

sedos

Bulletin 2002

Vol. 34, No. 1 - January

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Éditorial

Les deux premiers articles de ce numéro de janvier 2002 portent sur la question de la paix. **Mark Browder**, dans *A Call for the Palestinian Gandhi*, s'inspire des images de Gandhi et Martin Luther King pour indiquer ce qui fait défaut dans la recherche de solution au conflit israélo-palestinien.

Diego Irarrazaval, dans son article *Threads of Faiths in a Texture of Life — Theological Issues in Inter-faith Praxis*, fait état d'un monde nouveau en train de se construire, et qui présente de multiples défis. Monde caractérisé par la mondialisation politique et économique, le dialogue avec les autres fois, religions et spiritualités. Monde où sont présents les valeurs religieuses mais aussi leurs pièges.

Depuis une vingtaine d'années, des organismes de coopération internationale (OCI) appliquent l'approche Genre et Développement (GED) afin non seulement d'accroître la reconnaissance du rôle des femmes en les conscientisant sur les construits sociaux d'inégalité, mais surtout pour contribuer au renforcement de leur pouvoir décisionnel à tous les niveaux. Dans le même temps, et souvent sur les mêmes terrains que les OCI, l'Église affirme agir dans la ligne d'un "développement intégral" alors même que les faits révèlent souvent des difficultés réelles auxquelles sont confrontées les femmes de ces réseaux ecclésiaux en tant qu'agentes de développement. **Martine Floret**, dans *Développement et Église : Contagion par le genre ?*, propose des pistes de réflexion issues de la question suivante : l'approche GED, proposée et appliquée par plusieurs OCI, viendra-t-elle "contaminer" les réseaux ecclésiaux qui travaillent souvent en partenariat avec eux ? En d'autres termes, l'approche GED sera-t-elle une brèche par où le salut équitable arrivera ?

Dans *Spirituality in Interreligious Dialogue: Challenge and Promise*, **Giuseppe Scattolin** débute en citant le proverbe arabe qui veut que "les humains ressemblent plus à leur temps qu'à leurs pères". L'époque dans laquelle nous vivons façonne profondément notre vie intérieure. Le pluralisme est certainement l'une des caractéristiques majeures de notre époque et il représente un défi. Le pluralisme religieux ne peut être interprété simplement d'une manière négative et pessimiste ; le débat déborde le cadre des spécialistes ; nous entrons dans une nouvelle situation au plan de la spiritualité. Le spirituel est d'autant plus important qu'il est au cœur de toutes les religions.

Peter C. Phan, dans *Conversion and Discipleship as Goals of the Church's Mission*, prend pour point de départ l'exhortation apostolique *Ecclesia in America* (1999) de Jean Paul II, qui décrit trois sentiers qui mènent à la rencontre avec Jésus Christ. Le premier sentier est celui de la conversion et les deux autres sont ceux de la communion et de la solidarité. Dans cet article, l'auteur se penche principalement sur la conversion. Celle-ci est vue comme un "tournant" vers Jésus Christ et une prise en charge de sa mission. Puis il examine les implications de la conversion dans le contexte plus large de la mission et ce que suppose la conversion pour l'avenir de la mission.

Avec **Jean-Marie Bosc**, nous terminons ce numéro par un tour d'horizon du Viêt-nam où le père **Huynh Công Minh** nous parle de la situation de l'Église vietnamienne.

Bonne lecture !

Bernard East, o.p.
Directeur exécutif de Sedos

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Schreiter, Robert J.,
(edited by)
Mission in the
Third Millennium,
Orbis Books, Maryknoll,
New York, USA, 2001.

Available at SEDOS.

Directeur exécutif : Bernard East, o.p.
Secrétaire de publication : Ilaria Iadeluca
Abonnements et comptabilité : Margarita Lofthouse

Correctrices des épreuves
Langue anglaise : Philippa Wooldridge
Langue française : Sophie Guichard

Mark Browder

A Call for the Palestinian Gandhi

Recent events have shown just how terrible things can become in the Middle East, especially in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The world currently sees a war with no discernible end in sight combined with an escalation of the usual violence between Israel and the Palestinians. To the casual observer there would seem to be no way out of the vicious cycle of violence which begets more violence. Talk of peace has become just that; talk.

However, there may be a way out of this vicious cycle of violence after all, at least with reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And while few, and certainly not myself, are actually calling for an end to Operation Enduring Freedom, until terrorism is completely wiped out; an end to the violence between Israelis and Palestinians would be in everyone's best interest.

It would seem that the key to peace would lie with peaceful actions, not with violent actions. After all, the current cycle of violence is unlikely to produce a peaceful result even in a hundred years. However, we have two examples from history who have shown us that peace, security, and equal rights can be achieved by those who do not currently enjoy these rights within the space of 10 to 30 years' time. These two examples are Mahatma Mohandas Karanchand Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

Gandhi was struck by the inhumane and discriminatory treatment of his fellow Indian peoples in South Africa which he faced first-hand when he arrived there for the first time in 1893. He, therefore, began a peace movement he called *satyagraha* which espoused non-violence as the means by which to acquire civil rights for the Indian people. In 1901, having championed the cause of his native peoples in South Africa he left for India promising to return if he were needed again. A plea from the Indian community in South Africa in fact brought him back in 1902 where he continued to lead his non-violent movement for civil rights.

His deeds resulted in the passage of the Indian Relief Act in 1914. In 1915 he left South Africa for the final time and returned to his native India in tri-

umph. By this time, because of his success in South Africa, he began to be recognized by others as a Mahatmas, which is a term of reverence which is generally translated as 'Great Soul' and could roughly be equated with the term 'Saint'.

Beginning in 1915 he championed the cause of the downtrodden masses in India by continuing there his non-violent movement for the remainder of his life. Finally, in 1921, he made his first bid for Indian self-rule and independence from the British Empire. He was arrested many times throughout these years spending a total of 2,338 days in various jails in South Africa and India. Finally, Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January, 1948 at the age of 78. But his movement resulted in Indian Independence and peace. Violence had not paved the way; peace had.

Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., took Gandhi's example of non-violence as the method by which he wished to help acquire civil rights for American Blacks in this country. King had been greatly influenced by Gandhi during his studies which culminated in his completion of a Ph.D. in 1955. Immediately he elected to become a minister in Montgomery, Alabama, where he led a boycott of the local bus system that year. While others had much to do with beginning and nurturing the civil rights movement King led the way for the utilization of non-violent means by which, within 10 years, civil rights for American Blacks were achieved. King gave his famous "I have a dream" speech in 1963 and received the Nobel Peace Prize that same year. In 1965 he organized a march from Selma to Montgomery which helped lead later that year to the passing of the Voting Rights Act. Finally, on 4 April 1968 King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Again, the way to peace and civil rights had been achieved through peaceful means, not by violent means.

So, one may ask, by exactly what means might the Muslim and Christian Palestinians find and follow a path which would lead them to peace? The answer may be found in the Islamic Shiite tradition of the Mahdi. The fact that this tradition usually necessitates

the concept of a warrior saviour is not a problem since it is not a necessary part of the concept of the Mahdi. In addition, since many Muslims traditionally expect a reformer to be sent to them at the beginning of each century it would seem now to be the appropriate time. And there have been many claimants since the inception of the idea of the Mahdi. For example, in 1890 Ghulam Ahmad of India declared himself to be the Mahdi but added that jihad need not be physical warfare but rather spiritual warfare. He helped to pave the way for the concept of a, more or less, peaceful Mahdi.

It, perhaps, should be remembered that many Jews during the Roman occupation expected a Messiah to be sent to them who would be a warrior who would cast off the Roman yoke and destroy all of Israel's enemies. And there were many claimants to the title of Messiah both before and after the lifetime of Jesus. While scholars still debate whether Jesus actually claimed to be the Messiah himself, it can not be disputed that he has fulfilled the role of a peaceful Messiah which is not what the general population expected of their Messiah. And, although the movement he fostered, namely Christianity, has sometimes utilized violent means to achieve its ends, just as the peace movements begun both by Gandhi and King sometimes degenerated into violence, the overall impact of Christianity and these other movements has been peaceful.

The time is right for someone to lead the Palestinian cause in a peaceful, non-violent manner. If this is done it is possible that they may achieve peace, security, and civil rights within 10 to 30 years. Certainly this would be better than utilizing violent means which will never achieve a peaceful result.

Ref.: Text from the Author.

Conferencia de SEDOS

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La experiencia de evangelización de un misionero peruano

en una Misión de la Amazonía, Koribeni.

Con Daniel Wankun Vigil, o.p.

Martes, el 26 febrero 2002

hora 16:00

Hermanos de Escuela Cristiana

Via Aurelia, 476

Roma

La conferencia estara en castellano.

Traducción en inglés, francés, italiano

Entrada: Euro 4,00

Diego Irarrazaval, CSC

Threads of Faiths in a Texture of Life
Theological Issues in Inter-faith Praxis

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We deal with new challenges; namely, with political and economic global factors, religious pluralism in most societies, and Christian theologies in dialogue with other faiths for the sake of human well-being. In the midst of these realities, many go through a spiritual revolution. In my case, from a devout and fundamentalist Catholic milieu I have moved to inter-religious concerns for justice. Together with leading a Christian community I participate in indigenous rituals and celebrations that have syncretic and non-Christian features; all of this nourishes me. Urban populations in Latin-America walk among many symbolic and spiritual systems; and in the heart of most persons there is an encounter of various religions/spiritualities.

Since the Mystery of Life is revealed through a rainbow of cultural and religious mediations, theological discourse has to go beyond its sectarian history and to be relevant among peoples of different faiths. Thus we are weaving threads into a new theological fabric. It can be said that theology becomes macro-ecumenical in so far as we respond to plural manifestations of God's mystery of salvation. In my opinion, the task is a theology of universal salvation that arises from the cry of the poor, and not a limited "theology of religions".

1. World scenario

September 11, 2001, was a crime against humanity. What followed has been worse: a global market economy has joined hands with political and military powers. It is a North-Atlantic totalitarian alliance with governments of the whole world. Under the slogan of "war against terror" we are faced with new absolutes of Good (Western civilization) and Evil (any substantial critique or alternative). The modern empire has said: if you are not with me you are against me. So, there is a revival of several forms of fundamentalism, mainly a political-economic modern Mamon, and also Islamic and Christian fundamentalisms; with their cor-

responding idolatries.

In this scenario, we again turn to God's justice. It is incompatible, as Elsa Tamez explains, with a human programme of "infinite justice". The gracious and merciful God of Justice, that resurrects the Crucified, is also on the side of all victims throughout history.¹

In today's world there are also alternative voices and networks, like the Social World Forum that has met twice in Porto Alegre, Brazil; and all sorts of local initiatives in terms of health, ecology, labour, community, etc. ... that have an alternative thrust. How is God present in these struggles and dreams? They have to be measured by the Gospel ethical standards.

2. Mystery and plurality

To speak of one true Saviour and many human religions (as if this were a dilemma) is one point of view. It is preferable to focus on a multidimensional and inexhaustible Mystery and the human paths to wholeness. Asian theologians manifest a reverence of Mystery, expressed in other religions that have their rituals, texts, persons.² It is better not to judge with one's criteria another religion, but rather to focus on the Otherness of Mystery in terms of which any religion has to show its meaningfulness.

Plurality of religions is not only a phenomenon; it can be seen as a mysterious will of God, as it is pointed out by Claude Geffré.³ This does not imply relativism, nor a devaluation of Christ's salvation; since all of history, cultures, peoples, spiritualities, are touched by God's love.

3. Religious traps and values

Religions (particularly those with monotheistic prin-

ciples) have a tendency to be exclusive and intolerant; they often legitimize violence; and they can direct human attention to themselves rather than to a Source and Presence (and in that way religions become idols). Inter-religious dialogue has to make a critique of all those traps.

In a constructive way, inter-faith/religious dialogue addresses itself to a joyful Mystery of life. This is inseparable from the tasks of justice and peace. Faustino Teixeira warns that religion plays a special role but may not claim a monopoly over these tasks; Marcelo Barros praises efforts in Brasil and all over Latin America since the 1970's, between brothers and sisters of different Churches, together with non-believers who thirst for justice, in a common defence of land, of indigenous communities, of the political road to liberation.⁴ In terms of these values we carry on inter-faith praxis.

4. Theological guidelines

Inter-faith praxis, from our perspective, is rooted in the Spirit of Christ that moves everything and everyone in unpredictable ways; and we dialogue with other religious Sources of life. Its ethics is that of the Gospel of love and justice; that is, dialogue is not self-centred nor religion-centred; rather we contribute with our loving/just praxis and collaborate with other ways of seeking wholeness (according to each religious tradition). Thus we place different threads of faith in a common texture of life.

Notes

¹ See Elsa Tamez, "Justicia infinita, injusticia sin fin", *Pasos*, 98 (2001), 7-12.

² See Office of Theological Concerns, Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, "Doing Asian Theology in Asia today", Hong Kong, October 2000. This text affirms a plurality of methods in doing theology, which has to "meet the basic standards" of Revelation, of the *sensus fidelium*, and of the *magisterium* of the Church.

³ See Claude Geffré, OP, "Pour une théologie de la différence", *SEDOS Bulletin*, 33/11 (2001), p. 291.

⁴ See Faustino Teixeira, *Teologia das religioes*, São Paulo: Paulinas, 1995, pp. 206-7; and Marcelo Barros, *O sonho da Paz*, Petrópolis: Vozes, 1996, p.193.

