

Catholicism & Other Religions

Introducing Interfaith Dialogue



by Stratford Caldecott



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For the Sake of Truth

“For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.”

Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” (*Jn 18:37-8.*)

What is truth? That is the question at the centre of inter-faith dialogue. Dialogue is for the sake of ascertaining the true meaning of the world. We talk in order to come to an agreement about the truth. But we also talk knowing that we may not reach agreement, and that simply trying to understand each other is also worthwhile.

The fact is, we live in a pluralistic society. Only a third of the world population is Christian (more than a half of that 2 billion are Catholic). Muslims account for 21%, Hindus 14%, Buddhists 7%, non-religious for 16%.¹ But believers are scattered across the world, and modern communications and transport have brought about a situation where most people grow up with neighbours and friends – or family members – belonging to a variety of faiths. Some parts of England are more Muslim than Christian. The biggest Buddhist monastery and research

¹ Statistics from www.adherents.com.

centre in Europe is located in the west Scottish lowlands, at Eskdalemuir. It is big and pink, with paintwork in red, yellow, blue and gold. Inside are 1000 golden Buddhas, gold-encrusted pillars and silk-screen prints of dragons and birds.

A person trying to make moral and metaphysical sense of a world where the scriptures of every religion are equally accessible on the internet or in any large bookshop may be forgiven for feeling a bit confused. Every one of these religions offers a complete way of life and claims to answer the question of human and/or cosmic meaning. Apart from their obvious social and cultural expressions, every one of them has the following five components: *scriptures, institutions, doctrines, morality* and *rituals*. Most if not all of them claim some kind of revelation from heaven, and their holy men and women seem reputedly to perform the same kinds of miracles. Yet if you look at the actual teachings of each religion, they are so different from each other that they often appear contradictory. There seem to be at least five common views on all this:

Five Common Views on the Existence of Different Religions

1. All religions are false

This is a cop-out, although, given the way religious people often behave, and the apparent contradictions already

mentioned, one can understand why many people come to this conclusion and decide to live without a religious faith of any kind. A more subtle variation on this position is *relativism*, which is the view that religious statements are not the kinds of statements that can be (absolutely) true. A given doctrine may be ‘true for me’ but not for you, because its value depends on its context – the situation in which it is affirmed and the person who affirms it. In this way the very word ‘truth’ loses its force. It was partly this phenomenon that Cardinal Ratzinger had in mind when, just before his election as Pope, he said, “We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognise anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.”

2. One religion is true, the others are completely false

Sometimes called ‘exclusivism’, this is the second simplest solution to the challenge of religious diversity. It appeals to those who do not want to examine in detail the history and claims of several religions. Since – for good reasons or bad – they have decided that their own religion is true, they feel no need to examine the others. Those must all be false, since they say something different. Often this is accompanied by a belief that since the other religions must be false or unreliable, and have deceived so many, they are the work of the devil. A milder form of the same position regards other religions as uninteresting rather than

demonic, and assumes their existence is due to the capacity of the human soul for self-deception and wishful thinking, or fear of death and the desire to find consolation and reassurance. In the absence of divine revelation, human beings have to ‘make something up’.

3. *One religion is true, the others are merely approximations to or distortions of it (or perhaps stages on the way to it)*

This is a more nuanced, more subtle version of the previous position. It is often called ‘inclusivism’ because it seeks to include truths found in the other religions. Inclusivists argue that all the world’s other religions are pointing at theirs: only theirs has the fullness of truth. (Inclusivism can be ‘closed’ or ‘open’ depending on whether one thinks one can still learn something from others).

