

# COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS: DIALOGUE AT THE GRASSROOTS

Diocesan Interfaith Co-ordinators' Conference  
Boar's Hill, Oxford 30-31 March 2006

## ***A Multi-Faith Society: Frightening Demand or Exciting Possibility?*** (Rev. William Steele)

When you see a cloud rising in the west you immediately say, 'It is going to rain', and it does. And when you see the south wind is blowing you say, 'There will be scorching heat', and there is. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? [Lk.12:54-56]

The Old Testament prophets were not fortune-tellers. They had been empowered by God to read his will and message from the pages of the present moment – to see God's meaning in what was happening in their own time. This of course often included God's promise or warning about the future. Jesus is telling the crowd that their lack of faith in him made them blind to the overwhelming significance of his presence among them: a 'greater than Solomon', a 'greater than Jonah' was there.

To be able to see something of God's meaning in our present experience needs more than shrewd insight. It needs a lively faith in the reality of God's active presence in every event and every circumstance. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning said in her reflections about the Burning Bush, 'the earth is ablaze with the fire of God, but only those who see it take their shoes off. The rest sit around and pick blackberries!' [Quoted by Ronald Rolheiser in *The Shattered Lantern*, p.102] If we are to interpret correctly 'the signs of the times' we have to realise that we always stand 'on holy ground'.

I will suggest a few 'signs of the times' for our own day. Five of them. You will have others. The challenge is, how do we read these signs 'with our shoes off', in the light of faith?

Sign 1: The gross disparity between wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness in our world. The prophets would find that all too familiar.

Sign 2: The decline of Christianity in Western Europe, certainly in practising numbers and arguably in the quality and confidence of faith in many Christians. Faith has been weakened for many by the prevailing secular ethos. Faith in the real and living presence of God has certainly weakened.

Sign 3: The emergence of a newly confident Islam after the collapse of the empires of colonialism and Soviet communism. Those two empires had subjugated and humiliated the Muslim nations, yet their faith had taught them that Islam was destined by Allah to conquer the world and convert it. They were not *meant* to be a subject people. Now at last they were rising again, and Christianity was weak and in decline. For Muslims this must be a heartening 'sign of the times'.

Sign 4: Mass immigration into the West, not only of Muslims but (in smaller numbers) the other world religions. As far as Muslims are concerned, one might put the issue for them in this way: Which model of migration are they to imitate? There was the 'little *hijra*' when in the earliest days of Islam (614 A.D.) some of them fled persecution in Mecca and found

a kindly welcome in Abyssinia, where the Christian king let them settle peaceably and live their faith; and there was the 'great *hijra*' of 622, from which they date their years, when they moved to Medina and set up the first Islamic state. In other words, what does this sign from Allah mean for them – that they live in peace and cooperation with the host nations, or that one way or another they seek gradually to dominate and eventually assume control? The intention of the 'Islamist' extreme is clear, but what of the majority?

Sign 5: Modern instant, global communication. Most influential are probably the TV and the internet. Immigration combined with these means that the non-Christian religions are no longer just the stuff of text-books and travellers' stories. They are in our streets, schools and places of work, and when we switch on the TV they are in our living-rooms.

So there are five 'signs of the times'. If we 'take our shoes off' how do we read them: 'Red sky at night shepherds' delight', signs of opportunity and discovery; or 'red sky in the morning shepherds' warning', signs of danger? As my title puts it, *A Multi-faith Society: Frightening Demand or Exciting Opportunity?*

To put all this in another way, should we opt for 'dialogue' or 'dialectic'? Should we strive for a mutual listening, learning and respect, or settle into an adversarial 'either-or'? In social terms, should we be satisfied with living in parallel, segregated and equally fearful and antagonistic groups, or should we try much harder to achieve a society where differences are integrated but not absorbed, each part making a valued contribution to the whole? In other words, can we aim at unity, but not uniformity? Or is this ideal of a society enriched, not riven, by difference hopelessly unrealistic?