Ref.: Text from the Author.

Développement et Église : Contagion par le genre ?

Introduction

Imaginez ! Nous sommes au Nord du Burkina Faso : il fait plus de 40 degrés celsius à l'ombre, et une quarantaine de personnes, en majorité des femmes, participent à une session "*Femmes et hommes, partenaires en développement*". Par choix stratégique pour ne pas effrayer avec un nouveau mot, la mention "Genre" n'apparaissait pas dans le titre de la session même si nous l'avons utilisée tout au long de la rencontre¹ de quatre jours. Avec deux autres québécoisES, je participe à la co-animation de cette rencontre qui se situait dans le cadre d'un travail de collaboration entre un organisme de coopération internationale² québécois, la Fondation Jules et Paul Émile Léger, et son partenaire terrain, l'Organisation catholique pour le Développement et la Solidarité (OCADES)³.

Au cours de la deuxième journée, fin d'après midi, l'ambiance s'enflamme quelque peu. En effet, une femme, religieuse, donne comme contre-exemple au partenariat, la situation suivante :

Monsieur le curé dit : "Sœur Euphrasie, vous irez demain à Bam (ville voisine) pour une réunion des femmes". Et la sœur de répondre simplement "Oui, monsieur le curé".

Un prêtre enchaîne en reconnaissant que la pastorale est trop "*une pastorale de curés*". Et une autre intervenante d'ajouter que certains programmes du diocèse arrivent à la dernière minute, ceux qui décident n'ont besoin que d'exécutantEs.

Vous ne trouverez peut-être rien de très nouveau dans ces exemples. Pourtant je crois pouvoir y appliquer la réflexion d'Anita Caron analysant la situation québécoise des rapports homme-femme dans l'Église⁴ :

"bien que timide encore, cette prise de position incarne, de toute évidence, une ouverture à des changements qui se traduit notamment par une dénonciation du caractère patriarcal de l'Église (...). Il demeure qu'un bon nombre sont de plus en plus capables de reconnaître qu'en dépit des fonctions qu'elles exercent, elles sont toujours, dans l'Église, des fidèles de seconde classe".

À partir de cette observation, enrichie par des témoignages d'autres consultantEs d'OCI, je me suis demandé si nous ne venions pas d'assister à une sorte de contamination de l'Église par le Genre à travers ces remises en question de fonctionnement touchant aux relations femmes-hommes, clercs-sœurs-laïcs. Le responsable du bureau local diocésain de développement m'a d'ailleurs confirmé qu'une telle prise de parole publique était une nouveauté.

Alors pourquoi ne pas oser une certaine utopie prospective, comme nous y invitait, en août dernier Ivone Gebara, "*ayons des laboratoires d'utopie, essayons-les*".

Je m'y risque maintenant en me basant sur l'approche Genre telle qu'elle est présentée en développement international ainsi qu'à partir de textes et discours de l'Église afin d'étayer mon intuition première sur une possible contagion.

Mon exposé se divisera donc en trois parties.

1 - L'approche genre et développement ⁵

Travaillant dans un OCI, membre déléguée, entre autres, du Comité québécois femmes et développement (CQFD), j'ai ainsi eu la chance de participer à ses différentes réunions. L'une d'entre elles fut d'ailleurs

consacrée à un bilan de l'approche GED, dix ans après⁶.

La perspective GED, s'origine dans les années 80 alors que des chercheuses femmes du Nord et du Sud critiquent les approches jusqu'alors promues en développement comme celles de *Promotion des femmes* ou encore d'*Intégration de la Femme au Développement* (IFD).

L'approche *Promotion* se caractérise par une action "pour" elles : on leur proposait de participer à des actions sur des terrains leur étant traditionnellement dévolus (cuisine, couture...) sans réellement les rendre agentes de programmes. Elles étaient exclusivement confinées et confirmées dans leur rôle de mère⁷ et restaient des exécutrices.

L'Intégration de la femme au développement fit un deuxième pas en souhaitant les intégrer dans l'élaboration de projets terrain mais là encore sans réelle analyse des causes de leur marginalisation : "*elle ne questionne pas la base des rapports sociaux entre les hommes et les femmes*"⁸. De plus, cette approche considère les femmes comme "*un problème à résoudre*". Or, et je cite :

"il ne s'agit pas de faire participer les femmes dans des projets conçus et contrôlés par d'autres, mais plutôt de les appuyer dans leurs propres démarches au sein d'organisations qu'elles se sont données, (...) et se poser la question du pouvoir"¹⁰.

Une nouvelle approche a donc émergé, **l'approche GED**. Elle vise :

"la transformation des rapports entre les hommes et les femmes (...). Le but de l'analyse GED est que les femmes et les hommes agissent comme décideurs, que les marginalisés et les femmes acquièrent un pouvoir sur leur vie, l'"empowerment", que les relations inégales se transforment"¹¹.

Cette approche se caractérise par une analyse contextuelle selon les rôles ou différents types de travail (productif, reproductif, social) et selon les besoins (pratiques/stratégiques). Elle questionne également le pouvoir afin de renforcer celui d'agir, de se prendre en charge, de décider.

Ainsi, nombre d'OCI québécois travaillent avec des partenaires du Sud et portent l'approche GED à travers des analyses contextuelles, l'élaboration conjointe de projets, leurs réalisations et leurs évaluations. Les organismes du Sud semblent adopter cette ligne de transformations sociales et culturelles. La mise sur pied de coopératives pour femmes, des projets de micro-crédits gérés par des femmes, leur participation à la marche mondiale des femmes et des projets de formation en sont l'illustration et les signes d'un engagement à changer des structures et à déplacer des pouvoirs¹².

2 - Église et développement

Comme nous avons en présence sur le terrain de notre session au Burkina un OCI et un organisme d'Église, je me propose maintenant de regarder par touches impressionnistes comment cette dernière se situe en développement en mettant en évidence certains aspects qui m'apparaissent très contradictoires. En effet, une fois de plus, vous pourrez constater que l'Église met de l'avant un discours qu'elle ne s'applique même pas à elle-même.

Rappelons que c'est par son activité missionnaire que l'Église a participé et continue de vouloir participer en faveur du développement des peuples¹³ : "*l'activité missionnaire apporte aux pauvres lumière et encouragement pour leur véritable développement (...) développement intégral ouvert sur l'Absolu*"¹⁴.

S'inspirant de *Sollicitudo rei socialis*¹⁵ (1987), Jean Paul II met l'accent sur l'esprit d'initiative et, fait encore plus remarquable, sur la relativité des structures. C'était au Mexique en 1990, et je cite :

"Le développement humain exige un **esprit d'initiative**, de la part des personnes mêmes qui en ont besoin. Chacun doit agir selon sa propre responsabilité, sans attendre tout des structures sociales, d'assistance ou politique..."¹⁶.

L'Église mentionne également la nécessité de **changements institutionnels**, institutions qui sont génératrices d'injustice dans le monde¹⁷. Mais Mgr Camara, archevêque de

Recife (Brésil) de préciser : “le changement de structures dans les pays en développement sera impraticable sans le changement des structures dans les pays développés”¹⁸.

Enfin, l'Église dans ses différentes interventions écrites en faveur d'un développement intégral, parle largement d'égalité et de justice. Pourtant, comme le rappelait encore récemment Joan Chittister à l'occasion de la première Conférence internationale de Women's Ordination Worldwide à Dublin en juin 2001, “nous avons une Église qui **prône** l'égalité mais maintient une ecclésiologie de supériorité”.

Plus localement encore, le Synode africain a mis l'accent sur l'Église famille de Dieu et sur la justice avec une option préférentielle pour les déshérités.

Pourtant, dans le texte final *Ecclesia in Africa*, exhortation apostolique post-synodale, Jean Paul II, tout en déplorant et condamnant “les coutumes et pratiques qui privent les femmes de leurs droits et du respect qui leur est dû”¹⁹, a censuré le début de la phrase²⁰ des pères synodaux qui situait le problème dans de nombreux pays d'Afrique “et quelquefois aussi dans l'Église”. De plus, il n'a pas repris leurs recommandations concrètes notamment le numéro 48 :

“... Que l'Église établisse des ministères pour les femmes et intensifie ses efforts pour favoriser leur formation”²¹.

Un théologien, grand connaisseur de l'Afrique, note d'ailleurs à ce propos :

“Difficile d'écarter avec plus d'élégance, et sous le couvert d'une formulation indolore et sans âge, une suggestion jugée pour le moment inopportune”²².

Finalement, par ce très rapide parcours à travers des textes de l'Église sur le développement, nous pouvons retenir trois éléments :

-l'Église parle presque toujours **pour** les autres

-elle n'invite que très rarement à une **auto-critique**

-elle n'emploie jamais le terme **Genre** mais en est encore à la Promotion des femmes, approche largement dépassée dans

le milieu de la coopération internationale puisqu'elle nie en grande partie la responsabilisation des personnes dans la mesure où l'on pense “pour” elles. Or, comme l'écrivait Ivone Gebara dans son ouvrage *Le mal au féminin* :

“une réflexion sur le Genre (...) catégorie très peu utilisée en théologie, (permet de mettre à jour) tout un système de relations de pouvoir basé sur le rôle social, politique et religieux de notre réalité d'êtres sexués”²³.

N'est-ce pas ce qui permettrait de réaliser efficacement un développement véritablement intégral pas seulement pour les autres, les pays du Sud, mais aussi pour nous ?

3 - Quelle contagion par le genre ?

L'Église dans les pays du Sud a mis sur pied des bureaux diocésains de développement et de solidarité. Ils œuvrent sur un terrain dont ils n'ont pas l'exclusivité (comme en catéchèse ou en pastorale) mais collaborent avec d'autres OCI locales et internationales. Ces dernières travaillent notamment à la conscientisation des populations avec l'approche GED.

Si je reviens à mon exemple d'introduction, durant ces journées de session nous avons assisté à un événement doublement novateur. En effet, c'était la première fois qu'un tel rassemblement avait lieu sur le sujet “*Femmes et hommes partenaires en développement*” en touchant aux causes d'inégalités dans les rapports de genre. Pour la première fois, des femmes et hommes identifiaient ainsi en public des exemples de ce que je nommerai un dysfonctionnement ecclésial, comme me l'a confirmé un responsable burkinabé. Un premier pas venait d'être franchi : une sorte de contestation à l'interne, même si, arrivées à l'étape de pistes concrètes à envisager, les participantEs n'en ont formulé aucune en direction de l'Église. Pourtant, à n'en pas douter, un processus de changement touchant aux rapports femmes-hommes à l'intérieur même de l'Église est amorcé au Burkina.

Le terrain du développement ne serait-il pas alors un lieu de naissance et de propaga-

tion de rapports équitables entre femmes et hommes sujets ? Attitude qui se répercuterait ensuite, comme nous l'avons observé, à l'intérieur du fonctionnement de l'Église. Et ce, par le fait même que des femmes et des hommes travaillant en développement transmettent par ricochet leurs prises de conscience dans d'autres secteurs de la société dont celui de l'Église.

Au terme de cet exposé, je ne peux m'empêcher d'établir un parallèle avec un autre sujet pas si éloigné du développement surtout quand on le présente comme intégral. Je veux parler du récent scandale des violences sexuelles²⁴ faites à des religieuses par des clercs dans certains pays d'Afrique. Sujet plus que douloureux. La publication de différents documents à ce propos, ne laisse-t-elle pas aussi présager que de l'intérieur même de l'Église les langues vont se délier et dénoncer enfin ouvertement des dysfonctionnements graves touchant ici directement aux droits de la personne ?

L'Église va-t-elle laisser passer l'occasion de s'appliquer la même justice que celle qu'elle demande pour les sociétés civiles où sont bafoués de tels droits ? Souhaitons que non et qu'elle mette en pratique ses propres paroles :

“... Nul ne doit, parce qu'il est associé d'une manière ou d'une autre à l'Église, **se voir priver des droits habituels**”²⁵.

Conclusion

Il est indéniable que des femmes et des hommes, jusqu'alors vuES comme la masse des croyantES, osent aujourd'hui s'exprimer et contester un certain ordre établi en faveur du pouvoir de certains. Et je pense qu'ils le découvrent ou redécouvrent en Afrique, en grande partie par le travail de conscientisation opéré par des organismes de développement non exclusivement d'Église. Par la même occasion, ils mesurent l'importance de se solidariser²⁶ à travers des actions de développement et commencent à vouloir faire de même à l'intérieur de l'Église.

Il y a fort à parier qu'une telle onde de

choc entraînera des mouvements de peur, de surplus de contrôle comme nous le constatons déjà chez certains. Ils se targuent d'agir pour le respect du bien commun, de l'unité de l'Église mais pour ce faire, censurent le pluriel, le dialogue avec l'altérité. Nous avons d'ailleurs constaté, lors de la session au Burkina, que la plus grande résistance est venue de jeunes prêtres nouvellement ordonnés. Leur pouvoir leur semblait sans doute menacé et leur formation, à notre avis, ne les a pas outillés pour dialoguer théologiquement ni autocritiquer un certain fonctionnement ecclésial, dont le leur.

Pourtant, comme le dit un proverbe burkinabé : “*Si les fourmis se rassemblent, elles peuvent soulever un éléphant*”. Ces fourmis sont à l'œuvre même dans des contrées que l'on ne regarde pas toujours. Oui, j'ai vu des femmes et des hommes commencer à soulever l'éléphant du poids socio-écclésio-culturel des inégalités de genre. Et en ce sens, je crois que la contagion par le genre a commencé à se répandre au sein même de l'Église par ceux que l'on nomme “les simples” baptisés !

