

Intercultural Context and Mission

TALK GIVEN FOR JAPANESE AND KOREAN SISTERS OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF THE CARITAS OF JESUS (CONGREGAZIONE DELLE SUORE DELLA CARITÀ DI GESÙ) ON THE 19TH OF SEPTEMBER 2022, CASA BETANIA, ROME.

Part One: Intercultural Living

In the first part of my presentation, I would like to give some suggestions regarding “intercultural living” or “international living” based on some studies and some experiences in the field.

From a multi-cultural community to an “inter-cultural” community

The very first important lesson in “intercultural communication” is that there is a difference between “*multi-national living*” and “*international living*”! It is not because we live with different nationalities together under one roof that we are also in dialogue with each other on a cultural level. You can compare it to a hotel where people live in their own rooms and eat the meals in a common place. There is no interaction among them. Also, Pope Francis complains that most of the colleges in Rome are more hotels than real religious communities. As such it is already a beautiful thing to live together without troubles in a community and to share table and prayer, but when money is in shortage, or when a confrere is sick, or when manual work is asked for, one can see whether or not the community is really a community. This also counts for international communities. One has to work for a community to become a real community with interactions. An international community has on top of that “intercultural interactions”.

A first strong suggestion is therefore *to look for “interaction” among the different cultures in a community*. For a community to become inter-

national, inter-cultural, one has to change his or her way of doing things from time to time in order to give space to each of the members, to live and share its cultural background in the community, to have an “inter-action” from which we learn about the other language, nationality, culture, food, religion. For instance, although we share the same Christian culture, the way we celebrate mass or pray is different. Japanese like a solemn celebration whereas people from Latin-America want to move their body and sing a lot. To make a prayer session from time to time in a different language, with other habits and forms, can bring out the difference from which we can learn, as far as possible of course. Sharing one’s culture and liturgical expressions helps the person to feel at home without giving the feeling that the other has to become a Congolese, Japanese, Korean, or Belgian. Or to have a meal from a different country, made by the person from that country. Eating Belgian chocolates from time to time is pleasant, or Japanese *sushi*, or Korean *kimchi*, at least for those who can stand raw fish or spicy food. Sometimes the community might prefer to have more of one kind, for instance more rice as pasta, but one always has to check the feelings of the whole group. Not all can stand Japanese *wasabi* or *natto*...☺

Be aware of cultural differences

There exist differences between cultures. When we take Eastern and Western culture as an example, we know that people from the East, such as my Indonesian friend, do not say things clear-cut as for instance in North America. You have to understand it from the way they talk. It is not because they say yes, and shake with their head, that it is the final answer to your question. In intercultural communication science this is called the difference between **a direct style** and **an indirect style** in *conflict styles*. For Westerners it looks as if you are talking around the problem, but that is the way it is done in the East.

Another difference are the *emotional styles*: **emotionally expressive style** versus **emotionally restrained styles**, which can be found all over the world, but also among individuals. In America one will rapidly say how beautiful, how great, how successful someone is, but in the East, it will cause the opposite effect. One may not say how much one knows about one's specialization. One should say that one does not know that much about it, and then the other understands that you know a lot about it...

The four styles together give the following grid:

	Restrained	Expressive
Direct	<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Engagement (blow)</i>
Indirect	<i>Accommodation</i>	<i>Dynamic (humor)</i>

Another cultural difference is how the respect towards superiors is shown: there are big-power gap societies and small-power gap societies, namely those where you have to respect strongly the social status of a person, and there were it is not that needed. I learned for instance at SEDOS that when I write to someone, I first use the prepositions of Father, Sister, Brother so and so, and when the other responds with just "Peter", I will do the same. In the end, none is better as the other. Both ways are ok and should be respected. For instance, the moment one is ordained a priest in Japan, even the close faithful will not use anymore your name, but will only say "shinpusama" (father). We did not like that as missionaries and approached it as a problem, but in fact it was/is not a problem, it was/is a cultural difference. The opposite is true for confreres from Africa working in Belgium. The confreres do not feel respected when they are called by their name, but in fact that is just the way the people show their respect to the priest by calling you by *your* name and not a general name. Seen from the Christian cultural habit, we are all brothers and sisters and there should be thus no difference between people, but to love the other is also to respect the other. If the big-power gap is based on respect, there is thus no problem. The problem comes when there is misuse of power, such as in the case of clericalism. And the same for small-power gap,

a too intimate relation with the priest causes jalousie from other parishioners.

