

# PLURALISM AND THE PARISH

## 1. A changed scene

I suppose many of you are like me and have had the same experience. I was born and brought up in Walsall, a leather town in what used to be South Staffordshire and now is part of the West Midlands. Catholics were in the minority, though there was a good group living around our parish church, St Patrick's. Most, like myself, were of Irish origin, though there were also a couple of Italian families, ice-cream sellers. In the local grammar school I attended, before I left for the White Fathers' junior seminary, the few of us who were Catholics were not discriminated against but, I suppose following our parents' instructions, we did not attend religion classes, nor did we even attend morning assembly – we were given the task of taking down the names of late-comers.

I do not remember ever meeting someone who belonged to another religion, either at school or in other circumstances, not even among the patients who came to see my parents, both general practitioners, in the surgery at our house. There were no Jews, as far as I can remember, and certainly no Muslims or Sikhs or Hindus.

Then came the years of immigration and a note of pluralism entered into our area of the Midlands, including Walsall. First there arrived individuals, then families, then communities. The increase during the late 'Fifties and 'Sixties was noticeable, every time I came home for holidays. Around 1960 my parents, with retirement in view, moved from the centre of the town to a quieter house. They changed parishes, and were now in the 'posh' parish of St Mary's the Mount. Yet, lo and behold, all the houses around the parish church began to be occupied by new-comers from Pakistan. The sights and the smells were different. Some people were uneasy at this, but I remember my mother saying that the women in saris brought a dash of colour to our rather sober Midlands town. Gradually also the sky-line changed. Not only were there the usually churches of different denominations, but now you could see a purpose-built mosque, one of the first in the country I believe, a Hindu temple, a Sikh *gurdwara*. Pluralism had come to stay.

This is a pattern familiar to many of you, I am sure, though the spread of these communities throughout England and Wales is not even. There are areas of high concentration of other faith communities, Leicester, Bradford, Birmingham, Dewsbury, certain areas of London: Southall, Tower Hamlets. You will be able to complete the list. I was interested to discover recently that Harrow, in North London, is one of the boroughs in London with the highest number of Asians and that the Zoroastrian community has received planning permission to build, on the site of a former cinema, their fire temple. There are, of course, other parts of the country where one would be hard put to come across a Hindu or a Muslim, let alone a Zoroastrian. Does that mean that the topic chosen for this conference is of no interest to the priests who work in those areas? I do not think so. Given the greater mobility of our times, your parishioners may well be working in other areas where they do come into contact with people of different religions. There is also the upward mobility of some, though not all, of the members of these communities, so that you will find Muslims and Sikhs among the students at the universities, and also among the staff. And where would the National Health Service be without the doctors from other countries, many of whom are not Christians? Finally, there is the international scene which makes it imperative to know something about other religions, and in particular about Islam.

You can be reassured. It is by no means my intention to conduct a seminar on world religions. The purpose of these talks is to help you, as pastors, to reflect on relations with the followers of these religions. Tomorrow I shall attempt to address some specific questions of a pastoral nature. Today I would like to present a basic theological reflection. However, before launching into this, it may be good to describe the various reactions, at parish level, to the growing

religious pluralism in society. Since I have never engaged in pastoral work in the U.K., you will forgive me if the presentation is rather sketchy, and may reflect practice in other countries, including Italy. You will be able to fill it out yourselves.

## **2. Parish reactions to pluralism**

A number of parishes adopted an open and generous attitude to the first wave of migrant workers. They could offer them help in different ways; material help, assistance in dealing with local authorities, acting as mediators, sometimes providing instruction in language skills. Parish halls or other premises were put at the disposition of these communities for their feasts, for weddings, and at times even for prayers. This generosity may have been accompanied perhaps by a certain condescension, but it usually sprang from a good heart.