Notes

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¹ La session fut initiée par un organisme de coopération québécois en collaboration avec l'organisme catholique de développement et de solidarité du lieu (OCADES).

² Organisme de coopération internationale abrégé par OCI.

³ Organisme fondé par la Conférence épiscopale du Burkina, présent dans plusieurs diocèses du pays et reconnu par le gouvernement.

⁴ Anita Caron, “Une ouverture à des changements possibles”, dans *Les rapports homme-femme dans l'Église catholique : perceptions, constats, alternatives*, IREF, n.4, Montréal, 1999, p. 85-86.

⁵ Genre et Développement communément abrégé par GED.

⁶ *L'approche Genre et Développement : dix ans après*, CQFD, 2000.

⁷ Cf. Isabelle Jacquet, *Développement au masculin/féminin. Le genre, outil d'un nouveau concept*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1995, p. 86.

À ce propos, j'ai d'ailleurs constaté qu'un certain nombre de religieuses œuvrant dans le diocèse de Ouahigouya offraient de la formation pour jeunes filles dans ces mêmes secteurs traditionnels. Elles reconnaissaient être confrontées à un problème : ces jeunes filles ne trouvaient pas d'emploi et souvent allaient se prostituer à la capitale. Pourtant, elles ne remettaient pas encore en cause leur modèle éducatif.

⁸ Sonia Grmela, *Proposition "pour une politique féministe du développement de l'AQOCI"*, mai 1995, CQFD, Montréal, 1995, p. 10.

⁹ Centre Tricontinental, *Rapports de genre et mondialisation des marchés*, L'Harmattan, Paris/Montréal, 1999, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Les femmes : symboles à la mode ou véritables partenaires en développement*, CQFD, Montréal, 1988, p. 5.

¹¹ Sonia Grmela, *Proposition "pour une politique féministe du développement de l'AQOCI"*, CQFD, Montréal, 1995, p. 2-3.

¹² Cf. Idq, p. 21.

¹³ Pour un bref historique sur la question développement et Église, voir Ion Bria, dir., *Dictionnaire œcuménique de missiologie*, Cerf/Labor et fides/Cle, Paris, Genève, Yaoundé, 2001.

¹⁴ *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 59.

¹⁵ *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 44 "Chacun doit découvrir et profiter du mieux possible de l'espace de sa propre liberté. Chacun devrait être capable d'initiatives qui répondent aux exigences mêmes de la société".

¹⁶ Jean Paul II, "Appel aux habitants de la vallée de Chalco", dans *DC*, n. 2008, 17 juin 990, 605.

¹⁷ Cf. *Solidarité et développement. L'engagement de l'Église catholique*, Cerf, Paris, 1992, p.142.

¹⁸ Cité dans idq, p. 129.

¹⁹ *Ecclesia in Africa* dans Maurice Cheza, *Le synode africain*, Karthala, Paris, 1996, p.

353, n. 121

²⁰ Cf. René Luneau, *Paroles et silences du Synode africain*, Karthala, Paris, 1997, p. 181.

²¹ Maurice Cheza, *Le synode africain*, Karthala, Paris, 1996, p. 262, n. 48.

²² René Luneau, *Paroles et silences du Synode africain*, Karthala, Paris, 1997, p. 182.

²³ Ivone Gebara, *Le mal au féminin*, L'Harmattan, Paris/Montréal, 1999, p. 94.

²⁴ Voir à ce propos le site internet de Culture et foi qui a constitué un dossier sur le sujet, dont le reportage (16 mars 2001) du *National Catholic Reporter*. C'est par ce dernier que l'affaire a été rendue publique. (www.culture-et-foi.f2s.com)

²⁵ "La justice dans le monde", *DC*, n. 1600, 2 janvier 1972, n. 7.

²⁶ Cf. Jean-Marc Ela, "L'avenir de l'Afrique", dans *L'avenir du développement*, Col. Alternatives Sud, L'Harmattan, France/Canada, vol. IV, 1997, 100-120.

Réf. : Texte de l'auteure.

Spirituality in Interreligious Dialogue: Challenge and Promise

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Introduction

A common Arab proverb says: "Humans resemble their time more than their fathers". The meaning is that people, living in the same time context, share a mentality which makes them more akin than they are with people of previous generations. This proverb points to an important factor that shapes our lives: time. Time is not only the framework in which we are born and die, but it deeply shapes our interior life.

Interpreting "the signs of times" has become a common topic in Catholic theology since Vatican Council II. It is also one of the main themes of Scripture. God, we believe, reveals himself not in abstract thoughts, but through the events and happenings of human history. Consequently, Christian faith must be in continuous interaction with time and time events, taking them into account as decisive and essential factors for its growth.

The present essay intends to explore some aspects of Christian spirituality in our present historical context which is inescapably one of religious pluralism. This is, surely, a new challenge for Christian spirituality, but it may also turn into an opening to new dimensions and horizons. In the end, it may become an opportunity (in the sense of biblical *kairos*) of becoming more Christian.

1. Pluralism: The challenge of our time

1.1. The Present Context

Understanding our time and the deep changes our world is going through has become a compelling concern among scholars in our day.¹

The new era we are entering upon is often qualified as being one of a 'global context' or 'globalization'. The accelerating breaking down of economic, social and political barriers is creating a common global market. But along with such an economic expansion, deep cultural and spiritual changes are also going on. Peoples from all corners of the planet are now

coming closer. No one, Christians included, can possibly afford to live in seclusion, in cultural and spiritual isolation.

Jacques Dupuis remarks, at the beginning of his book, that: "... the encounter of cultures and religions, which is increasingly becoming a fact of life in the First World countries themselves, has turned the theological debate on other religions into a primary concern in the Churches of the Western world as well".²

In short, pluralism at all levels is becoming all the more a permanent feature of the present and future human predicament. Now we no longer discuss world religions as far away entities, belonging to foreign peoples and countries, but we find them on our doorstep. As a consequence, all religions, Christianity included, are now challenged to define their own identity in a plural context, in close interrelationship; this is vital for their future.

Finding the meaning of this new situation of religious pluralism both at the theological and the spiritual level has become a basic concern of theologians. Religious pluralism cannot be seen just as a historical accident, or interpreted only in a negative, pessimistic way. Theology is always called to be open to God's purpose and providence in the important events of human history. Now the question has already shifted from the old topic of 'theology of religions', as separated, distant entities, to 'the theology of religious pluralism', as the title of Dupuis's book clearly declares.

Christianity, in the past, used to live in a world vision in which it placed itself naturally at the centre. In such a vision, the 'other', the non-Christian, was basically seen as either a potential Christian to convert or an infidel whose destiny was not guaranteed. All this was well epitomized in the famous traditional theologoumenon: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (*Outside the Church there is no salvation*).

Nowadays we are entering, not without hesitations and refluxes, into a new spiritual situation. For the Catholic Church the turning point has surely been the Second Vatican Council. Since then, a lot of theological re-

search has been dedicated to the topics of religious pluralism and intrerreligious dialogue.

A. Race, for instance, says that: "... the future of the Christian theological enterprise is indeed at stake in the attitude the Christian adopts to the newly experienced religious pluralism".³

And D. Tracy adds that: "We are approaching the day when it will not be possible to attempt a Christian systematic theology, except in serious conversation with the other great ways".⁴

M. Barnes focuses on the fact that we are becoming more aware of the 'other', from all points of view, religious included. We are beginning to take difference seriously. The existence of the other can no longer continue to be peripheral to our faith: we have to exist and coexist in a pluralistic religious context.⁵

Consequently, our spirituality too cannot continue to be isolated, content to live in the secure fold of the Church. In a way, it must come out and meet the other, people of different creeds and faiths, on the streets, next door.

1.2. Spirituality in Our Time

The issue of religious pluralism is not confined to the academic level of theological discussions. It concerns the whole of Christian faith and life, and its spirituality too.

Spirituality is not an easy topic to define. Many different definitions or descriptions of it have been given by scholars.⁶

M. Downey sees spirituality as: "... a way of consciously striving to integrate one's life through self-transcending knowledge, freedom and love in light of the highest values perceived and pursued".⁷

For E. Cousin spirituality is connected with the 'spiritual' in humans: "The spiritual core is the deepest centre of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality".⁸

In short, it seems to me that spirituality is a complex attitude involving a number of different elements: the person concerned, the world context in which he/she finds him/herself, and the transcendent reference of both, the ultimate Reality. All these three dimensions must be part of an integrated spirituality.

For the purpose of the present research it is im-

portant to underline that the religious factor, in all its variety and plurality, is part of the spiritual context and must become an integral element of its constitution. In fact, the interreligious context has a special significance for it, being an important mediating factor in inter-human relationships and, ultimately, in relation to the transcendent Reality.

It is therefore important to investigate the way the new, present context of religious pluralism is going to shape our spirituality, highlighting the challenges that a true contemporary Christian spirituality has to face.

Looking to the past, one can say that the traditional spiritual world of Christian saints developed in what one might call a mono-religious context. This does not mean that Christianity existed without inter-action with its context; history witnesses to just the opposite. It is a fact, however, that Christian saints naturally sought their perfection inside the Christian fold. Non-Christians could at most benefit from their sainthood, but surely not teach them anything in it.

A good case in point is the great popular modern saint, St Thérèse de Lisieux. She was very sympathetic with sinners and non-believers, to the point of offering for them her life, as victim to the Divine Love. Yet, all this was done by her in the sole perspective of the salvation of their souls so that they too might enter the Christian fold in the end.

Such an isolated spirituality is now challenged by the present context, which is inevitably a pluralistic one. This new religious situation obliges us all to rethink our spiritual way of life, coming to terms with God's presence in our present world and finding a meaning for our faith. One could dare to say that Christian spirituality will have a real future only by becoming a meaningful presence in an expanding pluralistic context, in close encounter and dialogue with other religions. To this purpose, some basic interior attitudes must be developed, going beyond past spiritual and theological positions.

2. In interreligious encounter

2.1. The Other: Identity and Difference

A term which is becoming all the more central in our pluralistic culture is the 'other'. There is nowadays a growing sensibility and perception of the specificity of the 'other' at all levels, religious, cultural, racial, etc. This attitude is quite different from what was prevalent until the quite recent past in many world ideologies, such as nationalism, communism and others. A basic trait, common to these ideologies, was the rejec-

tion, to the point of elimination, of the 'other', the different, the foreign.

Accepting difference, taking it seriously, may not be easy. A basic feeling of fear of the 'other' needs to be overcome. We are, in fact, always inclined to reduce the unknown to the known, the unfamiliar to the familiar, distorting in this way, consciously or not, the image of the other. Rooted in all human beings there is a basic 'inclusive instinct'.⁹

Barnes, in his article, relates his estranged feeling in hearing his Christian experience kindly reduced by his interlocutor to Hindu terms. The same happens very often to one living in an Islamic context, as I do. However, I find this experience helpful, because it makes us aware that we, in our turn, may make the same mistake of reducing the other to our own terms. This attitude is not infrequent in the theological readings of other faiths: one is always easily tempted to interpret the other in one's own terms.¹⁰ Beyond all good intentions, such attitudes are likely to be perceived by the other as a kind of an imperialistic attempt at assimilation. In approaching the other, one has to come to terms first of all with the 'other in its otherness', taking differences seriously.¹¹

A common prejudice to be overcome in this process is that of picturing other religions in abstract terms, as closed systems of beliefs either to be accepted or rejected in their entirety. J. Lipner argues against such an attitude highlighting that religions are always polycentred phenomena. Particularly in day to day life there is always a human space in which people interrelate, bridge over to one another beyond fixed dogmatic patterns. For this reason, he calls for a basic attitude of 'constructive empathy', oriented to creating 'an open-ended mode of being'.¹²

Such an attitude helps people to be open to the presence of God in the other. To counter the 'inclusivist instinct' one has to become aware that God acts in all religions: "One must at least allow for the *possibility* of God's action outside the known boundaries".¹³ Accepted with such an open mind, the other ceases to be a menace to one's own self, becoming, on the contrary, an essential factor of one's own identity. Self-identity is not obliterated but enhanced through the openness to the other. There is a mutual fulfillment in a true interfaith encounter. D. Lochhead, for example, relates how he was personally enriched in overcoming a mentality of hostility towards his Catholic environment, crossing over to an attitude of understanding and partnership. He concludes saying that now his life cannot do without a 'Catholic' component, and this has been for him an unexpected enrichment.¹⁴

This is what is hoped for from a sincere interreligious dialogue. Change must not be required as a prerequisite of it, but it must surely be one of its outcomes.

In this way, the other ceases to be seen as an opponent, but turns into a catalyst that helps in deepening one's own religious experience, becoming part of one's own identity. Having lived for a long time in an Islamic context, it has now become impossible for me to think of my Christian faith and practice without having in mind the Islamic view and sensitivity to it. For example, picking up a book of Christian prayers or songs, I spontaneously ask myself: what would my Muslim friend get from such expressions? Would they help him/her in understanding something of Christian faith or make it more obscure to him/her? In some way, the 'other', the 'Islamic predicament', has become an integral part of my daily life and reflection, say, of my own identity.

