesis of Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* prove that religion and culture can make a deadly brew. More and more commentators are saying that religion must play a key role in the meeting of cultures so that even when civilizations do clash, as they must, the results will not be divisiveness, hatred and bloodshed. My hope is that the best in our spiritual traditions will keep our nation together especially when the political and economic climate becomes chilly and lonesome. And may the meeting of different peoples on the level of the Spirit gain for us the practical outcome of living together, and not just side by side, in unity, justice and peace.

Notes

¹ The Rite of the Sick, one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, originally comprised two parts: for the sick and for the dying. In the course of time the first part was lost and what was left was the rite for the dying or ‘extreme unction’ (last anointing). At the time of my growing up people invariably knew about ‘extreme unction’. To call for the priest was therefore a sign of imminent death. It was therefore not done in cases of illnesses that would eventually go away. Fortunately, the Rite of the Sick has been

restored to its proper place and people are generally aware of and frequently use both aspects of the rite according to circumstance.

² *THE TABLET*, 18 March, 2000, pp. 391-3

³ *Ibid.*, p. 392

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 392

⁵ Prof. Rambachan related the story of visiting a famous river in India and having purchased a book from one of the booksellers there. It was a kind of hand-book of wisdom written by a supposedly wise and holy man. Two questions struck him. One asked what should a woman do if beaten repeatedly by her husband. The answer was that she should accept the beating dutifully as reparation for past sins and in anticipation of a better life upon reincarnation. The other question was whether a woman should work. The answer was that she should not since the working world is too oppressive and exploitative and involves too much hard work. The irony is self-evident: she is strong enough to take the beating but not strong enough to work. This is an example of the deconstruction that is needed by all the major world religions in their attitude towards women.

⁶ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., quoting Hans Kung in *THE TABLET*, 20 October, 2001.

⁷ The colonial experience with its agenda of religious superiority and forced conversion, not to mention the ensuing feelings of distrust all retard the process at present.

⁸ Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*, n. 2) in Vatican Council II (1981) ed. Austin Flannery. This positive note was reversed in the awful Vatican document, *Dominus Iesus*, released last year. Many Catholic theologians today would also not agree with the wording “a ray of that truth” either finding it condescending or conceding that all religion can possess of God is a ray of his truth.

⁹ The “seamless garment” policy is a famous doctrine in Catholic Social Teaching. The metaphor is taken from John’s Gospel: “His undergarment was seamless, woven in one piece from neck to hem; so they said to one another, ‘Instead of tearing it, let’s throw dice to see who is to have it’” (Jn 19:23-24). Using this metaphor, it is said that Catholic social teaching must function like the seamless garment of Christ, resisting division or compartmentalization, and applicable to all aspects of social living. It is about moral consistency in politics, business, international trade and foreign policy. It has become a staple term in social ethics and I am sure corresponding doctrines exist in other religious traditions.

Ref.: Text from the Author. April 2002.

Mgr Henri Teissier
Archevêque d'Alger

En Algérie, aujourd'hui, le dialogue

Mgr Henri Teissier, Archevêque d'Alger, a donné cette conférence à Rome au Centre Saint-Louis des Français, le 29 novembre 2001, il est également l'auteur du livre Chrétiens d'Algérie, un partage d'espérance, publié à Paris aux Éditions Desclée de Brouwer.

Introduction

Nous connaissons, tous, les épreuves traversées par la société algérienne depuis dix ans. Les médias viennent de nous rapporter, aussi, les souffrances qui ont atteint certains quartiers populaires d'Alger, à la suite de intempéries du 10 novembre dernier. Mais ce dont je voudrais vous parler se situe au-delà de ces épreuves. Les médias internationaux ont, en effet, abondamment raconté les souffrances et les désordres de l'Algérie. Sans nier ces réalités qui touchent aujourd'hui encore la société algérienne à différents plans, c'est d'un autre point de vue que je voudrais partir.

Au-delà de ces épreuves il y a, en effet — et peut-être à cause même de la crise —, autre chose à découvrir en Algérie. Je l'ai intitulé : "En Algérie, aujourd'hui, le dialogue". Et j'ai laissé volontairement dans le vague le mot "dialogue", pour montrer qu'il s'agit d'une évolution de la société algérienne qui, tout en ayant son sens pour le dialogue islamo-chrétien, est cependant beaucoup plus large.

Je me propose, donc, de présenter, successivement, quelques uns des champs sociaux dans lesquels on peut remarquer la progression de ce dialogue entre les divers courants de pensée de l'Algérie ou entre les divers groupes du pays, à divers plans, avant de terminer par une brève évocation du dialogue islamo-chrétien proprement dit.

Le dialogue de l'Algérie avec elle-même à travers le colloque sur St Augustin

On sait qu'au début avril de cette année, l'Algérie a organisé, à la demande du Chef de l'État, un colloque international sur St Augustin. Ce fait, en lui-même, est déjà digne d'être remarqué puisque l'Algérie est un pays dont la quasi totalité de la population est musulmane et dans lequel, d'ailleurs, l'islam est reconnu comme religion d'État par la Constitution. Mais, plus remarquable encore est le fait que le Chef de l'État algérien ait choisi

le Haut Conseil Islamique comme structure algérienne chargée de ce colloque. Le sens de ce choix est clair. Il fallait dire au peuple algérien que la mise en évidence de St Augustin comme un grand personnage appartenant au patrimoine de la nation, n'était pas un choix fait en dehors de l'islam, encore moins contre l'islam, mais bien, au contraire, un choix d'ouverture du regard, au nom de l'islam.

Plus remarquable encore a été le fait que ce colloque fut présenté au public algérien non seulement par la radio et la télévision nationale, mais encore à travers 230 articles et communiqués de presse, avant, pendant et après le colloque, le tiers de ces articles étant publiés en arabe. Dans un pays musulman, une presse musulmane, rédigée par des journalistes musulmans pour un public musulman se passionnait, donc, pour la vie et l'œuvre d'un évêque chrétien. À travers les médias nationaux (et internationaux), ce sont des centaines de milliers d'Algériens qui étaient ainsi invités à découvrir la vie et le message de cet évêque chrétien.

Et c'est ici que nous rejoignons notre thème du dialogue, car, en fait, autour de ce colloque et autour de la personne de St Augustin, ce dont il s'agissait, c'était bien d'un dialogue de la nation avec elle-même et parfois d'un dialogue passionné. Il s'agissait d'abord de savoir si l'Algérie arabo-musulmane ou berbéro-musulmane pouvait considérer comme l'un de ses ancêtres un chrétien qui s'exprimait en latin et vivait dans le cadre de l'Empire romain.

Bien d'autres thèmes furent l'objet de ce dialogue passionné. Certains faisaient cette objection : un chrétien qui a écrit des traités sur la Trinité et confessé la divinité de Jésus peut-il être traité avec estime par des musulmans ? Un catholique qui a combattu la révolte donatiste — et parfois avec le soutien du pouvoir impérial — peut-il être regardé comme un fils de la nation ? Les donatistes, alliés aux circoncellions, ne sont-ils pas considérés comme les symboles de la résistance

autochtone à la présence romaine ? Le Président algérien a répondu en déclarant : “Augustin fait partie de la généalogie des Algériens”. Mais cette déclaration ne suffisait pas à trancher le débat et à clore le dialogue. D’où la prolifération des articles de presse et des débats de société. Le dialogue de l’Algérie avec elle-même rejoignait une question plus large : peut-on être algérien quand on n’est ni arabe, ni musulman ?

Le débat sur l’islam et son interprétation

Comme nous l’avons déjà dit, tous les Algériens, à quelques exceptions près, sont musulmans. Mais la crise grave traversée par le pays a posé la question de l’interprétation de l’islam.

Dans le cadre de cet exposé, je ne peux évidemment traiter de cette question avec l’ampleur qu’elle mériterait. Mais je prendrai comme exemple de ce débat la dernière livraison de la revue universitaire algérienne intitulée : “*Insaniyat*”. Le thème de ce numéro était présenté sous le titre suivant : “Le sacré et le politique”. Il est clair qu’il s’agissait là d’une réponse universitaire aux lectures politiques de la religion faites par l’islamisme. L’éditorial du numéro présente clairement cet objectif :

“Insaniyat” publie 14 textes qui ont en commun de s’être donné pour objet les pratiques sociales des religieux et les formations discursives fondatrices des attitudes et des positions de ces derniers, ou encore des textes réflexifs travaillant à en démonter les stratégies. Il s’agit, dans l’histoire intellectuelle de l’Algérie, d’un événement, dans la mesure où, depuis le début du XX^e siècle, les universitaires ont tacitement adopté une attitude d’autocensure, consistant à se taire sur les compromissions des religieux et des politiques dans les procès de légitimation qu’ils échangent [...].

Le passage à la violence extrême, après diverses mascarades multipartites et électorales, a montré à la société que la dictature autocrate pourrait être remplacée par une dictature sociophage, dont les premiers actes furent justement de mettre à mort ceux dont le métier était la recherche scientifique [...].

Naçr Hamed Abou Zayd¹, critiquant le discours religieux, montre comment le clergé, interprétant la parole de Dieu, la muant en droit canon, s’en empare et la fait sienne. Momificateurs du discours et magiciens, les religieux s’installent sur le Trône, fermant ce que le Texte Qoranique avait ouvert avant d’être lui-même clôturé.

Le pouvoir religieux c’est le pouvoir des religieux. C’est un pouvoir de vie et de mort, de prise de vie et de mise à mort [...].

Penser ... c’est séparer la religion de la pensée de la religion : le Texte de la pensée du Texte, le Texte du texte exégétique. Le clergé ne pense pas : il légifère, légitime, légalise en position d’absolue souveraineté du haut du Trône usurpé. Dans ces conditions, toute pensée, toute critique, tout doute méthodique devient dénégation — Kufr. La dénégation est apostasie. Elle est punie de mort.

Voici 14 textes donc.² Qu’on sache que leur radicale impertinence est qu’ils déverrouillent, pour la première fois en Algérie, les portes fermées de la pensée du religieux et du politique [...].

C’est à Farag Foda, Djillali Liabès, M’hammed Boukhabza, Abd El Kader Aloulou, Tahar Djaout, Mahfoud Boucebcé³ ; c’est aux imams assassinés dans leurs mosquées pour avoir refusé la confusion, à Mgr Claverie, évêque d’Oran⁴ aux Sept Dormants de Tibhirine (Seb’a Rgoud), aux journalistes et aux dizaines de milliers de victimes de Taghout, en Algérie et ailleurs, qu’il est rendu hommage. In Memoriam.

Ahmed Ben Naoum

On me dira peut-être qu’il s’agit de réflexions d’universitaires qui restent éloignés des réflexes spontanés du peuple. Je pourrais apporter la preuve qu’au niveau de beaucoup de gens simples, et dans une autre formulation, des questions semblables sont posées. À un autre plan, une lecture ouverte, actuelle et fidèle aux sources profondes de l’Islam était proposée ces dernières années par le professeur Abdelmadjid MEZIANE, Président du H.C.I.

Mais je me contenterai d’un autre fait de société qui prouve l’importance des évolutions suscitées par la crise au plan religieux. Depuis trois ou quatre ans des petits groupes de jeunes hommes ou de jeunes femmes d’origine algérienne sont devenus chrétiens, notamment en Kabylie. Fait tout à fait rare dans un pays musulman, des dizaines d’articles ont été publiés dans la presse pour présenter, objectivement, ce phénomène ou pour le critiquer. Le débat est arrivé jusqu’au Ministre des Affaires religieuses. Questionné sur les mesures qu’il pensait prendre pour faire face à ces conversions, le Ministre répondait ceci : “*Personnellement, je ne peux pas intervenir dans le choix que font les citoyens, parce que c’est un droit personnel qui entre dans le cadre des libertés individuelles et de croyance*”.⁵

Le débat sur la condition féminine

On sait que, lors de son indépendance, l’Algérie n’a pas eu la chance d’avoir un chef d’État qui puisse, comme l’a fait le Président Bourguiba en Tunisie, faire adopter tout de suite un code de la famille ouvert sur la modernité. Le problème du statut de la femme est demeuré en débat ouvert jusqu’à ce que l’Assemblée Nationale adopte en 1984 un code de la famille très en recul par rapport à celui de la Tunisie, voire même par rapport à certains de ceux de plusieurs pays du Moyen Orient. Depuis, le débat a repris, mais pour mettre en cause ce code de la famille.

M. Abdelmajid MEZIANE, Président du Haut Conseil Islamique, a eu le courage de poser à nouveau le problème lors d’un séminaire de la structure qu’il présidait, organisé à cet effet, sous le titre “La femme entre le droit positif et la *chari’a*”. Les positions prises par M. MEZIANE furent l’objet de critiques très sévères de la part des milieux conservateurs. Un vrai

débat de société s'est alors ouvert notamment par le moyen de la presse nationale. On trouvera dans les lignes qui suivent quelques exemples de ce débat.