Other differences are such as: do we decided by who gets the highest vote (democratic) or by a common decision, a "consensus"? Do we give priority to women or to men? Is the individual more important than the group? All things to reflect upon when living together with different cultural backgrounds. However, there is also a personal aspect in all of this as some might tend to a non-typical cultural stance. For instance, when I came to Japan, being a Belgian the people thought I would like to eat steak and smoke cigars and drink coffee and whiskey, but I am not that way... ☺ However, I do like social etiquette and for that I fit very well in the Japanese society with all its rules to behave in the house, at table, towards superiors etc.

Being aware of personal differences

In the same way, we tend to think that when there are problems in an international community it is because of the different cultures, but that might be a bit too simple as well. Culture is one thing, but personality is another! *Many problems in an international community are on a personal level*, because why can I be so happy with a sister of another country and not with one from my own country? It is therefore important to "discern" whether a problem among religious brothers or sisters is based on culture or on personality.

For instance, I lived already in different international communities, but cannot see always the difficulty of cultural difference when we share a common spirit and a common goal. We work and live together because we have chosen to do so. The logo of my congregation, CICM, is *Cor unum et Anima una*, one of heart and one of spirit, as it is written in the Bible. On the way we find out that there are different cultural habits, but when they are taken up in love and with understanding, it enriches the community. Sometimes, however, someone may use his or her cultural background as a way to hide a deeper personal problem. For instance, an Indonesian confrere of mine was not clear always when we took a decision and then did something else in the end. Still up to now I am not sure if he said so to protect himself. Thus, do not blame too fast a cultural difference as cause of the problem!

The aspect of personal differences we cannot deepen here further as it is not the topic of the day, but it is important to realize this difference between personal and cultural differences.

To live the local culture

A good suggestion in living together in a multi-national community is *to place the culture in which one lives, the “host-culture”, at the base for all members* of the community. In CICM we have taken this up in our Statutes as part of a mission-spirituality of “Incarnation” into a society.

We adopt a lifestyle which brings us close to the people with whom we live. We share in their legitimate aspirations, their joys and their sufferings, and thus participate in the important moments of their life. (Article no. 13.1)

In this way one avoids discussion about which language to speak, the food one eats, the people one meets. The community I lived in the last years was speaking French in Italy, eating African in Italy, talking about Congo politics at table and watching French news... Only the Eucharist celebrations and the football games on television were in Italian as the language is not important there...☺ Because of not being sensitive in this way to the world of the other, it is not surprising that confreres from Asia do not like to join the meals any longer, and new confreres do not want to come over to Rome for study anymore. I had chosen that community, the CICM Collegio, in order to have the occasion to speak Italian but pity enough this was thought wrongly. The house rule, however, is that we should speak all Italian, but if the rector is not giving the example... And I know it is not only a problem for our Collegio, but also in many other collegio's in town. Also on the level of food should be stressed that we eat what is the habit in Italy: pasta, pizza, spaghetti,... with of course some understanding for the food habits of the members. I encouraged for instance to have at least also rice with every meal instead of only pasta, because we did not grow up with pasta as Italians do... But by respecting the culture of the place we live in, we avoid the discussion of what should be the food, the prayer, the timing, and so on.

The world is becoming inter-cultural

Building international communities has become a way of doing mission. However, we should not be too much proud as missionaries or religious on our living together in the so-called “international communities”. The world is becoming more and more one, and so more and more families are multinational or multicultural these days. I was in Brazil for the holidays this summer and was impressed how people from so many a different background are living together there. Luckily, they speak the same language! Only when we can show how to live together as one family in an intercultural way can we give a good example and offer help to others who go through a similar process in their married life. A friend of mine in Japan, a very devout Catholic postman, got in love with a Korean lady who is an active member of the Japanese new religion called Soka Gakkai, a very nationalistic religion. He could not get married in the Church, and that is why he invited me to be present at least at his wedding feast; he could not let the children be baptized and that is why he asked me to give them a little cross on the forehead when the lady was out... They love each other and respect each other religious preferences, but it is not easy... And so, it is for us. It does not mean we do not love each other, but we have to learn first to accept that there are differences in cultural background, then we should wish to taste and participate in the other culture, appreciating the differences, and lastly coming to a deeper understanding of the cultural differences will make a community really INTER-cultural.

The Christian culture we all share

A suggestion in this connection is that *we should not forget that there is a culture that connects us: the Christian culture which goes beyond all nationalities*. You can see that when you deal with people who are not part of our Christian family. They do not understand when we give priority to the poor, when we do not want to be seated at the first place, when we do not seek to be rich and famous but share what we have, when we want to listen to God and obey to superiors ... things that Jesus taught us and that we want to live out. The vows are therefore that what unites us. Those who do not live them according to the three religious vows do not belong to our Christian community.

