

CONTEMPLATION AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

References and perspectives Drawn from the Experiences of Monastics

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This document is the result of a collaboration of the DIM (European) and MID (American) Commissions. A questionnaire had been put out in 1991. The numerous responses, which came from seven countries, were considered by a small group. Fr. Pierre de Bethune then drew up a text which was discussed at length during the annual meeting of DIM in June. This was submitted to several specialists and finally reviewed by the members of DIM in August.

PREAMBLE

"At a deeper level, persons rooted in their own religious traditions can share their experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith and duty, as well as their expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute. This form of dialogue can be a mutual enrichment and a fruitful cooperation for promoting and preserving the highest values and spiritual ideals of all peoples. Religious dialogue leads naturally to each partner communicating to the other the reasons for their own faith. The sometime profound differences between the faiths do not prevent the dialogue. Those differences, rather, must be referred in humility and confidence, to God who "is greater than our hearts" (1 John 3:20). In this way also the Christian has an opportunity of offering to the other the possibility of experiencing, in an existential way, the values of the Gospel."

(The Attitude of the Church before Believers of other Religions. Reflections and orientations concerning dialogue and mission, by the Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians, 1984, #35)

A. OBJECTIVES

The practice of monastic interreligious dialogue was something which pertained to only a few pioneers at the time when Vatican II published the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, but in the past twenty years an ever greater number of monks and nuns have become committed to the path of dialogue. Their experiences, which have been found on several continents, have occurred somewhat randomly and run the risk of being lost. For this reason we desire to assemble here the counsels and appeals of such persons engaged in a work of dialogue which embews the whole of the spiritual life. Such experiences are both positive and negative, following on a new path, which is at times hazardous, but done within the heart of the Church. The European D.I.M. and the American M.I.D. have responded in this way to the explicit and repeated request of the Secretariat for non-Christians,¹ and later the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue² to bring to bear its specific contribution to this great ecclesial task of dialogue.

We cannot touch here on all the areas of monastic life, such as obedience, humility or fraternal charity; we plan to limit ourselves to the practice of contemplation as lived in dialogue. This is a somewhat particular type of dialogue, for it does not consist in speaking about contemplation, but in truly committing oneself, as a Christian, in a practice of contemplative silence elaborated in another religion. Nevertheless this silent experience of encounter is no less dialogue in the broad sense. It is even probably the most significant type of spiritual interreligious exchange.

This collection is only the first stage of a work of great length. The encounter of religions at the level of prayer is in its beginning stages. Yet the sum of experiences in this regard can already be seen as considerable. Without wishing to anticipate the process of syntheses, we can already benefit from valuable judgments, particularly practical ones.

B. BENEFICIARIES

This study is destined first of all for Christian monks and nuns of the West who are involved in a practice of lived contemplative prayer, in varying degrees, in dialogue with the non-Christian spiritual paths. Other Christians may likewise find therein an echo of their practice and various useful counsels.

It is necessary to take account of some very diverse situations as well as varied degrees of commitment. Let us take note particularly of three categories:

1. Those who borrow certain elements of non-Christian spiritualities but who do not wish to be influenced by the place of origin of these elements.
2. Those who adopt certain ways of prayer which have been influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, but which have been already reelaborated by westerners such as K. Durckheim, John Main, etc.
3. Those who enter personally in an interior experience of "intrareligious dialogue" at the level of prayer, such as Frs. Henri Le Saux or Bede Griffiths. Their Christian practice of prayer is directly a contact with a non-Christian tradition.

In reality, these ways of doing things are not so clearly distinguished from one another. For some, they are even sometimes various stages. Moreover those who wish only to borrow certain elements, such as for example the hatha yoga, are still influenced to a greater degree than they foresaw. For this reason the counsels which we plan to consider here apply, in varying degrees, to each of these categories. But we are particularly interested in those of the third category, because their practice is more difficult and probably also more fruitful for the work of dialogue.

Moreover, this collection of comments may equally serve religious superiors who seek for certain criteria of discernment in regard to various persons who are confided to them and who wish to be involved in these new ways.