*“Pour la première fois, un homme de culte algérien, de surcroît président du H.C.I., se prononce, ouvertement et publiquement, sur la polygamie, le divorce arbitraire et le témoignage des femmes pour les qualifier d'offense aux droits des femmes”.*⁶

Dès que M. MEZIANE eut donné sa conférence d'introduction aux travaux de ce séminaire, les deux camps conservateurs et progressistes multiplièrent les prises de position, en sens opposé évidemment.

*“Pour l'association des ulémas que préside actuellement Abderahmane Chibane, les participants au séminaire ont une connaissance superficielle de l'islam et ne peuvent s'autoriser à faire des propositions ‘dans un domaine aussi miné que celui de la femme et de la famille’”. Pendant le séminaire, Mahfoud Nabnah (parti islamiste HAMAS), a tiré à boulets rouges sur le CSI (Conseil Suprême Islamique) en l'accusant de vouloir, à travers l'organisation de cette réflexion, semer la ‘fitna’ (division séditeuse) dans la société. Même réaction d'hostilité de la part du parti de Djaballah (NAHDA) qui accuse Abdelmadjid Meziane de vouloir ébranler la société algérienne. Ahmed Merani (ex FIS) y est allé aussi de sa critique en qualifiant d'ignares’ les séminaristes. Comme on peut le constater, c'est la mobilisation générale de la mouvance islamiste face à une initiative courageuse dont l'objectif est la promotion de la femme que les forces rétrogrades et conservatrices veulent maintenir au stade d'éternelle mineure”.*⁷

Un autre journal algérois, le Siècle, souligne, lui, les aspects positifs de l'initiative du Président du Haut Conseil.

*“Le Président du H.C.I., M. Abdelmadjid Meziane, ne répugne pas à appeler courageusement les choses par leur nom : il appelle à l'abrogation de la polygamie, à l'abolition de la répudiation traditionnelle pour préserver la dignité et l'honneur de la femme et, au-delà, celle de la famille et de la société. Le Haut Conseil dont il a la charge ne compte pas s'arrêter en si bon chemin puisqu'il prévoit de consacrer son prochain séminaire à la démocratie comme produit de la civilisation universelle et nullement incompatible avec les préceptes de l'islam”.*⁸

“Son président, l'éminent Dr Abdelmadjid Meziane, fait, en ce moment, face à une fronde intra-muros orchestrée par les autres membres du Conseil.

Dans un communiqué rendu public dernièrement, ils ont pris leurs distances par rapport aux déclarations de leur président, estimant que celles-ci n'engageaient que lui-même. “Il faut lever les ambiguïtés et définir les responsabilités morales et religieuses”, écrivent les signataires du communiqué, qui refusent d'assumer la responsabilité des propos de Abdelmadjid Meziane.

C'est donc la cassure au C.S.I. suite à l'organisation du séminaire sur “les problèmes de la femme et de la famille au

regard des principes islamiques et des traitements du droit positif” organisé les 11, 12 et 13 octobre dernier.

*Les débats contradictoires et enrichissants mais surtout les conclusions audacieuses auxquelles a abouti ce séminaire, n'ont manifestement pas l'heur de plaire aux gardiens du temple islamiste. Ils crient à la violation des principes sacro-saints de l'islam, en estimant que les propositions faites en matière de polygamie, de divorce, du témoignage de femmes ne cadrent pas avec l'orthodoxie jurisprudentielle”.*⁹

Je me suis contenté d'évoquer les débats autour de la condition féminine qui se sont développés à l'occasion du colloque organisé sur ce sujet par le Haut Conseil Islamique. Il serait aisé de faire tout un dossier sur ce thème à partir de l'action des Associations féminines et des réponses que leur font les milieux islamistes. Souvent les deux camps sont enfermés dans une polémique sans issue. Mais parfois aussi les Associations féminines suscitent une vraie réflexion.

La Liberté de la presse ou le pluralisme de la presse

Nulle part les débats internes à la société algérienne ne sont aussi visibles que dans la presse. Chaque jour, les événements de la nation sont passés au crible et font l'objet de déclarations passionnées qui, le plus souvent, ne ménagent ni le gouvernement, ni même le Chef de l'État. Ce fut le cas, ces derniers jours, à propos du cataclysme naturel qui vient de frapper le pays.

“Les Algériens sont en train de donner une leçon à leurs gouvernants. Il se sont mobilisés, spontanément, pour combattre les effets de la catastrophe qui s'est abattue sur la capitale. Les jeunes Algérois ont été tout simplement admirables.

... Tout le monde parle aujourd'hui de leur efficacité. Tout le monde admet qu'ils ont sauvé des dizaines de vies humaines.

... Pourtant cette jeunesse a toujours été méprisée, ainsi que tout le peuple algérien, par des dirigeants médiocres, incompetents sans foi ni loi.

*... En 1954, quand les ‘22’ ont décidé de déclencher la Révolution, ils ont confié celle-ci au peuple algérien... Les Algériens ont su prendre leur destin en main et ont accompli merveilleusement leur devoir en menant le pays à l'indépendance. Celle-ci acquise, des usurpateurs en ont malheureusement décidé autrement, écartant le citoyen de la gestion des affaires de la République, et ouvrant l'ère de la corruption, du régionalisme et du népotisme”.*¹⁰ [...]

Je laisse à l'éditorialiste du Watan la responsabilité de ses propos. Mais ils montrent la liberté de ton de la presse algérienne qui, à mon avis, l'emporte, sur ce terrain, sur la presse des pays arabes. Il est évident que d'autres publications en sens contraire répondent en défendant l'État et ses représentants.

On pourrait amener ici la preuve de débats

semblables sur la plupart des grands sujets de société : la réforme de l'Éducation nationale, la réforme de la justice, la réforme de l'État, la gestion de l'économie, la contestation des résultats des consultations électorales, la gestion de la crise des jeunes en Kabylie, le rôle des Assemblées Nationales, la place de l'armée dans la gestion des affaires de la nation. Sur ce dernier thème, retenons seulement à titre d'exemple récent, les propos d'un général qui répond aux critiques adressées à l'armée à laquelle on reprochait d'avoir voulu monopoliser les travaux de déblaiement après les inondations.

Le Général OUEDDAÏ, qui dirige les opérations de sauvetage, dément que les militaires monopolisent les secours.¹¹

L'Expression : *Les militaires ont-ils décidé de prendre les commandes des opérations ?*

Le Général Oueddai : *Non. Nos compagnies sur le terrain n'ont reçu aucune consigne pour prendre, à elles seules, les commandes des secours.*

L'Expression : *Donc les interventions de vos hommes se font en coopération avec les civils...*

Le Général Oueddai : *Des voix veulent faire entendre que les éléments de l'ANP empêchent les autres de mener à bien les sauvetages et secours. Mais je démens formellement ces propos. Nous travaillons en coopération avec d'autres corps, notamment les sapeurs-pompiers. Les civils ont aussi des initiatives très louables particulièrement lors des déterrements des dépourvues.*

Une fois encore mon propos est, conformément au thème de mon exposé, de montrer que le dialogue, voire le débat ou la polémique, prend une place de plus en plus notable, dans une société qui avait vécu depuis l'indépendance jusqu'en 1990 sous le régime du parti unique et de la pensée unique.

Le dialogue islamo-chrétien

C'est dans ce contexte qu'il faut situer le dialogue islamo-chrétien en Algérie. Le pays n'a pas organisé de grandes rencontres de dialogue, comme cela fut fait dans les pays voisins, en Tunisie, au Maroc, ou même en Libye.

Mais place est faite aux petits groupes chrétiens qui ont pu se maintenir, malgré les menaces de mort qui leur avaient été adressées par les groupes islamistes depuis 1993, menaces qui, comme on le sait, ont conduit à l'assassinat d'une vingtaine de religieux et religieuses, et de plusieurs dizaines de chrétiens d'origine étrangère, travaillant en Algérie, ou présents dans le pays pour avoir épousé un ou une Algérienne.

Ces violences ont été, d'ailleurs, l'occasion pour beaucoup d'Algériens musulmans, de diverses tendances, d'exprimer leur indignation et de témoigner

de leur solidarité avec la communauté chrétienne éprouvée. On trouvera la preuve émouvante de cette attitude dans un passage d'une lettre que m'écrivait en 1999 une jeune femme, médecin, musulmane, que je ne connaissais pas. Elle réagissait à une nouvelle parue dans la presse au sujet d'un éventuel retour des moines à Tibhirine.

"Aujourd'hui, en lisant un article concernant les moines, j'ai pleuré comme s'ils venaient juste d'être tués, comme si on venait de m'apprendre la perte d'un être cher. En effet, qui sont-ils ces moines, sinon nos frères en Dieu ! Qui sont-ils sinon nos frères en Humanité.... J'ai senti une peine irrémédiable, une douleur intolérable que seul Dieu peut atténuer. Je prie Dieu que vous puissiez vivre à nos côtés sans crainte ni problèmes, avec nos différences, mais avec ce qui nous relie pour l'éternité : l'Amour et le rapprochement vers Dieu".

En Algérie, aujourd'hui, il s'agit moins d'un dialogue, que d'une vie ensemble. Certains d'entre nous disent : un partage d'humanité. Un partage au nom de Dieu. Quelques exemples voudraient montrer ce qu'est ce partage.

Il y a un siècle quand les premiers Pères Blancs sont arrivés à Ghardaïa, les responsables de la communauté musulmane mozabite avaient interdit à ses membres toute relation avec ces "infidèles" (kouffar). Le mois dernier quand nous avons célébré le centenaire de cette arrivée, une famille mozabite nous a ouvert sa grande salle de réception, dans sa maison familiale de l'oasis, pour y célébrer la messe solennelle du centenaire. Le maire de la ville nous a prêté une grande tente de Difa pour la prière quotidienne pendant les trois jours de la rencontre. Et la maison des Pères s'est remplie d'amis musulmans pour la conférence sur le P. de Foucauld, personnage pourtant contesté par la presse en raison de ses liens, à l'époque, au Sahara, avec les officiers français. Le tout dans une maison attaquée en 1993 par les groupes armés et où les trois Pères n'échappèrent à la mort que par miracle.

Il y a un mois, une société nationale de travaux publics découvrait cachée par la terre une grande croix de sept mètres de long, abandonnée sur place lors du transfert des tombes d'un cimetière. Les responsables de la société faisaient transporter la croix, de leur propre chef, dans leurs ateliers et la restauraient, avant de venir la réimplanter dans le lieu que nous avons choisi, avec un socle de marbre, le tout aux frais de la société et dans le désir de prouver leur respect, comme musulmans, pour un symbole chrétien.

Le mois dernier, une confrérie musulmane invitait la communauté chrétienne à se faire représenter à un colloque sur son patrimoine spirituel, et le cheikh présidant la cérémonie plaçait à sa droite et à sa gauche les deux prêtres venus participer à la manifestation.

À un niveau plus officiel, on sait que le Président

BOUTEFLIKA a rendu un hommage solennel, en septembre 1998, au Cardinal DUVAL, lors du colloque annuel de RIMINI, puis, par la suite, aux Baléares, demandant même sa canonisation.

En 2003, une année de l'Algérie est organisée en France. Les responsables algériens ont tenu à ce que soit organisée à l'UNESCO une journée d'études qui présenterait les trois traditions monothéistes ayant tenu leur place dans l'histoire du pays : le judaïsme, le christianisme et l'islam. Ils m'ont nommé membre du groupe de préparation.

Il est vrai que les bouleversements connus par la société algérienne après l'indépendance ont entraîné le départ de la quasi totalité des chrétiens et de toute la communauté juive, assimilée à la communauté européenne depuis 1870¹².

Mais c'est cette évolution même que beaucoup d'Algériens voudraient stopper, en manifestant leur désir de faire une place, dans la nation, aux chrétiens qui demeurent.

Ce désir s'exprime de multiples manières, par les invitations qui nous sont adressées par de nombreuses Associations, par la faculté qui nous est laissée de retransmettre les offices chrétiens à la radio nationale pour les grandes fêtes, par l'intégration de notre *CARITAS* dans le réseau des Associations engagées dans l'action sociale, notamment en faveur des victimes de la violence.

Le film sur Mgr CLAVERIE et les séances pour le visionner ont donné un signe semblable. Réalisé par des Algériens, ce film a été présenté dans plusieurs salles du pays avec débats publics.

La même jeune femme musulmane dont j'ai cité une lettre écrivait aussi :

"Je pense que c'est Dieu qui veut la présence de l'Église en notre terre d'islam... Vous êtes une bouture sur l'arbre de l'Algérie qui, si Dieu le veut, s'épanouira vers la lumière de Dieu".