As a citizen, and even more as a Christian, I maintain that we have to opt for dialogue, but with a clear awareness of the realities, and with endless patience.

However, I wish to speak here not sociologically or politically, but spiritually and theologically, and with that in mind I would say that here we are meeting both the Gift and the Call of God – or rather God's gracious but awesome invitation to step out into the dark, the dark love of God, and by doing so find new and surprising life.

The Church is only too well aware of the threat (political and religious) from an extreme and militant Islam. Who can fail to be? Some have said that Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald's transference from Presidency of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue to the Apostolic Nunciature in Cairo is an indication that the new Pope has moved Church policy to a more 'hard-line' stance, and feels that Archbishop Michael is a shade too 'dialogical' and not 'dialectical' enough. Others, though, point out that Michael is an Arabist, and that the Al-Azhar University in Cairo is the intellectual centre of Sunni Islam, which makes it a very wise appointment. In any case, Pope Benedict is most certainly committed to dialogue. On World Youth Day in Cologne last summer he had a special word for the young Muslim representatives present:

Inter-religious, inter-cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is, in fact, a vital necessity on which, in large measure, our future depends.

So we have to combine realism with an unremitting search for dialogue. That is why it is essential to realise that the Church's search for dialogue is not based simply on the human virtue of tolerance, admirable though that is, nor even simply on a desire for peace in the world, which most people want, but on the specifically Christian virtue of charity. Charity is the other-centred, self-giving love that follows the humble, crucified Christ. That is our

motive for persevering, against all the odds and even when it looks foolish, because the Cross is the sign of the foolishness of God. That is the 'spirituality of dialogue'.

As interfaith Co-ordinators you know that the Catholic Church has been insisting, more and more forcefully, on the need of inter-religious dialogue ever since *Nostra Aetate* famously called on Christians

...to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture. [NA 2]

Notice the phrase 'with prudence and charity' – i.e. combining realism with the foolishness of the Cross.

Pope John Paul repeatedly insisted on the need for dialogue, but he also insisted on the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel. Inter-religious dialogue is always orientated towards proclamation, yet

This missionary duty does not prevent us from approaching dialogue with an attitude of *profound willingness to listen*. [Novo Millennio Ineunte, 2001, n.56. Emphasis is the Pope's.]

You will also be familiar with the forms of dialogue the Church speaks of. 1. There is the dialogue of simple friendliness, neighbourliness. 2. There is the dialogue of working together in matters of justice and peace, from a concern born of faith and not only of a common humanity. 3. There is academic dialogue of experts in theological and other fields. 4. There is the spiritual dialogue, which can range from the simple and unambitious to very deep conversation, a sharing in depth of one's personal commitment and belief. These forms of dialogue are not, of course, rigidly separate: one can easily lead to another.

It is in the last form of dialogue that the severest challenges are to be found, above all in the dialogue with Islam, because Islam, like Christianity, is a missionary religion with exclusive claims.

The dialogue that is most costly and risky, and most Christ-like when entered into with proper formation, is when the partners face each other across the gulf of difference, confess their faith fully and openly (including openness about the difficulties each has with the other's religion), and then truly *listen*, humbly and with the grace of an inner quiet, as they endeavour to enter the 'otherness' of the spiritual world of their partner as he/she is confessing their faith.

It is essential for this depth of dialogue that the partners be well-grounded and mature in their own faith, without the defensiveness (or the desire to please) that comes from insecurity or ignorance. It is only when they are thus formed that they can go out to the other with an openness to being changed, not merely in the sense of being better informed but in the sense of being changed in themselves: a conversion, a *metanoia* as they open themselves to the 'God of Surprises', who can speak in the strange voice of another religion. The Spirit 'blows where he wills', and (as John Paul II said) 'is mysteriously present in every human heart' [Redemptoris Missio 1990, n.29]. The Pope also pointed out that there are 'seeds of the Word' in the various religions, reflections of the one boundless Truth [Redemptor Hominis 1979, n. 11]. If this be so, then that divine Word, in the risen Christ, can come to those who listen humbly to the faith of a dialogue-partner.