In his book *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis takes a few pages at the end to run through the common moral beliefs that he sees around the world in all the religions, including the “primal” or ancient native religions. This idea goes back at least to the second century, when the Christian Justin Martyr wrote of the “seeds of the *Logos* [*semina Verbi*] implanted in every race of men”. Lewis calls this universal moral law the *Tao* – the ancient Chinese word for the Way. It includes some version of the Golden Rule (*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*), plus various important virtues on which an ordered society seems to

depend, such as humility, charity and honesty. Religions give people a reason for cultivating these virtues, even when it might be to their own immediate advantage not to do so. As the Pontifical Council prepared its guidelines for interreligious dialogue in June 2008, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran echoed Lewis and Justin when he said:

“The Ten Commandments are a sort of universal grammar that all believers can use in their relationship with God and neighbour. ... In creating man, God ordered him with wisdom and love to his end, through the law written within his heart (*Rm 2:15*), the natural law. This is nothing other than the light of intelligence infused within us by God. Thanks to this, we know what we must do and what we must avoid. God gave us this light and this law at creation.”

As a Christian inclusivist, for example, I would argue that Christianity has the moral teaching of the natural law common to all religions *plus something else* that is found in no other religion: the Incarnation of God, which reveals the Trinity.

*4. All religions are true in what they agree about,
but false wherever they disagree*

For the final two options we move from inclusivism to outright pluralism. Clearly there are many points of agreement between the religions. This version of pluralism

argues that we should take them seriously where they overlap, and ignore the rest of what they say. It would be a bit like an exercise in trigonometry – we can pinpoint a position on a map by projecting a direction first from one place and then from another: the goal lies at the point where the two lines cross. You come from the south, I come from the west, but we both meet in the middle. In that sense all religions are on a level.

*5. All religions are true:
any contradictions are only on the surface.*

This kind of pluralism is more subtle. It adds another dimension in which it tries to reconcile religious differences. A metaphor that is often used is that of paths up a mountain. If the truth is the summit, the religions are the various ways we can climb in order to reach it. The contradictions between these paths are only provisional. If I am climbing the north face, it is true that I must go left at this rock here and right at that ledge there. But if I am climbing from the south, the instructions will be very different, depending on the terrain. It is only when we get to the top that all these different ways can be seen to be equally valid, and the various contradictions to form part of a bigger picture. Another metaphor is that of languages or dialects. Each religion is viewed as a symbolic dialect in which the truth is expressed, and the contradictions are

held to disappear when you are able to translate them from one language to the other.

A variant of this last position holds that there are two levels of ‘truth’, sometimes called relative and absolute. Absolute truth is completely beyond words and concepts. It cannot be expressed except by denials (the truth *is not* this or that). Religious differences are confined to the ‘relative’ level of truth, which is provisional (i.e. to be discarded when we reach enlightenment) and pragmatic (i.e. the religions offer ‘skilful means’ by which we progress towards a goal). Relative truth is therefore like a ladder that we can abandon when we reach the top. This view is associated with many forms of Asian spirituality, but also with some Christian ‘negative’ mysticism that stresses our approach to God through denial of his likeness to anything in the world. At the popular level it translates crudely back into the ‘relativism’ mentioned in connection with option 1.

The Catholic Balance

Out of the five options just listed, I think 3 (open inclusivism) corresponds best to the position of the Catholic Church as expressed in the Second Vatican Council. Catholics cannot simply dismiss other religions as completely false. We are told in *Nostra Aetate*:

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflects a ray of that truth which enlightens all men [*Jn 1:9*]. ... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among them” (n. 2).

Thus the Church recognises there are “good things”, even truths, to be found in other religions. The question is how to “preserve and promote” these good things at the same time as witnessing to Christ – for the sentence I omitted from the quotation I just gave affirms that the Church “proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (*Jn 14:6*), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.” This also means that we cannot be the kind of pluralists I described in option 4. Catholics are committed to the belief that our faith is true – we cannot drop one part of it simply because another religion disagrees with it. (The pluralism of option 5 is

more difficult both to understand and to contradict, but I will touch on this later).

This booklet is therefore about dialogue, but it is also inevitably about proclamation, because those engaged in interfaith dialogue cannot be silent about what they believe to be true. One of the important Vatican documents mentioned below is called *Dialogue and Proclamation*. Referring to interfaith dialogue in his talks in the United States in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI suggested that “in our attempt to discover points of commonality, perhaps we have shied away from the responsibility to discuss our differences with calmness and clarity. ... The higher goal of interreligious dialogue requires a clear exposition of our respective religious tenets.” This ‘higher goal’ is the achievement of truth. It means, of course, that we must be prepared to see our beliefs called into question. To listen to other points of view, to try to understand the arguments against our own, and to come up with a convincing answer to those arguments, is all part of what ‘dialogue’ means.