Une autre jeune femme faisait remarquer à propos des relations entre chrétiens et musulmans dans le pays que les liens établis faisaient qu'en quelque sorte, une partie de nous-mêmes appartient à l'autre. Voici ce très beau texte :

"Vous avez bien choisi de vivre avec ce peuple, de partager ses joies et ses peines ! Vous avez choisi, ou c'est Dieu qui a choisi pour vous... Je ne serais pas logique si je ne disais pas que votre existence sur cette terre et dans ce peuple vous a dépassés, car une partie de vous-mêmes nous appartient. On ne peut exister quelque part sans appartenir, d'une certaine façon, à l'autre..."

Quand on met en regard cette réflexion avec les condamnations sans appel des extrémistes qui ne voient

en nous qu'infidèles à exclure ou à supprimer, nous mesurons les évolutions qui s'opèrent dans les mentalités.

Il ne s'agit pas d'un dialogue théologique, mais de cet accueil de l'autre dans son identité propre, qui seul peut assurer la communion dans la différence.

Conclusion

Nous savons tous les problèmes qui demeurent dans la société algérienne et qui causent la souffrance de beaucoup de familles défavorisées. Nous connaissons les agressivités ou les rancœurs qui marquent encore les mentalités dans de nombreux milieux. Mais nous voulons aussi rendre grâce à Dieu pour ce progrès du dialogue dans la nation, à commencer par les débats entre citoyens. Nous sommes intégrés dans ces débats ou dans ce dialogue, ou, mieux encore, nous sommes considérés par beaucoup comme des frères, des sœurs ou des amis.

Cette évolution est pour nous un signe de ce Royaume de Dieu à l'œuvre dans l'histoire et dont JeanPaul II nous donnait une définition précieuse dans *Redemptoris Missio* :

"Le Royaume (de Dieu) doit transformer les rapports entre les hommes et se réaliser progressivement, au fur et à mesure qu'ils apprennent à s'aimer, à se pardonner, à se mettre au service les uns des autres... La nature du Royaume est la communion des êtres humains entre eux et avec Dieu".

Un image pour décrire cette communion nous est donnée par l'enterrement du P. François d'ONCIEU dont voici le récit dans le Moudjahid.¹³

Drapé d'un simple "naâch" et mis en terre avec la lecture de la "Fatiha"

« Le cimetière chrétien de Constantine a vécu, vendredi dernier, une cérémonie d'inhumation comme il s'en passe rarement, sinon jamais ici, puisqu'elle a combiné les traditions chrétienne et musulmane de manière naturelle, et comme si l'antinomie entre les deux traditions n'était qu'une invention artificielle. Le père François d'Oncieu, de la congrégation jésuite, décédé l'avant-veille, a en effet été enterré selon sa volonté en terre algérienne et selon la tradition de ce pays dans lequel et pour lequel il a vécu.

Dans le concret, cela a donné cette scène à la fois inédite et d'une grande portée symbolique pour qui sait voir : un père chrétien pleuré et accompagné à sa dernière demeure par une foule composée en majorité de musulmans. Il était enveloppé d'un simple linceul blanc et porté sur les épaules sur un simple "naâch" (chez les musulmans : dispositif en bois servant à transporter la dépouille au cimetière).

Au cimetière chrétien, que beaucoup de ses accompagnateurs constantinois découvraient pour la première fois, l'assistance mixte qui rendait un dernier adieu au défunt était surprise d'écouter une oraison funèbre en arabe classique et dialectal et en français

où se sont succédé à la fois des corréligionnaires et des amis musulmans du défunt : les uns comme les autres se sont exprimés avec la même émotion sincère.

Mais la plus grande surprise fut d'entendre le prêtre présidant la cérémonie demander, juste avant la mise en terre du corps, la lecture de la Fatîha du Coran : "Il aimait beaucoup cette sourate et avait exprimé le vœu qu'on la lise à son enterrement".

Plus que mille discours et ouvrages, ce sont des gestes pareils à la fois simples et vrais qui peuvent changer le monde, et, dans ce cas, amorcer dans la pratique le dialogue des civilisations et des religions dont on parle tant de nos jours.

La foule qui a accompagné ce père chrétien qui s'appelait François-Abdelaziz était différente de religions, de nationalités, de niveaux culturels et économiques mais elle avait la même appréciation sur la personnalité de l'homme : "c'était un homme de bien, et le bien sincère et désintéressé transcende toutes les frontières de quelque nature qu'elles soient".

[NDLR : Les musulmans présents dirent la Fatîha, puis les chrétiens dirent le Notre Père].

Notes

¹ Théologien musulman d'origine égyptienne, contraint à l'exil en Hollande, en raison de ses recherches sur l'islam et sur l'exégèse coranique.

² Les quatorze articles contenus dans le dossier que présente la revue *Insaniyat*.

³ Intellectuels assassinés par les islamistes, tous algériens, à l'exception de Farag Foda qui était égyptien.

⁴ Cf. Jean-Jacques Pérennès, *Pierre Claverie, un Algérien par alliance*, Paris, Cerf, 2000, p. 391.

⁵ *Jeune Indépendant*, 13 août 2001, p. 5.

⁶ *El Watan*, 12 octobre 1999, p. 4.

⁷ *Liberté*, 1^{er} novembre 1999, p. 29.

⁸ *Le Siècle*, n. 15 du 20 au 26 octobre 1999, p. 6.

⁹ *Liberté*, 1^{er} novembre 1999, p. 2.

¹⁰ *El Watan*, 14 novembre 2001.

¹¹ *L'Expression*, 19 novembre 2001, p. 4.

¹² Le décret CREMIEUX (1870) avait donné en bloc la nationalité française à tous les juifs algériens.

¹³ *El Mondjabid*, 25 novembre 2001.

Réf. : Texte de l'auteur. Juin 2002.

Christophe Héraudeau
Volontaire au Paraguay

Foi, religiosité et engagement au Paraguay

Je m'appelle Christophe Héraudeau, je travaille au sein du SEPA, une ONG spécialisée dans le développement social. Comme ingénieur agronome, je suis particulièrement engagé dans un programme de formation aux petits paysans, formation à l'agriculture biologique, à la participation citoyenne et à la gestion.

Je suis aussi la coordination d'organisations de jeunes à travers un processus d'échange initié en juin 2000, entre jeunes de la commission diocésaine du CCFD du Doubs et la coordination paraguayenne de jeunes. Cet échange se fait autour du thème de l'engagement des jeunes dans la société.

Le Paraguay est un petit pays coincé entre les deux géants que sont le Brésil et l'Argentine. Oublié des circuits touristiques comme des livres de géographie, c'est un pays méconnu des Européens. Peut-être est-ce pour cela que les Paraguayens sont si hospitaliers et chaleureux ? Peut-être cela vient-il aussi d'un catholicisme omniprésent dans la vie politique, la vie publique, dans la famille ? Il est certain que les expressions de foi sont nombreuses au sein de cette population métisse espagnole-guarani. La façon de recevoir l'inconnu en est certainement une, les actes de religiosité et d'expression populaires de leurs croyances sont aussi témoignages d'une foi quotidienne qui se partage, enfin l'engagement de militants jeunes et adultes démontre que la foi est un moteur qui pousse à l'action. Ma vision du peuple paraguayen est certainement réduite, cela ne fait que deux ans que je vis ici. En outre, je ne suis en contact régulier qu'avec les paysans, les artisans, les populations marginales de trois départements de la partie orientale du pays. Mais la commune où je vis, Carapegua, fait partie d'un département de peuplement ancien, d'où sont originaires beaucoup des familles qui peuplèrent les parties Est et Nord du pays. C'est une zone où les traditions tant chrétiennes que païennes sont très présentes.

L'accueil de l'inconnu

Les familles rurales avec lesquelles j'ai la chance de travailler sont parmi les plus pauvres du pays. Un accès très réduit à la terre, pas ou peu de possibilité de crédit, éducation primaire incomplète, elles sont les plus nombreuses et les plus exclues à la fois. Mais ces familles ont un don, celui de recevoir. Elles savent prendre le temps, accueillir, partager. J'ai eu l'occasion de vivre dans quelques pays du Sud, et il est vrai que l'accueil de

ces populations est toujours largement plus chaleureux que le nôtre, mais au Paraguay, c'est très spontané et naturel. Une personne inconnue passe devant chez eux, et ils l'invitent à boire le *téré*, sorte d'infusion froide, ou à partager le déjeuner. Je crois qu'il y a aussi une part de curiosité, les gens sont curieux de savoir d'où vient cet inconnu, ce qu'il fait par ici, comment c'est chez lui, etc. Il est possible que les 35 ans de dictature du Général Stroessner qui ont enfermé le pays sur lui-même aient avivé la curiosité et la soif de connaissance des gens. Les amitiés se tissent à la fois par cette hospitalité spontanée et par la curiosité naturelle de la population. Pour moi, ce don de s'intéresser à l'inconnu qui passe devant sa maison, c'est l'amour de son prochain.

Une religiosité omniprésente

Le catholicisme revêt de nombreuses expressions populaires de foi. La plus importante dans la vie spirituelle et publique du pays est le pèlerinage à la Vierge de Caacupé. Ce pèlerinage ne se fait pas pour demander une faveur ou la protection à la Vierge, mais c'est une action de grâce. En effet, quand un étudiant doit passer un concours, il se confie de la Vierge en lui demandant son aide. S'il réussit son examen, en remerciement, il ira en pèlerinage, à pied, jusqu'à la Vierge de Caacupé. Ainsi, tous ceux qui demandent aide à la Vierge, et qui voient leurs vœux exaucés, vont à pied de leur ville jusqu'au centre du pays, où se trouve Caacupé. Les familles rurales sortent en charrette à bœuf quand le voyage est long (plusieurs jours parfois), ou pour emmener les grands-parents auprès de la Vierge. Ils sont des milliers sur les routes et chemins du pays autour du 8 décembre, jour de la Vierge de Caacupé.

Au Paraguay, chaque ville, chaque quartier a son saint patron, qui est l'occasion d'une fête populaire. Normalement, les neuf jours qui précèdent le jour du Saint, il y a messe ou prière, le soir, à l'Église, et cela culmine par la grand-messe le jour donné. Ensuite, la communauté se réunit autour de repas typiques et de jeux pour les enfants. C'est un moment de partage, d'expression d'appartenance à une communauté de croyants, c'est aussi et surtout beaucoup de joie et d'allégresse. C'est sûrement un moment pour réunir et fortifier la communauté des chrétiens, à travers l'organisation de la fête patronale. C'est une occasion de travailler ensemble, de montrer le dynamisme de la paroisse et d'exprimer une foi qui se vit à travers un collectif.

Il existe de nombreuses autres expressions de foi. Ancrées dans la culture et la vie quotidienne, elles témoignent presque toujours du besoin de se réunir pour prier, pour célébrer, ou pour festoyer. Cette religiosité populaire est très présente là où je vis, les prières aux défunts tous les six mois ou les pèlerinages pour les fêtes patronales rassemblent des foules.

Des militants engagés pour transformer leur pays

Les actes de foi les plus discrets, mais aussi les plus nobles, sont, selon moi, ceux que réalisent les travailleurs sociaux, les militants dans leurs actions pour construire un monde plus fraternel et solidaire. Au cours de la dictature, de nombreux mouvements ont lutté pour plus de justice et de liberté. En zone rurale, les *Lignes Agraires*, mouvement paysan dans la ligne de la théologie de la libération, ont rassemblé des milliers de familles afin de leur permettre de voir avec un regard critique leurs conditions de vie, d'analyser ces réalités et d'agir pour les changer. Peu soutenus par la hiérarchie ecclésiale conservatrice, réprimés violemment par le gouvernement de Stroessner, les militants des *Lignes Agraires* ont compté dans leurs rangs des martyrs. Mais leur soif de justice, de liberté, le sens que donnait à leur vie l'Amour libérateur du Christ, leur fournissaient la force de continuer. Aujourd'hui, cet esprit subsiste au sein de la militance de nombreuses organisations. Bien sûr, l'arrivée d'une pseudo-démocratie fait qu'il n'y a plus de répression systématique, le droit à se réunir est reconnu, les conditions pour s'organiser sont donc plus favorables. Il n'en reste pas moins que la justice n'existe toujours pas, la liberté est un leurre quand on vit dans des conditions de grande pauvreté. Les organisations de jeunes sont parmi les plus actives et visibles sur la scène publique. Que ce soient des mouvements de jeunes de mouvance

catholique (JOC, MJCC¹), ou des organisations de jeunes laïques (*Mouvement des Objecteurs de Conscience, Mouvements des Collégiens, Parlement des Jeunes* etc.), tous partagent la conviction que c'est à travers la formation des jeunes qu'un Paraguay nouveau pourra émerger.

