Religions & Harmony – A Christian Perspective

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Introduction

First, I wish to pay tribute to the Armidale Harmony Group for organizing this important conference on harmony and the religions. I am reminded of Hans Küng’s famous statement of the problem: no peace on earth without peace among the religions; and no peace among religions without dialogue among the religions. With you, I look forward to this experience of dialogue which I trust will be one which provides new understanding, vision and praxis of peace and harmony.
Second, while I am honoured to be here as the ‘Christian’ voice, I am sure we are all aware that there is no single Christian perspective on any topic, including harmony. Nor do I claim to speak for any specific church even though I speak as a member of the Catholic church that has recently (in the past forty years or so) developed a new energy for dialogue among the world’s religions and cultures. Some of what I say arises from the official teachings of my Church; the rest is my considered reflection as a theologian. So, I speak as a Christian and Catholic without pretending to speak for all Christians or all Catholics.

**Spirit of Religion Project**

I am committed to dialogue among religions and cultures as a necessary and important requirement for global harmony. As a member of the Spirit of Religion Project, I have recently spent a week living, praying and studying with representatives of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Oral and Tao-Confucian scholars in Spain. Again, while I use the word ‘representative’, I am aware that we speak from our own religious traditions as distinct from speaking for them. Much of the work of this project arises from the shared conviction that we are at a new moment of human and religious consciousness in which all ethnic, cultural and religious traditions need to understand each other and work co-operatively together for world reconciliation, harmony and peace.

The originator of this project is Raimon Panikkar who embody many of this new vision in his own person. Born to a Spanish Catholic mother and an Indian Hindu father, he has devoted his life to the harmonization of religions claiming, in his own case, to embrace Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Secular-Humanist traditions. The phenomenon of multi-religious belonging is not something to which most of us are called. Nonetheless, it is important to realise that such a path does exist. Moreover, it makes us aware there is
no such thing as religion disembodied from peoples and cultures. And like people and cultures, religions are forever changing, growing, evolving through historical contact with other traditions—often in opposition, sometimes by incorporating the ideas, symbols and rituals of those traditions. Certainly, we are at a point in human history when no single religious or cultural tradition can responsibly decide to live in glorious isolation from the rest of the world. We either learn to live together in harmony or face the distinct possibility of destroying the one world we are called to share.

**Religious Dialogue**

From what I have said so far, religious harmony requires religious dialogue. However, religions don’t dialogue; people do! The first prerequisite for such dialogue is that people know and understand their own tradition at some level of depth. This is what Panikkar calls *intra*-religious dialogue. Often, the problems among religions stem from people who do not appreciate their own tradition beyond a superficial level. In this case the religious tradition may become a face which harbours ignorance and prejudice. Religion then becomes an ideology. I have to admit that my own Christian tradition has fallen into this trap too often in its two thousand year history, not least in the period of western colonization. *Intra*-religious dialogue requires such a moment of self-critique.

Inter-religious dialogue depends then on *intra*-religious dialogue. Do I know and understand my own tradition? Then we need to critique our understanding of the religious other. In particular, we need to move to a point where we understand the religious other not as a threat to our own religious identity so much as an opportunity for growth. This can arise from the increasing belief that no single religion or culture—including our own—has all the answers for resolving the problems facing humankind. We actually need to learn
from one another. We also need to avoid the all-too-common trap of comparing the ‘ideals’ of our own tradition—such as the Christian commandment to love—with the ‘practices’ of another—such as Islamic terrorist bombers. This is not only unhelpful, but profoundly dishonest given that we could just as easily compare Islamic insistence on divine mercy and hospitality with the Christian crusades.

Next, we should realise there is no place for facile comparison of religions. There are often profound differences—not least religious notions of God or the Absolute—which no amount of dialogue can dissolve. Religions may have much in common which we need to appreciate; however, they also express radically divergent and even mutually contradictory views of reality. This highlights the importance of religious experience over religious doctrines in dialogue. As Panikkar states: “Beliefs divide; faith unites!” Through dialogue, we search for a way of living harmoniously that respects radical difference. Here too we can learn from the postmodern insight that every tradition has its own symbols, rituals and values that need to be respected on their own terms and that, in the context of mutual respect and understanding, may well speak to those who embrace other traditions. However—and we need to be clear on this—we are not aiming for a ‘new world religion’ that dissolves the particularities of any tradition. We are aiming for an emergent harmony arising from the distinctiveness of all traditions.