As G. M. Hopkins put it in his sonnet 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame...',

- for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

In the charity and respect that is present in true dialogue, God can come to us anew, and the Kingdom of God can grow in each of us like a mustard seed. When that happens there has truly been evangelisation, even though in dialogue we are, with absolute sincerity, *not* aiming at the conversion of the other to our religion. We are, however, aiming at the conversion of both of us more deeply to the one God.

'It takes two to tango', though, and it takes two to dialogue, as the word implies. There has to be an agreement, tacit at least, to strive to listen humbly, and be attentive to God in the other's confession of faith. And therein lies a paradox. It is one thing to be friendly, or to work together at common issues, or to hold academic discussions, or to exchange interesting information about one another's religion. All have their value, most certainly, but the spiritual dialogue of confessing and listening we have been looking at is a very different story.

Dialogue is demanding anyway, because real listening, and the inner quiet needed for that, is demanding, but it seems to me that the dialogue we've been looking at is a specifically Christian thing. If that is so, then to ask someone of another religion to enter into this depth of dialogue is asking them to follow a Christian agenda, dance to a Christian tune. Why should they? Therein lies the paradox: the Church calls some at least to strive for this, yet it seems to be striving for the unattainable!

Why is this level of dialogue a 'specifically Christian thing'? To answer that we need to go on a short theological tour:

The God of the Bible is a God of dialogue. The creation of man and woman in Genesis 1 & 2 was not an impersonal 'making', a sort of divine manufacture. Nor can we see it nowadays merely as part of an impersonal evolutionary process. Creation in Genesis is revealed as a personal God, an 'I', addressing and calling forth a free response:

God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it' [1:28]

You may freely eat of every tree in the garden. But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you may not eat. [2:16 f.]

God created us as persons by calling forth our freedom, so that we can reply as an 'I' to the divine 'Thou', responding in attentive trust to God and responding in love and cooperation with one another, first and foremost in the basic society of man and woman:

It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner [2:18]

The word 'dialogue', at least in the non-argumentative sense that we are using it here, does not appear in the Bible, but the word 'Covenant' certainly does. 'Covenant' is the solemn commitment of an 'I' and a 'Thou' to each other: in this case God and God's human creature. 'Covenant' is a dialogue: God and humanity, human beings to one another, saying 'Yes'.

Time and again God renews and amplifies the Covenant, in spite of human failure: with Noah before the Flood [Gen.6:18], again after the Flood [Gen.9:1-17], very solemnly with Abraham [Gen.15 & 17], and, most detailed and solemn of all, with Moses and the Israelites [see especially Exod.24]. God is the Dialogue-God, calling the dialogue-partner to answer 'Yes' to the divine 'Yes', and calling human beings to answer 'Yes' to each other in love:

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. [Lev.19:18]

Finally came the culmination of God's dialogue with us: the divine Word, God's 'Self-expression' so to speak and eternal Word of Dialogue, is made flesh in Jesus Christ. God's 'Yes' to us, and our 'Yes' to God come to their fulfilment in Jesus:

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not 'Yes' and 'No'; but in him it is always 'Yes'. For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'. For this reason it is through him that we say 'Amen' to the glory of God. [2 Cor.1:19 f.]

One could say that God's 'downward' 'Yes' to us is expressed in such sayings as 'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son' [John 3:16], while the 'upward' dialogue of Jesus to the Father finds expression in the Letter to the Hebrews, 'Behold I come to do your will, O my God' [10:7].

More powerful still is the 'upward' cry from the darkness of the Cross: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' [Lk. 23:46].