Formation civique, formation éthique, formation économique et sociale ... tout cela afin de faire des hommes et des femmes compétents, insérés dans la vie publique, et porteurs de valeurs comme l'honnêteté, la justice, le respect, la tolérance. Depuis deux ans s'est créée une plate-forme d'organisations de jeunes visant à permettre des échanges entre ces organisations, ainsi que des actions communes.

Des luttes risquées mais justes et nécessaires

Les luttes sociales au Paraguay se heurtent à l'omnipotence des hommes politiques, à l'existence de mafias liées à la drogue, et aux luttes entre partis politiques. Les jeunes doivent maîtriser ces facteurs pour réussir dans leurs actions. L'année dernière, grâce à l'effort continu d'un mouvement de collégiens, le *Mouvement pour l'Obtention du Billet Étudiant*, puis à l'appui des autres organisations de jeunes, est entrée en vigueur la loi sur le billet étudiant de transport en commun. Cette loi, votée en 1992, n'avait jamais en effet été appliquée en raison du refus de la corporation des transporteurs de laisser les étudiants payer demi-tarif. Les manifestations, pressions sur le gouvernement, rencontres avec les ministres et avec les députés, ont mis ces jeunes face à un pouvoir corrompu et mafieux. Grâce à leur ténacité, à une organisation solide et à leur grande compétence, ils ont réussi. Maintenant qu'il est plus facile aux étudiants d'aller à l'école puisqu'ils ne payent que demi-tarif, ils lancent leur offensive sur le budget du gouvernement, où seulement 25% des sommes allouées à la Défense permettrait de multiplier par deux le nombre de professeurs dans tout le pays.

Ces militants de moins de 25 ans sont bénévoles, ils sont jeunes et pourtant capables de négocier avec un ministre, ils s'engagent pour des causes qui ne leur apportent pas de bénéfice personnel... Ce dévouement, ces actions sont autant de signes de la Bonne Nouvelle sur la terre. Quand on connaît les pressions que subissent ces jeunes de la part des hommes politiques ou de la part des entrepreneurs, quand on connaît le nombre de dirigeants syndicaux qui se sont fait acheter par des ministres ou des députés, la ténacité de ces jeunes militants prend toute sa valeur. En outre, ceux qui ont organisé la lutte pour l'obtention du *billet étudiant*, pour citer un exemple, venaient en grande majorité de familles aisées, c'est-à-dire qu'ils n'en avaient pas besoin

personnellement. Je crois que c'est un acte de foi, c'est l'expression d'une croyance en l'homme et la femme, c'est croire que nul être humain ne peut voir bafouer ses droits les plus élémentaires que sont la justice, l'éducation et des conditions de vie dignes.

Certaines organisations d'adultes sont aussi engagées pour changer le pays. Que ce soient des organisations paysannes, des organisations ouvrières, des organisations de gens de classe moyenne, leurs actions vont aussi vers plus de justice et de liberté. Mais il est certain que les organisations d'adultes souffrent plus de l'ingérence gouvernementale, qui voit d'un mauvais œil l'émergence d'organisations sociales. Elles ont plus de mal à coordonner leurs actions. Il n'en reste pas moins que de nombreuses ONG et de nombreux mouvements de jeunes sont nés grâce à la participation, la volonté et les compétences de militants adultes. Le *MLAMSI*, mouvement d'Action Catholique des adultes de milieux indépendants, compte parmi ses membres des sociologues dont les analyses dans les grands journaux de la presse écrite comme télévisée ont un impact considérable, des directeurs d'ONG travaillant sur la participation citoyenne ou des dirigeants du syndicat d'entrepreneurs catholiques ; ils appuient des mouvements de jeunes et ils ont initié de nombreuses concertations entre représentants de la population civile et gouvernement. Bien que leur mouvement ne soit pas visible publiquement, ce sont bien ses militants, grâce à la formation qu'ils reçoivent dans leurs équipes, qui impulsent ces actions citoyennes.

Il est certain que les mouvements d'Action Catholique occupent une place privilégiée au sein de ces organisations de jeunes et d'adultes. Cela s'explique surtout par la formation intégrale que reçoivent leurs militants. Cela en fait des acteurs sociaux capables d'analyser la situation de leur communauté, à l'engagement sans faille, et aux valeurs chrétiennes ancrées et solides. En outre, le sens que donne à leur vie la foi en Jésus-Christ ressuscité, est comme un fil directeur qui les soutient et les guide dans leurs actions. Ils en sont d'autant plus forts et convaincus que le fait d'agir s'inscrit pour eux dans la construction du Royaume de Dieu sur la Terre. Je crois que ce sont aussi des personnes moins "corruptibles" et plus stables. Si les adultes de l'Action Catholique d'aujourd'hui sont déjà des acteurs sociaux de première importance, bien que discrets, il est certain que les jeunes engagés actuellement au sein d'organisations comme la JOC ou le MJCC seront des acteurs sociaux fondamentaux demain.

Le Paraguay vit une foi communautaire et vive

La foi est communautaire car elle se vit dans le quartier, le village ou la ville, au sein des pèlerinages et

des fêtes patronales. Elle est communautaire car elle s'est vécue et se vit au sein des équipes de révision de vie comme au sein des communautés de base.

Elle est vive car, joyeuse et festive, elle est présente dans le quotidien de la vie des gens. Elle est vive car elle motive et permet l'action de milliers de militants convaincus que le Royaume de Dieu sur terre est possible et que la Bonne Nouvelle s'annonce par notre vie et nos actions.

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Towards an Interreligious Spirituality

1. Disillusionment with Religion

A while ago, a Japanese friend of mine and I were engaged in a dialogue on the importance and relevance of religion. My friend, who is an avowed agnostic, kept insisting that religion should be done away with if human beings are to be free. She was of the view that religion blinds people to the wider reality of truth as it seeks to bind people to exclusive communities. She then pointed out that many of the conflicts of the present-day world are fought precisely in the name of religion. So, if the world is to have peace and freedom, then our first task is to bring an end to the notion of religion.

Judging from what's been happening in places such as Kashmir and Palestine or Maluku and Gujarat or Northern Ireland and Northern Sri Lanka, it's difficult to dispute my agnostic friend's thesis that religion seems to be at the root of, or at least implicated in, many of today's wars and conflicts. To be sure, religion is a terribly vulnerable institution and is easily used and abused, especially in times of conflict. Hence, we witness a good number of people who have willingly died in the name of religion, and an equally good number who are only too willing to kill in its name. Such a phenomenon, of course, is not new, as history testifies to countless conflicts and catastrophic tensions where religion has played a significant role.

That it was a Japanese friend of mine who was skeptical about the role of religion is by no means accidental. Japan, as many of us know, is the most industrialized, modern and developed nation in the whole of Asia. Modernization and development, of course, come with materialism and sophistication, as well as a certain degree of secularism. Hence, it is not uncommon to find many Japanese who are disillusioned with religion, especially over the roles and functions traditionally accorded to mainstream religions. This phenomenon, of course by no means confined to Japan, is equally pervasive in many other modern and developed cities throughout Asia. It is, I would hazard to guess, very much the experience of many Western countries too, where quite a few peoples seem to have given up on the usefulness and relevance of religion in their lives.

2. Fanaticism in Religion

On the other hand this is certainly not the case with much of Asia, as well as with much of the rest of the world. To be sure, the majority of peoples continue to subscribe to religion and are in the main traditional observers of religious rituals and traditional believers of religious edicts. The problem, in fact, is that in many instances there is way too much of this belief in and adherence to religion so much so that they border on the fanatical. In general most of these religious fanatics have a simple and unquestioning faith so that religion permeates the core of their being and influences the mode of their existence. That accounts for why religion is so susceptible to being manipulated since blind obedience to religious authority often paves the way for abuse. Thus, it is not difficult to find many, especially those who are impoverished or disenfranchised in one way or another, who obediently yield to the dictates of charismatic leaders who use religion for a less than noble agendas.

On top of that, many of these religious fanatics are also missionary oriented, in that they believe it is their God-given mission to bring about the conversion of the rest of humankind to their own brands of faith and their own understanding of religion. Such missionary zeal, when combined with an unquestioning faith, renders them vulnerable to teachings which preach that unbelievers and infidels have no right to exist. Thus, in some instances violence is even justified as the religious fanatic truly believes God to be on her/his side. Hence, it is merely in obedience to God's will that they seek to conquer all others for God, or, in Christian parlance, to claim all for Christ. Such fanatical and exclusivistic attitudes can be found in all the religions of the world, and Christianity and the Catholic Church are by no means exceptions.

3. Theologies which Exclude

To compound the problem, many of these fanatical and exclusivistic attitudes do have theological roots and justification. These are theological positions which generally stem from an approach towards religion which is narrow and fundamentalistic. These theo-

gies take as their starting point the belief that their own religion is the only true one. They thus oblige their followers to be committed since there is only one true and complete religion. Such teachings, if kept within one's own community for the purpose of nurturing the faith of one's own followers, present no danger. However, when they are used as weapons to pass judgment upon and condemn other religions then such theological positions pose real problems. They pave the way for feelings of self-righteousness on the one hand, and feelings of disrespect and contempt for other religions on the other.

Such feelings could then even rationalize the destruction and conquest of other religions, since they are viewed as in error at best or even evil and demonic at worst. These views, therefore, regard missionary activity as at once promoting one's own religion as well as annihilating the other religions. For the Christian, it is tantamount to having the crucified Christ, whose example we ought to be emulating, transformed into the conquering Christ, whose name we fight in defense of. The cross of Christ becomes a sword for Christ. Thus, on the basis of our self-righteous theological presuppositions, it is possible that we justify aggression towards the other. Again, let us be reminded that such theological justifications can be found in all the religions, including Christianity.

The sad reality, however, is that such theologies continue to be passed on as mainstream teachings by many churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. In other words, they are not only theological positions which are preached by the extremists, but very much those preached by mainstream thinkers of the various religious traditions as well. This is in part because alternative approaches either do not exist or have not really been worked out. Moreover, most religions have traditionally formulated their theologies and understanding of other religions in isolation, i.e. even before they have encountered them. This accounts for why most religions portray themselves as superior and others as inferior. In the absence of contact and knowledge, judgements can be severe and harsh. It is much like a person who has never travelled anywhere outside her/his own country who makes absolute assertions that her/his own country is the best there is on the face of the earth. That in itself is not harmful, but when that person begins to assert that other countries are flawed, inferior or deficient, then it becomes problematic.

Unfortunately, such a need to project one's own religion as unique and superior seems commonplace as is the desire for more converts to one's own reli-

gion. Such attitudes continue to dominate many mainstream religious traditions. They, of course, cannot but fuel enmity, hatred and tension. In view of such exclusiveness it is no wonder that my agnostic friend and many others have lost faith in the ideals and value of religion. Religion has become more a source of rivalry and competition. Persons of other religions are viewed more as enemies to be conquered rather than as partners to collaborate with. In the name of God, humankind is divided into the "saved" and the "unsaved", or into "believers" and "non-believers". Religion, therefore, divides rather than unites, sows hatred rather than affection, and facilitates conflicts rather than harmony and peace. In such a context, it may be better to do away with religion.

4. Theologies which Include

Alternatives, however, do exist. These alternative theologies take as their starting point the need for religions to be in dialogue with one another. It is through dialogue that religious believers get to know as well as to appreciate the other religions. It is through dialogue that they learn from, as well as to share with, one another. It is only after this learning and sharing have taken place that they attempt to postulate a theology of other religions. In other words, any attempt at trying to understand the role, value and function of other religions or any attempt at passing judgement upon them ought to come only after one has encountered the other in a true and sincere dialogue. This is more or less the objective of the ministry of interreligious dialogue.

In this ministry of interreligious dialogue and of positing an alternative theology which is more respectful of other religions, the Church in Asia ought to be at the forefront. This is because Catholics number no more than 3 per cent of the Asian population which is so rich and alive with all the other major religions. Hence, one would expect that Asian Catholics who live always and everywhere amongst peoples of other religions are veterans in interreligious dialogue. Unfortunately, this has not been the case for the most part of the 500-year history of the Church in Asia. This is in part because the Asian Church was in the main a transplanted Church from the West. The missionaries who came with the colonial powers literally transplanted the Western notion of what it means to be Church in Asia so that the Asian Church was no more than a little colony of the Western Church. As such, the Asian Church had little regard for other religions since that did not feature in the concerns of their mother-Church. Thus, over the centuries, theologies which show little regard for the value and beauty of other religions were

taught and propagated by Asian Christians even as they themselves were living amongst peoples of other religions.

Things began to change, however, in the last half century, in part because of the end of colonial rule which in turn gave rise to the spirit of nationalism throughout most of Asia. This nationalistic fervour which spilt over to the Churches saw the rise of theologies which were more inclusive of and sensitive to the other religions. To this end, the Church adopted dialogue as the primary means for understanding the local cultures and religions of Asia. Of course, dialogue was also to enable the local cultures and religions to understand what the Church really stands for. Thus, dialogue became the new way of being Church in Asia. Dialogue became the new path of evangelization and dialogue constitutes the very essence of what it means to be Christian in Asia. The post-colonial Church in Asia, therefore, promoted a totally different outlook and orientation towards evangelization and mission as it sought more inclusive ways of relating with the other religions and Asian cultures. This new approach then paved the way for renewal in theologies, so that new methods and expressions were explored and slowly developed.