**Christian Resources for Religious Harmony**

Since I am the Christian voice in this dialogue on religions and harmony, I will devote the rest of my presentation to uncovering what I call Christian resources for religious harmony. Or to ask the question differently: what strategies should Christians employ in order to make the most of their contribution to global harmony. My remarks will necessarily
be brief. I trust that we will be able to develop some of these in the ensuing dialogue.

**Historical Critique**

Knowledge of history shows that the Church of the early centuries was not aligned to political powers. To the contrary, Christians were the ‘pagans’ of the day: they refused to worship Roman gods and emperors; they were often persecuted and forced underground. However, there are also examples of Christians working and living harmoniously with those of other traditions. With the advent of Constantine in the fourth century, Christianity became the state-sanctioned religion which reached its zenith in the Middle Ages. Christianity (or Christendom) took on a militant edge notably in the Crusades and the clash with Islam as well as in persecution of the Jews. Again, we can point to significant exceptions—such as medieval Spain where Jews, Christians and Muslims lived together in relative harmony for several centuries.

Following Columbus and the colonization of the so-called “new world”, Christian expansion was at the expense of Indigenous cultures across Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas. Even as recently as a century ago, a world meeting of Christian churches (Edinburgh 1910) confidently proclaimed the Christianization of the whole globe within a generation. Things have certainly changed since those heady days in the wake of two world wars, the rise of post-colonial independence movements, the resurgence of local cultures and other world religious traditions as well as the most significant migration of peoples in human history. Reluctantly, the Christian churches have had to face the reality of cultural and religious pluralism. They have also needed to acknowledge their responsibilities in the subjugation of peoples, cultures and traditions. Surely, such missionary excesses cannot be justified on the basis of the
religion of Jesus or genuine Christian theology. In turn, this has led to significant Christian self-reflection.

**Biblical and Theological Recovery**

Biblical recovery points to the reality that Jesus neither lived nor preached religious sectarianism. To the contrary, Jesus engages in dialogue with foreigners in a fully respectful manner; and he recognizes in the Roman centurion a greater faith than in all of Israel (Matthew 8: 10). Moreover, Jesus seemed far less concerned about people’s beliefs than their attitudes and actions. At the heart of his prophetic ministry are the words of the Beatitudes, also called “The Sermon on the Mount”, where Jesus speaks of universal human values necessary for living a life of righteousness, peace, justice and mercy.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are they who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek,  
for they shall possess the earth.  
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice,  
for they shall be satisfied.  
Blessed are the merciful,  
for they shall obtain mercy.  
Blessed are the pure of heart,  
for they shall see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they shall be called children of God. Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [Matthew 5: 3-12]
Jesus’ message does not avoid the reality of human conflict; in fact, such conflict is to be expected. Importantly, though, Jesus does not promote conflict in the name of religion or any other cause. To live according to the Beatitudes means that one needs to be passionately committed to peace, justice and reconciliation. This may cause one to “suffer persecution”. In such a situation, one is called, to quote another aphorism of Jesus, “to turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5: 39). The Beatitudes stand in stark contradiction to those all-too-often historical instances where Christian praxis adopted patronizing, intolerant and even violent attitudes in the so-called “name of Jesus”.

Another Christian resource for the promotion of harmony among peoples is the doctrine of the Trinity which celebrates pluralism in the Godhead. In other words, for Christians, the ultimate reality is both one and three: unity and plurality coexist in a manner that neither defies unity nor ignores diversity. So, for Christians, ultimate reality is imaged as the communion or harmony of Father, Son and Spirit, an image that should surely be reflected in human, earthly relationships. Such harmony should be reflected in the interrelationship of peoples, cultures and religions. As well, the Christian doctrine of the divine-and-human reality of Christ (the Incarnation) can be appropriated as a model for approaching religious and cultural diversity: we are really different in our beliefs; we are really united in our humanity and in the divine mystery we all share (by whatever name). These are just two examples whereby Christian theology is attempting to confront its own self-understanding—and its historical ‘shadows’—for the sake of achieving greater self-authenticity and harmony with other traditions.