There will come a moment of Truth, for instance when he or she misuses money, has intimate relationships outside the community, or does not want to listen to the superior's advice, the person will then leave or will have to leave the community. The Christian culture is our culture as Christians and we are proud of it. Of course, missionaries in the past have confused this Christian culture with the Western culture, and brought their culture instead of the Christian teaching, as if the people we come to are like a *tabula rasa*, a blank paper where we can write on. We now know that it was wrong. Pope Francis advised it in his message to the Mission Symposium we organized for SEDOS last year in the following way:

*“His Holiness encourages proposals and their implementation that, avoiding to impose fixed cultural forms, reflect the nature of the people of God all holy and with a thousand faces.”*¹

There is also a difference within our Christian culture itself, namely the “ecclesial culture”. The assumption that we all have exactly the same vision of Church, ministry, religious life, and spirituality can lead to misunderstandings, resentments, and conflict. It is therefore tantamount to celebrate the Eucharist from time to time in another way in order not to get fixed into one form, and to give all members the occasion to show how they pray in their own local ecclesial culture or to share how the Church is lived in their own place. In Japan for instance, the priests go together to the public bath, being naked together with their bishop. This is not considered perverse in Japan but just an ultimate sign of trust and friendship.

And last, our Christian culture is now entering into a real dialogue with other religious culture, and this needs also some learning about inter-religious dialogue and how to adjust our ecclesial culture to the presence of people of other religions or atheists. We will talk about this more in the last part of today's lecture.

Going beyond culture

A last suggestion is that when we enter into another culture, *we should not always think that*

the other culture is completely different from ours. Cultures are not that different. Everywhere people want to greet, to eat, to pray, to talk. The difference lies only in the way we do this. Whether I greet by bowing like in Japan and Korea, or give a warm embrace like in Italy and Spain, the essence is that we greet each other, or not? When my mother had passed away in Belgium I was in Japan. The confreres there organized a memorial mass for her, and when the moment came for my confreres to show their compassion, confreres from different cultural backgrounds, they did it all in a Japanese way by bowing deep in front of me, and I myself responded in the same way to them. It felt so strong, almost stronger as the usual kiss on the cheek or an embrace would have been on that moment in that place. It shows of course that we all had become a bit Japanese. Do you know how an African greets?

When my Buddhist friends from Japan came to Italy for an interreligious dialogue, the rector of the university of Italy asked me how to greet the Japanese rector. I told them that normally it is by bowing, but knowing the Japanese they like to give a hand to foreigners. So, said, so done. Hands were shaken. But when the rector of the university in Japan where I studied Buddhism came to me, he bowed to me instead of giving me also a handshake. I understood from this that I had become a Japanese with the Japanese...☺

Interculturality, not a new issue

The problems we experience in living in an international community is not new. Already Jesus in his time had to deal with these differences in cultures. See for instance the discussion of Jesus with the Syrophoenician woman from Cana (Mark 7:24-30; Mt 15:21-28) about his role as Messiah to Jews only, or not (bread and crumbs). And the first Christian community as well, if you can remember the discussion between Peter and Paul regarding what you can eat as a Christian or if circumcision is also obligatory for new converts (Galatians 2:11-19). Let us therefore not be discouraged by the difficulty in living together in a multi-cultural community, but to see it as invitation to open our mind and heart to the reality others are living in, as Jesus did as well.

¹ Peter Baekelmans, CICM, Marie-Helene Robert, OLA, edit., *New Trends in Mission, The Emerging Future* (New York: Orbis Books, 2022), p. xi.

Part Two: Intercultural Mission

The first part of my presentation was on intercultural *living*. We now enter into another aspect of interculturality, namely the intercultural *mission*. The new paradigm for mission is “interculturality”. But how do we do this? Let us start here from where we begin as missionaries, namely from the formation program, because this will form us to real “intercultural” missionaries.