5. Towards a Church of Dialogue

In their exploration of new methods and expressions of theology, Asian theologians began by examining why the traditional forms were deficient. Specifically, the colonial Church, which was a transplanted version of the Western Church, was looked upon as motivated by what some have called a “helicopter” theology. The helicopter, while descending upon Asia, forcefully blew away everything which belonged to the earth and soil of Asia. It also made a lot of missiological noise and showed little sensitivity and respect for the ground which it descended upon. To be sure, the helicopter regarded itself as uniquely superior to whatever is local to the context of Asia. It is not surprising therefore that the colonial Church was looked upon by persons of other religions as an outsider, an invader, an enemy, and a conquering Church.

In view of such an image, Asian Christians of the post-colonial Church have been striving to evolve a different version of what it means to be Church in Asia. Specifically, they draw inspiration from what has been called a “bullock-cart” theology. Like the bullock-cart, it is at once a theology which is indigenous to Asia as well as in harmony with the great religions. With its wheels touching the unpaved roads of Asia, the bullock-cart is certainly more in touch with Asian

realities than the helicopter could have been. In particular, it is in touch with the cultural and religious traditions which have nourished the lives of billions and billions of peoples over the centuries, long before the arrival of Christian missionaries. Moreover, for the bullock-cart to move forward, it has to be in continuous contact and friction with the ground, so that the Church too has to be in constant dialogue with Asia’s cultures and religions if she wants to move along in her evangelizing mission. More important still, the humble message which the bullock-cart brings does not in any way antagonize the peoples of Asia, who have no problems in welcoming Christianity into Asia and consider her as integral to the cultural matrix of Asia’s religions.

6. Towards a World Church

While this dialogical Church of post-colonial Asia may have arisen largely in the context of the religiously plural Asia, it is equally relevant to the rest of the world which is slowly but surely becoming religiously plural. Two factors are of significance. Firstly, globalization with its concomitant movements of peoples across cultures has resulted in more and more persons of other religions migrating to countries in the West which have hitherto been predominantly Christian. Thus, with time, Christianity will no longer be the dominant religion of the West, resulting in what some have come to call a post-Christian West. In this post-Christian West, the other religions will feature very prominently in much the same way they do in Asia. To be sure, there could even come a time when Christianity may not be the majority religion in some countries in the West. When that day comes, the Church will have no choice but to relate actively with other religions as equal partners of dialogue, much the same way the post-colonial Church of Asia has made dialogue its way of being Church in Asia.

Secondly, it is also becoming evident that Christianity has been on the decline in the West, while seeing dramatic increases in the developing continents, especially in Asia and Africa. In fact, statistics reveal that in the year 2000, the majority of Christians, or 58%, reside in the developing nations. Thus, in all probability, the future of Christianity is one which will no longer be associated with the West, resulting in what some have called a post-Western Christianity. In this post-Western Christianity, the experience of the other local Churches, such as the Church of Asia and of Africa and of Latin America, would be given greater prominence. This, of course, augurs well for what Karl Rahner has called the World Church. A World Church is one where the Western Church is but just one of

many local Churches and by no means taken as normative for the Christian tradition.

In this regard, theologies which have arisen from Asia, Africa and Latin America will probably become more mainstream and universal, just as those which arose from the Western Church have hitherto been propagated as mainstream and universal theologies. To be sure, the World Church will probably see an integration of the various forms of theologies and spiritualities which arise from these different and varied local contexts. Each continent would make a significant contribution to the theology of the World Church. The contribution of the Asian Church would probably be in the realm of interreligious dialogue since Asia has been privileged with the experience of religious pluralism for a much longer time than any other continent. In other words, the Asian Church would lead the universal Church in her understanding of what it means to be Church in a religiously plural world. More specifically, it is probably the Asian Church which is blessed with the vocation of showing the World Church how to continue its existence as a Church of Dialogue. Put another way, whatever has been the experience of the Asian Church in the last 50 years will probably be the normative experience of the World Church 50 years from now, since, by then, religious pluralism will probably be an absolute reality in every part of the world.

7. An Interreligious Spirituality

It is in the context of the preceding reflections that the present paper posits that we ought to move towards evolving an interreligious spirituality. Such a spirituality necessarily begins with dialogue. Thus, a Church of Dialogue can lead in this initiative, which is then shared by peoples of all religions. To be sure, it is a spirituality which anticipates that all religions will co-exist peacefully together, each as equal partners, with none claiming to be unique or superior to another. On the other hand, it is by no means relativistic as it is a spirituality which takes as its starting point the essential teachings of each religious tradition. Hence, it is an interreligious spirituality. The experience of the religious traditions are not discarded, but taken seriously as an integral dimension of this spirituality. In other words, it is a spirituality which is universal but rooted in one's own tradition while consciously related to others. To better appreciate this interreligious spirituality of dialogue, allow me to use the metaphor of the "tree" to continue the present discussion.

To begin with, the tree is a symbol which is at once familiar to persons of all ages as it is universal to peo-

ple of all cultures. In other words it cuts across all cultures and is not a symbol readily identified with any one particular community. To be sure, trees fill the majority of the earth's biomass, and so belong to the entire biosphere. Thus, the tree has become to many Asian gurus or masters of all religious traditions the primal master of humanity, the teacher, the guru of life. It was the tree which people referred to and learnt from long before religious teachers appeared on the scene. It was the tree which was the source of knowledge, long before books played that role. It was also the tree which provided much inspiration to many a guru and religious leader, through whom the message of life was preached to humanity. The Judeo-Christian tradition, in the Book of Genesis, speaks of the tree as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16-17). The Holy Qur'an speaks of the person's good word as very much the same as a good tree. Its roots are firm and its branches are in heaven (14:24). The Bhagavadgita speaks of an eternal pipal tree where the verses of Scripture are its leaves. Hence, whoever understands the tree understands the Scriptures (15:1). Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, experienced his enlightenment when meditating under the sacred Bodhi tree. Thus, the tree can be regarded as the eternal and universal teacher, the master guru to all of humanity.

In this regard it is not surprising, therefore, to see that many religions give a place of reverence to the tree. Most spiritual centres or ashrams have gardens with plentiful trees. The practice of meditation, if done under a grand old shady tree, is certainly much different than if done inside an air-conditioned room. Trees are one of the favourite places where people build their religious shrines and holy places. There is a sacredness to this symbol of the tree. It connects the world above the earth to the world beneath the earth. It links humanity to God and the eternal cosmos. The tree is, therefore, at once a symbol of God's presence to humanity as it is a symbol of humanity's presence to God. A slide of the human brain, the heart or the kidney reveals the root structure of the tree. There is a connectedness, therefore, between the tree and the human being. The tree is rather like an archetype of the human being, just as it is a representation of the cosmos. Humanity is dependent upon trees, for it is trees which contribute to nutrient recycling, carbon dioxide absorption, and oxygen regeneration. Thus, the tree can certainly teach us much about life, about relationships, about God and about the universe. It is the eternal teacher and we thus look towards the tree for some primary lessons of life in the context of an interreligious spirituality.

8. Lessons from the Tree

Firstly, the tree is divided into three major organs: the roots, the stems, and the leaves. The leaves are all over the tree, and are of different shapes, sizes, colours and textures. They are attached to numerous branches which are all enjoined to the main stem or trunk of the tree. This tree trunk connects the leaves and branches to the roots, which provide the anchorage for the entire tree. If we consider the leaves and the branches as representing humanity, then the roots represent the anchorage or source of this humanity. This source is variously called God, the Absolute, the Divine, Allah, Holy One, Truth, Heaven, Brahman, Nirvana, Tien, the Tao, or whatever name one's religion attaches to the Ultimate Reality.

Secondly, in every tree the leaves and branches are different and diverse, just as every human being is different and diverse. No two leaves are the same, just as no two persons are exactly identical. Likewise, no two branches are the same, just as no two human collectivities are the same. The different branches could, therefore, be likened to the different communities, cultures or religions, just as the leaves are likened to the members of these communities. Some branches have plentiful leaves while others have few. Likewise, some religions have many followers while others have few. Every branch, however, has its place on the tree. None should be chopped off or discarded. The different leaves and branches live in close relationship with one another. Injury to one part of the tree affects all the other parts, just as injury to one human collectivity or religious tradition adversely affects the life of the others. Having said that, it is also true that each branch is self-contained and self-sufficient and connected to the source, the roots, in its own particular way. Likewise, each religion is self-sufficient and, indeed, does not depend on any other for its growth or survival. By itself, each branch achieves the fullness and completeness of growth and development, just as each religion is full and complete by itself. No one religion can claim to be the completion or the fulfillment of another, just as no leaf or branch can claim to be better or more authentic than another. The others are different, no doubt, but by no means inferior. It is therefore meaningless for one leaf or a branch of leaves to assert that theirs is the one and only true branch. Each has its place in the design and plan of the tree. Likewise, each religion has a place in the design of God's saving plan for humanity.

Thirdly, while each leaf and branch is different, there are also some common features which unite them all. Likewise, while each religion is different, each possesses

characteristics which cut across all religions. Some of these similarities are so close that they seem to have developed from the same source. In fact, it is because they all share in a same source, namely, the roots, that leaves and branches have similarities. Likewise, religions too arise from one common source and so have expressions, moral codes, ritual practices, and belief systems which correlate with one another. Furthermore, it will be noticed that branches which lie closer to one another seem to possess even more similar features than those which are farther apart. Likewise, some religions are more closely related to others, since they have similar root-structures or developed out of similar cultural conditions. To be sure, the external environment shapes much of how the leaves and branches develop, just as every religion is conditioned by the culture and particular contexts from which it developed.

9. A Trinitarian Spirituality

The next thing to look at is the relationship among the various parts of the tree. To begin with, if we ask the leaf, "Have you seen the root?" we will probably get a response in the negative. However, if we ask the leaf, "Do you believe in the root?" we will probably get a positive response. Likewise, human beings have not seen God but many do believe in God. For many, God is seen as the source and fountain of their existence. This is not that God is an entity or an object which is out there, but that God is at the roots of our existence and the subject of our being. Put another way, God is the ground reality from whom all living beings spring and in whom all are nourished. God, therefore, is the very source and essence of life. Thus, just as the leaves and branches draw their life and sustenance from the roots, human beings and religions rely upon God and the Divine for sustenance and nourishment. To be sure, it is the same roots which are the source and sustenance for all the many and varied human collectivities and religious traditions.

In the tree the nourishment of the leaves is supplied through the vascular tissues such as the xylem and the phloem. These are the conducting tissues which carry water and mineral resources from the roots up to the leaves and branches. Similarly, there is a vital sap which is in continuous flow and which nourishes human beings within the tree of life. Specifically, this flow of nourishment which comes from God, is that of the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is the Spirit which is in continuous flow through the stem to the various parts of the world and to humanity. In other words, from the depth of these roots, the Spirit flows out to give life and nourishment to the many branches and leaves of humankind. It is in this context that one can under-

stand the Gospel when it speaks of the living water which nourishes life and quenches thirst in such a way that one will never thirst again.

This Spirit of life flows through the vascular systems within the stem of the tree, and especially through the main stem, the trunk of the tree. In a way, therefore, the trunk is the primary mediator, through which the Holy Spirit flows from the roots to the leaves and the branches. For us Christians, this main stem or trunk is Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Thus, in the main stem is God the Son, just as in the vital sap is God the Holy Spirit, and in the roots we experience God the Father. Thus, we understand Jesus when he says, "I am the vine and you are the branches". That is also how we can make sense of his saying, "I and the Father are one", since the stem is but an extension of the root. Likewise, it makes sense to conceive of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as constituted of the same substance (*homoousios*) in the one single living unity in the mystical tree of life.

While Christians understand this main stem as Jesus the Son of God, for people of other religions this main stem may take on a different name. For the Hindus, for example, it could represent Krishna. For the Buddhists this main stem could be the Lord Buddha. The Muslims may conceive of this main stem as the Holy Qur'an, which is the principal revelation and through which the straight path to God is revealed. Whatever it is, it suffices to acknowledge that at the depth of the tree is the root which is the source and sustenance for all of these different mediations. Put another way, if the external manifestations of this tree of life goes by different names and forms, the depth and ground of being is the constant which is God and the Absolute Unity. Even if this God may go by different names, in essence it is the same unchanging spiritual and deep reality. Thus, in a way, while the religious expressions may differ, the spirituality which informs and nourishes them remain one and the same. It is in this context that an interreligious spirituality is one which appreciates the difference which the different religions promote but which draws from the one and the same spiritual truth which is universal. The Vedic scriptures are emphatic that "Truth is One", even if sages call it by different names.