As the different faith communities grew, so did hesitation on the part of the Catholic community. The demands of these faith communities, particular of the Muslims, increased, and their voices seemed perhaps to become more strident. Now it was less a matter of borrowing places for worship, but acquiring them, so the question arose about selling surplus Catholic property. There were questions too about what attitude to take towards children belonging to other religious traditions who were attending Catholic schools: what religious instruction should be given, what Catholic practices should all take part in. As the local authorities, in their own way, came to terms with religious pluralism, the embarrassment of Catholics only grew. Some local authorities, aided and abetted by the mass media, seemed to go overboard to show that they respected all traditions – except Christianity. So lights could go up for *Diwali*, but not for Christmas, and no Christmas cribs please. Special mention would be made of Ramadan and ‘Id, but no attention to Lent and Easter. Hot cross buns were out, *chapatis* in. All this helped to generate a sense of frustration among staunch Catholics, and perhaps even a feeling of resentment that others should be given special treatment. So there may have been the growth of a more inward-looking parish community.

In recent years, particular with the events of 9/11, as the Americans call it, and those of 11 March of this year, there has appeared a new note of fear. There is the threat of terrorism, connected with a certain type of Islam. Various events in this country have lent justification to this apprehension. So the attitude to Islam and to Muslims tends to be one of suspicion. Yet there is another aspect to take into consideration. There is the realisation that people belonging to other communities generally have more children than do Christians, including Catholics. So the balance of faith communities is changing. Moreover, the other communities often appear to be more lively than our parish communities. Added to this is the fact that some Muslims do not hide their desire to win Europe over to Islam, seeing this religion as the solution to the perceived moral decadence of the West. Does not all this create a defensive attitude among Catholics today?

Is this the right attitude? Can it be justified by Catholic teaching? Would it not be good to go back to the vision of the world presented by the Second Vatican Council and see how it applies today? This I would like to do with you now, through a re-reading of the Declaration *Nostra aetate* on the relations of the Church to the people of other religions.

## **3. Respect for Other Religions**

It is interesting to note that *Nostra aetate* does not immediately focus on the differences between the Catholic faith and other religions, but concentrates first on what they have in common and on the fundamental unity of the whole of humankind. In a nutshell, the teaching based on Scripture, and especially on the Acts of the Apostles, is that all peoples are created by God, come from one stock and share the common destiny that God has prepared for them. John Paul II has repeated this many times, including when reflecting on the Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi 27 October 1986. On that occasion he referred to the common origin and common destiny of humankind, but added that in

the in-between period “we must learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others”.

The common origin means that, despite the evident differences, there is a basic unity. It could be said that this reflects the very nature of the human person, *homo religiosus*, who is faced with the same fundamental questions: the meaning of life, the origin of suffering, how to understand death, where is true happiness to be found. People have turned to religions for the answers to these enigmas. Perhaps in our day some distrust the established religions and wish to create one of their own which would suit them better. This New Age tendency still reflects nevertheless the basic religious drive of the human person.

*Nostra aetate*, after mentioning some of these religious responses, including Hinduism and Buddhism, states that “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 reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all” (NA 2). I would like to emphasise the words “high regard”, repeated in the next paragraph with reference to Muslims. The Church’s attitude is one of respect for the followers of other religions, based on the values to be found in them.

Something should be added here, for *Nostra aetate* is not to be taken in isolation but together with all the other documents of Vatican II. There could have been a cross-reference to *Dignitatis humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Liberty, though this was only given solemn approval over a month after *Nostra aetate*. The Declaration teaches that “the right to religious freedom is based in the very dignity of the human person” (DH 2). There is an obligation to search for the truth, but the individual has the right to be free from coercion and to be respected with regard to individual choice with regard to religious matters. Moreover this individual freedom is to be extended to communities, since religion has a social dimension to it. *Dignitatis humanae* declares that to deny “the free exercise of religion in society, when the just requirements of public order are observed, is to do an injustice to the human person and to the very order established by God for humankind.” (DH 3).

The attitude to the various religions cannot therefore be dismissive, or one of mere tolerance. There must be a deep respect for people. To repeat what John Paul II has said: despite the differences, we must learn to walk together. *Nostra aetate* therefore follows its teaching on respect with the exhortation to the members of the Church “to enter with prudence and charity into discussion<sup>1</sup> and collaboration with members of other religions” (NA 2).