C. METHOD

The basis of the work which we present here is made up of the results of an inquiry made among nuns and monks of Europe and the United States. We have received more than fifty responses, some very detailed, from persons whose spiritual life has been influenced by the spiritualities of the East, in some cases for more than twenty years. Though we can consider that this "sample" is representative, and yet it remains limited. There are many treasures of experiences from which we have not yet been able to benefit.³ The witness gathered here concern primarily the encounter with Buddhism and Hinduism, and, to a lesser degree, Judaism and Islam, particularly Sufi.

We do not intend to give here a full account of this research, but, as planned from the beginning, we put forth a collection in which the essence of the responses is found in a logical order. There are counsels of prudence but also at times what we might call counsels of boldness or at least

counsels for proceeding forward. A first chapter concerns the dispositions of one who engages in dialogue. The second will treat the attitude in regard to what one encounters. Finally, the third chapter sets forth the perspectives which this way opens for the contemplative life in the Church.

It is a question of counsels of monastic wisdom rather than exposes of doctrine. In effect, we base ourselves and make constant reference to *Nostra Aetate*, to two documents of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (*Dialogue and Mission* " , *Dialogue and Proclamation* ") and the letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith *On Various Aspects of Christian Meditation* " for the doctrinal basis of this collection.

Parallel to these "References and Perspectives", the D.I.M. - M.I.D. is preparing a new edition of the collection *The Church - Non-Christians - Monks. Facts and Documents* presented by Father S. Tonini, and a *Bibliography* (for each linguistic region) on this particular subject of dialogue at the level of prayer.

Finally, let us indicate that we deliberately make use of the term "contemplation" in the precise sense which Christian tradition gives to it, even though recent usage of this term has brought about a certain disesteem or at least vagueness. We make use of the classic distinction of the *Scala Claustralium* of Guido the Carthusian⁷ between *lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio*. It is for this reason that we have titled this study *Contemplation and Dialogue*, since it is indeed "contemplation" which corresponds best, from the Christian perspective, to the later stages of the spiritual life in other religions.

D. THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Even if this collection is not intended directly as a theological dissertation, it still seems important for us to mention its theological context and the spiritual options which surround it. Several of the monks and nuns have attempted to clarify this point in their responses to the questionnaire.

As Pope John Paul II repeats each time he treats this question, and particularly in relation to the day of prayer at Assisi on October 27, 1986, "every authentic prayer is brought about by the Holy Spirit Who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person".⁸

This conviction is the justification for a fundamental confidence: the forms of meditation, prayer or contemplation elaborated apart from Christian tradition are not a priori a threat to Christian faith. The history of Christian prayer attests to this fact. If these influences have at times disturbed certain Christian communities, in other cases, where they have been received with the necessary spiritual discernment, they have been positive and have even fostered the realization of the Gospel. Consequently we can say that contemplation is not more Christian to the extent it is less influenced from without. Rather, what makes it Christian is the way in which the contemplative succeeds in entering into the spirit of Christ in

order to make all things flow together towards the coming of the Kingdom.

It is precisely the goal of this collection to contribute to this. It does not limit itself to giving counsels to avoid the risks of this enterprise of "intrareligious dialogue".⁹ It also wishes to highlight the opportunities which such an encounter offers for the practice of Christian faith and the developments of spiritual and monastic theology which have been made possible by recent theological reflection on the subject of dialogue.

I. SPIRITUAL DISPOSITIONS FOR ENTERING INTO DIALOGUE

"Your dialogue at the monastic level is truly a religious experience, a meeting in the depths of the hearts, animated by the spirit of poverty, mutual trust and profound respect for your own traditions. It is an experience which cannot always be translated adequately into words and which often can best be expressed in prayer-filled silence."¹⁰

It is necessary to develop here the demands of this **religious experience of dialogue** to which the Pope alluded during an intermonastic exchange organized by the D.I.M.

The monks and nuns questioned on this subject frequently begin by narrating their encounter with the spiritualities of the East. These stories are equally diverse as they are instructive; it is not always possible to deduce from them general directives. Moreover, as one of them emphasized, one must never forget that each case is unique. General counsels do not suffice. It is necessary to begin by listening to the person in order to give a personalized response.