Exit Learning and Entry learning

When we receive a mission destination, we not only have to learn about the culture of the mission country, which is *Entry Learning* (learning to leave) but also have to learn to leave behind our own culture, which is *Exit Learning* (learning to leave). We rapidly forget that we are born in a culture and carry with us that culture, willingly or not. In Japan I was repeatedly called “America-jin” even though I come from Europe. But for the Japanese I am a white skinned person with colored eyes and soft brown hair, something they associate with those to whom they lost the war. They feel less than the Americans because of the war, and one experiences therefore a kind of “positive discrimination” in Japan as American/European. One is given priority on certain public occasions while my Eastern confreres would be neglected. It is a bit like a priest entering the Vatican. Without the roman-collar you are treated differently as with, though the person is the same. Sometimes I forget I am wearing a Roman-collar and do not understand why some people are suddenly so kind to me... ☺

We tend to see the other through our own lenses. Being able to understand the other means being able to understand also yourself, the way your culture thinks, value things, look at things, etc. This can be learned! Let us go through the different steps to become a person open to the other culture but not blind to one’s own culture. This process is important for those going abroad, but the same for those opting to live in an international community. I follow here the teachings of Jon P. Kirby, SVD, as he brought it to the seminar on *Interculturality: Living and Mission* (2-6 May 2016).²

Exit Learning

We go through a process in leaving behind our ethnocentrism and accepting other cultural expressions by first **denying** that anything good can come from another culture. We think that our culture (religion) is the best. We need here to learn to be humble and submit ourselves as Christ did (*Phil.* 2:5-8). To be open to the reality. Meditation can help in this as it teaches a person to look at himself or herself as an outsider, critically and lovingly. This first step has to be done in the country of origin as it might be too difficult when confronted already with a possible culture-shock. Tribalism, nationalism, extremism are all aspects that indicate that the person has not yet opened him- or herself to another culture. At this stage, communities should strive for more inclusivity, and seek out experiences of other cultures or dimensions of difference. I wonder whether we can leave this stage completely behind. If I am honest, I am still working on this as it is almost impossible to eradicate some kind of superiority or inferiority feeling. Nevertheless, we do not give in to these feelings and try to see the beauty and greatness, but also the weaknesses of other cultures as well. When one opens oneself, there is still the tendency of going into the **defense**, namely defending the superiority of one’s own culture (and religion). We still feel threatened by another culture and view them by way of stereotypes. We say “Japanese are like that ...”, and “Koreans are like this...”. We make generalizations which is always dangerous. Not all Germans are Nazis, or priests child abusers. When one is in minority, there is a tendency to uncritically accept all of the other culture and rejects one’s own culture, which is also not healthy. For instance, when people are “going native”, or dislike the political situation in the country.

A next step in the process is that the differences are recognized, but **minimalized or trivialized** as not important. One has become “culturally sensitive”, but still largely ethnocentric. When a certain cultural group becomes the majority in the community or congregation, one has to remain vigilant not to impose unconsciously one’s own culture. My own Congregation is moving from a Belgian congregation towards a

² Jon P. Kirby, “Intercultural competence for Religious Communities: Models, Gauges and Guides”, *SEDOS*

Bulletin, Vol. 48, No. 5/6, pp. 23-37.

Congolese congregation. Is that bad? I always ask my older Belgian confreres when they oppose this evolution with the question: Was it then better when it was a Belgian congregation? We have to accept realities, but know how to deal with them. In the mission, one is always in a minority, but should therefore not minimize or trivialize the differences. Not everyone likes to eat raw fish, isn't it? Just to be honest is not a sin.

Entry Learning

Here one starts to “enter” into the world of the other culture and becomes really sensitive to the other culture, ready to put on the behavior, values and perspectives of the other culture. Intercultural mission starts here. There is first the **acceptance** of another culture. In Japan, one starts to eat sushi, go to the public bath, bow as the Japanese bow, and so on. There is a genuine interest and curiosity regarding the other culture. One starts to see cultural patterns from the perspective of the other. Why do one need to put slippers on when entering home, and others again when entering the toilet, why can't you boast about your success in front of others, etc. Cultural differences may be judged negatively, e.g. cannibalism or circumcision of girls, but these judgements are not always ethnocentric. Many missionaries remain on this level of acceptance of another culture.

A next step is then the willingness **to adapt oneself** to how the other does things and to be eager to see the world “through different eyes”. One can adapt without losing one's own principles or core values. I always had a hard time accepting the habit of eating raw fish that is still trembling on your dish, or to enjoy *balut* in the Philippines, cooked eggs in which the foetus of the chicken is present. It goes against my Biblical background: *thy shall not kill*. At the other hand, I did the whole practice to become a Buddhist priest of the Shingon school in Japan, including the fire ritual practice *Goma*, just to be able to understand how their rituals work compared to ours. More about this in the last part of our talk.

The final stage is the “**integration**” into one's own life and/or community. It is the ongoing process to integrate the cultures of the other, and one's own, into a new identity broadened by experience. For religious communities, this

means losses and gains for each person while giving birth to a new way of living in community, an inter-cultural way of living. When a new member comes in, the process has to be repeated in order that that person can feel at home, and can understand the other. In working together in the mission, also this “cultural sensitivity” is needed and add to the effectivity of the mission. Bringing the Gospel in an *inculturated* way becomes possible on this level.

Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS)

One can measure where a person is in the integration process. There are test to do so, the so-called Intercultural Competence Scale (ICS),³ but there is no “one size fits all” here! Maybe a good reflection on the 12 characteristics of a person who is intercultural competent by Muriel Elmer (ICS, 2000) might serve as well: 1) approachable, 2) intercultural receptive, 3) positive oriented, 4) forthright, 5) socially open, 6) enterprising, 7) showing respect, 8) perseverance, 9) flexible, 10) cultural perspectivism, 11) venturesome, 12) social confidence. Remark however that the fourth characteristic might be typical for an American, but not for an Asian...

This kind of questions are not always part of the evaluation of a candidate for mission. They may be worthwhile also for those going to work in an intercultural mission.

Working interculturally in an intercultural mission

After the formation comes the moment we work for the mission, and also there we can do it in a very Italian, Japanese, Belgian way, or in an inter-national and thus inter-cultural way. Many Congregations have started with international communities in their mission as a way of mission. By showing that they can live together as brothers and sisters “*though they come from the ends of the earth*” (Rudyard Kipling), then others can do it as well. But mission is more than living together, there is also work to be done. And here more creativity is asked for, because the persons in such an international community have each their task in the house, in the parish, in the school, but are not working

³ See, *SEDOS Bulletin*, Vol. 48, No. 5/6, p. 32.

therefore as a team. The Union International of Superiors General have initiated a program in Sicily in which not only sisters from different nationalities but also from different congregations work together in one missionary endeavor. Sr. Elisabeth Flick, former President of the UISG, shared about this experience at one of SEDOS conferences. She first mentions how much the younger religious have grown up in a multi-cultural world and are used to it through school, family, migrants, internet, inter-congregational novitiate and now also inter-congregational projects such as the South-Sudan Solidarity or the one in Sicily. The novelty of these inter-congregational projects is not the “works of mercy” as such, but the way they do it. Many missionary works have become pure social work, which social workers can do better indeed. Ours should be with a believing heart, showing the universal love that Christ taught us. The project in Sicily is for migrants. Ten sisters from different countries and from seven different Congregations work together in Sicily. They are migrants too, in a way, and that makes it easier for them to enter into the reality of migrants. Sr. Elisabeth tells us about this experience:

“The passion for God and for humanity is their reason to be together there. The common mission enlivens them and helps them to undertake with creativity arduous, totally unknown paths and leads them to invent new and different approaches, and to bravely face the inevitable difficulties, even the suspicion of the people towards all that is new and different.”⁴

Interculturality is thus a new paradigm for mission, not only for our religious communities. It is somehow logical that in a multicultural world, an intercultural mission is the best way of doing mission. I could see that already in Japan where in our parishes a great presence of Filipinas and Indonesians are present, and were thus my Philippine and Indonesian confreres could help those parishioners to integrate into Japanese society. Missionaries are “change-agents”, they help foreigners like them to integrate more easily into a new society and

culture. But for that we have to know both cultures well.

Intercultural monasteries

And what about monastic communities? I know that Claris monasteries can choose to be national, as the one in Kyoto, Japan, or to be international as the one in Bruges, Belgium. I sometimes wonder what the difference is between living in a monastery with people of the same country, or with people from different nationalities. Probably not that much. We all have to go through our sicknesses, old age, unfinished desires of when we were young, conflicts with those we can’t understand why the person do this or said that.

If you had the choice today, would you choose for a national or an international community? I for one entered CICM not because it was a Belgian Congregation in origin, but because it had become international and I was eager to meet with my confreres from all different places over the globe. My older confreres did not choose really for an international congregation, and that is why you feel that they more easily become discriminatory in the way they speak or think about confreres. I am the opposite. I chose for an international congregation and would not have entered if it was only Belgian. And so, do most of the young people today. The world is not anymore of one color but of a unity of colors. There is a joy in living and working together as one great family. Look at the twelve apostles how different they were and how different the cultural background they had! It did not hamper them to feel one. The one who fell out, Judas, was the one who had his own agenda, a personal problem. Multiculturality brings new life in a community. It only has to be guided in order to become fruitful. Here lies the task for those in leadership to help this integration process. For the moment, multiculturalism is still an option, but very soon it will be a reality to live with. At the same time, a new culture is coming up through globalization which facilitates the integration process. Who does not know Italian opera, Spanish songs, or not have eaten American hamburgers, French frites (in fact Belgian frites), Italian pizzas, Japanese *sushi* and Korean *kimchi*, or not have gone on pilgrimage to Rome, Assisi, Santiago di Compostela, Fatima, Lourdes, Guadalupe,

⁴ SEDOS Bulletin, Vol. 48, No. 5/6, p.53.