Types of Dialogue

It is important to state at the outset, however, that the kind of intellectual dialogue I have been discussing so far is only one among several types of dialogue that Catholics are engaged in. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue talks about four. These are dialogues of life, of works, of theological discourse, and of spiritualities. To this is sometimes added dialogue of cultures.

Dialogue of life

This means living together, sharing our day-to-day struggles, becoming friends with followers of other religions, getting to know each other's way of life, joys and troubles. The success of interfaith dialogue largely depends on this important first step, because a religious tradition can only truly be known through the people who make it live, and understood through the friendship that transcends ideological differences and this means also that Christianity, like every religion, is known best by observing the people who live it best, namely the saints.

Dialogue of works

We may go a step further than simply living together, and collaborate together on some common project, whether it be building a dam or planning an exhibition or running a soup

kitchen, for the well-being of others, especially people who live alone, in poverty or sickness. Such common endeavours both test and deepen friendship and mutual understanding, and demonstrate an important solidarity between religious traditions in neighbourly charity. As Pope Benedict XVI said to the Council for Interreligious Dialogue in June 2008, “Religious collaboration offers the opportunity of expressing the highest ideals of every religious tradition. Helping the sick, giving succour to victims of natural disasters and violence, care of the elderly and the poor: these are some of the sectors in which persons of different religions can work together.”

Dialogue of theological discourse

This might be better called ‘intellectual dialogue’, since it includes philosophical or metaphysical dialogue based on the analysis of language and natural symbolism, as well as the more strictly theological type of dialogue concerned mainly with truth as revealed in scripture. In it, thinkers of the different religions get together to compare and discuss their interpretations, assumptions, ideas, and doctrines. This enables us to understand in greater depth and detail each other’s religious heritage and tradition, and helps to prevent misunderstandings that sometimes lie at the root of conflict.

Dialogue of spiritualities

Of course, spirituality or religious experience should never be divorced from theology, but this type of dialogue

is concerned more with sharing the riches of the life of prayer and meditation than with academic study and conceptual analysis. Tibetan and Benedictine monks, for example, often get together to compare experience of their lives of religious dedication that on the outside appear somewhat similar, however different the inner reality may be. Often this kind of dialogue is limited to mutual listening, in which practitioners of the various religions share their experience of prayer with each other, or at least try to express their experiences in a way the other might understand. From this process commonalities and parallels often emerge. However, any attempt to probe the actual meaning of terms in order to discern differences beneath the surface leads into the “dialogue of theological discourse” mentioned above.

Dialogue of cultures

This was stressed particularly by Pope John Paul II. As he wrote in his Message for the World Day of Peace, 1st January 2001, “People are marked by the culture whose very air they breathe through the family and the social groups around them, through education and the most varied influences of their environment, through the very relationship which they have with the place in which they live. There is no determinism here, but rather a constant dialectic between the strength of the individual’s conditioning and the workings of human freedom” (n. 5). A dialogue of

cultures is one in which we try to understand the value that lies in the very distinctiveness of cultures “as historical and creative expressions of the underlying unity of the human family”, sustained by common values rooted in the nature of the human person (nn. 10, 16). The exploration of artistic expressions of beauty and meaning is also an important part of the dialogue of cultures. A religion is not only a set of ideas, but a way of imagining the world.

In recent years, with the continued persecution of Christians in many Islamic countries, and the growth of international terrorism, the Pope and Pontifical Council have become conscious of the danger that Christian openness to dialogue may, in some quarters, be taken as a sign of weakness, or at least lead to certain unpleasant topics not being addressed for fear of offending the other side. The truths that we put on the table cannot always be truths that the other side already wants to hear. As Cardinal Tauran said at a conference in Kenya on 23rd April 2008: “Partners in dialogue must be open to talk about those issues not often put on the table: religious liberty, freedom of conscience, reciprocity, conversion, religious extremism, etc.”