Some have encountered the paths of the Orient after many years of monastic life. Others, on the other hand, have discovered and practiced Buddhist or Hindu contemplation prior to their monastic conversion. These latter, which are becoming ever more numerous, force us to be attentive to the evolution of the cultural context in which Christian contemplatives are situated. In any case, no matter what degree of initiation into Eastern paths they have had, they must fulfill certain prior conditions if they wish to integrate this practice into their monastic vocation and to contribute to a fruitful dialogue in the Church.

These spiritual dispositions which are required of the subject who enters into dialogue can be summed up in two:

A. TO ASSURE THE BASIS

1. Environment

a. In order that this monastic experience of dialogue at the level of the spiritual life can take place harmoniously, it is important that the person who enters into this be supported with confidence by the superior and respected by the community. This experience is certainly new and can disquiet those who are less prepared, but it

is a proven fact that this confidence of the community is a decisive environment for the proper development of a particular vocation.

b. The environment outside the community is likewise important. We are thinking here particularly of those to whom the monk or nun can easily refer in dialogue: certain monasteries of the region, good "meditation groups", various interreligious organisms, and especially the M.I.D. and D.I.M. commissions.

2. Maturity

Everything that is important for a healthy spiritual life is important for the practice of dialogue: common sense, realism, humor, solid human maturity, psychological balance and a strength of character which will enable one to react without anxiety to the eventual questioning which the experience can produce. A good general culture is likewise necessary, in order to be able to situate this intercultural encounter in its context and in order to avoid remaining at the level of concepts. But, it must be specified, this general culture need not be necessarily historical or literary; for some it can be artistic or take some totally other form of development and refinement of the person.

3. Personal Rootedness

Thomas Merton noted in 1968: "This contemplative dialogue should be reserved to those who have been formed by many years of silence and a long practice of meditation. I wish to add again that it should be reserved to those who have seriously entered into their own monastic tradition and are in authentic contact with the past of their own religious community." "It is necessary to develop somewhat these counsels of one of the great pioneers of "contemplative dialogue".

a. Rootedness in the Community and in the Church

The criterion of belonging to a concrete community is almost always determining. If the nun or monk who wishes to practice an Eastern contemplative prayer is poorly situated within their own community, this practice runs the risk of making them yet more marginal and it may even become an obstacle to the movement of dialogue. Obedience to the Abbot, fidelity to fraternal charity, to lectio divina and the liturgy are the foundation of every Christian contemplative life; they are all the more indispensable for one who wishes to pursue a path which is less well marked out by tradition.

Apart from the monastic community, the wholehearted attachment to the Church and to her teaching is likewise an indispensable condition if one desires to carry out true dialogue, not merely for one's own sake, but in place of and for the benefit of the whole community of believers.

b. Communion with the Christian Tradition

The task of dialogue requires at least a fundamental theological and spiritual knowledge, which is well integrated in the spiritual life, open, in the spirit of Vatican Council II, sufficiently

complete to be able to situate in Christianity those values which one sees developed elsewhere.

In these dispositions, the approach to other traditions enable and even invite one to discover the treasures of their own tradition. It would be at least strange if a Christian nun or monk became fully acquainted with the Bhagavad Gita, Nagarjuna or Dogen and barely knew Gregory of Nyssa, Eckhart or John of the Cross! At each stage of discovery of another tradition there should be a corresponding rediscovery of one's own.

A frequent comment made by those who practice contemplation in dialogue also concerns the new outlook on Scripture and the discoveries connected with that.

c. Spiritual Maintenance

In order to assure the spiritual base of the experience of dialogue, a spiritual maintenance is necessary. This guidance is frequently assured by the instructors themselves, since, in many cases, they are Christian. But in other cases a spiritual Father, even without having any great knowledge of Eastern spiritualities, can help to make the necessary discernments, so long as that one is not *a priori* opposed to dialogue.