This way of acceptance of the other, in his/her otherness and difference, is often designated as 'intra-religious dialogue' and proposed as the premise for a true 'inter-religious dialogue'. The other is no more a foreigner, but a guest in our journey of faith: we let the other's belief and life question and test our own belief and life. This openness will add depth and breadth to our own understanding of Christian faith.¹⁵ Dialogue, in fact, is not, in the first place, dealing with abstract systems of thought, but with concrete persons in their quest for truth, a quest in which each partner must become a 'thou' for the other. Eventually, we all are called to journey together from hostility to 'partnership' (Lochhead), or 'relation in mutuality' (Cousins), or 'mutual conversation' (Barnes). In any case: "Dialogue probes both partners in all aspects of their humanity and religious commitment".¹⁶ In conclusion, a common ground of mutual esteem and understanding, an intra-religious dialogue, should be fostered before meeting in an exterior dialogue. Experience proves that there is no meaningful and fruitful interreligious dialogue if it has not been prepared by an intra-religious one. However, this attitude cannot be just taken as a pragmatic way of getting along with people of other faiths, but must grow from a new theological vision of God's presence in the world.

2.2. On Paradigms and Beyond

Finding the meaning of the contemporary pluralistic religious context has become one of the major issues in modern theological reflection.¹⁷ In 1973, John Hick with his book *God and the Universe of Faiths*, launched his 'Copernican revolution', calling for a 'God-centred' theology of religions as a radical departure from the traditional 'Christ-Church-centred'. Since then, the de-

bate has been focused on the so-called religious paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism.

This division, however, is becoming obsolete, as we are moving beyond paradigms.¹⁸ Proposing a 'common idea of God' to be shared by all religions, as the supporters of the pluralistic view pretend, is seen as an over-simplification of differences, leading to a dangerous religious reductionism and relativism. In fact, all religious reflection is situated in a specific 'faith context', and only in it can be properly understood. There is no Christianity without Christ, no Buddhism without Buddha, no Islam without Mohammed. On the other hand, exclusivist and inclusivist paradigms do not seem in tune with the new perception, emerging from the present situation of religious pluralism.

The salvation of non-Christians is no more the central issue in the interreligious debate. Contemporary theology feels to be called to focus on: "... the meaning in God's design for humankind of the plurality of living faiths and religious traditions with which we are surrounded".¹⁹

Many theologians, such as Barnes and Dupuis, think that instead of starting from a preset theological paradigm it is better to build a theology of dialogue on the basis of an actual interreligious encounter. They propose theologies in conversation (Barnes), or in dialogue (Dupuis), or in interpenetration (R. Panikkar). No religion, meeting the others, can start by setting itself or its views on the top of them all, fixing an *a priori* theological pattern, even if a pluralistic one. There is an increasing awareness that in interreligious dialogue each partner should start rethinking his/her own faith in an unprejudiced openness to the others.

Each religious tradition, in fact, should develop from within itself an open and dialogical attitude in relation to the others. The two aspects, commitment to one's own tradition and openness to the other's faith, should not be contrasted, but strictly and faithfully conjugated together by all partners. This is surely a positive spiritual attitude to be developed and a workable premise acceptable by all sides.

It is to be remarked that the official documents of the Catholic Church do not discuss at length the theological status of non-Christian religions, but give just some practical guide-lines on how to enter into dialogue with them indicating the four basic levels of, life, works, thought and spirituality.

In fact, an open, dialogical attitude can be developed only through an actual experience of dialogue.

Dialogue, in fact, does not involve only theoretical thinking, necessary as it may be. It must be, in the first place, a meeting at the level of spiritual life and religious experience which are the heart of all religions. It seems that in the present interreligious context a spiritual person, or saint, should not be such only in the limits of his/her own religious tradition, as it has been in the past. He/she should gain a sort of recognition beyond strict confessional boundaries if his/her sainthood is to be contextualized in our present historical situation. Recently, we have witnessed some holy persons, such as Mother Teresa (d. 1998) and Bede Griffiths (d. 1993), gaining appreciation and recognition beyond their confessional boundaries, by people of other religious traditions. Their way of life, opened to the pluralistic religious context surrounding them, had a tremendous impact, opening paths of mutual understanding and esteem among people of different religious traditions.

This seems to be now the type of sainthood fitting for our present pluralistic context, and this is what the people of our time expect: an interreligious way of sainthood, one could say.

3. Entering into dialogue

3.1. A new spiritual vision

Entering into a dialogical attitude is not an easy task. A radical interior change is required. Accepting the 'other', not as an opponent, but as a partner in one's own journey of faith, implies a growth towards a new understanding of one's own faith. This attitude may be summarized as a basic openness to two mysteries: the mystery of God's love working in all creation and human history, and the mystery of the human person in quest of ultimate truth and love.

One must grow first in the conviction that God speaks through the other and must be 'allowed' to do so. One has to recognize that the other, too, has a truth from God which may complete one's own truth. No religion can claim to possess the full truth about God, or the full comprehension of God's mystery. Dialogue, in fact, is: "... a matter first and foremost of coming to terms with the mystery of what God is doing in the world".²⁰

On the other hand, one must be open to the mystery present in every human being. The human being is defined as essentially self-transcendent, in a perpetual quest of truth and love beyond any particular situation or predicament. In this sense, no paradigm can fully express such a dynamism of self-transcendence which starts from within a given tradition but reaches out beyond it to the unknown. Religions are not just fixed

patterns of beliefs. In each religion there is an inner life, a dialectic between prophetic dynamic aspects and institutional static ones. These are openings for mutual encounter and exchange.²¹

Moreover, religions exist in communities of people, living in particular historical and social contexts. Every believer feels to be called to the double task of fidelity to one's own faith and openness to the others. In a true interreligious encounter or dialogue, the two moments are not contrasted, but always interrelated: in a sense, they grow together.

For this reason, Barnes prefers the term conversation to that of dialogue among religions. Dialogue seems to suggest rather a dialectic of words, while conversation indicates a direct meeting of people. In fact, he insists, entering into dialogue one must turn from an 'idea-dominated' relationship into a 'person-centred' one. The common ground of dialogue is not, in the first place, a given general idea about God, but the common human quest for God. A true encounter, based on this premise, is bound to bring a new and enlarged understanding of one's own faith.

Cousins describes dialogue as a spiritual journey, a crossing over to the other and a coming back, enriched by the other's richness. As has been seen, to this purpose a deep, mutual empathy between the partners is required. Interreligious dialogue is becoming, in his view, the distinctive spiritual journey of our time: "Through interreligious dialogue, we may be entering a new age of faith".²² One may say that spirituality in our present pluralistic context is becoming all the more a spirituality of openness to the others, or a spirituality of and in interreligious dialogue.

3.2. For a theology of dialogue

Interreligious dialogue, however, should not be seen just as a new fashion or cultural mood. It must be grounded in a deep understanding of one's own faith. Christian theology is struggling to come to terms with two basic tenets of its faith: the uniqueness of Christ as the universal Saviour and God's love and presence in all religions. Are these two truths in contradiction so that accepting one of them the other is forfeited? This has been the central issue of the theological paradigms. Now a more comprehensive solution can be looked for in a new understanding of the Trinitarian mystery seen as the source of the theology of dialogue. Our human interreligious dialogue is viewed as an image, a participation of the dialogue going on at the very core of the ultimate mystery of Being, God himself. This mystery is, in Christian terms, not just an undifferentiated or amor-

phous Oneness, but a deep dialogical interrelation in which unity is expressed in and through the distinction and otherness of persons: the mystery of the Trinity. This same mystery is seen to be the source and the model of all interreligious dialogue and spirituality. Also here unity and diversity among the religious partners must be accepted and conjugated together.

Dupuis expands a Trinitarian theology of dialogue centred on the presence of the Word before and outside the limits of the Incarnation.²³

Barnes develops a Trinitarian theology of dialogue based on the role of the Holy Spirit as the revealer of God's mystery in human history.²⁴ It is the same Spirit of God who makes the mystery of Christ present throughout human history. In this way, Barnes intends to go beyond both a self-centred inclusivism and a reductionist pluralism. In dialogue, he says, one does not just look for the 'hidden' Christ in other religions but for: "... the way the Spirit of Christ is active, in all religions, in revealing the mystery of Christ — the mystery of what God is doing in the world".²⁵ God's presence in creation and human history, religious history included, in all its various manifestations, becomes now the main concern of the theology of religious pluralism and dialogue. In a Christian understanding this can be conjugated with the centrality of Christ's revelation.

In the end, however, one must always be aware that God, even in his self-revelation, remains for ever the known-unknown, the present-transcendent, the never exhausted Mystery: "God remains a mystery, but a mystery which seeks to reveal itself".²⁶

And in meeting God's mystery, one must know that: "Paradox and dialectic are at the heart of all human religiosity; we only come to know God by being prepared to struggle with ambiguity and insecurity".²⁷ Faith is never a conquest, but a gift to be received in wonder.

Besides, Dupuis reminds us that interreligious dialogue should take into consideration the actual conditions of humankind. The great world religions extend through areas of the impoverished and oppressed masses of the South of the world. A true interreligious dialogue cannot overlook such a situation of injustice and exploitation, but must always be conjugated with both a theology and praxis of liberation.²⁸

Conclusion

The present research is intended to point to the fact that a new spiritual attitude is required by our present context of religious pluralism. From within all religions, an attitude of openness to the 'other in his/

her otherness' must be developed. This can be achieved only on the basis of a new perception of God's presence in all religions and cultures. The other, the different should no longer be perceived as a threat, an opponent, but welcomed as a partner on a common journey of faith. Such a deep spiritual change can only be brought about through a new understanding of one's own faith. In a Christian vision, dialogue should not become just a new fashion of our times, but the expression of a deeper insight of the Trinitarian mystery. This mystery is considered the source and model of a spirituality of and in interreligious dialogue.

Such spirituality must, finally, become involved in the suffering of humankind, in the struggle for justice and liberation on behalf of the oppressed. These are, in my view, some basic traits of a spirituality suitable for our time, a time of religious pluralism and interreligious encounter.

Notes

¹ 'See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, London, SCM, 1983, pp. 1-9; Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, pp. 1-21; Michael Barnes, *Religions in Conversation: Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism*, London, SPCK, 1989, pp. 3-16; Ewert H. Cousins, 'The Nature of Faith in Interreligious Dialogue', *The Way Supplement* 78 (Autumn 1993) 32-41. Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York, Orbis Books, 1997: 'Introduction', pp. 1-19.

² Dupuis, *Toward*, p. 1.

³ Race, *Christians*, p. 4.

⁴ Cited in Dupuis, *Toward*, p. 19.

⁵ Michael Barnes, 'On Not Including Everything: Christ, the Spirit and the Other', *The Way Supplement* 78 (Autumn, 1993) 3-4.

⁶ On spirituality in general see: Richard Woods, 'History of Christian Spirituality', in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey (ed.), Collegeville, Minnesota, 1993, pp. 938-946; Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality*, London, SPCK, (1st. ed. 1986) 1996: 'Preface', pp. XXIV-XXVI; Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, 1997, pp. 6-15; Peter H. Van Ness (ed.), *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, World Spirituality, London, SCM, 1996.

⁷ Downey, *Understanding*, p. 15.

⁸ Cousins, 'Preface to the Series': in Van Ness (ed.), *Spirituality*, p. xii.

⁹ Barnes, 'On Not Including', pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ 'Compare the reading of the Hindu concept of 'saccidananda' in Wayne Teasdale, 'The Mystical Meeting Point between East and West', in *Mysticism: Medieval and Modern*, ed. by Valerie M. Ligorio, Salzburg (Austria), Institut für Anglistik and Amerikanistik, 1986, pp. 109-117, with the understanding of the same concept in Dupuis, *Toward*, pp. 274-279.

¹¹ Julius J. Lipner, "The 'Inter' in Interfaith Spirituality", *The*

Way Supplement 78 (1993) 64-70; *id.*, 'Seeking Others in Their Otherness', *New Blackfriars* 74 (March, 1983) 152-165.

¹² Lipner 'Inter', pp. 64-70; 'Seeking', pp. 155-160.

¹³ Barnes, 'On Not Including', p. 5.

¹⁴ David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative — A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter*, London, SCM, 1988, pp. 66-70.

¹⁵ D'Costa, *Theology*, pp. 117-125; Barnes, *Religions*, pp. 160-164.

¹⁶ Barnes, *Religions*, p. 164.

¹⁷ Besides the above bibliography, see Ian Markham, "Creating Options: Shattering the 'Exclusivist, Inclusivist, Pluralist, Paradigm'", *New Blackfriars* 74/867 (January 1993) 33-41, and the response of Gavin D'Costa, 'Creating Confusion: A Response to Markham', *New Blackfriars* 74/867 (January, 1993) 41-47.

¹⁸ Dupuis, *Toward*, pp.180-201; Barnes, *Religions*, pp. 111-131.

¹⁹ Dupuis, *Toward*, p. 10.

²⁰ Barnes, *Religions*, p. 116.

²¹ Barnes, *Religions*, pp. 89-107.

²² Cousins, 'The Nature', p. 32.

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²⁵ Barnes, *Religions*, p. 143.