Reciprocity

In Catholic circles, the principle of reciprocity is becoming a particularly important point to insist upon. It is a condition of dialogue that both (or all) sides be allowed to express their views openly without fear of coercion or reprisal.

This is relatively unproblematic for Christian and post-Christian groups and societies, where the rights to religious freedom affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s (see below) are widely accepted. These rights were first defined and promulgated in the American Bill of Rights in 1791 and consolidated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. They are the fruit of a Christian civilization since they rest on respect for the divine image in man, but they have been framed in a way that does not assume Christian faith, and are now regarded as the bedrock of a secular democratic society. Other civilizations, such as the Islamic, that have not yet developed or accepted the same philosophy of human rights may find it harder to offer such freedoms.

One of the tasks for a ‘dialogue of cultures’ must therefore be to explore the doctrine of human rights, including the right to religious freedom. The difficulty is that for Western or Christian participants it may appear to be not so much an item for discussion as a presupposition. Nevertheless dialogue actually depends on a more primitive and universal set of principles and attitudes: human respect, empathy, the desire for truth. The formulation of mutual respect in terms of a doctrine of human rights is one way, but not the only way, to foster respect and reciprocity.

Facing Difference: Recent Developments in Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue, which was one of the themes and achievements of the Second Vatican Council, received an enormous boost from Pope John Paul II. In 1986 he organised an inter-religious prayer meeting in Assisi which may have been one of the inspired moments of his pontificate, although it provoked severe criticism from some Catholic conservatives.

In order to take account of these criticisms, the Pope was careful to make a distinction between ‘praying with’ and ‘praying in the presence of’ a member of another religion, given the widely different understandings we have of what it is we do when we pray, and of exactly whom we address in our prayer. It is not possible to pray a common prayer, he said, but only to pray our own prayers in the same place. He also took pains to emphasise that “The fact that we have come here does not imply any intention of seeking a religious consensus among ourselves or of negotiating our faith convictions. Neither does it mean that religions can be reconciled at the level of a common commitment in an earthly project which would surpass them all. Nor is it a concession to relativism in religious beliefs, because every human being

must sincerely follow his or her upright conscience with the intention of seeking and obeying the truth.” In making these remarks, he may have had in mind several recent attempts to produce a kind of global religious alliance along the lines of a World Parliament of Religions, such as the United Religions Initiative (www.uri.org). Such attempts are full of good intentions, but risk subordinating the search for truth to the search for peace and social collaboration.

Since 1986, interfaith initiatives involving the Catholic Church have become increasingly common. In 1990 the papal encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* set this kind of initiative in the context of a strong reaffirmation of the value of evangelisation and mission – in other words, of the attempt to persuade non-Christians to become members of the Catholic Church. This was reinforced by the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* the following year by Cardinals Arinze and Tomko. And in the previous year, 1989, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal Ratzinger had already produced a letter to the world’s bishops on *Christian Meditation* which clarified some of the essential differences between Christian and other forms of spirituality and prayer.

Christian Meditation states that “the essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man” (n. 3). Christian prayer and mysticism, unlike any system of Buddhist meditation or of Yoga, is not aimed at

transcendence of the human condition. It is focused on the Person of Christ – on his love for us rather than our love for him. Any particular ‘techniques’ of prayer, even if they involve traditional Christian devotions such as the Jesus Prayer, or the Rosary, or certain methods of breathing and interior stillness practised by the Desert Fathers, are placed by the letter in that context. It says that Christian mysticism “has nothing to do with technique: it is always a gift of God; and the one who benefits from it knows himself to be unworthy” (n. 32). It adds that one may take from the other religions whatever is useful in the way of prayer, but only if “the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements, are never obscured” (n. 16). In fact “all the aspirations which the prayer of other religions expresses are fulfilled in the reality of Christianity beyond all measure” (n. 15). But the difference is this, that according to Christianity “the personal self or the nature of a creature” is never dissolved (n. 15).