#### 4. Discernment

The fact that other religions may reflect “a ray of the truth which enlightens all” does not imply that everything is light in them and that there are no shadows. We would acknowledge that, although the Church is Holy, the members of the Church are weak and inclined to sin, and hence the Church is *semper reformanda*. There is no reason why the same should not apply to other religions. Some people tend to be Manichaean, seeing things starkly as either black or white. Hinduism is either sheer idolatry or an immensely creative response to the Divine. Buddhism is just an ego-trip or else it is the most profound philosophy of life. Islam is a creation of the Devil or it is the only religion that can bring sanity and sanctity into today’s world.

Is not the truth somewhere in between? *Nostra aetate*, it must be admitted, points to the positive elements of the different religions, rather than to their negative aspects. It speaks of the recognition of the Supreme Being in the Traditional Religions, and the deep religious sense with which life is

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<sup>1</sup> “Dialogue” would be a better translation of the Latin text.

consequently imbued. It refers to “the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy” in Hinduism, and the Buddhist way to “perfect liberation”. With regard to Islam, some of the beliefs held in common with Christians are referred to, as also elements of practice, such as prayer, alms-giving and fasting<sup>2</sup>. A completely objective and exhaustive examination of religions would have to point also to their defects<sup>3</sup>. Traditional Religion often imposes taboos which restrict human freedom, or enjoins practices which go against basic moral principles, such as the rejection of twins in some ethnic groups and their exposure to death. The iniquities of the caste system have been consolidated, not eliminated, by Hinduism. Buddhism seems to encourage a concentration on the problem of the individual, although it must be said that there is a growing movement of socially engaged Buddhism. Islam, by way of contrast, would be seen to emphasise the communitarian aspect of religion to the detriment of the individual’s freedom, and one could also point to certain inequalities in the treatment given to men and women, though the passages in the Qur’an on which these are based can be given a reasonable explanation in relation to the culture of the time.

These shadows are mentioned to show that we should not be afraid to take a critical stance with regard to other religions, as long as we are ready, at the same time, to acknowledge the many beautiful and noble elements that they contain. Similarly, we should not be unduly offended if others find fault with Christianity, particularly in the way it is practised, but we would hope that they could also appreciate the depth of its riches. What must be avoided, at all costs, is the comparison of the ideals of one religion with the defects of another, or rather with the defects of its followers. One of the components of respect is to be true and just in one’s appreciation of the other and the other’s religion.

### **5, One way of salvation in Christ**

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions” (NA 2). This statement, already referred to above, bears further examination. It is worth underlining the second term used, namely “holy”. Does this not imply that these religions contain elements of grace which allow their followers to attain to salvation? Does not it follow then that the other religions are ways of salvation alongside Christianity?

In fact, the same Declaration *Nostra aetate*, which inculcates respect for the various religions, teaches unambiguously that the Church “is in duty bound to proclaim without fail Christ who is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn 1:6)” (NA 2). Jesus is thus the way of salvation, for it is in him that God has reconciled the world to himself. This has been strongly reiterated recently by the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus*. Respect for other religions does not mean that the Church has to give up preaching Christ. On the contrary, dialogue requires respect not only for the religion of others, but also for one’s own. Therefore it is necessary to remain firm in our own faith and abide by our own principles.

Yet the Catholic doctrine of salvation in Christ has to be understood correctly. The complete vision of Vatican II needs to be taken into account. In *Gaudium et spes* it is stated clearly that “we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery” (GS 22). It will be noticed that this is not an option open to us, an opinion

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<sup>2</sup> I shall say little in this paper about Judaism, since the dialogue with Jews is the competence not of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue but of the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, which comes under the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity.