10. An Experiment in Dialogue

In light of the preceding discussion, allow me now to very quickly demonstrate what an experiment in interreligious dialogue might look like. Specifically, I will draw from a parable to illustrate how dialogue helps us discover the wealth in the various religions as

well as insights into the depths of a spirituality which cuts across all religions. Let me begin, then, with this parable:

There was once a young man who left home and migrated abroad in search of a better life. After many years of failure he ended up a beggar and decided to return to his home-country. While he was gone, however, his own father had become very successful and amassed great wealth. He had changed his identity, moved to a new city and successfully built up an estate. All this time, however, his only longing was that his long-lost son would return so that he could share his wealth with him.

Now, one day the son ventured into the father's estate, begging. His father immediately recognized that this was his long-lost son but refrained from showing it. The son, however, had no clue whatsoever that this was indeed his father, and so approached the old man in fear and trembling. Instead of giving the young man some money, the old man offered him a job. Because the wages were good, the young man accepted the offer.

Hence began the new life of the young man as a servant to his own father. The job was dirty and involved shoveling manure and collecting garbage. But because the old man was kind and patient, the young man was quite pleased to be working for him. Then one day the old man offered the young man a promotion. He was now to take charge of all the other servants on the estate. The young man was grateful, but continued to see himself as just a humble servant to the rich old man. With time, the old man asked the young man to take charge of all of his personal accounts and financial matters. The young man thus became familiar with his own father's business and wealth. Yet, the son still had no idea who he really was.

Finally, while nearing death, the old man summoned the young man and told him that he was indeed his son, and bequeathed his entire wealth to him. The son, who earlier could not have coped with such wealth and responsibility, took to his new status with relative ease.

I suppose many of us recognize this story as being parallel to the Biblical parable of the prodigal son. It is, by the way, a story taken from the Lotus Sutra of the Buddhist scriptures. By way of comparison, both the Christian and the Buddhist versions speak of a young man who left home and thus was disconnected from his roots. Both the young men became lost as they went about in search of themselves. Amidst hardship and suffering, the two young men in both stories realized that home was where they belonged. Home was where they could be re-connected to their roots and it

was in faith that the two young men took the journey back. I use the words “in faith” because both had no idea what to expect on returning home, just as human beings have no certainty of what God or the final destiny is like. Now, upon their return, both were welcomed by the father. In fact, both the fathers were waiting in anticipation for their son to return. The sons then led new lives with their fathers. The Buddhist version speaks of this new life as joyfully working for the father, while the Christian version describes it in terms of the celebrations and the new robes, sandals and a ring on his finger. Both stories then end with the fathers sharing their love and bequeathing their wealth to their sons.

This experiment in dialogue reveals that there is much which is similar and which cuts across the different religious traditions. It is not so much that one religion might have borrowed the story from another but that God or the Ultimate Reality has revealed similar visions and teachings of life to different human collectivities. It only points to the thesis that the various religions are rooted in the one same source, and that this source is universal even if it manifests itself in different forms. To be sure, there are many other teachings which are similarly shared by all the religions. For instance, the Golden Rule, of treating another the way you want that person to treat you, is found in practically every religious tradition. Thus, there is but one Truth, even as it may be expressed in different stories and forms. It is this universal core which constitutes the spirituality which is at once inclusive of all as well as particular to each and every religious tradition. It is certainly a better alternative to emphasizing the differences in our religions, especially those differences which are on the level of forms and which are exclusive and judgmental of others. To be sure, such differences on the level of religions do not derive from the spiritual root which is universal.

On the other hand, if we now look beyond the similarities of the two parables, we will of course discern some fundamental differences between them. Firstly, the Buddhist story focuses on the son’s loss of identity. He did not know who he was. He left home in search of his identity and even upon returning still did not realize that he was his father’s son. This sense of illusion, of not knowing one’s true self, is a fundamental tenet in Buddhist anthropology. Buddhism, therefore, emphasizes the need for awakening. Whereas, the Christian story focuses more on the sinfulness of the son, his rejection of his father which resulted in him leaving home, and then squandering away his inheritance. This is certainly in line with Christian anthropology which emphasizes the “fall” and humanity’s sin-

fulness. Christian teachings, therefore, posit the need for redemption through a redeemer. This brings us therefore to the second point, viz. salvation. Salvation, according to Christianity, is a free offer of grace, but which must be accompanied by a sincere repentance for one’s sinfulness. Thus, the father in the parable rushed forward to kiss and embrace the penitent son and did not even consider exacting any sort of punishment for his sinfulness. Whereas, in Buddhism, salvation is more about discovering who we truly are. This exercise requires effort, we must work at it, day after day, following the rigorous training of the Eightfold Path, or, as the story has it, shoveling manure and collecting garbage. Upon sufficient practice, one awakens to one’s true identity in an experience called the enlightenment or Nirvana. Thirdly, the two stories differ in their portrayal of what the father looks like. Christians view God as a loving, ever gracious and forgiving God, who is always waiting for our return, and whose reward of heaven goes beyond anything we can imagine or deserve. The feast and the banquet in the parable capture what the Kingdom of God looks like. Whereas, Buddhists view the Buddha as a kind of mentor and guide, ever gentle and patient, and whose role is to merely point the way to the right path. It is therefore not the Buddha who is important as it is the Dharma, or teachings about life. Essentially, the goal of life is to extinguish all of our attachments, especially the attachments we have to our false and egoistic self. Thus, Nirvana literally means “to extinguish” or “to blow out” the illusions in our lives. In other words, Nirvana is more a state where we are no longer bound to anything or to anyone, where we are completely free, free even from ourselves, so that everything which restricts the boundless self will have died.

As can be seen from this simple discussion, there are also some radical differences between the different religions. Even if Truth is One, it can certainly be made manifest in a diversity of ways. In other words, while the spiritual roots of the religions may be the same, their external expression in the realm of religion may differ. More important, one then discerns if these external expressions are deeply rooted or merely on the level of form and only peculiar to a particular religion. Expressions which are inclusive and which transcend religions are of the former while those tending towards the exclusive are of the latter. The differences in the deeply rooted expressions of Truth can then be looked upon not so much as contradictory but as complementary. For sure, there is much that each religion can gain and learn from another as each manifests only aspects of the Divine. Thus, an openness to the many and varied aspects of the Truth will only serve to enlarge our understanding of who God is and what God

is like. To be sure, God, who is infinite mystery, will always remain ineffable and limitless. However, through dialogue, we can at least learn more about aspects of God whom we do not yet know as well as to share with our dialogue partners the aspects of God we are familiar with. Such learning and sharing can only serve to bring peoples together in the name of religion as well as to counter the forces which aim at pitting one religion against another. In a way, there is still much we can do with religion. It need not be brought to an end. What is more important, however, is that we emphasize the spiritual roots of religions as well as approach religion from an interreligious perspective.

By way of conclusion, I wish to borrow from the teachings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, one of the most renowned Buddhist monks of this century, founder of a forest monastery in southern Thailand. At the main entrance of his monastery, which receives thousands of pilgrims coming from all the various religious traditions, there is a foundation stone which spells out these three fundamental precepts: Firstly, let everyone be rooted in her/his own religion. Secondly, let everyone relate with other religions so that they may appreciate what others stand for. Thirdly, let everyone build on the essence of what the religions teach, so that they may work together to build a better world. These, therefore, are the three precepts which have inspired my own reflections. Yes, we need to be rooted in our own. We need to have a relatedness with others. And, our ultimate aim is to use religion as a force for collaboration so that together we can build a better world. Keeping these three precepts in mind, I invite all of us to work towards an interreligious spirituality.

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“Thy Kingdom Come...”
**Woman and Man as Equal Partners in Building
 God’s Community in Africa: A Woman’s Perspective**

Introduction

It is an accepted truism that the African woman is a disadvantaged human species. This fact is further underscored by the prevailing disadvantages to the African woman namely economic poverty, lack of education, inferior social status and overall negative societal appreciation of the human personality of the woman. This article, which examines biblical evidence, papal and magisterial documents, aims to establish beyond reasonable doubt the universal equality of man and woman. In addition, when talking about equality, this paper will argue that it is essential to take into consideration three important words: ‘difference’, ‘complementarity’ and ‘reciprocity’. Therefore equality must be reckoned within any effort aimed at building God’s community, which includes women both as partners and as co-heirs with men.

Who is woman?

1. Biblical Foundation

1.1. The Creation of a “Helper” Fit for Man (Gn 2:18-24)¹

Genesis 2:18-24 focuses on the creation and nature of human beings. The rest of the creation is mentioned only secondarily where it relates to humans.² The narrative begins with the formation of man *Adam*, out of the clay of the ground *adamah* (2:7), created by God as a living being but not yet having the sort of existence God had in mind for him. So God decided: “I will make him a helper fit for him” (v. 18). The creation of animals did not meet this lack but served to heighten the tension in the narrative. Man found himself in search of his own identity before God.³ It was only with the creation of woman that God’s work in creating human beings was successfully brought to a conclusion (v. 23).

It is the first time that something does not appear good in the creation (v. 18). The Hebrew word, *èzer*, for “helper” is taken as something subordinated but in reality it is a term used frequently for God’s action as an action of salvation. It is almost always used in the Old Testament referring to God as the helper of his people, of the poor, of men, etc.⁴ Woman is like a mirror that reflects the face of man, she reveals him to himself. It is in this way that v. 18 speaks of “helper”.⁵ The term for “fit” in Hebrew is *ke’negdô*. The connotation of the word *neged* is to be in front of someone, at his side, in his presence in a reciprocal relationship.⁶ According to G.H. Tavard being created at the end is a sign of major perfection. As against some who think of the creation of woman as the lowest in the series of creation he states that it is “a creation that grows from Adam to woman, with the intermediate creations serving to establish the stage for the higher creation that is achieved with the modelling of woman”.⁷

1.2. The Creation of the Human Being as Male and Female in the Image of God (Gn 1: 26-28)

After six days of work the climax of God’s work is the creation of the human persons in God’s own image and likeness. The grammatical construction of a plural “let us make” is a plural of deliberation — a deliberative style in Hebrew.⁸ “God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (v. 27). The threefold repetition, the fact of being given dominion over the rest of creation, and the evaluation “very good” after the creation of man and woman show that humanity is the climax of God’s creative activity. They were representatives of and witnesses to God’s power and love toward all creation. Both man and woman share this responsibility and this greatness. Both bring God’s touch to the world.⁹ From this we infer that man and woman equally make God’s presence felt in the world.

According to S.B. Clark sexual differentiation is part

of God's original purpose for the human race since man and woman are essential for a fully functioning human race. He observes on 1:26-28 that since it is about the creation of the human race everything that is said about "man" is true of every human being. Nothing in it indicates that "woman does not take part in the commission associated with being in God's image", rather the repetition in v. 27 indicates that woman shares not only the commission but also the image of God which makes the commission possible.¹⁰

1.3. Women and Jesus

There were many women who followed him and some of them were of means "who ministered to him of their substance" (Lk 8:1-3). These women remained faithful even to the end. Women come to him and he helps them directly. He heals them, on occasion he touches them. He talks to them individually, regularly in private and sometimes in public (cf. Jn 11:17-44). On one occasion he even talks to a woman when both of them were unaccompanied. He teaches women along with men (cf. Lk 10:38-42). When he teaches, he speaks of women and uses womanly tasks as illustrations. He never shows disrespect but relates in a brotherly fashion. He has some women travelling with him to serve him (cf. Lk 8:1-3). He calls them individually "daughter of Abraham" (Lk 13:16), explicitly according them a spiritual status like that accorded to men. On his way to Calvary he calls them, "Daughters of Jerusalem" (Lk 23:28). He admires the "feminine" response of the Cananite woman and sometimes he presents this lively faith as an example. This way of dealing and speaking with women clearly constitutes an "innovation" with respect to the prevailing custom of his time. At the foot of the cross, in front of the most arduous test of faith and fidelity women proved stronger than the apostles.

1.4. Paul and the Dignity of Woman

None of Paul's statements implies that he thought of woman as less the object of God's redemptive love than man. He worked with women very actively and his love and respect for women did not diminish. On the contrary there is much evidence of Paul's friendship with women:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchræ, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquilas, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus ... Greet Mary who has worked hard among you ... Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaina and Tryphosa. Greet

the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, eminent in the Lord, also his mother and mine ... Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them (Rom 16:1-3, 6, 12, 13, 15).