Pope Benedict XVI

Under Pope Benedict XVI the process has continued: the emphasis has been on dialogue, but perhaps increasingly on the recognition of difference. Inevitably the period after 2001 has been dominated by the growing fear of Islamicist terrorism and the so-called “War on Terror”. A speech by the Pope at the University of Regensburg in September 2006 provoked outrage in Muslim circles by its citation of a dialogue written by the medieval emperor of Constantinople

during the siege of the city by Muslims around 1400. The Emperor's harsh words concerning Islam were an occasion for Pope Benedict to condemn the spreading of faith by violence as something 'unreasonable'. The Pope wanted to make the point that "not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature", and he raised the question of whether this was as true for Muslims as it is for Christians. The Gospel of John tells us "In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." For Christians, therefore, God is '*Logos*', which means he is the very archetype of reasonableness. But Muslims do not have John's Gospel. If God is thought to be not *Logos* but pure Will, is there not a danger we will end up with "a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness"?

The comments were construed as a criticism of Islam, and Muslims protested that it was an unfair one. There were several incidents of violence against Christians as a result, but some of the outcomes were more positive. A month after the speech was delivered, thirty-eight Islamic authorities and scholars from around the world joined together to deliver an Open Letter to the Pope in the spirit of intellectual exchange and mutual understanding. It was said to be the first time in recent history that Muslim scholars from every branch of Islam had spoken with one voice about the teachings of Islam. A year after that letter, a total of 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals from every denomination and school of thought in Islam,

and every major Islamic country or region in the world, issued *A Common Word Between Us and You* addressed to Christians everywhere. In it they affirmed a common ground between the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the teachings of Jesus Christ (and the Jewish Scriptures) in the commandments to love God and love one's neighbour. This in turn led to other interfaith initiatives and dialogues aimed at addressing mutual concerns, including a permanent Catholic-Muslim Forum that began work in 2008. The text of the *Common Word* can be found on the official web-site, www.acommonword.com.

In addition to the fear of terrorism, there are two other new factors contributing to the growth in interest and sense of urgency about interfaith dialogue. One of these is widespread concern about human degradation of the **environment**. From being the obsession of a fringe minority in the 1960s, the environmental and conservation movement moved fully into the mainstream by the turn of the century, so that concerns about climate change, biodiversity, recycling, sustainability, and ecological balance are now commonly expressed by scientists and citizens alike. The third new factor is the continuing rise of **secularism** and what has been called 'the new atheism' in the consumerist West, along with a set of ideological tenets commonly referred to as 'political correctness' that seem to pervade the intellectual atmosphere in many European countries. (Of course, environmentalism itself is sometimes

dismissed as one of these tenets). The significance of these factors is that they are capable of transcending the divide between one religion and another. Just as many believers seek to work together in an alliance against terrorism, so others are trying to work together to save the earth, and others again to defend shared traditional notions of decency, morality and piety.

Three Rules for Engaging in Dialogue

The future Pope Benedict XVI suggested three rules for the kind of religious dialogue that might be capable of discovering common moral principles without engaging in unacceptable compromise.²

No Renunciation of Truth

The first is “No renunciation of truth” – that is, no truth must be sacrificed for the sake of unity. Scepticism and pragmatism, he rightly points out, do not unite people anyway. We must cling to the truth we already have, but we must become capable of seeking more truth than we have already, by looking beyond the alien appearances of another’s religion to find “the deeper truth hidden there”.

Criticism of one’s own religion

The second principle he enunciates is “Criticism of one’s own religion”. Religion, he says – even my own religion

² J. Ratzinger, *Many Religions – One Covenant*, 110-12.