4. Monastic Conversion

The "religious experience" of dialogue, particularly when it is situated at the level of prayer, demands a still greater commitment. Interreligious encounter is only truly fruitful if it takes place in a heart converted and unified by an experience, no matter how modest, of life in Jesus Christ. Whoever knows the Christ in this way knows that in "losing oneself" in contemplation, under any of its forms, one allows oneself "to be grasped" by the Lord. Such an experience enables one to accept the risk of destabilization and the loss of habitual references just as it allows one to cooperate with all that is encountered on the way. This is why one who has not already been familiarized with Eastern methods prior to entering the monastery should not be initiated in them during the novitiate. The Master can certainly enable him to tacitly benefit from certain psycho-somatic aspects of the traditions of the East which the Master will have first assimilated, but the monastic orientation should first transmit to the candidate our traditional spirituality and teach him "to be content".¹² Only later dialogue can be pursued upon the basis of a fundamental spiritual decision.

B. TO VERIFY THE MOVEMENT

"The Church of Christ, in our time, experiences a profound need to enter into contact and into dialogue with all these religions."¹³ This "profound need" of which the Pope speaks to the peoples of Asia must be constantly verified at every level of the practice of dialogue.

1. Intensity of desire

Simple obedience to a command of the superior will not suffice in order to enter into interreligious

dialogue if the monk or nun is not imbued with a profound desire to encounter other believers and, still more, if one does not "truly seek God"¹⁴ in this contact.

"There is always more in God", as a monk put it in his answer to the questionnaire. The Christian contemplative seeks to recognize this in the whole of his tradition and even beyond that. He knows that "God spoke only one Word, in His Son, and He continually pronounces this in an eternal silence"¹⁵, but he does not conclude that all has already been expressed in our Catholic tradition and that we have no need to look elsewhere. In fact, at the level of spiritual paths, other religious persons, have elaborated various means "to prepare the heart and the body"¹⁶ which can help one to know Him better. In their stories the monks and nuns frequently recount how dissatisfaction with the various ways of transmitting our traditional contemplative methods has led them to search likewise in the East for ways to remedy this. But it must be verified whether this research is sufficiently deep and pure so that one does not stop on the way. Syncretism, understood as the subtle mixture of several traditions taken equally, is an impass precisely because such a path is usually determined by personal preference rather than an intense search into the faith.

2. Purity of Motivation

Recourse to Eastern spiritualities can be ambiguous. It can be motivated by reasons which are still superficial, such as the desire to acquire various new and extraordinary "states of consciousness", the search for certain "powers", the hope of finding a higher comprehension, a "gnosis" or also to receive simpler answers to the problems of life - not to mention a simple desire for change. These motivations run the risk of being insinuated in even the best aspirations; hence it is important to discern them, for they can deflect us from the essential: by keeping us at a superficial level, they make it impossible to attain to the depths of the heart.

Nor is it necessary to search too much for concordances. This is a frequent temptation in Christian milieu. In centering too much attention on the similarities, one thinks that the work can be made easier and less dangerous, but the lack of intellectual probity leads to a degradation of the process of dialogue. This assimilation of the other results in effect in using the other for our profit.

On the other hand, what contributes most to purifying the motives is patience. Spiritual sharing is a work which matures slowly. One can expect of monastics that they bring into play in the encounter of religions their great reserves of patience, moderation and perseverance.

One can sum up the need for purifying the motives by paraphrasing the Gospel: Seek first the Kingdom and the Justice of God, and dialogue (or the capacity to dialogue well) will be given to you in addition.

II. THE DIALOGUE PROCESS ITSELF

Dialogue is, literally, a word which is followed by another one, a true word coming from the heart and which touches the heart of the other. The basic spiritual dispositions given above have been destined to well prepare the heart of the Christian who desires to enter into dialogue. Now it is necessary to specify those attitudes which are necessary in order to reach, to the extent that it is possible, the heart of our partner. In this way true dialogue can take place from "heart to heart",¹⁷.

This process is characterized first of all by the greatest respect; it is even close to friendship. Hence it is not a question of judging other believers, nor their religion or their spirituality. Each religion must make its own self-critique. But all effort must be made to discern what is essential.

A. CRITERIA FOR DISCERNMENT

Discernment (*discrisis*) is always coupled with dialogue, and, from their origins, Christian monks know that "discernment is *par excellence* the work of the monks"¹⁸ Today, then, they must apply this faculty to interreligious dialogue.