**Catholic Perspectives**

John Paul II’s lengthy reign as pope (1978-2005) witnessed a sea-change in official Catholic attitudes to other religious traditions. Building on the teachings of the Second Vatican
Council (1962-1965) which called on Christians “to enter dialogue and collaboration with members of other religions”, John Paul made this his personal mission. This was particularly evident in a number of symbolic initiatives including his visit to the synagogue of Rome (1986), his praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (2000), his invitation to religious leaders to join him in prayer for World Peace (Assisi: 1986 & 2002) and in his apologies for the church’s negative impact on diverse groups of people including women, Jews and Indigenous peoples. John Paul was keenly aware of the responsibility of religion and religious leaders to reject violence and to work together in harmony for the wellbeing of the world. He was also aware of the Catholic church’s less than impeccable record: hence, his call for forgiveness. He also often spoke of “the one Spirit of truth” uniting peoples of all religious traditions.

In recent decades, official Catholic teaching has also emphasized the importance of dialogue in order to “overcome divisions, foster friendly relations, achieve mutual understanding, and to work together with people of all faiths for the betterment of the world” (Vatican II). The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue insists that “all Christians are called to dialogue” (Dialogue and Proclamation, 1991) albeit in different ways. Distinguishing between dialogues of life, action, theological exchange and religious experience, the document recognizes that dialogue needs to be two-way in order to create an environment of trust, mutual respect and a sense of human solidarity to pursue the truth together. In particular, given past history, Christians must be prepared “to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions . . . (and so) give up ingrained prejudices, revise preconceived ideas, and allow the understanding of their faith to be purified”. All this marks a significant change in official Catholic attitudes and approaches to other traditions.
Of course, I am not claiming that such attitudes are universally present in the lives and practices of Christians, Catholics included. Nonetheless, I believe the church, along with other traditions and sectors of society, is moving in the right direction as we face together the violent upheavals of our contemporary world. Along with other religions, the church has valuable intellectual and spiritual resources which, effectively harnessed, can contribute to peace and harmony at local, national and global levels. The significant change in the Catholic approach is the call to deep and committed dialogue on the basis of mutual understanding and respect—and in the belief that we have much to learn from one another.

**Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, I would like to leave you with Panikkar’s “Sermon on the Mount of Intra-Religious Dialogue”. Adapting the teachings of Jesus to our contemporary concern for harmony, we are reminded of the importance of personal religious experience and spirituality. If the religious traditions come to the dialogue-table armed with unbending doctrines and narrow beliefs, these will lead at best to argument and debate—at worst to expressions of violence. The dialogue of which Panikkar speaks must be based in another reality, a new vision, a divine call, or trust in the mystery that transcends us. Only through such dialogue, founded on the particularity of each religious tradition, will religions play their vital role in the creation of a civilization of love, peace and harmony. This, after all, is what all religions claim to be their goal. What is new today is the realization that we are called to do this together. So:

When you enter into an intra-religious dialogue, do not *think* beforehand what you have to believe.

When you *witness* to your faith, do not defend yourself or your vested interests, sacred as
they may appear to you. Do like the birds in the skies; they sing and fly and do not defend their music or their beauty.

When you dialogue with somebody, look at your partner as a revelatory experience, as you would—and should—look at the lilies in the fields.

When you engage in intra-religious dialogue, try first to remove the beam in your own eye before removing the speck in the eye of your neighbour.

Blessed are you when you do not feel self-sufficient while being in dialogue.

Blessed are you when you trust the other because you trust in Me.

Blessed are you when you face misunderstandings from your own community or others for the sake of your fidelity to Truth.

Blessed are you when you do not give up your convictions, and yet you do not set them up as absolute norms.

Woe unto you, you theologians and academicians, when you dismiss what others say because you find it embarrassing or not sufficiently learned.

Woe unto you, you practitioners of religions, when you do not listen to the cries of the little ones.

Woe unto you, you religious authorities, because you prevent change and (re-)conversion.

Woe unto you, religious people, because you monopolize religion and stifle the Spirit, which blows where and how she wills.

Further References


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