– can fall sick, can keep us from the truth; it must be constantly purified. While it is easy to criticise the religion of the other person, we must be ready to accept criticism of our own where it is justified. Pope Benedict has made many statements that suggest he is keenly aware of the failings of Catholics – and especially of Catholic priests – in this regard.³

Proclamation as dialogue

The third principle is “Proclamation of the gospel as a dialogical process”, or, more simply, “Proclamation as dialogue”. In other words, dialogue does not replace missionary activity or evangelism on behalf of one’s religion. Instead, dialogue and proclamation should ‘mutually interpenetrate’. The conversation between religious representatives should not be an ‘aimless chat’, but be directed at finding the truth (together, in charity). Each should be a receiver as well as a giver: “We are not telling the other person something that is entirely unknown to him; rather, we are opening up the hidden depth of something with which, in his own religion, he is already in touch.”

From a Christian point of view there will be things that we know to be true and that we wish to share with an interlocutor, things that they are not aware of, or perhaps

³ He lists some examples of corruption in the various religions – including Christianity – in *Truth and Tolerance*, 204.

have misunderstood. The central truths of our faith such as the two natures of Christ and the three persons of the Trinity fall into that category. We may correspondingly learn things that we ourselves did not know, and be forced to revise our view of the other religion with which we are in dialogue. We may fail to convince our friends of particular truths that have been revealed to us, but none of us can lose from the destruction of ignorance through sympathetic study and conversation, and with it we return to our own faith enriched.

As a private theologian, as Prefect of the CDF and now as Pope, Benedict XVI knows that even if we have memorised a creed or two, truth is not the *exclusive possession* of the Christian. We have a duty to proclaim what has been revealed to us, but we also have the duty to continue listening, obeying, searching. Just as St Thomas Aquinas did in his day (with reference to the pagan Greeks and their Islamic and Jewish commentators, Averroes, Avicenna, and Maimonides), we must look to other traditions for truths that will enable us to understand better what we ourselves have been entrusted to represent. And in this he is being faithful to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, where we read that the Holy Spirit may be at work in other religions: “The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society 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.”⁴

In a very interesting paragraph of his book *Truth and Tolerance*,⁵ the future Pope Benedict asks: “Can or must a man simply make the best of the religion that happens to fall to his share, in the form in which it is actually practiced around him? Or must he not, whatever happens, be one who seeks, who strives to purify his conscience and, thus, move toward – at the very least – the purer forms of his own religion?” After all, he continues,

“The apostles, and the early Christian congregations as a whole, were only able to see in Jesus their Saviour because they were looking for the ‘hope of Israel’ – because they did not simply regard the inherited religious forms of their environment as being sufficient in themselves but were waiting and seeking people with open hearts. The Church of the Gentiles could develop only because there were ‘God-fearers,’ people who went beyond their traditional religion and looked for something greater.”

And he applies this to Christianity itself. “It is not simply a network of institutions and ideas we have to hand

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes* 38. St Thomas Aquinas has a saying he borrowed from Ambrosiaster to the effect that “All truth – no matter who says it – comes from the Holy Spirit.”

⁵ *Truth and Tolerance*, p. 54

on but a seeking ever in faith for faith's inmost depths, for the real encounter with Christ." We cannot simply assume that we have arrived at our goal. So it is this "dynamic of the conscience and of the silent presence of God in it that is leading religions toward one another and guiding people onto the path to God, not the canonising of what already exists, so that people are excused from any deeper searching."

The Pope has said on many occasions that to privatise religious belief as one more lifestyle option open to the religious consumer is to betray the very nature of religion. It is only by taking religion more seriously than this, in a common search for the truth, goodness, and beauty no human being and no religion can exhaust or monopolise, that the key to peaceful dialogue will be discovered. "God is always infinitely greater than all our concepts and all our images and names."⁶ But all of this implies that an ecumenism which is prepared to gloss over substantial differences for the sake of initiating friendly discussion needs to give way to a more profound engagement – the kind of fruitful argument that can take place only between friends.

⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 25.

On Asking the Right Questions

Having laid out the basic rules and principles of interfaith dialogue in general, I want to take a closer look at a particular set of problems that arise when we engage in such dialogue, namely the apparent inability of the participants truly to hear what each other is saying. Why is this?