Aparecida, and so on...? Within this trend of globalization there is also a new need for identity. That is why young Christians tend to be more “conservative” as they feel that Christianity is losing its “flavor”, or “salt”. Finding the right balance between the own culture and the Christian culture in religious life is surely a task for the near future. I feel it in my own religious life already. This challenge is even greater in the dialogue with other religions about which we will share in the last part of this talk.

Part Three: Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is a specific form of intercultural exchange, namely the dialogue of religious thinking and religious behavior. How does a Muslim understand the compassion of God, and how behaves a Buddhist priest in his temple? To understand this one has to study the other religion and also take part to a certain extent to their religious behavior. Let us first discuss how to enter into “dialogue” with another religion.

Dominican Father Jean Druel, head of the Islamic research center in Kairo, teaches that there are four kinds of dialogue: scientific, dogmatic, emotional, and symbolical dialogue in his book *Je crois en Dieu! – Moi non-plus, Introduction aux principes du dialogue interreligieux*.⁵ The skill requested here is to know what kind of dialogue you are engaging in with another religion. When you are discussing the difference between religions on a scientific level, one should not mix it with bringing in a theological or emotional argument. When I say to a Muslim, Jesus is God, then this is a theological idea which he does not have to agree with. If I say that Jesus has lived, then this is a scientifically based fact that is not emotional, symbolic, or theological. In my new book *The Hidden “God”, Towards a Christian Theology of Buddhism*, I tried to make these differences clear on the level of the god of Buddhism. Normally it is said that there is no god in Buddhism, but is this a scientific, a theological, or an emotional idea? In fact, it is a missionary idea because it wants to differentiate Buddhism

from Christianity in which the existence of a god is the most important theological topic. So, I showed that scientifically speaking Buddhism recognizes the existence of gods, but not the god of the Bible, which is the unique creator personal god. But when entering the theological-philosophical field, one can discover several aspects that link Buddhist thinking about certain absolutes which come close to our thinking about God. This made me conclude that although Buddhism does not agree with the aspects of uniqueness, personality, or creator aspects of our God, what we have in common is the idea that God is in the end a hidden reality and we cannot know God to the full. For Muslims, for instance, there are 99 names of God, because the 100th name He has not revealed. Luther spoke of the “*deus absconditus*”, which is the basic reasoning about God in Christian theology. The idea of Emptiness is so essential in Buddhism that it can be understood as the way they experience God. They also teach us Christians that we should avoid too much reasoning about God. It is a non-conceptual reality, a mystic presence in this world.

Now, our Catholic Church speaks of four kinds of dialogue: dialogue of life, of experience, of theology, and of action.⁶ I place them in this order, as it would be the ideal way in interreligious dialogue: one first live among another religion, one then becomes interested in their way of living the faith, next one wants to understand the origin of their thoughts and actions, and lastly one wishes to work together in this world. When I entered CICM, I was given two possible mission destinations, one was Senegal where the confreres have opted for the dialogue of presence among the Muslims, without putting up big structures that can become an obstacle to dialogue, and the other one was Japan where especially two confreres where into the intellectual dialogue with other religions and started the Center of Religion and Culture at the Nanzan University, Nagoya. We also have a research center for religions, ORIENS, in Tokyo, which became more a catholic publication house than a place for

⁵ Jean Druel, *Je crois en Dieu ! – Moi non plus, Introduction aux principes du dialogue interreligieux* (Paris : Cerf, 2017).

⁶ Dialogue and Proclamation (Vatican City : Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, 1991), chap. 3, no.42.

dialogue. It was difficult for me to choose between Senegal and Japan as I had been already in Senegal where my oldest brother had started a “Salon du The et du Glacier”, and where I made a wise Muslim friend. Japan was thus the great unknown to me, which as a missionary is always the most attractive, and because I had to admit that I like studying, Japan became my choice.

My relation with the Senegalese Muslim friend is interesting because he belonged to one of the active Muslim prayer schools, but when I brought him to Coeur Moussa outside Dakar, he wanted to become a Catholic monk. I told him not to change so fast of religion, and when I met with him again a few years ago, after more than 30 years, I saw him taking care of the monks of Coeur Moussa as a medical doctor and joining the masses, even for communion, though remaining a devout Muslim, married now and graced with two daughters. I saw a bit myself in him, because also I myself am a Catholic believer, but when I join the Zen monastery in Okayama, Shogenji, it is as if I am a Zenmonk on that moment, joining them in all their activities. One easily speaks of “double religious belonging” in that case, but it is not so. One knows the religion one belongs too, but is open to other religious expressions and groups.