1. To Discern the Authenticity

In response to the increasing demand for "oriental spirituality" which has been seen for several decades in the West, what is offered increases, but they are not always something of quality. Consequently it is important to be on one's guard and not be too quick to consider as a witness of some venerable tradition something which is in actuality only a by-product which is more or less genuine. For encounter of religions is only fruitful when it takes place with their most authentic representatives.

Luckily, it is rather easy to verify the references of books, methods or associations which are presented to us, by consulting good bibliographies or inquiring from recognized organisms.

2. To Discern the Authority

The problem presented by spiritual masters themselves or the instructors of Eastern methods is more difficult. But, without prejudging the persons, it is indispensable to be able to appraise the value of their teaching and their guidance.

Their true "authority" should be verified in accord with a certain number of criteria which have sometimes been discerned through various regrettable experiences with pretended gurus.

There is first of all the criterion of true freedom: to what extent is the master a person freed of "ego", without attachment to money, to comfort, to renown and to the devotion shown by the disciples; is he truly humble and without scorn of the common norms of morality and dogma of his religion?

Another, more fundamental criterion of authority is the quality of his formation; his connection within his own tradition, his spiritual lineage, and the way that he refers himself to the Scriptures, or on the contrary manipulates them.

Finally, a last series of important criteria for our issue concerns his attitude towards other religious traditions: is he even desirous to learn anything or is he only preoccupied with making proselytes? It is not conceivable how a Christian could establish a beneficial link with a master who does not respect his Christian faith and who even takes a position antagonistic to its tradition. On a broader scope, in the same line of thought, it is necessary to see if the master is concerned with the whole of humanity or whether he is only solicitous to form an elitist group, the group of those who will be saved.

There are increasingly a number of Christian masters or instructors who initiate in the contemplative methods of the East. The same criteria must be applied to them and they are to be judged by their fruit.

B. DEMANDS OF OPENNESS AND HOSPITALITY

Even when the encounter takes place at the level of prayer, the rules of hospitality should be applied to it. It is question, in effect, of welcoming a stranger into one's own place, with all the precautions and discernment necessary, as we have seen, in order to avoid introducing a Trojan horse, but also with the magnanimity demanded by the Gospel, as well as the universal tradition of sacred hospitality.

At the conclusion of a sojourn of Zen monks in various Benedictine monasteries, Pope John Paul II addressed the disciples of St. Benedict in these terms: "Your specific contribution to interreligious dialogue does not consist so much in entering into explicit dialogue, for your way is primarily dedicated to silence, to prayer and to the witness of community life, but you can do much by means of your **hospitality** to promote a spiritual encounter at the depths. By opening your house and your heart, as you have done in these days, you are truly in the tradition of your holy Father St. Benedict. You apply to brother-monks who have come from other horizons and a very different religious tradition the beautiful chapter of his Rule on welcoming guests."¹⁹

In so receiving even into our heart the stranger and the call which he stirs up, we realize that he is always in some way a Messenger of our God.²⁰ For this reason it is just to hope to receive much from him when our interreligious approach is animated by an attitude of faith.

Still in this logic of hospitality, we must never forget that, even when we merely adopt certain spiritual methods, it is always persons that we welcome; the tradition we encounter is elaborated by generations of seekers of the Absolute. Consequently, we must respectfully learn to know their outlook and their mentality. Only thus can we avoid mistakes in the matter of spiritual methods.

There now follows some rules of conduct destined to ensure good competence in these matters and a true relevance in their interpretation. They are particularly directed toward those who desire to be involved more directly in this encounter of religions.

1. Competence

The experiential knowledge of contemplative methods which originated in the Orient is certainly essential but, it is also necessary, particularly for those who teach them, to know their historical, philosophical, psychological and religious background.

Such a basic competence will help one to become aware of the great variety of Eastern paths and to avoid thoughtlessly mixing various disparate elements. It will enable one to distinguish between what is cultural and what is properly religious. Certain traits of a spiritual tradition stem in effect from a particular culture, as, for example, the typically Japanese character of contemporary Zen. Certainly, these traits are frequently precious, but they still are not essential to the original intuition of *ch'an*. The distinction between cultural and religious is delicate, particularly in the Orient, but it is frequently important, since it enables one to discern at what level is situated an eventual incompatibility with Christianity. In other cases, a better knowledge of the context will allow one to appreciate the importance of the requirements of these spiritualities and to know, for example, whether a style of Zen destined to prepare the monks for "a course of one hundred meters" (as the Japanese monks recognized at the end of their stay in various Christian monasteries) may not apply for the Benedictines, "specialists in the marathon".