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Conversion and Discipleship as Goals of the Church's Mission

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* (1999) Pope John Paul II describes three paths leading to an encounter with Jesus Christ.¹ The first path is conversion, the other two being communion and solidarity. Of course, these paths are not parallel roads to Christ; rather they are convergent paths, or to change the metaphor, they are three skeins woven into a single rope binding us to Christ.²

While conversion, communion and solidarity are all necessary for our union with Christ, it is highly significant that the Pope places these three attitudes in that precise order in his Exhortation, with conversion heading the list. Clearly, conversion is treated first because it is the foundation and the condition of possibility for communion and solidarity.³ It is as it were the gate through which a person passes to meet Christ. Furthermore, it lends depth to communion and authenticity to solidarity. Without conversion, communion would be a mere feeling of empathy and sympathy, a sense of clubby fellowship of like-minded individuals, praiseworthy indeed, but lacking the dimension of personal union, the total gift of self, which is the hallmark of true communion, as it has been exemplified by Jesus. Without conversion, solidarity risks being reduced to a simple sharing of common interests which binds together the members of a voluntary non-profit association or a business corporation, necessary indeed for the well-being of a society, but still falling far short of the commitment to suffer with and for the marginalized, the poor and the oppressed and to struggle with them to regain justice and human dignity.

Essential as conversion is for Christian life in general, it is even more central for mission. Indeed, for a long time, it was taken to be the very goal of mission, since it is only through conversion that “soul-saving” and “church-planting” — the two purposes of mission — can be realized. The success of mission was often measured by the number of conversions it brought about. Of course, faith, hope and charity remain essential, but when it comes down to requesting funds for a particular missionary project, unless one can produce facts and figures of conversions likely to be achieved, there is little likelihood that a pragmatic and result-oriented foundation will dole out grants in the hope that the project will increase the three theological virtues.

Nevertheless, in recent theologies of mission, the notion of conversion as the goal of mission, especially if it is understood as renouncing one religion or Christian denomination

to join another, has been seriously questioned. In the last four decades, many if not most missiologists have rejected the long-held view that the purpose of mission is “soul-saving” and “church-planting”.⁴ “Soul-saving” tends to individualize salvation, belittling the other aspects of the Church’s mission such as inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and liberation. “Church-planting” tends to ecclesiasticize salvation, identifying the Church with the Kingdom of God and fomenting rivalries among Christian denominations.

Instead of this church-centred approach to mission, a kingdom-of-God-centred view has been proposed in which the Church is made subservient to, though not separate from, the reign of God.⁵ It is the reign of God that determines the Church and its mission, and not the other way round. In terms of priority and intrinsic importance, the reign of God stands at the top, followed by mission, proclamation, and church. This is the order in which these four realities of the Christian faith should be understood and related to each other.⁶ In this perspective, conversion in the sense of renouncing one religious tradition and joining the Christian Church still is a desirable outcome of mission, but it is not its main goal, let alone its sole purpose.

In light of this radical revisioning of mission, it is necessary to re-examine the concept of conversion and its place in mission. I will first briefly review the biblical concept of conversion. Next I will place it in the wider context of the history of mission. Lastly, I will relate it to the future of mission in Asia as this can reasonably be prognosticated.

Conversion as “turning” to Jesus Christ and taking up his mission

That “conversion” occupied a prominent place in Jesus’ preaching is beyond dispute. His message has been summarized in a terse sentence: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is close at hand, repent and believe the Good News” (Mk 1:15). This message is composed of two parts, the first being a statement of fact, and the second a command. Jesus informed his audience that God’s promise that God would intervene on their behalf was being fulfilled; and he used the symbol of God’s kingdom or rule to describe this intervention. In other words, Jesus declared that they were living in the apocalyptic or end time. The old age had passed, and the new age was dawning. As the result of this

epochal change, Jesus commanded his hearers to “repent and believe” the good news he was telling them. “Repent” and “believe” were presented as two distinct but not separate acts; indeed, they were linked by the preposition “and” to indicate that they form a single process in which “repent” leads to “believe”. This complex process is later called “conversion”.

Conversion as “Turning” to Jesus

As is well known, the word “conversion” is associated with the Hebrew word for “turning” (*teshuvā*) and the Greek word for “change of mind or direction” (*metanoia*).⁷ In neither Hebrew nor Greek is there a connotation of sorrow or regret or shame, much less a rejection of one religion in favour of another, often associated with conversion. In the case of Jesus’ announcement, there might be some feelings of sorrow or regret provoked by turning from one thing to another, as usually happens when one moves from one era to another, or from one place to another. However, the dominant feelings conjured by Jesus’ proclamation were joy and happiness; after all, he was speaking of “good news”! At any rate, there was no question of abjuring one religion and joining another. At no time was Jesus advocating renouncing Judaism and joining another religion such as Christianity, if there be such a thing then. Nor was Jesus seeking to establish a new religion in the way many religious founders did after him, laying out a constitution, by-laws, organizational structures, rituals, and so forth. After all, he continued to be a pious Jew, and was even called a rabbi, observing most if not all of the Jewish laws, especially the Sabbath and the studying of the Torah.

On the other hand, for Jesus, it was not Judaism as usual. In and through his words and deeds, and above all through his own person, something utterly new had happened that burst the bounds of Judaism, like the new wine bursting the old wineskin. This unexpected and total novelty consists precisely in the coming of what Jesus called “the Kingdom of God” which he himself ushered in. By this symbol Jesus understood the definitive coming of God in power to rule in the near future, to bring the present state of things to an end and to establish God’s full and victorious rule over the world in general and Israel in particular. This kingly reign of God would mean the reversal of all unjust oppression and suffering, the bestowal of the reward promised to faithful Israelites, and the joyful participation of believers — and even of some Gentiles — in the heavenly banquet with Israel’s patriarchs.⁸

Because of this utterly new reality, Jesus taught with supreme authority, his own, unlike other rabbis and scribes who had to depend on the Torah; dealt with the Mosaic law with sovereign freedom, breaking even its most sacred rules and regulations, when necessary, to demonstrate that God’s kingdom had indeed arrived; criticized, at times very harshly, religious authorities such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees, for failing to recognize the signs of the coming of God’s reign;

and performed miraculous deeds as signs of the coming of this kingdom.⁹ Most importantly, in light of the coming of God’s kingdom, Jesus related to God in a most unique and intimate way, calling God “Abba”. No less importantly, because of the dawning of this kingdom, he included everyone into his circle, barring none, without any discrimination whatsoever. Rabbi though he was, he was known to share table with tax collectors and prostitutes, thereby defiling himself, but by the same act, he was showing them that God forgave them unconditionally. Rabbi though he was, he transgressed the impurity laws and touched and let himself be touched by women, menstruating and sinful women to boot, to let them know that they too were to be treated with dignity because the Kingdom of God had arrived. And so, the sinners, the impure, the sick, the poor, the women, the children (the so-called “lost sheep of Israel”), even the pagans (*goim*) — whose faith amazed him and was praised by him — flocked to him, and he accepted them all.

That was, I submit, their “conversion”, that is, their “turning” to Jesus.¹⁰ He was as it were the home to which they returned, an image evoked by the Hebrew word (*šabb*). They also changed their thinking about him, in the meaning of the Greek *metanoia*, because they believed that he was not just any other Jew, but the embodiment of what the Kingdom of God stood for, namely, the all-inclusive, gracious, forgiving, healing, saving, tender, motherly, fatherly love of Yahweh.

Lest we think that such a conversion is just a warm and fuzzy feeling, a hand-holding, body-swinging, hallelujah-shouting thing, Jesus’ command to “repent and believe” was both urgent and radical. Urgent, because there was no possibility of tergiversating and procrastinating. Not even the sacred duty of burying one’s own father could serve as an excuse: “Let the dead bury the dead” (Mt 8: 22). Radical, because conversion or turning to Jesus demands a total and absolute denial of self: “If anyone wishes to follow after me, let him deny himself, and take up the cross, and follow me” (Mk 8:34). This is so because conversion is not like taking out a club membership, or changing a religious preference, not even joining a religious organization; it is becoming a disciple of Jesus.

The first and abiding consequence of turning to Jesus is becoming his disciple.¹¹ Accepting Jesus’ call, and never on his or her own initiative, a disciple renounced possessions, abandoned familial and social ties, and literally followed Jesus in his wanderings. A disciple (*mathētēs*) is primarily one who “follows” or “walks behind” Jesus (*akolouthēin*). She or he enters a lifelong relationship with him (“that they be with him” [Mk 3:14]), and therefore can never aspire to become a master in his or her turn. A disciple is not just a student receiving instruction from a teacher. A disciple of Jesus is primarily an apprentice, learning by close observation and personal imitation, by *doing* what Jesus the Master does and by sharing his life.¹² As disciple of Jesus, a person will be persecuted, as Jesus was, precisely because he or she must perform what Jesus did, namely, service to the kingdom.

Conversion as Continuing Jesus' Ministry

This brings me to the second aspect of conversion, namely, continuing the ministry of Jesus. When Jesus called disciples to himself, he did not just want them to keep him company, to hang around with him as it were. On the contrary, the call to discipleship is simultaneously a sending to the people of Israel for the sole purpose of proclaiming the approaching Kingdom of God. Consequently, he sent them out on mission, to preach that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand”, and to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out devils” (Mt 10:7-8). And, after his resurrection, on account of which all power in heaven and on earth was given to him, Jesus commanded them to go forth, teach all nations, and preach the Gospel to all creatures, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15). Clearly, conversion is for the sake of mission.

This intrinsic orientation of discipleship to mission is particularly true in the case of the “Twelve” who were the standing exemplars of what discipleship meant. The number twelve itself was symbolic: it stands for the twelve tribes of Israel. Furthermore, by sending the Twelve out on a prophetic mission to Israel during his lifetime, Jesus connected their mission with his own, which was to gather and reconstitute the tribes of Israel in the Kingdom of God. As John Meier puts it concisely: “The creation of the Twelve thus coheres perfectly with Jesus’ eschatological, people-centred message and mission: God is coming in power to gather and rule over all Israel in the end time”.¹³ In the particular case of the two brothers Peter and Andrew, Jesus promised to make them into “fishers of human beings” (*halieis anthrōpon*).

I would like to suggest that even the command of Jesus at the Last Supper to his Disciples to take the bread and eat it, and the cup and drink from it was also a command to take up his mission. I do not want to deny that at the Last Supper Jesus established a new ritual that would later be called the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which Jesus was really, truly, and as the Council of Trent was to say, substantially present. Unfortunately, the “real presence” of Jesus in the eucharistic species has often been understood in a static and thing-like way. What I am suggesting is that the two expressions “body” and “blood” here mean more than the “body” and “blood” of Jesus in the physical sense. We know that for the Hebrews “body” means the entire reality of the person, what we call today “body and soul” or the self; similarly, “blood” refers to the same entire reality of the person, and not something different from the body, but the same “body and soul” as living, the self as a historical, evolving, living reality, since blood is the symbol of life. But the person of Jesus was more than his “body and soul”. What and who Jesus was, was determined by his relationship to his Father and what his Father assigned him to do. Jesus’ self-identity cannot be restricted to his ontology or his two “natures”. In other words, the “body and soul” of Jesus cannot be separated from the Kingdom of God and his mission within it.

Recall further that the Last Supper was called “last” be-

cause it was a farewell dinner. Jesus knew he was going to be killed because of his message about and work for the Kingdom of God. He also knew that he had not completed the mission entrusted to him by his Father because his life was cut short by those whose interests were threatened by his Kingdom-of-God-oriented behaviour. That was why he wanted to have a farewell dinner with his Disciples. Now, at a farewell dinner, the one who is going away usually hands on something, perhaps the most precious and enduring thing, of herself or himself to those who remain behind. If a teacher, maybe a few words of wisdom; if a parent, a testament or will; if a friend, a token of abiding love. What was most important for Jesus was his mission; it had consumed his energies, it had been his passion and obsession; it had made him who he was. So when he commanded his Disciples to eat his body and drink his blood, he was effectively saying to his Disciples: You who are my followers, take over my mission and complete it for me, since I am prevented from completing it. By eating my body and drinking my blood, you are taking on my mission for the Kingdom of God. The Eucharist is therefore the sacrament of mission *par excellence*.

In sum, conversion means first of all turning to Jesus in a radical way, in a personal and absolute commitment to him, because he embodied the Kingdom of God. Secondly, it also means taking over and continuing his mission for that kingdom.

Conversion in the wider context of mission

If this is the essential meaning of conversion, when and why did it take on the further connotation of joining another religious organization, of becoming a member of the church? In a sense, this new meaning is not something totally alien to the original meaning of turning to Jesus and taking on his mission. Jesus did not call individuals *qua* individuals to conversion. While personal commitment to Jesus and his cause was required, his call to repent and believe in the good news was addressed to the People of Israel as a whole. As we have seen above, the number twelve of the special disciples whom he gathered with him is symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel. It was the People of Israel, and not just individual Jews, that Jesus wanted to gather into the Kingdom of God.

There was no evidence, however, that Jesus himself wanted to found a religious society — “religion” in the modern sense — apart from, much less opposed to Israel. Nor was he perceived to have done so by his contemporaries and even his followers. He and they continued to be and to behave as pious Jews, even though in several practices they did diverge from the official rules and norms. Rather Jesus was seen as a new prophet who, as other prophets before him, attempted to give a new interpretation to the Torah and to purify contemporary Judaism of errors and abuses and bring it back to its authentic ideals. In other words, Jesus was perceived as starting a reform movement *within* Judaism itself.¹⁴

Jesus was not however a religious “lone ranger”. As we

have seen above, he called others to join him as a group in his mission for the Kingdom of God, and taught and trained them for this purpose. In this sense, whoever wanted to follow Jesus, to “convert” to him, necessarily had to join a new movement, a new group, a new community, albeit as yet not separate from and opposed to Israel. Conversion to Jesus was not simply an internal, spiritual experience, a response to his call, but required following him, physically, and joining the community of his disciples.