Normally it is because each regards his own religion as in some way superior. His religious needs are met by the rituals and spiritual practice in which he is engaged. His religion has holy men and women who serve as models and guides for his life. The influence of such exemplary people – and, analogously, the beauty of the artistic heritage of those traditions – is understandably pervasive and long-lasting. And each religion has ways of placing other faiths in a relatively inferior position. So a Muslim, for example, will probably have been told that the Jews and Christians have falsified and corrupted their own Scriptures over time. A Christian evangelist will therefore find it hard to persuade him to read the Gospels except to find truths that he can already see in the Koran.

Another fundamental reason why communication is so difficult and at times frustrating is that each religion is an answer to a slightly different question. It is this that gives

each of us the conviction that *our own* religion is best.⁷ We will be speaking at cross purposes as long as we assume that we are all talking about the same thing. Obviously we are all talking about fundamental realities and meaning, but our specific approaches are very different.

- The primary question that the religions of India tend to ask is *Who am I?* The answer that emerges from the Upanisads and from the teachings of the Buddha is that the innermost self is one with the Absolute.
- Buddhism asks, *What is the way beyond suffering?* The answer it gives is the Noble Eightfold Path of detachment from the world.
- Judaism asks, *Who are we?* Or *What is our identity as a People?* Being Jewish is being a member of the people who have been called into a Covenant by the One God, a Covenant defined in the Law, the Torah.
- Islam asks simply, *What must I believe and do, in order to be rightly guided?* The answer is that I must worship the one God only, and follow his Prophet.
- The fundamental question Christianity asks is different again: *Who is Christ?* The answer is: the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

Christianity is therefore centred not on a doctrine, or on a method, or on a law, or on a book, but on a person (and thus also, the greatest contribution of Christianity

⁷ I am not ruling out the possibility that one of us may be right about that, just trying to explain why we all have the same conviction.

to civilization is arguably the importance and dignity of personality, or *personhood*, both divine and human). The message of Christ, you could say, was simply himself; he is the Word of God. He did not come to teach us something, but rather to ask us to *believe in him, in order to be saved*. And from this basic difference flow a multitude of others. For a religious perspective has to be seen as an organic whole, a carefully balanced harmony of ideas and spiritual methods, of symbolic images and ways of speaking.

If we do not recognise that the other religions have different concerns and different questions, we will continue to be puzzled that no real communication is taking place. We will be speaking in different rooms. Furthermore, we should be aware that inter-religious dialogue is as much about coming to understand each other's questions as it is about understanding the answers – in fact, the answers will make no sense without the questions.

Christianity and Buddhism

Take for example the word 'saved'. Both Christians and Buddhists use the word, but the meaning in each case is very different. When it is used in Buddhism it means *salvation from ignorance* through enlightenment, which implies the dissolution of the false self – or rather from a whole chain of false identities that is supposed to continue from life to life until enlightenment is finally attained. The origin of our state of *avidya* or ignorance is nowhere

explained. Nor is the existence of the world attributed to a creator God – the Buddha seems to have been exclusively concerned with the process of liberation itself (this did not, however, prevent the development of elaborate cosmological speculations among his followers after his death, especially in the Mahayana tradition).⁸

Christianity does have an explanation of the beginning of all things – namely a free act of creation by God. It also explains the beginning of sin and ignorance. An original graced harmony between Man and God was destroyed by human action in the garden of Eden. For Christianity, ‘salvation’ is from the resulting state of alienation from God, the path that leads from sin to suffering and death. Through his incarnation, death and resurrection within history, as the culmination of his self-revelation to humanity, God overcame this alienation and invited us to join him in eternal life. Our existence is therefore destined not to be extinguished, but to be made eternal in God. Salvation is the process by which in this life we become part of Christ.

What Christians mean by *love* also seems to differ radically from what Buddhists mean by *compassion*. For the Buddhist, compassion is the natural result of dissolving the selfish attachments which create the illusion of a self. As a Christian, I am supposed to love my neighbour as

⁸ I am speaking about Buddhism at a very general level. For the significant differences between the various branches, see Paul Williams’s booklet *Buddhism* from CTS.

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