1.4.1. There is neither Male nor Female but All are One in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28)

The recipients of the Letter were Gentile Christians. Paul's teaching revolved around the theme 'Life in Christ'. It refers to the new sphere of existence of the Pauline Christians. To become a Christian, in the Pauline vision of things, meant "to go away from one *place*, firmly controlled by custom and culture imposed upon it by temple and synagogue practice, into another *place*, where all the normally accepted barriers between men and women, imposed by custom and culture, were brushed away".¹¹

The 'neither male and female' assertion does not mean the total abolition of sex difference in a biological sense but concerns relationships: since status in the community depended solely upon the faith and baptism common to all, status and privileges based on gender had no relevance. Man and woman were equal in dignity and responsibility before the Lord.¹²

2. The Dignity of Woman in Recent Magisterium

In fact the growing concern on the dignity of woman is a recent phenomenon that has come from the awareness of her dignity and the importance of her contribution to the edification of the Body of Christ. The Church teaching on woman in the twentieth century represented a significant departure from traditional Church attitudes.¹³ Until the nineteenth century the accepted norm concerning woman was inequality as the natural order of God's world, where woman was considered morally inferior to man. This traditional Catholic conviction disappeared from Church teaching in the nineteenth century. The female role model was that they were honoured in the home and were considered moral guardians and teachers of their children.¹⁴ Their working outside the home was lamented by Pope Leo XIII. But from the time of Pope Pius X to that of Pope John XXIII there was a slow progression in understanding woman's position and her participation in the Church and society.¹⁵

Pope John XXIII speaks of women in two Encyclicals. He does not say that woman is oriented to motherhood but his focal point is that both parents are responsible for family life, for procreation and the education of children.¹⁶ *Pacem in Terris* (1963) is the

climax of his teaching where women are seen as persons and not as sexual objects and it recognised their involvement in society as a “sign of the times”.¹⁷ It affirmed woman’s equality to man and argued that the modern world could not tolerate women being treated as inferior or minor in any way. Women are to be encouraged to reach their full potential for the benefit of the whole society.¹⁸

2.1. Vatican Council II

The Council did not have a profound reflection on the presence and role of women in the ecclesial community, even though we find some references that affirm the importance of a greater participation of women in the life and apostolate of the Church. In the third session of the Council some women were allowed to be present in it as experts and listeners.¹⁹ In October 1965 while the Council debated the proposed Constitution on the Church in the Modern World two bishops submitted some remarks about the position of women in the Church and in the world. The remark of Archbishop P.J. Hallinan includes the confession that “the Church has been slow in denouncing the degradation of women in slavery and in claiming for them the right of suffrage and economic equality”.²⁰ He made four proposals in favour of women: to define women’s function in the liturgy; to include them in the schema to be set up to further the lay apostolate; to give women religious a representation in matters that concern their interests; and to give them opportunities to offer their talents to the ministry of the Church.²¹ Illustrating the part played by women in salvation history Bishop Fulton J. Sheen admitted that women’s role was changing, but insisted that true civilisation demanded certain qualities, which only women could give. These can be characterised “as purity, protection of the weak, sacrifice, procreation, the sustaining and care of human life”.²² He then developed a three-fold aspect of motherhood saying if motherhood is physical, it could also be spiritual and social. Citing the gifts the Christian woman can contribute to society in the civil, economic, cultural and social order he concluded:

“It is not by chance, but in the providence of God, that a woman, given the capacity to give herself totally to others, be placed in the middle of a world which has forgotten its soul. Every woman without exception is morally obligated according to her capacity and condition in life to realise one of these forms of motherhood”.²³

Gaudium et Spes turned its attention to the situation of women. The Church, recognising her solidarity with “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish” of the mod-

ern world, hastened to condemn the injustices of a discrimination based on sex. With reverence for women’s rights and duties in accordance with their own specific aptitudes, she solicits a responsible and fuller share in the whole of the life of society.²⁴ Such an equality and dignity is based on Christ and precedes every difference of charism, roles, and ministry even that of “sex and the particular role which providence has appointed to each sex”.²⁵ Looking at the duties of Christians in relation to culture the document again focuses on women. It demands that all Christians work for the “recognition and implementation everywhere of the right of every man to human and civil culture in harmony with the dignity of the human person, without distinction of race, sex, nation, religion, or social circumstances”.²⁶ Women become the Council’s example of how this must happen.

2.2. Pope Paul VI

He agreed with Pope John XXIII that the sexes had to be equal in rights. Then he argued in one of his audiences that justice for women did not consist in the mere assimilation of their life into a masculine life-style but rather in the elevation of their femininity in a manner that would be complementary to the lives of men.²⁷ In one of his Encyclicals Paul VI also proclaimed that one of the new mighty forces of the modern world was “a new understanding of the dignity of woman and her place in society”.²⁸

At the close of the Second Vatican Council, the Pope solemnly addressed himself to the women of the world from all walks of life whom he identified as “one half of the immense human family”. He told them, “the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and in the course of the centuries, in diversity of characters, to have brought into relief her basic equality with man”.²⁹ This is part of a “deep transformation” humankind is undergoing, and Christian women are asked to “aid mankind in not falling”. As guardians of life he beseeches women: “Reconcile men with life ... and watch carefully over the future of our race. Hold back the hand of man who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy human civilisation”.³⁰

Speaking on social problems, in *Octogesima Advenians* (1971) the Pope also spoke of the discrimination done to women and recognised the steps taken to attain equality of rights and respect for their dignity. He called it a “false equality” which would “deny the distinctions laid down by the Creator himself and which could be in contradiction with woman’s proper role ... at the heart of the family as well as within society”.³¹ There was an emphasis to protect her proper vocation amidst the developments and a call to recognise her “interde-

pendence as a person, and her equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social and political life".³² This is a universal truth and each local Church is encouraged to read the signs of the times in its nation and to act. He recounted how, in spite of the repeated call for change, discrimination still existed on racial, gender, cultural and religious grounds and urged the members of the Church to work for its eradication, taking it as their personal responsibility.³³

In his Message to the Secretary General of the International Women's Year Conference (1975) affirming the goals of the conference he spoke of justice for women who are considered inferior and, of ensuring their full integration in the global effort for development and of recognising their contribution for peace.³⁴ The Pope signed *The declaration on certain questions regarding the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood* which said that the Church could not change the teaching on an exclusively male priesthood because it had been handed down through the centuries of the Church's tradition. But all the same insisted that this did not take away from the dignity and vocation of women in the Church. It made clear the gender roles appropriate to men and women revealed by Christ in the natural order.³⁵

2.3. Pope John Paul II

John Paul II's commitment to restoring women's dignity is outstanding. On many occasions directly and at other times indirectly he has called for a united effort for women's cause. In *Laborem Exercens* (1981) he says, from the view point of the good of society and of the family women, abandoning family tasks and taking up paid work outside the home are wrong when this hinders or contradicts the primary goals of the mission of a mother. At the same time he argues that women should not be discriminated against in employment because of their feminine nature or family duties:

"The true advancement of women requires that labour should be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them and at the expense of the family in which women as mothers have an irreplaceable role".³⁶

Familiaris Consortio (1981) underlines the importance of the equal dignity and responsibility of woman with man. In creating in his own image God gives both man and woman an equal personal dignity "endowing them with the inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person". The highest form of the manifestation of woman's dignity is God taking human flesh from the Virgin Mary and presenting her as the model of redeemed woman. The attitude and

deeds of Jesus towards women confirm their equality and dignity and the climax of this is seen in the mission entrusted to them on the day of the Resurrection.³⁷ Finally he calls for an end to all discrimination against women so that "the image of God that shines in all human beings without exception may be fully respected".³⁸ It is clear then that femininity becomes more a value to defend, a diversity to cultivate and a character to distinguish.

2.3.1. *Christifideles Laici* (1988)

Referring to John XXIII who saw woman's consciousness as "signs of our times" the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici* (1988) affirmed the urgency of defending and promoting the "personal dignity of woman" and her equality with man. The two purposes of the Synod Fathers to give special attention to women's role and status are: to acknowledge themselves and make others acknowledge the indispensable contribution of women to the building up of the Church and society. Acknowledging the need to destroy the unjust and deleterious mentality towards women the Exhortation writes that the first steps towards it would be to recognise their personal dignity and their participation in the Church and in society. "The dignity of women, gravely wounded in public esteem, must be restored through effective respect for the rights of the human person and by putting the teaching of the Church into practice".³⁹ This awareness has been increased in the post conciliar period.

2.3.2. *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988)

This Letter of John Paul II highlights the equal dignity of man and woman, basing its foundation on the Bible which, shows man created in the image and likeness of God as male and female (cf. Gn 1:27). This vision gives the basis for a reciprocal relationship. "*The woman is another 'I' in a common humanity*" with whom man enters into relationship and creates communion.⁴⁰ Thus called to enter into "relationship with", man and woman reflect the Trinitarian communion in the world. To say man is created in the image and likeness of God means that he is called to exist for others, to become a gift, for "man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself".⁴¹ It is from this truth that the Pope begins his reflection on woman. There is a repeated calling to the "unity of the two" which was broken by sin. The dignity and vocation of woman is related with the spousal character of the vocation of every human person created in and by love. While the Pope emphasises the equal dignity accorded to man and woman in being created in God's "image and likeness" he does not stop from saying

that there is a difference in which each gender images God. He condemns all types of “masculinisation” of women and says that equal dignity is not in losing the feminine “originality” but in safeguarding and realising it.⁴² Mary is shown as an example of discovering true feminine humanity. In conclusion the Pope thanks God for the mystery of woman, for the fruits of feminine sanctity and asks all to value and acknowledge the inestimable manifestation of the spirit given to woman, and invites women to express their “genius” which our time awaits.

2.3.3. The Discourses on the “Genius” of Woman

As preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing, in 1995, the theme of the Holy Father’s discourse for the Sunday “Angelus” was on women. The Pope repeatedly affirmed women’s gifts and leadership and praised the “genius of women”. All these texts invited a committed action on behalf of women.

Peace is possible only through a new awareness of human dignity and its promotion. The Pope invited women to become teachers of peace with their whole being and in all their actions because human life is entrusted to them in a special way. The unity of the human family will be incomplete without women sharing their gifts fully. They can do it only if they nurture peace within themselves and this is possible only if they experience being loved by God, which very often is not the case. He affirmed that women must be involved in public life but they should not detract from their unique role within the family.⁴³

In his Message to the Women’s Conference he said that solutions to women’s issues and problems could only be found if they were based on “*the recognition of the inherent, inalienable dignity of women*, and on the importance of women’s presence and participation in all aspects of social life”.⁴⁴ For, recognition of the dignity of every human being is a universal human right. Therefore a new culture must develop affirming the basic dignity of women, denouncing all injustice against them, and respecting and welcoming their “femininity”.⁴⁵

“Without the contribution of women, society is less alive, culture impoverished, and peace less stable”. Hence it is necessary to strive to ensure that the widest possible space is open to women in all areas of human life, so that “human society is increasingly enriched by the gifts proper to masculinity and femininity”.⁴⁶

The Pope said that woman’s genius is vitally essential to both society and the Church. Though man and woman have fundamental dimensions and values in common these acquire different strengths, interests and emphases and it is this diversity, which becomes a

source of enrichment. In the wedding at Cana only Mary realised that the wine was finished. This is the “genius” of woman. Woman’s sensitivity is seen as her “genius”.⁴⁶ The “feminine genius”, he sees, in their capacity to serve others, in their giving themselves to others. According to him,

Perhaps more than men, women *acknowledge the person*, because they see persons with their hearts.... They see others in their greatness and limitations; they try to go out to them and *help them*. In this way the basic plan of the Creator takes flesh in the history of humanity and there is constantly revealed ... that *beauty* ... which God bestowed from the very beginning on all, and in a particular way on women.⁴⁷

As created “to help” mutually, the Pope also speaks of complementarity from the physical, psychological and ontological point of view. Men and women shared equal responsibility from the start in transforming the face of the earth. It is only through the duality of the “masculine” and “feminine” that the human beings find full realisation.⁴⁸

3. Difference

There is general agreement that there are intrinsic physical, emotional and intellectual differences between men and women and these differences make them complementary pairs. Man appears to have a differentiated spatial understanding while woman possesses a greater gift of communion. But neither sex is superior to the other. Beyond sexual characteristics and functions, there is biological and psychological evidence for a substantial difference between the sexes that cannot be reduced to “roles” enforced by history, culture, and society.⁴⁹ The differences find various expressions in different cultures. Edith Stein observes:

There is a difference, not only of bodily structure and of certain physiological functions, but the whole somatic life is different, as well as the relation of the psyche and body.... The female species is characterised by the unity and wholeness of the entire psycho-somatic personality and by the harmonious development of the faculties; the male species by the perfecting of individual capacities to obtain record achievements.... [Woman’s] strength is the intuitive grasp of the living concrete, especially of the personal element. She has the special gift of making herself at home in the inner world of others.⁵⁰

Von Hildebrand thinks that men and women are equal in their nature and in their call to holiness, yet they are two different expressions of human nature. His view is:

“The difference in the personality structure of man

and woman remains an undeniable reality. If we try to delineate these specifically feminine and masculine features, we find in women a unity of personality by the fact that heart, intellect and temperament are much more interwoven; whereas in man there is a specific capacity to emancipate himself with his intellect from the affective sphere".⁵¹

Genesis 1:27 expresses the difference between the sexes. Both were created in perfect equality as human persons but in their respective beings as man and woman. The identity is the same but the image is reflected in two ways as male and female. Porcile Santiso believes that the only difference from which we can infer the specificity is in the physical level and there is no difference in being and in the responsibility. According to her what makes the woman different is her corporeality. This difference cannot have any direct consequence in the social function which man and woman must exercise.⁵² Therefore the difference is in the way of existing as image and not in function, mission or responsibility.⁵³

4. Complementarity

In Genesis 1:27 Pope John Paul II sees the unchanging foundation for all Christian anthropology.⁵⁴ Difference and relationship between the sexes are indicated by the terms of complementarity. "Man and woman were made 'for each other'— not that God left them half-made and incomplete: he created them to be communion of persons, in which each can be 'helpmate' to the other, for they are equal as persons and complementary as masculine and feminine".⁵⁵ With the narrative symbolism of Genesis 2:18-23 the difference between the sexes is interpreted in a deeply uniting key. The complementarity of the sexes in Genesis 1:27 is also aimed at constructing the original unity, the "unity of the two", through the experience of reciprocal communion. Pope John Paul II says that it is precisely because the woman is different from the man that she can be his "helper". This help is not one-sided but mutual. It is not a help merely to "acting" but to "being". Both are complementary from physical, psychological and ontological points of view.⁵⁶ The experience of reciprocal communion enables them to experience their relationship as an enriching gift that confers a responsibility.