In this connection, it may be useful to reflect briefly on the nature of Saul’s (later known as Paul) so-called “conversion”. He was certainly one of the most celebrated converts to Jesus’ movement and certainly *the* most influential one. Without his missionary labours and his many letters, Christianity as we know it would not have taken place. Yet we must be careful not to talk about his conversion as a rejection of his former religion, namely, Judaism and joining a new religion called Christianity, as the word “conversion” is popularly used today, when we say that so-and-so is a “convert” from Judaism or from a Christian denomination to the Catholic Church. Paul was and continued to be a religious Jew until the end, and extremely proud of his religious heritage, even though he was deeply pained to see that some of his fellow Jews did not accept Jesus. Paul’s so-called conversion was not joining a new “religion” but rather a change of brands of Judaism, switching from Pharisaic to Christian Judaism. It was an acceptance of a “call” from Jesus to proclaim that the Kingdom of God, which had been addressed to the Jews, was now extended to the Gentiles as well. In other words, in his conversion Paul was not called to join a new religion but commissioned to proclaim that the “God of the Jews” is also the “God of the Gentiles”.¹⁵

However, as the absolute novelty of Jesus’ message about the Kingdom of God dawned more fully on his Disciples, and as the opposition to the new reform group on the part of some officials of Judaism gathered force and became more intense (Paul’s persecution of the Christians was part of this opposition), the identity of Jesus’ community as a separate social and religious entity grew more distinct. Indeed, at Antioch in Syria, the followers of Jesus were given the name of “Christians” (Acts 11: 26). This process of sociological and theological self-definition was accelerated by the fact that Jesus’ followers were expelled from the synagogue, that certain practices functioned for them as entrance requirements and initiation rites (e.g., baptism in the name of Jesus, or in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit), that some essential requirements of Judaism were abandoned (e.g., circumcision).

Above all, the political events surrounding the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the subsequent dispersion of the Jews from Palestine contributed mightily to the emergence of the Jesus movement as a separate “Way” (Acts 9: 2) and eventually a “religion”. This process of separation from the Jewish matrix and emergence into a distinct religion reached its apogee when Christianity was first accepted as a *religio licita* under Constantine and subse-

quently as the official religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius. From then on, the story of Christianity’s extremely rapid, massive, and nothing short of miraculous expansion throughout the Roman Empire, not least by means of “mission”, is too well known to need retelling here. Henceforward, conversion meant abandoning one religion and joining Christianity as another religion.¹⁶

To gain a better understanding of conversion I will place it in the wider context of past missionary endeavours. I will make use of the works of two noted missiologists, a Catholic and a Protestant, Anthony Gittins and Wilbert Shenk.

Anthony Gittins, in his brief but illuminating study on conversion, speaks of it as a “complex and multifaceted” process. In a sense, it may be described as a “religious experience”.¹⁷ But, as Gittins points out, for many peoples, especially the less technologically advanced ones, “religion is inextricable from life, embedded within its fabric. ‘Religious’ experiences are thus not entirely or always separable from what is conventionally labelled an ‘economic’ or ‘political’ or ‘social’ activity”.¹⁸ Therefore, conversion must be seen in the total context of the people to be converted. In this way, it is seen less as a sudden, dramatic event that happens to an individual, a breaking off from the past, though it is certainly that. It is much more, as Gittins notes, “a process rather than an event, part of life’s unfolding”.¹⁹

But being a process does not mean that conversion is not or must not be radical. However, Gittins again notes, “[r]adical is not necessarily dramatic; conversion occurs through continuity as well as by discontinuity with earlier life. Radical disjunction certainly marks the lives of some individuals, particularly men, but does not necessarily characterize all communities, or many women ... many women’s experience is that lives may be lived authentically through commitment to daily routine, rather than by blazing new trails like explorers or pioneers”.²⁰

Finally, because conversion takes place within the total context of a person’s life, it is necessarily related to the community or the culture to which she or he belongs. Consequently, “mass conversion” should not be belittled or dismissed out of hand because of the contemporary emphasis on individual choice as the only truly free choice: “People in social groups frequently act precisely *as* a group, and the exercise of individual choice is subsumed into the group choice, as discerned or decided by appropriate authority”.²¹ Again, Gittins point out, “the conversion process represents the ultimate transformation of the community (and its members) in Christ. Missioners, especially, must discern the ‘seeds of the Word’ or ‘gospel values,’ or simply the presence of God, among people long before the arrival of Christian ministers”.²² Hence, the converts should not be detached from the community, both the old community from which they come, and the new community to which they are now joined, because “[t]he support of a community can legitimately endorse an individual’s conversion and offer positive and negative sanctions to help it continue over time”.²³

Several points made by Gittins about conversion are confirmed by the history of mission. First of all, Gittins's warning against separating religious conversion from its social, economic and political contexts is well taken. Only a very small number of the total of conversions that have taken place in mission fields took the form of a dramatic *volte-face*, à la Paul or Augustine, or of an intellectual discovery à la Newman or Dulles. Rather, the majority of them occurred because of tribal membership (e.g., in Taiwan, the highlands of Vietnam, and many other countries in Africa and Asia, where mass baptisms by legendary missionaries are still recalled with admiration and nostalgia); or familial connections (e.g., getting married to a Christian); or educational contacts (e.g., going to a Christian school); and of course, through infant baptism (which forms the overwhelming majority of cases). These modes of conversion do not differ substantially from those that were operative in the first five centuries of Christianity, both before and after the so-called Edict of Milan in 313.²⁴ These conversions, though not purely religious at first and dramatic, are not necessarily less radical, especially as time goes on and the individual is assisted in his or her faith growth in and by the community.

Secondly, Gittins's remark about group conversion is also to the point. One of the ironies of mission history is that whereas Western missionaries, especially of the evangelical tradition, emphasized the necessity of a "change of heart" and "rebirth" of each individual in the process of conversion, the great majority of conversions occurred in group, e.g., as the result of the conversion of the head of the tribe (who might have found conversion a politically and economically expedient act). As Wilbert Shenk notes, "converts were drawn almost entirely from cultures in which the decision-making is communal. Personhood is defined in relation to one's group: 'I belong, therefore I am'.... The evangelical missionary message was directed to the individual, but that message was received through the eyes and ears that responded corporately, by a community that felt itself besieged".²⁵

Wilbert Shenk provides an additional perspective on conversion in the wider context of mission. Canvassing the recent history of mission in Africa and Asia, he describes the context in which conversions occurred. He begins by noting that the world has become a *world system*, that is, "it has become increasingly interdependent through a series of subsystems: communications, financial, educational, political, religious, technological. At the heart of this system is a world economy held together by technology, which enables it to react to stimuli with great speed".²⁶ Religion, too, is now understood as a system, that is, as Clifford Geertz describes it, a " (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".²⁷

In light of this view of the world and religion as com-

plex and interlocking systems, and from the history of mission, Shenk derives five postulates with regard to conversion. They may be summarized as follows: (1) As long as a group's world system and religions provide satisfactory answers to its various problems, there is little chance for large-scale conversion; conversely, large-scale conversion will likely occur only if the group's world system and religions suffer a crisis. (2) The extent to which a world system and religions control the group determines the degree of success of a religion brought in from the outside in converting the members of the group. (3) In countries that have been colonized, there has been a coercive dimension in conversion, often overt, but real nonetheless, in so far as becoming a Christian in a colony was perceived as ensuring one's social and economic well-being; conversely, refusing to become a Christian could be seen as a patriotic act against colonialism. (4) The modernization and Westernization that missionaries brought with them were perceived as threats by traditional cultures. Hence, the Christian message, which could not be and was not separated from modernization and Westernization, was perceived to create social fragmentation. Consequently, conversion was increasingly confined to the "spiritual" realm. (5) Conversion occurs for a multiplicity of reasons and motives, some of which are reprehensible, while others can be used as bridges to build a more mature faith.²⁸

As confirmation of these postulates Shenk highlights two significant facts of mission history: the vast majority of all conversions to Christianity have taken place (1) among small-scale ethnic, usually agrarian/subsistence societies, where there is no differentiation between religion and culture, not from the adherents of other world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam and (2) from the poor, those who are marginalized and oppressed by a powerful majority society, such as the Harijans in India.

The foregoing observations are not intended to belittle the importance of Christian conversion as a personal "turning" to Jesus and taking up his mission. Rather they remind us that conversion is much more than renouncing one's former religion and joining another religion. Furthermore, the history of mission offers us useful insights into the nature and dynamics of conversion which, though a profoundly personal act in its intention, must be placed in the larger socio-political, economic and cultural context to be fully understood, especially in the work of evangelization. Let us now examine how these insights into conversion will play out in the future of mission, especially in Asia.

Conversion and the future of mission

In concluding his monumental study on mission David Bosch reflects on "Whither Mission?" and ends with these words: "... Mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus ..., wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a commu-

nity, for the sake of the world".²⁹ On his part, Wilbert Shenk, speaking of "the Future of Mission", suggests that any prognostication must use a twofold approach: "reflection on God's action in history, and reading with discrimination the signs of the times".³⁰

God's action in history, I have argued above, is the establishment of his kingly rule in Israel and the world, which is referred to as the Kingdom of God. God did this supremely through the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, the Pentecost, and the Parousia.³¹ While these divine actions remain the theological constants, the "signs of the times" are by their very nature changeable and ever shifting. However difficult the reading of such signs is, it is essential for the future of mission. In the 1960s, the signs were the shout "Missionary, go home!" from Asia and the call for a moratorium on Western missionary movements in Africa. Perhaps those signs of the times should be heeded since the Church's missionary activities were at the time too enmeshed with Western colonialism and too preoccupied with self-preservation and self-aggrandizement.

Some 30 years later mission and missiology have experienced a significant revival, though in ways not anticipated or perhaps even desired by most missionaries of the past.³² For one thing, the Church has been decentred; in its stead the Kingdom of God is given pride of place as the goal of mission, because the mission of the Church is nothing more than the continuation of the *missio Dei* in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Mission is, in the words of David Bosch quoted above, "quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus". Instead of being defined by the Church, mission now determines the identity and tasks of the Church. Instead of viewing mission as something done by the "sending Church" for the "receiving Church", the Church now is understood as missionary by its very nature, and therefore mission is incumbent upon every Christian. Furthermore, it is now maintained that mission is not only something that Christians carry out for the benefit of the so-called "pagans", but also something that the followers of other religions do for the benefit of the Christians, so that the evangelizers become the evangelized and the evangelized become the evangelizers. The *missio ad gentes* becomes a *missio inter gentes*. This is so because the Divine Spirit is present and active in these cultures and religions and infuses them with the "values of the Kingdom."³³ Finally, the proclamation of the Good News, which was considered as the foremost activity of the church's mission, is now placed within a whole gamut of other, equally indispensable activities of the multi-faceted ministry of the Church: witness, worship, liberation, interreligious dialogue, inculturation, etc.

In this new theology of mission, what place does conversion occupy? Certainly, not the place of supreme honour assigned to it by the old theology of mission, namely, as the very goal of mission. As everything else, conversion is now made to serve the Kingdom of God. Mission is not undertaken in the anxious fear that without Baptism and incor-

poration into the Church, pagans would be condemned to hell (mission as "soul-saving"). The possibility of salvation outside the visible confines of the Church is no longer in doubt.³⁴ Nor is "church-planting" rejected; rather it is seen only as a part of the Church's mission and is undertaken not in order to promote Church extension but for the sake of the Kingdom of God.³⁵

Here it may be useful to take note of Pope John Paul II's rejection of some missionaries' practice of remaining silent about the call to conversion and of their separation of conversion from baptism. With regard to the first, the Pope says: "Nowadays the call to conversion which missionaries address to non-Christians is called into question or passed over in silence. It is seen as an act of 'proselytizing'; it is claimed that it is enough to help people to become more human or more faithful ... to justice, freedom, peace and solidarity".³⁶ There is no doubt that conversion in the sense of turning toward Christ is the irreplaceable goal of Christian mission, and silence about it is not only unfaithful to the Christian message but also disingenuous. In this sense, works for justice and peace do not exhaust the mission of the Church.

Not every silence about the call to conversion, however, is reprehensible, and to understand the Pope's statement correctly, the following distinctions seem to be necessary. (1) If the call to conversion takes the form of "proselytizing" understood as any kind of manipulation of non-Christians to convert, by inducement or by threat (the so-called "rice Christians"), then the Pope himself would condemn such an evangelizing strategy, since it infringes upon the convert's freedom of choice. (2) If the silence about the call to conversion is motivated by the concern that conversion has often been, especially in colonized countries, connected with psychological, most often covert but nonetheless real, coercion (see Wilbert Schenk's third postulate), then it is more than justified. (3) If it is claimed that "promoting and witnessing to the values of the reign of God may not be treated as though it were merely a means to achieve the end of building up the Church; this work can be just as authentically missionary as building a church or preparing people for the sacraments",³⁷ then such a claim is theologically valid.

If certain missionaries have been reticent about the call to conversion, it is perhaps because they see that conversion, which often is understood as renouncing one religion and joining the Christian Church, has been made the be-all and end-all of mission. This brings us to the Pope's second rejection, namely, that of the separation between conversion and baptism: "... not a few people, precisely in those areas involved in the mission *ad gentes*, tend to separate conversion to Christ from Baptism, regarding Baptism as unnecessary".³⁸ Again, it must be acknowledged that Christian Tradition has consistently affirmed an intimate link between conversion and baptism. However, if the separation of conversion from baptism is motivated by the concern that the number of conversions has been used as the yardstick to measure the success of mission, and that baptism has been administered without adequate spiritual preparation, then it is a salutary warning to

missionaries that the temptation to make the Church the centre of mission is hard to resist.

