

## INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

# A PATHWAY TO INNER TRANSFORMATION

Interreligious encounter transforms those who resolutely engage in it. Not all forms of dialogue between religions require such commitment, but when someone of a particular religious tradition accepts the testimony of another tradition within his or her own spiritual life, it can, it is true, be a time of severe testing, but also a time of profound transformation. Raimon Panikkar referred to this as “intra-religious dialogue.” Signposts are needed to point out the way on this less travelled pathway, and it is our hope to provide some of them.

This document was crafted by a group of people who participated in a symposium held in Brussels in May 2014. It expresses a Christian point of view. The symposium participants, members of several different churches, came from some fifteen European countries and from abroad. We are conscious of the fact that individuals and communities from other spiritual traditions would express their views in ways that are different from ours, but also in ways that are similar. This awareness and this hope inspire our commitment to dialogue and are demonstrated by the fact that guests from other traditions were invited to participate in the symposium.

The ideas and suggestions we present here are consonant with the openness of Christian churches to other spiritual traditions and are based on official declarations made by churches in recent years. At the same time we intend to be attentive to gestures of openness and engagement that are offered by other traditions (especially Buddhist and Hindu).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See especially *Dialogue and Proclamation*, a document published by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (1991); “Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths,” World Council of Churches (Geneva, 1979); “Contemplation et Dialogue Interreligieux: Repères et perspectives puisées dans l’expérience des moines.” *Bulletin* of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, n° 84 (1993); English translation: “Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue. References and Perspectives Drawn from the Experiences of Monastics,” *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* 49 (January 1994), pp.12-19, and reprinted in *The Attentive Voice: Reflections on the Meaning and Practice of Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. William Skudlarek (Brooklyn: Lantern Press, 2011), pp. 143-164.

We have collected the testimony of some pioneers and shared our own experiences, doing so to clarify the constituent elements of this type of interreligious dialogue. We then identified the risks it involves, doing so in order to determine what is required if this encounter is to show respect for all the parties concerned. Finally, we were able to point to the challenges and benefits of this dialogue.

#### A. WHAT IS “INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE”?

Intra-religious dialogue is first of all inter-religious dialogue: an explicit encounter between members of two or more religions who expect to receive something meaningful from the other(s) about the mystery that permeates everyone and everything.

The space opened by dialogue allows for the acceptance of the other, an acceptance that then interrogates the one who took the initiative. Dialogue is thus internalized and brings about an inner transformation and a deepening. Intra-religious dialogue is the silent maturation—in each of the partners—of the encounter/discovery that each one has experienced. For this maturation to take place, there must be a conscious acceptance of an interpenetration of two distinct religious traditions within one’s own spiritual life. Intra-religious dialogue is thus a pathway that leads to the reconciliation of rootedness and openness.

#### B. DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

While one’s initial involvement with intra-religious dialogue may be experienced as an exciting adventure, it also gives rise to deep and sometimes painful questioning. It is therefore necessary to be aware of the conditions required for this practice, all the more so because those who have not experienced it—or who have had a bad experience—perceive it as a threat to Christian identity. In some Church circles, intra-religious dialogue provokes misunderstanding and even suspicion.

At the same time, intra-religious dialogue challenges Christians to reflect more deeply on the major themes of the Christian faith, a challenge especially directed to the theologian. Just how far can the Christian who is committed to intra-religious dialogue go in reformulating Christological doctrines? How are we to perceive the action of the Spirit in other spiritualities? In all these areas, there are fundamental questions that call for a response.

#### C. REQUIREMENTS AND FAVORABLE CONDITIONS

In any event, dialogue does not just happen. We must carefully attend to the soundness of this approach.

Dialogue at this level is first and foremost a response to **a call** from God. It is essential to keep this in mind, for it is the first condition to be fulfilled by anyone who wants to embark on this pathway. As the pioneers have shown us, this kind of interreligious encounter is not a matter of personal taste, but of a desire to respond to a heartfelt yearning. It is an act of faith that seeks to encounter the faith of the other. It is always—and explicitly so—in communion with the whole Church. Therefore, we need constantly to examine the motivation that draws us to be engaged with another religious tradition. It must always be purified of any desire for immediate gain, even spiritual gain. And yet, it must also be sustained by the hope that we will be graced by such an encounter.

The **environment** of dialogue is often decisive.

Multiple factors and circumstances foster an in-depth encounter: friendship, intercultural settings (mixed marriages, for example), living abroad, the practice of silent meditation, an experience of non-duality, the presence of a great spiritual teacher, works of art, sacred sites, pilgrimage. Moreover, we can also hope for an increasing number of places that are open to an intra-religious encounter—places for sharing discoveries and comparing experiences, but also places for developing the discretion that is needed to ensure that teachers who propose an encounter with their traditions are indeed reliable witnesses of that tradition. It is also advisable to have contact with people who have benefited from intra-religious encounters. They can inspire us, even if we do not imitate them. Indeed, it is very helpful to be accompanied by an experienced person as we proceed along this way.

Prayer, or at least the experience of accompanying someone from another spiritual tradition at the deep level of his or her prayer life, is first among the most favorable conditions for deepening dialogue. In general, however, every instance of fellowship with a believer of another tradition can contribute to a deeper experience of dialogue: working together; coming together to read each other's sacred scriptures; giving and receiving hospitality, especially in places intimately connected to a particular religion, as some monks and nuns (and a good number of others!) have been able to do.

Finally, we should note the necessity, during verbal exchanges, of clarifying and evaluating such key concepts as religion/spirituality, interreligious/intra-religious, prayer/meditation, truth, otherness, syncretism. If misunderstanding is not cleared up, dialogue will simply lead to confusion.