Complementarity implies an equality, a correspondence between man and woman and a difference. Their roles are not identical. Their complementarity allows them to be a partnership in which each needs the other, because each provides something different from the other. Each is superior to the other in his/her own domain because each one is endowed with

specific mental values and qualities.⁵⁷

Complementarity though sounding good in practice leads to a two-nature anthropology, as human beings are divided into two different kinds each with an identifiable difference that becomes normative for the sex. Thus males have a set of unique characteristics and females another set of complementary characteristics. This bipolar vision leads to an equally bipolar understanding of their respective place, namely the home and the world.⁵⁸ Women see in the notion of complementarity a mentality that sees female as opposite to male, and an attempt to conceive her in terms of the male who is the "authentic" human. Only one who is totally something can likewise give totally this something. With her distinctive value she has her task, which is still part of the essence of the person.

5. Reciprocity

As has been stated earlier a human being is a relational being; s/he exists in interpersonal relationships; acquires self-knowledge and awareness by responding to another "I" that questions him/her in the same dialogical circle. This relationship, which respects the uniqueness and autonomy of the subjects is called reciprocity.⁵⁹ Reciprocity brings a mutual openness between man and woman, an openness that accepts the differences and the reciprocal responsibility. The reciprocal difference is a reflection of God, his image and likeness. God's image is expressed fully in the integration of the two sexes. Their union constitutes the first form of communion of persons. "In the "unity of the two", man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist "side by side" or "together", but they are also called to *exist mutually* "one for the other".⁶⁰ They stand each in need of a substantial infusion of the other's qualities to achieve harmony and balance in the human person.

Vatican II teaches, "If man is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake, man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself".⁶¹ Relationship between man and woman is essential to understanding the truth about the human being and self-giving. The "sign" of the man-woman relationship remains in woman and it develops and grows until she can spend herself. Woman can lose herself in giving life to others. This is a superiority of affectivity, of vulnerability, of acceptance, of response and of joy. Her superiority lies in protecting and making life grow.⁶² In fact real superiority brings to participation, growth, education, nurturing, development, dialogue, creation and recreation. There is no command but rapport and dialogue and mutual understanding. Here what is evoked is the theological aspect

of the relationship of the Trinity among whom there is no hierarchy and whose order is always mission *ad extra*. Interpretation of femininity and masculinity reflects a human relational society in a Trinitarian circular model.⁶³

Reciprocity therefore, is understood only in the relational nature of the human person. It is a relation to be with and to be for. In it both discover the true self as a person and experience the affirmation of personal dignity, rights and responsibilities.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Woman has an indestructible dignity because she is the image of God. She is directly in relationship to God. By the fact of being made in the image of God woman is equal to man in dignity, rights and responsibilities. In Jesus we find the restoration of the original intention of the created order and it becomes a reality in his Cross and Resurrection. Being the image of God, and therefore a person, a woman is beyond all roles and her value is in God himself. This autonomy would remain abstract if not expressed at a concrete level.

The unfolding and realisation of a woman takes place in her own feminine way differently from man. The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way by the reason of her femininity. This awareness and vocation speak to woman of the dignity she receives from God himself. "Thus the 'perfect woman' (cf. Prov 31:10) becomes an irreplaceable support and source of spiritual strength for other people, who perceive the great energies of her spirit".⁶⁵ Through her inherent motherhood and its virginal connotation a woman can "reconcile men with life" and can keep mankind from falling.

The evidence of women's great mission shown throughout this paper, and the equality of man and woman, cannot be simply overlooked, denied or wished away. The problem is grave for Africa because our societies are mostly patriarchal and masculistic (masculine) in orientation. But one can say that our acceptance of this God-willed reality may be a measure of our self Christianisation. This acceptance implies the empowerment of women, providing educational facilities, helping them in their search for their identity and self-realisation and granting them the respect they deserve. This is a duty sanctioned by God and the Church. A duty that we owe the women-folk of Africa both in charity and in justice. It will then be impossible for God's kingdom to come and we cannot presume to be building God's community in Africa when the contributions of half the population — women — are neglected or frustrated or

when they are excluded and/or discriminated against in the process.

Notes

¹ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Bangalore, Collins, 1980. All Bible references will be taken from it (CCC, n. 371).

² I. Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament*, Minnesota, The Liturgical press, 1997, p. 133.

³ John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis*, Boston, St Paul Books and Media, 1981, p. 47.

⁴ M.T. Porcile Santiso, *La donna spazio di salvezza*, Bologna, EDB, 1994, p. 149. See also A. Magistretti "Il paradigma biblico della donna nei primi tre capitoli della Genesi", in *AA.VV., La dignità della donna*, Roma, Ave, 1989, p. 26.

⁵ A. Gentili, *Se non diventerete come donne: Il femminile nell'esperienza religiosa*, Milan, Ancora, 1987, p. 56.

⁶ M.T. Porcile Santiso, *La donna spazio di salvezza*, p. 149.

⁷ G. H. Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition*, London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1973, p. 5.

⁸ M.P. Hogan, *The Biblical Vision of the Human Person: Implications for a Philosophical Anthropology*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 1994, p. 95. See also G.A. Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research*, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 26, Stockholm, Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1988.

⁹ I. Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament*, Minnesota, The Liturgical press, 1997, p. 133.

¹⁰ S.B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Man and Woman in the Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences*, Michigan, Servant Books, 1980, pp. 13-14.

¹¹ F.J. Moloney, *Woman First Among the Faithful*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984, p. 29.

¹² B. Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Woman*, Homebush, St Paul Publications, 1988, p. 10.

¹³ R.L. Camp, "From Passive Subordination to Complementary Partnership: The Papal Conception of a Woman's Place in Church and Society since 1878", in *The Catholic Historical Review* 76 (1990) 3, p. 507.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Leonard, *Beloved Daughters: 100 Years of Papal Teaching on Women*, Ottawa, Novalis, 1995, pp. 15-20.

¹⁶ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, Encyclical Letter, in *AAS* 53 (1961), 401-464, 45, 193-195.

¹⁷ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, Encyclical Letter, in *AAS* 53 (1963), 257-304, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, nn. 8-17.

¹⁹ S. Recchi, "Donna (Consacrata)", in T. Goffi and A. Palazzini (eds.), *Dizionario teologico della Vita Consacrata*,

Milan, Ancora, 1994, p. 638.

²⁰ V.A. Yzermans (ed.), *American Participation in the Second Vatican Council*, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1967, p. 201.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 202.

²² *Ibid.* p. 203.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Gaudium et Spes* nn. 1, 29, 60, in A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1992. All other documents of the Vatican Council II are taken from the same text.

²⁵ *GE*, n. 8.

²⁶ *GE*, n. 60.

²⁷ Paul VI, "Nel XX di attività del Centro Italiano Femminile", in *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, Vol. III, Città del Vaticano, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1965, 310.

²⁸ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, in *AAS* 60 (1968) 481-503, 2.

²⁹ Paul VI, "Closing Message of the Council to Women", in W.M. Abbott (Gen. ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, 733.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Paul VI, *Octogesima Advenians*, Apostolic Letter, in *AAS* 63 (1971) 401-441, n. 13.

³² *Ibid.*, n. 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, nn. 16-17.

³⁴ Paul VI, "Message to Secretary General of International Women's Year Conference", in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition), July 3, 1975, 5.

³⁵ SCDF, *Inter insigniores*, in A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II. More Post-Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 2; Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1982, p. 343.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, Encyclical Letter, in *AAS* 73 (1981) 577-647, n. 19.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Apostolic Exhortation, in *AAS* 74 (1982) 81-191, n. 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 24.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Boston, Pauline Books and Media, 1988, 49.

⁴⁰ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, n. 6.

⁴¹ *GS*, n. 24.

⁴² *MD*, n. 10.

⁴³ John Paul II, "Women are invited to be teachers of peace", 1 Jan 1995, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition), 4 Jan 1995, p. 5, n. 2, 5-6, 9.

⁴⁴ John Paul II, "Realization of Women's Aspirations Depends on the Recognition of their Full Human Rights", 26 May 1995, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition), 31 May 1995, p. 2, n. 2. See also John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, n. 6.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, "Culture Must Respect Femininity", 18 June 1995, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition), 21 June 1995, 1, 1-2.

⁴⁶ John Paul II, "Society and Church Need Genius of Woman", 23 July 1995, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition), 26 July 1995, p. 1, nn. 1-2;

⁴⁷ *MD*, n. 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 7.

⁴⁹ K. Lehmann, "The Place of Women as Problem in Theological Anthropology", in H.U. Von Balthasar *et al.*, *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, San Francisco, Ignatius, 1988, p. 28.

⁵⁰ E. Stein, *The Writings of Edith Stein*, London, Peters Owen, 1956, p. 142.

⁵¹ D. Von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman*, Chicago, Franciscan Herald Press, 1965, p. 13.

⁵² M.T. Porcile Santiso, *La donna spazio di salvezza*, p. 203.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 204.

⁵⁴ *MD*, n. 6.

⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican City, Libreria Ed. Vaticana, 1994, n. 372.

⁵⁶ John Paul II, "Culture of Equality is Urgently Needed Today", 28 June 1995, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition), 28 June 1995, p. 1, n. 1. See also John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, n. 7.

⁵⁷ S.B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 23; also see J. BURGGRAF, "Woman's Dignity and Function in Church and Society", in H.U. Von Balthasar *et al.*, *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, San Francisco, Ignatius, 1988, p. 104.

⁵⁸ J. D'Mello, "Paradigms for a Feminization of the Church", in *SEDOS Bulletin*, 31 (1999) 8/9, pp. 226-227.

⁵⁹ Cf. C. Militello, "Maschile e femminile nel segno della reciprocità", 47. See also G.P. Di Nicola, *Uguaglianza e differenza: La reciprocità uomo donna*, Rome, Città Nuova, 1988.

⁶⁰ *MD*, n. 7.

⁶¹ *GS*, n. 24.

⁶² M.T. Porcile Santiso, "Uomo-donna: Prospettive antropologiche e teologiche", in C. Militello (ed.), *Che differenza c'è? Fondamenti antropologici e teologici della identità femminile e maschile*, Turin, SEI, 1996, pp. 139-140.

⁶³ M.T. Porcile Santiso, "Uomo-donna...", p. 141.

⁶⁴ G. Colombo, "Libertà e responsabilità per una pienezza di vita", in P. Cavaglia *et. al.* (eds.), *Donna e umanizzazione della cultura alle soglie del terzo millennio: La via dell'educazione*, Rome LAS, 1998, 194.

⁶⁵ *MD*, n. 30.

Ref.: Text from the Author. June 2002.

Coming Events

Living Our Mission Today in Conflict and War Situations - The Pastoral and Spiritual Challenges -

*by Msgr. Luis Augusto Castro Quiroga, I.M.C.
Archbishop of Tunja (Colombia)*

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The Heart of Mission: Comforting and Befriending

*by Chrys McVey, O.P.
Missionary in Pakistan*

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Working Groups

Next Fall 2002, **Bible and Mission Group**
Wednesday, 11 September, **China Group** 15:30 hrs at **SEDOS**