From the start of my missionary life in Japan I had a good contact with Buddhists. Especially Rev. Yamanouchi Yugen of Tokoji in Nara where I went to help in the garden or the temple whenever I had the time. This was on the level of the dialogue of life. I admired him as he did other activities besides being a priest, namely baking and selling natural yeast bread and teaching *Futari Yoga*, a way to cure people through pressing with the foot the body of the partner. I can show you a few pictures here of this dialogue of life.

Another great experience with Japanese Buddhism was my experience of sitting in Zazen. I had read a lot about Zen before, but to sit together in zazen for hours in a row was a great experience. Even when too cold or too hot, one has to remain seated in order to train the mind to listen to you and not the other way around as is most of the case. I had done some meditation on my own before coming to Japan, and my first introduction to the power of meditation was imagining that my parents were

dead. I was living in Lugano, Switzerland, in that time, and internet or cellphones did not exist encore. If I wanted to know if they would be really dead, I had to wait for information from home that would take at least three days. And so, I started to think that they might be really dead. I got scared, and cried, because that possibility became a reality to me. The first thing I did the next morning was going to the next town where there was an international phone box. My mother took the phone and asked me, *Well Peter, why do phone because that is expensive you know...* I did not dare to say that I thought they had died, but I was so happy to hear her voice ☺ Since that time, I became really grateful to the parents, always happy that they were still alive. Now both are in heaven, and I have no regret that I might not have shown them enough my love. In preparation for the diaconate, I asked for a one-month stay at the temple and asked the Indian monk there to shave my hair. It had taken me several years to decide for that experience as I was much attached to my hair. It was great to feel my own bold head as if you are just born. Since that moment I also have no fear to lose my hair, and instead am happy I still have a bit... It took me seventeen years before my body and mind were able to take part in the *Rohatsu*, ten days of only sitting in zazen. I will show you some pictures of this kind of dialogue of experience. These experiences have helped me in understanding later on Buddhism more profoundly.

For my doctoral studies, I had chosen to compare the theology behind our sacraments with the reasoning behind Buddhist sacraments, the so-called Three Mysteries in the Shingon school of Esoteric Buddhism in Koyasan, Japan. And I not only wanted to make this study on the level of scriptures, but also on the level of experience, a phenomenological study. The difficulty to do this was that I had to get initiated in order to be able to participate in the religious practice to become a Buddhist priest. I saw once the first initiation, called *Tokudo shiki*, and thought to myself: how come I would do something within Buddhism which I had not dare to do yet in my own religion? That experience become the reason for my accepting to become a Catholic priest first. I was already seven years a religious brother but was afraid to

take the next step. That was what I realized through this encounter. Then there was a friend Buddhist priest and scholar, Rev. Habukawa Shodo, at Koyasan who was willing to give me the possibility to join the practice without joining the initiation. So, I gladly accepted. However, just a few days before I would start the first three weeks of practice, he let me know I was welcome to join also for the initiation. As this was a genuine proposal, I could not refuse, though my Zen teacher and Yoga teacher, both great spiritual teachers, were not in favor. I therefore started the practice with a little heart, thinking that I might commit some spiritually great fault, but as the practice evolved, I could see it brought me the insights I needed. The summum of the practice is the fire ritual, *Goma*, which started just on the day I had done my first mass ten years before. I was offered in the end to also take the last initiation to become a Buddhist priest, *Denpo Kanjo*, but that I kindly refused as it might confuse people what I am in the end. There was though a small moment of hesitation because I could see that I also could help people through this kind of rituals. But God gave me a clear sign that this is not my way. I will show you some pictures of this dialogue of theology.

The fourth and last form of dialogue among religions is the action, there were we to something together to make this world a better place. Also, here there are many possibilities to be active together. My first mass was an interreligious mass where Buddhists and Hindus were present. Further, we have organized several times an interfaith chanting as this permits us to be together in a religious way, and signing is twice praying. I also helped a theological dialogue about Art and Religion between monks from Koyasan and theologians from Firenze for one week in Florence and one week in Koyasan. My first book was written for the theologians to explain what Shingon religion is about. As director of SEDOS, I have organized also some ecumenic celebrations, interreligious dialogues, and seminars on the topic. The most beautiful moment for me was the Interreligious Pilgrimage to the Holy Door in 2016. Before the closing of the Holy Door, I wanted to go there together with people from other religions as they too wanted to have that experience. And as the Holy Door of 2016 was

in the context of forgiveness, we asked forgiveness to other religions for what we have done wrong in the past as missionaries. The presence of other religious persons was great, and it became a very meaningful moment.