In the crucified and risen Christ the new and final Covenant-Dialogue had begun, and we are enabled, by the gift of the Spirit in faith and Baptism, to enter into that dialogue. It is a dialogue with the Father through Christ by the power of the Spirit, so that we can, like Jesus himself, use the word of familiarity 'Abba, Father', and by the same token relate to each other in dialogue as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In that last sentence I used the three Names, 'Father', 'Christ' and 'Spirit'. In the earliest years of Christianity, often in terrible persecution, they lived the life of the Spirit, the life of the risen Christ, praying 'Our Father, who art in heaven'. In this daily living-out of the Christian faith they saw more and more clearly, though with great struggles to articulate the vision, that the God they lived by, and lived in, must in his own mysterious life be a God of dialogue. In that polytheistic Roman world they died for their faith that God is *one*, yet they believed no less certainly that in the living unity of God there is a mystery of 'I' and 'Thou', the mystery of a dialogue-relation of 'otherness': Father and Word, one in the dialogue unity of the Holy Spirit.

The one God we Christians worship, the God we touch in our sacraments, reach after in our prayer and share in our life together in the Church, is not like the *Allah* of the Muslim, nor completely like the *Jahweh* of the Jew. The life of Jesus, and supremely his life's culminating moment in death, is the God of dialogue making present for us his mystery and life, and calling us to answer 'Yes'.

I hope you will forgive this floating up into the spiritual stratosphere, but I wanted to show how fundamental and inescapable the call to dialogue is for the Christian. Inter-religious dialogue is part of that. The honest confessing and humble listening in inter-religious dialogue are modelled on Christ himself, and above all on the Christ of Gethsemane and Calvary, when the dialogue reached its crescendo, and where God revealed most fully, and most darkly, what it is to be God. Behind the cry 'Why have you forsaken me?' and

'Into your hands I commit my spirit' we can discern the Voice that spoke to Moses, fifteen hundred years before, I AM WHO I AM.

So we have to persevere, even if our motives are misunderstood by those Muslims who can only see a dishonest attempt to get converts, or who suspect that we ourselves are no longer secure in our own faith and 'ripe for the picking'. We have to persevere, even if our fellow-Christians can only see dialogue as a betrayal of our faith and a woolly relativism. We have to persevere, even though we know how hard it would be for a Muslim to enter dialogue at this depth, not only because it is a Christian agenda but also because his Islamic faith tells him that Jews and Christians have corrupted the true revelation given to Abraham and the prophets. Muhammad is the final and definitive prophet, and consequently they can have nothing to learn or receive of God from humbly listening to a Christian confessing their faith: they would simply be endangering their own.

Yet in spite of all these barriers we must persevere, because it is profoundly and inescapably our agenda, our mission, and a part of the wider evangelisation of being God's instruments in making Christ and the Spirit actively present, so spreading the Reign and Kingdom of God.

If all this looks like foolishness and a recipe for failure, so be it:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. [1 Cor.1:22-25]

As I said earlier, the search for this depth of dialogue is paradoxical. It is. It is the paradox of the foolishness and weakness of God.

I would like to end with some further words from the last Pope. Two months to the day after the 9/11 atrocity, John Paul II gave a spiritual conference to his Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue in Rome. His subject was *The Spirituality of Inter-religious Dialogue*. He reflects on Philippians 2, where St Paul speaks of Christ humiliating himself, his 'self-emptying' (*kenosis*):

...in interreligious dialogue we must take to heart the exhortation of St Paul, 'in your minds you should be the same as Christ Jesus'. The Apostle goes on to understand the humility of Jesus, his *kenosis*. It is in the measure that, like Christ, we empty ourselves that we shall truly be able to open our hearts to others, and walk with them as fellow pilgrims towards the destiny that God has prepared for us.

This reference to the *kenosis* of the Son of God serves to remind us that Dialogue is not always easy or without suffering. Misunderstandings arise, prejudices can stand in the way of common accord, and the hand offered in friendship may even be refused. A true spirituality of Dialogue has to take such situations into account and provide the motive for persevering, even in the face of opposition or when the results appear to be meagre. There will always be a need for great patience, for the fruits will come, but in due time, when 'those who are sowing in tears will sing when they reap'. [John Paul II, Rome Nov.11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Reported in *Catholic International* Feb.2002, p.9.]

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**15 April 2006**