<sup>3</sup> As has been said, the documents of Vatican II are to be taken together, not in isolation, so to be fair to the Council Fathers one could quote from *Ad Gentes*: “(The Church’s missionary activity) purges of evil associations those elements of truth and grace which are found among peoples, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of God; and it restores them to Christ their source who overthrows the rule of the devil and limits the manifold malice of evil. So whatever goodness is found in the minds and hearts of men, or in the particular customs and cultures of peoples, far from being lost is purified, raised to a higher level and reaches its perfection, for the glory of God, the confusion of the demon, and the happiness of men” (AG 9).

we may or may not adopt; it is something “we must hold”. Does the Holy Spirit lead people to enter the paschal mystery, which is *the* way of salvation, in spite of their religions or through them? If there are elements of grace in these religions, how can they be such for the followers of these religions, helping them to grow in holiness, that is in friendship with God? *Dominus Jesus* encourages theologians to examine how, in fact, different religions can play a part in the plan of salvation. The door is not closed to research in the field of the theology of religions; it is only directed out of blind alleys into more fruitful paths.

It is not theology in itself that interests us here, but rather pastoral practice. Yet pastoral practice to be fruitful must be based on sound theology, so I do not apologise for the brief exposition above.

## 6. Dialogue and Proclamation

The simultaneous presence in *Nostra aetate* of a call to both dialogue and proclamation has led necessarily to reflection on the compatibility of these two elements of the Church’s mission. A first document of the Vatican office in which I have the privilege to work, *The Attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, published in 1984, situated interreligious dialogue within the mission of the Church. It said that this mission was “a single, but complex and articulated reality”, and went on to enumerate its elements: the simple presence of a believing community; the prayer and worship of this community: its *diakonia*, or service; dialogue with people of other religions “in order to walk together towards truth and to work together in projects of common concern”; and finally “announcement and catechesis” or the proclamation of salvation in the name of Jesus Christ (cf. DM 13). This did not answer all questions. On the contrary, it raised a further question. If dialogue and proclamation are both elements of the Church’s mission, how are they related, and which has the priority?<sup>4</sup> The office started working on a new document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, published eventually in 1991. However, the previous year saw the publication of Pope John Paul II’s missionary encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*. This encyclical declares roundly that “interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelising mission”. It continues: “In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue... These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable” (RM 55).

What are we to make of this rather chalcedonian type language? The “intimate connection” could be that dialogue always contains something of proclamation, in that Christians entering into dialogue are called to witness to Christ, by their life first, and then, if judged appropriate, in words, whereas proclamation, to be effective, must always be undertaken in a spirit of dialogue. Yet there is also a “distinctiveness”. The aim of proclamation is obviously to invite the other to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and to enter into the community of the faithful through receiving baptism. The aim of dialogue is not that the other be converted to my religion, but rather that we may help one another to live in harmony, to work together, and to stimulate one another in following God’s will as our conscience leads us. *Dialogue and Proclamation* concludes: “The two activities remain distinct but, as experience shows, one and the same local Church, one and the same person, can be diversely engaged in both” (DP 77). Which activity to engage, at which time, must be discerned, following the lead of the Holy Spirit.

## 7. Dialogue for the Abundance of Life

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<sup>4</sup> Some people built up a thesis on the word “finally”, namely that all the first mentioned elements of the Church’s mission were oriented towards and a preparation for the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately for the argument, the word “finally” is not in the original Italian text; it has only been added for redactional purposes in the English version.

The overall theme for the National Conference of Priests over the next three years is *Life in Abundance*. It is in this context that we should be considering interreligious dialogue. The contribution of dialogue to a more abundant life can be seen on different levels.

A first level would be the overcoming of negativities. The final paragraph of *Nostra Aetate*, one to which insufficient attention is paid, returns to the idea of God as origin. Since all are created in God's image, we cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we do not treat people as brothers and sisters. This leads to a very practical conclusion: "The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, colour, condition in life or religion" (NA 5). Unfortunately there is still a need to reiterate this condemnation of discrimination.

Since the origin of *Nostra aetate* was a document on the Jews, it is obvious that this condemnation of discrimination was primarily aimed at any manifestation of anti-semitism. There has been a recrudescence of anti-semitism recently, so there is certainly a need to be vigilant in order to combat it and eradicate its causes. Yet it is also true that there are manifestations of anti-Muslim feeling, islamophobia, which need to be addressed. One could add too that all prejudices must be overcome, and this can only be done by conveying more accurate knowledge of other religions. Overcoming prejudices, dissipating mutual suspicion, will be one way of helping people of different religious traditions to live together in harmony and peace. Surely this could be considered one expression of life in abundance, since peace is a mark of the Kingdom of God.