The problem of language remains obviously formidable. The knowledge of Sanscrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese or Japanese is indispensable for any study of these texts if one wishes to do scientific work. The approach to the texts through valuable translations nevertheless does enable a good knowledge of the reality. It is important to study these texts and not be content with certain contemporary summaries or presentations. This is particularly true for those who have a responsibility as guides in this dialogue. What would we think of a Hindu who claims to know Christianity well yet has never read the New Testament?

The direct encounter with qualified representatives of other traditions has fortunately become possible for numerous monks and nuns. About 100 monasteries of Europe and America have received various Hindu or Buddhist monks and more than 70 Christian monks and nuns have stayed in various monasteries of the East. They have since contributed to spreading an experiential knowledge of the paths of the East in the Christian monastic Order of the West.

2. Pertinence

No matter what degree of competence one may have attained, it still remains always necessary to be attentive to the manner in which we interpret this

body of knowledge. It does not suffice to have a pure motive when we prepare ourselves to approach other spiritualities. It is necessary also to purify our inquiry when we effectively approach them. Even with the best of intentions, some come to certain evaluations which have no pertinence because they were unable to avoid the reefs proper to this difficult stage of dialogue.

There is particularly the danger of taking consideration only of those elements of these spiritualities which are suitable to us. The danger of concordism has already been mentioned. It should be added here that the differences and even the incompatibilities must equally be taken into account, for they constitute an integral part of the reality. Moreover they often constitute a challenge which stimulates our research and requires a deepening of our faith.

It is common knowledge that comparisons are always risky in these areas, for it is difficult to determine what is truly the equivalent in another tradition to what we have in mind from our side. An over-simplified way of proceeding consists in putting foreign practices into our categories in order thus to be able to give a rapid appraisal regarding their "monism, pelagianism quietism" or other "isms". But such a prejudicial putting into categories prevents us from arriving at that unique nature of these spiritual searchings.

Yet for all that, one need not renounce making evaluations or consider that all is relative and ultimately indifferent. But it is necessary to bring together two gospel attitudes: on the one hand, humility and respect before the mystery proper to each one; on the other hand, the simplicity, that is to say the opposite of ambivalence, since it is impossible to have one foot in each religion! Dialogue can only take part between partners who assume their own identity and are solicitous to ensure the reciprocity of the exchanges.

III. DIALOGUE MOVEMENT AND CONTEMPLATIVE RENEWAL

The monks and nuns questioned by M.I.D. and D.I.M. did not limit themselves to sharing various counsels. They also bore witness to their discoveries and they expressed their convictions in regard to the pursuit of this interreligious encounter at the level of prayer. We here group together their opinions.

Every encounter is a discovery. It is the opportunity to learn something new or at least to be surprised and sometimes even to be amazed: "A Christian finds the greatest interest in observing those who are truly religious, in reading and listening to the testimonies of their wisdom, in receiving the direct proof of their faith, a faith which makes one recall the words of Jesus: 'Among noone in Israel have I found such faith!' (cf. Mt. 8:10)"²⁴

But it is also true that every encounter produces a **rediscovery** of our own identity. Dialogue with another religion enables one to revisit in some

way the whole patrimony of our own tradition. The stimulation of our spiritual research provoked by the witness of the faith of other believers, the humility discovered in such contacts and the clarity of interior attention fostered by these spiritual paths enables the disciple to "draw forth from the treasures both old and new."²² Three dimensions of the Christian faith are in this way "revisited".

A. UNIVERSALITY

Prayer lived in common with believers of other religions is an experience which profoundly transforms the religious consciousness. It is a change in mentalities which was unthinkable only a few years ago. The Christian churches passed this threshold during the prayer meeting at Assisi in 1986. The monks and nuns who have been involved in this dialogue at the level of prayer realize a corresponding change of conscience. By praying not only for the whole human race, but with those who pray from all religions, they discover simultaneously the specificity of Christianity and the universalism of salvation. By the same fact, the image of the Church is forceably changed since it is henceforth more concretely situated in the context of the whole of humanity which surrounds it. The vocation to dialogue in depth is a service of the Church but it is also a commitment to peace in the world.