Moreover, there is another reason why the call to conversion as the invitation to join the Church has not been sounded in recent times, and that is, as far as Asia is concerned, the prospect of mass conversion to Christianity is extremely unlikely. The reason lies in Wilbert Schenk's first postulate mentioned above and is borne out by the fact that there have been few converts to Christianity from Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The same point has also been made by Aloysius Pieris who argues that Asian religions, which have penetrated deeply into the Asian soil, cannot be dislodged and replaced by Christianity. In other words, for most Asians, their religions do provide satisfactory answers to their existential problems, answers that Christianity cannot hope to improve upon, at least by theoretical arguments.³⁹ Missionaries in Asia must, calmly and soberly, face the fact that Christianity will remain forever a minority religion, despite Pope John Paul II's urgent appeal to direct the mission *ad gentes* to Asia in particular.⁴⁰ Moreover, this fact is not limited to Asia; rather, as Wilbert Schenk has noted, "the Church of the future will be a minority Church in most parts of the world".⁴¹

This minority status of the Church is not however something to be lamented over, nor should it be cause for missionary pessimism. Again, as Schenk suggests, "The prospect of a Church stripped of the accoutrements of privileges and power and committed to servanthood 'in the power of the Spirit' promises a real gain".⁴² But such a promise can be fulfilled only if conversion is taken seriously in its twofold aspect of "turning" to Jesus as Lord and taking up his mission for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Conversion as joining the Christian Church is still a desirable outcome of mission, but it is made secondary to the turning to Jesus and taking up his mission.⁴³

To better understand the role of conversion in mission, it would be helpful at this point to consider conversion in its psychological and anthropological aspects. Such a detailed study is of course beyond the purview of this essay.⁴⁴ For our purpose suffice it to point out that if we only consider conversion in the strict sense, namely, the change of an individual from one religion to another, which mission *ad gentes* seeks,⁴⁵ and if we take into account the six stages of conversion as outlined by developmental psychology, namely, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and growth,⁴⁶ it would seem proper, within the new theology of mission centred on the Kingdom of God, to focus more on these six elements of conversion than on the individual's eventual act of joining the Church through baptism or lack of it. Another way of explaining the role of conversion is to say that of the three components of religious conversion, namely, 1) a change in denominational affiliation or status; 2) a movement *back* or *to* God through personal introspection or outward encounter; 3) a sense in which a person solves or resolves a religious identity crisis which integrates the personality and informs one's purpose";⁴⁷ the focus should be placed on the last two

components rather than on the first.

The reason for this shift of emphasis is that, given the little likelihood of many conversions to Christianity in Asia in the future in terms of receiving baptism and joining the Church, the Church's mission must focus on witnessing to the "kingdom values" by helping others cope with their personal crisis. This crisis may be caused by factors other than religious, such as material poverty, physical illness, psychological loneliness, political oppression, loss of the loved ones, break-up of relationships, etc. The purpose is not to exploit these vulnerable moments in a person's life and manipulate them into opportunities for evangelism and conversion. Rather, this work is part of the Church's larger task of dialoguing with the local cultures (inculturation), with the poor (liberation) and the indigenous religions (interreligious dialogue).⁴⁸ Through this triple dialogue not only individuals but also (and more importantly for Asia, since individual conversions will not be numerous) the cultural, political, social, and economic structures will be converted (Pope Paul VI's concept of "evangelization of culture"), that is, suffused with the Gospel values of justice, peace, solidarity, reconciliation, harmony, forgiveness, sharing, and love.

Furthermore, in this triple dialogue, not only the so-called pagans and the cultures are converted but the "converters" as well. The evangelizes become the evangelized. Mission is never a monologue by the missionaries proclaiming the good news to those who have to listen to it; rather, it is a two-way movement in which, as in any effective communication, the sender becomes the receiver and the receiver becomes the sender in alternation. In this way, conversion is no longer exclusively leaving one religion to join another, but learning whatever is good from another religion so as to be a better follower of one's own religion. Conversion does not always take the form of tradition transition (leaving one religion for another) but also that of "institutional transition", "affiliation", and "intensification", as explained above.

Conversion then can mean, in its Latin etymology, "turning *with*" rather than simply *toward* something else. Christians and non-Christians can turn *together*, with one another, toward not a particular religious organization or church but toward the Kingdom of God, and they can and must help each other in doing so. Just as in ecumenism, the model of "returning" of the so-called "separated brethren" to the Catholic Church is no longer adopted as the goal of Church unity, so in mission in the future, especially in Asia where religious pluralism is the fact of life, conversion is not sought as the joining of the Christian Church by, e.g., ex-Buddhists or ex-Hindus or ex-Muslims (though that may happen from time to time, just as the other way round is also possible) but as the "turning" of all humans, together and with reciprocal assistance and encouragement, toward Christ, that is, to the way of life and the values that he embodied in his own person, and the "taking up of his mission" in the service of the Kingdom of God.

Notes

¹ For an English translation of *Ecclesia in America*, see *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in America of the Holy Father John Paul II* (Washington, DC: NCCB/USCC Publications, 1999).

² *Ecclesia in America* begins with the theme of encountering Christ in general (Chapter I) and in America in particular (Chapter II). It then discusses “the path of conversion” (Chapter III), “the path to communion” (Chapter IV), and “the path to solidarity” (Chapter V). Note the change of prepositions from “of” to “to” in the second and third paths. The Exhortation ends with a discussion of the Church’s mission of new evangelization in America.

³ This order is made clear by the Pope: “Conversion leads to fraternal communion, because it enables us to understand that Christ is the head of the Church, his Mystical Body; it urges solidarity, because it makes us aware that whatever we do for others, especially the poorest, we do for Christ himself” (no. 26).

⁴ These two aspects of the Church’s mission form what David Bosch calls the “medieval Roman Catholic missionary paradigm”. See *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 214. Bosch refers to them as the “individualization” and “ecclesiasticization” of salvation, the former as the result of Augustine’s doctrine of the total corruption of humanity in his debate with Pelagius, and the second as the result of his doctrine of the centrality of the institutional Church in his debate with the Donatists.

⁵ John Fuellenbach puts it tersely in his *Church: Community for Kingdom* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2000) 217: “The mission of the Church must be seen and understood from this perspective: totally in the service of God’s Kingdom designed for the transformation of the whole of creation”. Fuellenbach also makes it clear that the Church is not identical with the Kingdom of God; rather it is the sign of and instrument for the Kingdom. He describes well one of the temptations of the Church: “One of the temptations for the Church in history is to claim the Kingdom for herself, to take over the management of the Kingdom, and even go so far as to present as the realized Kingdom of God *vis-à-vis* the world” (*ibid.*, 79).

⁶ This view of mission is elaborated in detail in Peter C. Phan, “Proclamation of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church: What For, To Whom, By Whom, With Whom, and How?” *SEDOS* (Rome, 2002), forthcoming.

⁷ For the biblical notion of “conversion”, see Beverly Robers Gaventa, “Conversion”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1131-1133; *idem*, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1986); and W. L. Holladay, *The Root šûbh in the Old Testament* (Leiden, 1958).

⁸ See John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 452: “... the kingdom of God is not prima-

rily a State or place but rather the entire dynamic event of God coming in power to rule his people Israel in the end time. It is a tensive symbol, a multifaceted reality, a whole mythic story in miniature that cannot be adequately grasped in a single formula or definition. This is why Jesus can speak of kingdom as both imminent and yet present”.

⁹ For a historical reconstruction of Jesus, see the work of John Meier already cited above, in addition to volume 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (1991), volume 3: *Companions and Competitors* (2001), and the projected fourth volume: *The Enigmas Jesus Posed and Was*.

¹⁰ Interestingly, one of the important contemporary studies on religious conversion is entitled “Turning”. See Emilie Griffin, *Turning: Reflections on the Experience of Conversion* (New York: Doubleday, 1980). Griffin sees “turning” as a process composed of four stages: desire or longing, dialectic or argumentative, struggle or crisis, and surrender. For helpful studies on conversion, see Stephen Happel & James J. Walter, *Conversion and Discipleship: A Christian Foundation for Ethics and Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) and Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986); and *Conversions: The Christian Experience*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulders (Grand rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983).

¹¹ For studies on discipleship, see Hans Weder, “Disciple, Discipleship”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 207-210, and the helpful bibliography cited therein. John Meier summarizes discipleship as (1) the result of Jesus’ initiative in calling; (2) leaving one’s home and following Jesus physically; (3) risking danger and hostility (i.e., losing one’s life, denying oneself and taking up one’s cross, and facing hostility from one’s family). See his *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3: *Companions and Competitors* 47-73.

¹² For a theology of the Church as a community of disciples, see Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

¹³ John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3: *Companions and Competitors* 154.

¹⁴ As is well known, the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has been the subject of much controversy, and the literature is immense. A very helpful introduction is Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

¹⁵ On Paul and his conversion, see the helpful essay by Hans Dieter Betz, “Paul,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 186-201, with an extensive bibliography. It is to be noted that even Paul, after his “conversion”, had to join a community of Christians through baptism, namely, that of the Gentile Church in Damascus. Indeed, it was from this community that he learned that righteousness came not from the Torah (as he had believed) but from faith in Jesus, whom he now confessed as “Lord” and “Son of God”.

¹⁶ For a history of the spread of Christianity in the first centuries, see W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadel-

phia: Fortress Press, 1984) and Ramsay McMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). For a brief presentation of the evolution from the Jesus movement to the institutional Church, see Howard Clark Kee, "From the Jesus Movement toward Institutional Church," in *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 47-63.

¹⁷ Anthony J. Gittins, "Conversion", in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, ed. Karl Müller et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997) 87-89. Here, 87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²² *Ibid.*, 89.

²³ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁴ As Ramsay McMullen points out in his study of Christian conversions in A.D. 100-400, there were "non-religious factors" in these conversions, of which Church leaders were quite well aware. See his *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400*, chapter VI "Non-religious Factors in Conversion", 52-58. McMullen summarizes: "Emperors or ecclesiastical officers controlling the material benefits waved them in front of non-Christians obviously in the hope of changing their allegiance, or they handed out money and food (and advertised the fact) at the instant of change, or threatened to take money or food away from the already converted if they would not abide in their allegiance" (pp. 114-15). Of course, McMullen does not ignore cases of conversion through intellectual demonstration (pp. 68-73).

²⁵ Wilbert Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 101.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 87. The quotation comes from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 87-91.

²⁹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 519.

³⁰ Wilbert Schenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, 186.

³¹ David Bosch refers to these six salvific events as the "faces of the church-in-mission". See his *Transforming Mission*, 512.

³² Donal Dorr describes the older theology of mission, which was predominant from 1850 to 1960, as "the crusader model" or "the commando model" of mission. Its main image of mission is "sending out" missionaries. The alternative model of mission uses two complementary images of "gathering in" and "solidarity". See his *Mission in Today's World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000) 186-92.

³³ See Paul John Paul II's exceedingly important statement on the presence of the Holy Spirit not only in individuals but also in religions and cultures as such in his 1990 Encyclical on mission *Redemptoris Missio* [RM], n. 28: "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also soci-

ety and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history". For an English translation of RM, see *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Proclamation*, ed. William Burrows (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 5-55.

³⁴ On Vatican II's teaching on the possibility of salvation outside the visible confines of the Church, though not without some connection with it, see *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16.

³⁵ Donal Dorr makes helpful distinctions between two kinds of missionaries, those engaged primarily in the building up of the Church both as a community and in its institutional aspects and those primarily engaged in the promotion of "kingdom values" such as health care, education, human rights, ecology, and so on. The second kind of activities is no less mission than the first. See his *Mission in Today's World*, 193-201.

³⁶ RM, 46.

³⁷ Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World*, 198.

³⁸ RM, 47.

³⁹ See Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) 54-55. Pieris distinguishes between "cosmic" [formerly called "animist"] and "metacosmic" religiousness. Cosmic religiousness is an open-ended spirituality which is oriented toward its expression in metacosmic religiousness. The metacosmic religiousness is embodied in world religions, and takes two forms: "agapeic" (such as Christianity) and "gnostic" such as Hinduism and Buddhism). Pieris acknowledges that Christianity still does have a chance of mass conversion in areas where cosmic religiousness remains intact such as some tribal societies of India and Southeast Asia (as it had in the Philippines). See also his *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) and *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

⁴⁰ See RM, 37 (a): "Particularly in Asia, toward which the Church's mission *ad gentes* ought to be chiefly directed, Christians are a small minority". The Pope also says that he is seeing a "new and promising horizon" for evangelization being fulfilled in Asia in his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 9. For an English translation of *Ecclesia in Asia*, see *Origins*, 29/23 (1999), 358-84.

⁴¹ Wilbert Schenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, 188.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴³ For a very helpful study of the role of conversion in the Roman Catholic theology of mission up to Vatican II, see Ronan Hoffman, "Conversion and the Mission of the Church", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5 (1968) 1-20. Hoffman recommends dialogue as the way of mission and writes: "But if at the end of the dialogue, non-Christians wish to retain their religion, Catholics must not only give in gracefully but even, further, let them know that they would sincerely like them to be better followers of their chosen religion and leave all matters to Almighty God" (*ibid.*, 19).