Raising intercultural competence

Greeting is one thing, but thinking is another. We have to become able to make the translation between cultures/religions and to understand how the other culture/religion thinks. *There is therefore an urgent need for "intercultural competence"*. In order to stimulate this process, I have collected for instance during my time as pastor of the University Parish in Louvain, Belgium, a number of stories from different cultures and then put these two or three stories together who have a common message but from a different cultural context, or showing that a similar story in different cultures exists but with different understanding. By comparing these two stories one can more easily grasp the meaning of each as well. Let me give here one example.

The wind and the fan (Zen story)

Zen master Baoche was fanning himself some fresh air with a fan.

A monk passed by and asked him: 'Master, the wind is everywhere and reaches all the places of the world. Why do you use then still a fan?'

Baoche answered: 'You understand already that the wind is everywhere, and that it reaches all the places of the world. But you do not grasp yet the nature of the wind.'

The farmer and Holy Providence (Christian story, by Luc Versteyle)

There was once an English farmer who was ploughing his land.

And while he was ploughing, a dominee came by and they talked a little.

'What a marvellous field', the dominee said.

'Yes', said the farmer.

'And what a great cooperation between the effort of man and the blessing of the Holy Providence.'

'Yes', said the farmer.

'You do not seem to be very enthusiastic', said the dominee.

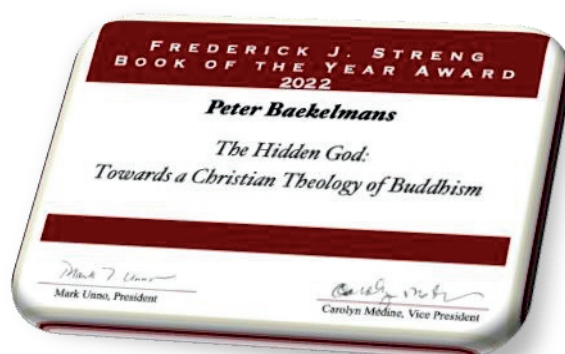
'No', said the farmer.

‘Don’t you find these thoughts not inspiring then?’

‘For sure’, the farmer said, ‘but you should have come when the Holy Providence has been working here on her own.’

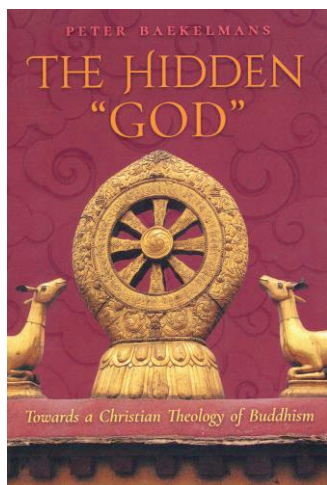
We see here that cooperation between the Divine (wind or nature) and Human Being (using a fan or ploughing the land) is needed. In the same way, if God blessed diversity by creating a so diverse world, why should we kill the diversity? Our task is to understand the diversity of culture and to make the best of it. The world is interconnected, and so should we be! We should live the difference, not the indifference.

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Fr. Peter Baekelmans, CICM, received the “Frederick J. Streng Book of the Year Award 2022” from the *Academic Society of Buddhist-Christian Studies* in North-America for his latest book: *The Hidden “God”, Towards a Christian Theology of Buddhism* (New York: Angelico Press, 2022). Fr. Peter explains the importance of this book:

As a theologian, specialized in Theology of Religions, I am interested in the experience of God within other religions, especially in the Buddhist faith and practice. There exists in the West the idea that “there is no god in Buddhism”, but I always felt that as incorrect. God is universal, and so there should be an experience of God also within Buddhism. But what is then their idea and experience of God, and what can we learn from it?



The word Dharma (Teaching, Truth) comes close to our understanding of God, but then in a non-personal way, a God we cannot describe, a “hidden” God. Even Christian theology always has guarded the mystery of God, and it is this mystical experience of God as the One beyond all, the One within all, the great power, that the Buddhists cherish and want to safeguard from people (especially theologians) who think too fast that they “know” God.

For Buddhists, the Dharma is the mystery of the Void, the interrelatedness of all, the greatness of the human mind, and the power behind the universe. In these four aspects of the Buddhist faith experience we discovered a certain relationship with the

Christian experience of God, and have expounded on that in this book for the sake of interreligious dialogue.