Such a practice, finally, strengthens the fundamental experience of the unconditional benevolence of God our FATHER, as is stirred by the closing words of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*: "...in this way they will be truly children of the Father who is in heaven" (cf. Mt.4:45).²³

B. INCARNATION

The true encounter between East and West takes place within each one of us. When lived out in the right conditions, the discovery of the Eastern culture and spirituality acts as a catalyst in a process of interior unification.

The majority of those questioned on the matter of their encounter with Hinduism or Buddhism begin their narrative by stating how they have discovered the importance of their body, of their breath and of their physicality. Their choice of monastic life had been determined by a desire to seek God in this state of life which demands an ever more integral development of the spiritual life. But they speak of their astonishment at discovering that it is recourse to various Eastern methods, as for example an elementary hatha yoga, which enabled them finally to incarnate this spirituality in their daily life and in this way to better unify their heart. In fact, the anthropology which underlies these spiritual exercises enable one to concretely go beyond a certain dualism which contrasts body and spirit. Western spirituality, particularly since the end of the Middle Ages, has a tendency to oppose action and contemplation, asceticism and mysticism, etc., and, contrary to the more ancient monastic tradition, it does not demonstrate any great confidence in the so-called inferior faculties of the human. We must even recognize, more generally, that the Christian

practice has not always found in the West the anthropology which its theology of God-incarnate merited. Hence the use of the anthropology developed in the East can stimulate a spiritual practice which integrates more harmoniously all of the faculties, "so that in all things God may be glorified".²⁴

This unification of the spiritual life brings one in turn to take a new look at Scripture and more particularly at the person of Christ Jesus. In fact, we can never exhaust "the richness of the mystery of God hidden in Christ", but a new approach brings one to discover therein other "treasures of wisdom and knowledge".²⁵

The contemporary theology must confront anew the question of the universal salvation by Christ situated in the context of the encounter of religions. Various men and women of prayer share in their own way in this great work of the Church while pursuing their contemplative search in this context of dialogue. Their religious life established on fraternal life, obedience, lectio divina and the sacraments assures them that ecclesial incarnation which is indispensable in order to realize this exploration of the mystery in fidelity and in this way to recognize anew the visage of the incarnate SON and the unsuspected dimensions of His work of salvation.

C. INTERIORITY

A third dimension of the Christian faith which contemplation in dialogue allows one to look at again is the depth, the dimension of the HOLY SPIRIT. Here again, the narratives of the monks and nuns involved are very explicit: the encounter with the East has frequently corresponded to the passage of a threshold in their life of prayer. They state that the monastic life had stirred up their thirst for interiority, but that they had the impression of standing still until the day when the discovery of a simple method, such as sitting in silence, enabled them, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to descend to a more fundamental level of spiritual commitment. Some acknowledge that the sociological and theological climate of secularization had, at a certain time, put their vocation in danger and that the contemplative practice renewed by recourse to the East brought the anecdote which was necessary for the rediscovery of the taste for their monastic life.

But if this practice sometimes brings various responses to certain situations, it at the same time raises many questions. These are the ancient questions which had already been raised by fundamental theological reflections in the early centuries of Christianity: the relationship between nature and the grace of the Holy Spirit, the importance of the apophatic dimension, that is to say, the right relation between word and silence, or also various questions regarding the correct interpretation of the Scriptures, while avoiding the risks of historicism and esotericism. It is known that these questions already stirred the monastic milieu from their origins. Later all of the ecclesial movements which emphasized the dimension of interiority (for example in the 14th or the 17th centuries) had to confront them. When

the contemplative practice revives, these questions arise anew in a concrete manner. These problems are not theoretical. They touch on the foundations of our faith. In the new current context, a renewed reflection has been opened up. The adequate bibliography gives some good studies of spiritual theology on this subject. But the task is considerable and one of the conclusions of this inquiry among monks and nuns is to emphasize the necessity of involving more systematically those who can do this work more.