Speaking of relations between Christians and Muslims, *Nostra aetate* takes cognisance of the "many quarrels and dissensions" of the past, and asks Christians and Muslims "to forget the past and ...achieve mutual understanding" (NA 3). We are only too aware of the flare up caused by the mere mention of the word "crusade", and we should recognize too the dead weight that colonialism has settled on Christian-Muslim relations. Is it really possible to forget the past? John Paul II would seem to have taken a different road, that of looking squarely at the past and asking God for a healing of memories. This is why the Pope has said there can be no peace without justice, and no justice without forgiveness. So where tensions have arisen, reconciliation is necessary for good relations to be restored and life to be lived to the full.

Yet there is more. *Nostra aetate* says to Christians that "while witnessing to their own faith and way of life" they should "acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture" (NA 2). This is in fact quite a remarkable statement. It supposes the ability to discover the working of the Holy Spirit not only in the hearts of individuals, but also in the customs and rites of the traditions to which they belong. This is something which requires a contemplative spirit. Are the members of our Christian communities equipped for this? Is it part of their own faith and way of life?

The riches thus discovered are to be preserved and encouraged. There is no question of preventing people of other religious traditions from being themselves; rather they are being encouraged to express their identity in their social life and cultural activities. This does of course raise the question how the different cultural and religious communities can live together in harmony in society. In France there is a great fear of what is termed "communitarianism". It seems to me that the U.K. has a better record in this respect, though this does not mean that there are no problems. The recognition of diversity can bring about enrichment. One of the forms of dialogue is the dialogue of religious experience "where persons, rooted in their own religious tradition, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute" (DP 42). The Monastic Interreligious Dialogue is engaged in this type of sharing, but it should be possible for lay people also, even if in an informal way.

One final point. *Nostra aetate* suggests that Christians and Muslims should “together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values” (NA 3). There is no reason, moreover, why such tasks should be confined to Christians and Muslims; they are the concern of people belonging to all religious traditions. Is not this collaboration already taking place? There are people of other faith communities joining Catholic inspired pro-life movements. Cooperation has built up between CAFOD and Islamic Relief, an Islamic aid agency based in Birmingham. Local inter-faith councils and the national Inter Faith Network are providing an opportunity for people of different religious traditions to make their voices heard in society. Organizations such as the World Conference of Religions for Peace are enabling people of different faith communities to work together for justice and peace. The pluralistic society in which we live offers many possibilities for a dialogue of action which is geared not to the advantage of particular groups but rather to the well-being of all.

## 8. Conclusion

In the passage of John’s gospel where Jesus presents himself as the gate of the sheepfold, he says that anyone can pass in and out freely and find pasture. He has come so that people may have life and have it to the full (cf. Jn 10:7-10). There would not seem to be any restriction here. Can it be said that the words apply only to Christians, to those who consciously and explicitly acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and Saviour? Are we who believe in Christ not to encourage others, even if they do not share our faith, to enter through the narrow gate of death to self and self-interest which leads to life?

The evangelist remarks that Jesus’ words caused disagreement among the Jews who heard them. They said that Jesus was possessed, that he was raving, and that it was not worth bothering to listen to him. I hope that this will not have been your reaction to this morning’s presentation. But if there is disagreement with what has been said, then you have the workshops to share your objections and exchange other points of view. I wish you fruitful discussions.

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PLURALISM AND THE PARISH  
**Questions for Group Discussion**

1. Are you aware of different faith communities in your parish? Do you, or any of your parishioners have contact with them? Do they wish to have contact with you and with the Catholic community?
2. Has there been any change in your attitude towards people of other religions? Has there been any change in the attitude of your parishioners? What would you attribute this to?
3. Would you describe your parish as a witnessing community? In what way?