⁴⁴ For a brief study, see Lewis Rambo, “Conversion” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990) 228-30 with a useful bibliography and Alan R. Tippett, “Conversion as a Dynamic Process in Christian Mission”, *Missiology* (1977), 203-21.

⁴⁵ This type of conversion is called “tradition transition” (leaving one religion for another, e.g., Buddhism for Christianity) as distinct from “institutional transition” (leaving one community for another *within* the same religious system, e.g., Roman Catholicism for Lutheranism); “affiliation” (movement from no commitment to a nominal or strong commitment); and “intensification” (revitalization of the commitment to a religious body). See L. Rambo, “Conversion,” 228 and V. Bailey Gillespie, *The Dynamics of Religious Conversion* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1991) 14-15.

⁴⁶ See L. Rambo, “Conversion”, 229-30. I am modifying somewhat Rambo’s categories. Persons undergoing conversion generally go through the following six stages: (1) In the stage of *crisis* they experience dissatisfaction with their lives which they see as inauthentic and feel that change is demanded; (2) In the stage of *quest* they seek new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting; (3) In the stage of *encounter* they meet a person or group whose message seems to answer their needs; (4) In *interaction* they see that their needs are met by this person or group: needs for an intellectual system of meaning, for an emotional sense of belonging, for new modes of acting, and for a leader; (5) In *commitment* they decide to break with their past and accept the new way of life, often through some ritual; (6) In *growth* they consider their new life as a pilgrimage and is supported by the community which they have joined.

⁴⁷ V. Bailey Gillespie, *The Dynamics of Religious Conversion*, 63.

⁴⁸ On this triple dialogue, see the documents issued by the plenary assemblies and various offices of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. See *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. Documents from 1970 to 1991*, ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arévalo (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1992) and *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1997).

Ref.: Text from the Author.

Jean-Marie Bosc

Petit tour d'horizon de l'Église au Viêt-nam avec le Père Huynh Công Minh

Le Père Huynh Công Minh était, il y a quelques mois, de passage à Paris. Il a poursuivi plusieurs années d'études à la rue du Bac, il a été député à l'Assemblée nationale du Viêt-nam de 1976 à 1986, il remplit en ce moment les fonctions de Vicaire général du diocèse de Hô Chi Minh-Ville. Vu sa grande expérience, nous lui avons demandé de faire avec nous un petit tour d'horizon de la situation de l'Église dans son pays.

"D'une façon générale, les relations entre l'Église et le gouvernement vietnamien sont nettement plus détendues qu'il y a quelques années, dit le P. Minh. Il y a davantage de liberté, mais de nombreuses restrictions subsistent encore. Cela dépend beaucoup des temps et des lieux".

Autorisations allégées

Pour commencer par le sommet, la Conférence épiscopale pour tout le Viêt-nam réunifié a été constituée en 1980. Il existait auparavant une Conférence épiscopale, mais pour le Sud Viêt-nam seulement. Les débuts furent difficiles, car les évêques du Nord, à cause de la situation avant 1975 sous régime communiste, n'étaient pas habitués à ce genre de réunions, avec libre discussion ; mais l'unification s'est faite peu à peu. Depuis 1980, les évêques se réunissent tous les ans en assemblée générale.

Il existe aussi le Comité permanent de l'épiscopat, qui se réunit plusieurs fois par an pour traiter des affaires courantes qui réclament son attention. En plus, au moins dans le Sud, les évêques de la province se rencontrent régulièrement. L'archevêque de Hô Chi Minh-Ville lui-même invite volontiers les évêques de la province à venir chez lui pour un jour ou plus, ce qui est bien plus facile qu'auparavant, car les routes se sont améliorées. Entre Saïgon et Nha-Trang (430 km) par exemple, il ne faut guère plus de six heures de voiture, là où il fallait auparavant une journée entière. Cette facilité de communication entre les évêques facilite grandement leur mission.

"Beaucoup d'autorisations des autorités, nécessaires auparavant, ont été supprimées, constate le P. Minh. L'évêque dans son diocèse peut se déplacer librement pour les confirmations ou les visites pastorales. Les gens ordinaires peuvent se déplacer librement dans tout le pays, sauf, paradoxalement, les prêtres d'HCMV, qui doivent prévenir la police locale quand ils vont ailleurs, ce qu'ils "oublient" souvent de faire. Par contre, dans la

ville, ils peuvent aller célébrer la messe partout, ce qui n'est pas le cas dans les autres villes. On pourrait relever nombre de détails complexes de ce genre".

Visiteurs nocturnes

Il reste aussi pas mal de tracasseries. Ainsi, au milieu d'une nuit, des policiers ont sonné au presbytère de la cathédrale, ils voulaient visiter la maison. Le vicaire leur a fait visiter toutes les chambres, mais il n'y avait personne. Ils avaient déjà fait cela il y a plusieurs années. Mais on leur a fait remarquer que les temps avaient changé : le couvre-feu a été supprimé ; donc un visiteur ou l'un des prêtres aurait pu, de façon tout à fait légale, être sorti en ville. De plus, la police n'a plus le droit de perquisitionner sans une permission expresse des autorités, qu'elle doit présenter. En fait, chaque famille possède un livret sur lequel tous les membres sont inscrits et la police venait vérifier s'ils étaient bien là.

En quelques autres diocèses, il devient compliqué d'organiser une simple concélébration à l'occasion, par exemple, des funérailles d'un prêtre ou d'un de ses parents. Le curé du lieu doit en effet demander une autorisation spéciale pour chacun des concélébrants.

À la fin de chaque réunion de la Conférence épiscopale, la coutume était de demander une audience au Service des Affaires religieuses, dont le chef a rang de ministre, ce qui souligne son importance aux yeux du gouvernement. Les autorités demandaient d'ailleurs que ces réunions se tiennent à Hanoi. Si des problèmes étaient soulevés et devaient être discutés avec le gouvernement tout le monde était sur place. Mais à part ces audiences officielles, il était difficile pour les évêques de rencontrer le responsable de ce service. Là encore, les relations se sont améliorées. À chaque assemblée de la Conférence épiscopale, c'est le responsable des Affaires religieuses lui-même qui prend une matinée pour rendre visite aux évêques et chacun peut lui poser des questions. En fait,

ce n'est pas lui qui décide. Si on lui présente des demandes, il prend des notes et il dit qu'il portera la question à l'instance supérieure. À qui exactement ? On ne le sait pas.

Le Père Minh a rempli deux mandats de cinq ans à l'Assemblée nationale, soit de 1976 à 1986. *“À cette époque, explique-t-il, l'Assemblée nationale se réunissait deux fois par an et, chaque fois, pour cinq ou six jours seulement. Donc, ce n'était pas comme en France où tout se discute autant que nécessaire. Au Viêt-nam, on sait que, en fait, c'est le Parti qui décide. Mais là encore, il y a une évolution vers plus d'ouverture. Le Parlement continue à se réunir deux fois par an mais plus longtemps, ce qui permet de vraies discussions. De plus, en assemblée générale, les discussions sont télévisées et ainsi tout le monde peut suivre. C'est un progrès”.*

Mais il faut voir aussi la manière dont sont choisis les députés. Tout le monde ne peut pas être candidat. C'est le Front de la Patrie qui les présente.

Le Front de la Patrie

Le Front de la Patrie est un organisme officiel, qui coordonne et fait la liaison entre les différentes catégories sociales que compte la société vietnamienne : les hommes, les femmes, les ouvriers, les paysans, les intellectuels, les représentants des religions, etc. Son but est de promouvoir l'amour de la patrie, de faire connaître et d'expliquer les directives du gouvernement, de favoriser la concorde, de résoudre les conflits. Il fait le lien entre le gouvernement et le peuple.

Entre autres activités plus particulières, le Front prépare les élections et présente les candidats, en s'arrangeant pour que le nombre de candidats soit légèrement supérieur au nombre de sièges à pourvoir. Mais on sait à l'avance qui sera ou ne sera pas élu et toutes ces manœuvres sont donc pour la forme.

Le Front de la Patrie couvre tout le territoire, avec un échelon national, provincial et jusqu'au district. *“Quand je veux faire une réclamation ou présenter une requête, entend-on souvent, je me rends au siège local du Front. C'est beaucoup plus facile que d'essayer d'atteindre les autorités”.* Il demande que les bonzes, les prêtres soient représentés et c'est ainsi qu'avec le plein accord des autorités ecclésiastiques, tous les diocèses, surtout ceux du Centre et du Sud, ont des prêtres qui font partie du Front. Le Saint-Siège a seulement demandé que les prêtres ne fassent pas partie du gouvernement ni du Parti communiste. Il a aussi des réticences contre le “Comité de Solidarité des catholiques du Viêt-nam” (qui s'appelait autrefois “Association des catholiques patriotes”, mais le mot “patriote” a été remplacé par l'expression plus neutre de “catholiques

du Viêt-nam”.

Il est le pendant vietnamien de l'Association patriotique de Chine, mais il n'en a pas le caractère sectaire.

“Le Parlement national, dit le P. Minh, compte quatre prêtres. En 1986, j'ai été remplacé par le P. Tu, qui y siège toujours ; trois autres prêtres représentent le Nord Viêt-nam ; l'un d'eux a 86 ans, mais les deux autres sont des jeunes !”

Périodiquement, le Vatican envoie une délégation au Viêt-nam pour avoir des contacts directs avec le gouvernement et traiter les affaires importantes, notamment les nominations d'évêques. C'est dans ce cadre que le cardinal Etchegaray, puis Mgr Celli et Mgr Migliore se sont déjà rendus plusieurs fois à Hanoi. Mais les réponses des autorités tardent souvent pendant des mois, rendant les contacts longs et difficiles. *“Ainsi, dit le P. Minh, la dernière demande avait été faite pour venir au mois de février. Elle fut reportée juste avant le carême, puis après Pâques, et les envoyés ne purent venir finalement que du 2 au 6 mai, et encore à deux personnes seulement ! C'est ainsi que des diocèses restent vacants et que des évêques qui ont dépassé 75 ans ne sont pas remplacés ! Si nous avions des relations diplomatiques avec le Vatican, avec un nonce au Viêt-nam, cela faciliterait beaucoup les relations. On en parle toujours, mais rien n'est encore réalisé”.*

Les nominations épiscopales sont toujours difficiles. Le Saint-Siège présente un candidat au gouvernement. Il y a des candidats qui ont été proposés depuis trois ou quatre ans et les réponses sont toujours dilatoires. En fait, on ne donne pas de raisons précises ou vérifiables. Ainsi on a parfois répondu : “Il y a des chrétiens qui ne sont pas d'accord avec cette nomination”. Mais à qui ont-ils demandé ? ou bien encore : “Ce candidat est malade !” Mais est-ce au gouvernement de juger du degré de santé d'un futur évêque ? Et ainsi de suite.

Des séminaires bien encadrés

L'accueil des élèves au séminaire est toujours enserré par des quotas, bien que, petit à petit, la situation s'améliore, comme le remarque le P. Minh : *“Quand le séminaire de Saïgon fut rouvert, en 1986, dit-il, nous n'avions le droit de recevoir de nouveaux séminaristes que tous les six ans. Mais lorsqu'un candidat rentre en première année, il peut quitter en cours de route, et on ne pouvait pas le remplacer avant la fin du cycle de six ans ! Après de longs pourparlers, le gouvernement a fait des concessions, on a pu en accueillir tous les trois ans, puis tous les deux ans. Nous en sommes là”.*

Les évêques trouvent avec raison que cette situation n'est pas normale : les universités reçoivent de nouveaux étudiants chaque année. Pourquoi les séminaires ne pourraient-ils pas en faire autant ? Depuis

quatre ou cinq ans, le gouvernement promet que les séminaires pourront recevoir des nouveaux tous les ans. On attend avec impatience la réalisation de cette promesse. Et il faut ajouter que chaque diocèse ne peut recevoir à chaque fois qu'un nombre limité de candidats : le diocèse de HCMV a droit à 20 candidats tous les deux ans. Les diocèses plus petits ont évidemment droit à moins.

Le gouvernement a fondé une maison d'édition spécialisée pour les ouvrages religieux, quelle que soit la religion. Ce qui est un bon moyen de contrôler toute l'édition religieuse au Viêt-nam. Les évêques avaient demandé depuis longtemps de pouvoir fonder leur propre maison d'édition, mais l'autorisation a toujours été refusée. Chaque diocèse passait donc par la maison d'édition du gouvernement, et l'éditeur devait lui-même demander l'autorisation du Bureau des Affaires religieuses. Tout cela faisait des va-et-vient sans fin. Mais le diocèse pouvait discuter directement avec l'éditeur et donner quelques petites "aides" pour faire avancer la question.

"Maintenant, continue le P. Minh, le gouvernement nous propose de constituer ensemble une "entreprise conjointe" (joint venture) et de devenir membres de la direction de la maison. Cela nous permettrait de parler directement. Mais ils nous demandent évidemment d'apporter une partie du capital. De plus, leur but serait de viser à faire des bénéfices en fixant pour les livres un prix élevé, tandis que nous visons au contraire un prix le plus bas possible pour pouvoir vendre davantage d'exemplaires. Le cas de cette maison d'édition est typique de nos relations avec le gouvernement, faites de limitations et de perpétuels marchandages. Mais c'est ainsi qu'avance souvent le Royaume de Dieu !"

Réf. : *Missions Étrangères de Paris*, n. 359, Mai 2001.

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