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In concluding of this research, the place in the Church of monastic experiences of dialogue can be seen more clearly.

It is situated at the meeting-point of two movements: the contemplative renewal and the dialogical movement.

One can in effect state that the nuns and monks whose life of prayer had been revived by the encounter with the East spontaneously communicated to their community their taste for prayer under diverse forms. And the monasteries where such persons are more numerous frequently become centers of contemplative prayer. Over a longer

period of time, this encounter with the East is an opportunity for the Western monastic Order by allowing a reawakening of this contemplative search which is constitutive of its nature.

Today, the renewal of Christian contemplation is manifested in many ways in the Church, whether in the "charismatic renewal", among new communities of monastic inspiration, or other communities of Christian life. Monks and nuns, just as numerous other Christians who pursue their contemplative search in dialogue with the spiritualities of the East, are also situated in this same ecclesial movement.

But they also participate in the great dialogical movement which flows ever more through the body of the Church. They even have a special place in this, as we have seen.

And when these two dynamisms join together, they can create a current of life which is very intense in the Christian community. This encounter brings about in effect a reciprocal stimulus in which dialogue is invited to deepen itself in prayer and in which contemplation is called to broaden itself through the practice of dialogue.

Each linguistic region will add a **Fundamental Bibliography**

1. Letter of Cardinal S. Pignedoli, President of the Secretariat to the Abbot Primate, Dom Rembert Weakland, June 1974, *Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christians* n.67 (1988), p.13; *Bulletin A.I.M.* 1980 (29), p.25.
2. Letter of Cardinal F. Arinze, President of the C.P.D.I., to Fr. Pierre de Bethune, Moderator of D.I.M., July 27 1991, *Bulletin of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, n.80 (1992), pp.139-140; *Bulletin A.I.M.* 1992 (52), p.103.
3. It should be noted that we do not consider here the testimonies of Christian monks and nuns of Asia who are involved in this process of dialogue. Their experience must be unique. It is for this reason that these "references and perspectives" are not directed to them in their present form, even if, we hope, they may be able to draw some benefit
4. *Documentation catholique* n. 1880 (1984), pp.844-849.
5. *Origins* vol. 21, n.8, p. 121-135. July 4, 1991.7
6. *Doc. Cath.* n. 1997 (1990), p. 16-23.
7. Guigo the Carthusian, *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, translated and introduction by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1981.
8. Discourse to the Cardinals of the Curia, December 22, 1986, *Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christians*, n. 64 (1987), p. 69.
9. Cf. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, Paulist Press, New York, 1978.
10. Discourse of Pope John Paul II to Christian and Buddhist monks received in audience on September 20, 1989, *Bulletin C.P.D.I.* no 73 (1990/1), p. 17.
11. "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue", in *The Asian Journal* of Thomas Merton, New York, A New Direction Book, 1973, p.316.
12. Rule of St. Benedict, ch. 7,49; 61,2&3.
13. John Paul II, *Message to the Peoples of Asia*, February 21, 1981, *Bulletin of C.P.D.I.*, n. 46 (1981), p.14.
14. R.B. 58,7.
15. St. John of the Cross, *Dichos de Luz y Amor*, n.99, in *Vida y obras*, Madrid, B.A.C., 1960, p. 1133.
16. R.B., Prologue, 40.
17. Consider "Cor ad cor loquitur", the motto of Cardinal Newman, who was one of the masters of Christian dialogue. Also see the expression "i shin den shin" which is dear to Zen Buddhists.
18. *Apophtegmata of the Fathers of the Desert*, Greek series (Nau 90).
19. "Discourse of the Pope to Zen and Christian monks" (September 9, 1987), *Bulletin of P.C.I.D.* n. 67 (1988/1), p. 7-8.
20. Cfr. R.B. 53,1,7,15; 61,4.
21. Discourse of Pope John Paul II to the participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat for non-Christians, April 27, 1979, *Bulletin of the Secretariat* n.41-42 (1979), p. 83.
22. Mt. 13:52.
23. Declaration of Vatican Council II *Nostra Aetate*, n.5.
24. Rule of St. Benedict, 57,8.
25. Cf. Col. 2:2&3.