Furthermore, we need to be specific about the **internal dispositions** that foster fruitful dialogue at the level of spiritual experience.

The most fundamental disposition is spiritual maturity, being rooted in one's own tradition. What this involves is not only a good understanding of one's own tradition, but a real experience of faith, nourished in prayer. Then we can be confident that it is possible to evolve and to change without running the risk of weakening or losing our faith.

This maturity is also expressed by a spirit of humility, both in personal relationships and in statements of doctrine. We need to recognize the limits of doctrinal formulations, but, at the same time, we should be sensitive to their importance as a vehicle for truth. The reason humility is the font of freedom and boldness is that it is based on truth, truth that is experienced in prayer and expressed in life.

#### D. SOME FRUITS OF INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Done in a spirit of humility, intra-religious dialogue is also an opportunity to deepen one's faith. The first stage is one of emptying. Then comes transformation. Finally, there is integration when, after a period of questioning, one goes to the heart of the Christian tradition and is able to recognize and reaffirm the essentials of one's faith. By helping Christians reflect on what their faith means to them here and now, dialogue offers a way to renew our participation in religious rituals, and also to renew our way of proclaiming the message of the Gospel.

Intra-religious dialogue also invites us to rediscover the dimension of mystery and the importance of non-discursive thought and silence that we find in the spiritual life of the mystics. It encourages us to engage in prayer beyond words and concepts, predisposing us to rediscover the apophatic tradition. It shows how limited words are to express spiritual experience. We believe that the practice of Zen and other Eastern forms of meditation contributes to a rediscovery of this element of the Christian tradition. It thus seems to us that in certain circumstances praying together may, in fact, be a fruit of interreligious dialogue.

Moreover, this contact with other, mainly Eastern, traditions (yoga, Taoist practices, Buddhist meditation, etc.) is an invitation to discover or rediscover the body as a *locus* of spirituality. It suggests that we reconnect with an anthropology that emphasizes the role of the body in the spiritual journey. In doing so, we will be able to enter into a respectful and more correct relationship to the natural environment. These holistic teachings and practices will help us accept our weaknesses, and that, in turn, will reinforce humility.

We should also note that intra-religious dialogue invites one to be open to the action of the Spirit outside the Church. It enables us to move beyond an

overly institutional and too self-centered vision of the Church—a vision that is likely to cut us off from the real issues of the modern world in all its diversity.

#### E. THE FUTURE OF INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Several questions remain. The “from faith to faith” approach to interreligious dialogue is quite new. Until recently it was unimaginable and even prohibited; Today, many believers still have doubts about it. But we are convinced that the development of this form of interreligious dialogue is crucial for the advancement of good relations between people of different faiths and different convictions.

The future of humanity really depends on our ability to engage in dialogue—or at least negotiation—between different people and competing interests. All forms of dialogue are important, whether they be at the concrete level of everyday life, at the level of interreligious collaboration, or at the level of explicit and respectful discussion of our differences. But we believe that the dialogue of spiritual experience is essential for the future of religion. If we cannot meet at the deepest level, the level where all believers acknowledge that the Mystery is infinitely beyond anything they can conceive of or say, then the entire edifice of dialogue will be weakened, and even threatened with extinction. Today, all religions are called to meet at this most fundamental level, and at Assisi in 1986, this was shown to be possible.

We are happy to note that those who make use of one or the other spiritual practice shaped by a religious tradition for therapeutic purposes—“mindfulness meditation” for example—find it to be an invaluable aid. However, for the proper development of dialogue at the level of spiritual experience, we should be careful never to allow a spiritual tradition to be exploited and reduced to its psychosomatic techniques.

We are also well aware that we are not the custodians of a privilege that is only granted to “religious” people! We recognize that people whose religious roots are weak or nonexistent, but who adopt practices developed by religions to advance their search for meaning and purpose, are also on this pathway. They too can arrive at a high level of spirituality. However, since our exchange was among Christians, it is neither possible nor necessary to say more about this reality.

In conclusion, we must recognize that interreligious encounter at the level of spiritual experience is just beginning. Pioneers opened a breach, but many issues remain to be worked out. Intra-religious dialogue is not only for monks and nuns. Every Christian is called, if circumstances permit, to situate his or her encounter with people of other faiths or convictions at this level. Intra-religious dialogue can make a vital contribution to the life of the churches,

helping them to develop their vocation to promote the unity of the entire human family.

*This document is the final message of the Conference organized by “Les Voies de l’Orient” at the Maison du Chant d’Oiseau (Brussels) from May 29 to June 1, 2014. All sixty invited participants are or have been involved in interreligious dialogue. Fifteen of them were members of regional and national commissions for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue.*

*During the meeting some of the great iconic figures of intra-religious dialogue were recalled, for example, Raimon Panikkar, Edmond Pezet, Vincent Shigeto Oshida, Keiji Nishitani and Henri Le Saux.*

*Keynote presentations were given by Swami Amarananda (Geneva), Jean-Claude Basset (Geneva), Bettina Bäumer (Varanasi), Fabrice Blée (Ottawa), Christophe D’Aloisio (Brussels), Pierre de Bethune (Clerlande), Bernard Durel (Strasbourg), Henri Huysegoms (Niigata), Shafique Keshavjee (Lausanne), Claire Ly (Marseille), Jacques Scheuer (Louvain-la-Neuve), William Skudlarek (Fujimi) and Bernard Stevens (Louvain-la-Neuve).*

*The conference participants were assigned to six different workshops and met after each presentation to compare notes and reflect on the core elements of intra-religious dialogue.*

*No text can reflect the rich diversity of reflections and personal testimonies exchanged during those days. Nevertheless, we have tried to bring together the essentials. The participants themselves are the ones to make known, far and wide, the fruit of this gathering.*