

Inter-Faith Dialogue

by Katharina Smith-Müller

"You are a monk?" – a question I hear, spoken in a soft German accent, only because I am standing so very near – I do not think that either the person speaking it, or the person it is addressed to, are aware that there is anyone else listening in. To me, this question has more depth than it implies on first reading – it is asked by someone who is open, and is opening this conversation, to true encounter, in the way that the German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber defines it, as a meeting between two people who perceive each other in the fullness of their being, rather than focusing on the qualities or categories associated with the other. Such an encounter, Buber asserts, will not leave those who are involved in it unchanged.

Underlying this question, I hear another, deeper one: What is your spirituality? How does your belief that this life is not everything, that there is something beyond it, shape your life here, now? How does it change your relationships with others? And, as a leading question that runs throughout



Katharina Smith-Müller

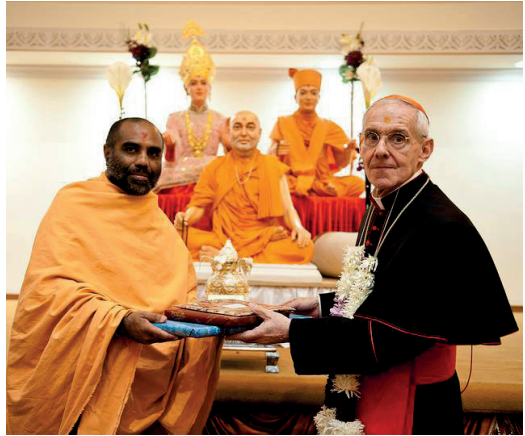
this day, how does the fact that you live your life as you do, ordered towards something that holds more permanence and more importance than many human aims do, change the society you live in?

The day being shaped by this question was September 17th 2010 and the person asking it, not only of the Buddhist monk I overheard him speaking to, was a Christian German thinker – Professor Joseph Ratzinger, or, as he was better, and globally, known on this day, Pope Benedict XVI. He was spending a portion of his visit to the United Kingdom with representatives of the nine major religions to be found here, shaking hands, asking questions, giving a well-thought-out, inspiring address – but mostly, maybe surprisingly to some, who were expecting an academic led by the head – exuding true human warmth and interest in those he was enjoying this encounter with.

Visitors to England

In the last few years, England in particular has been blessed with the visits of a number of very senior Catholic figures who come, at least in part, because of their interest in the relationships and the dialogue between the religions which live side by side, in a situation that is unique in Europe. Benedict XVI was followed, fittingly, by the person who first informed the world of the election of his successor, Pope Francis.

When Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran came to England in June 2013 he spent a busy three days visiting a Sikh, a Jain and a Hindu place of worship; at each he led a dialogue on the commonalities between these religions and Christianity. Colourful and insightful though these occasions may have been the arguable highlight was still the “Together in Prayer for Peace” event which he hosted at Westminster Cathedral Hall. There, he shared the stage with representatives of each of the nine religions, all of whom took



Cardinal Tauran heads East

to the microphone in turn, praying for peace in the words their tradition has given them, witnessed by the large and diverse audience of invited guests and of people of goodwill. In the shared silence following these prayers, the room was resounding with the unspoken prayer of them all.

The question that arises from those two landmark visits is twofold – why is there such interest in the interreligious dialogue as we live it in the United Kingdom specifically; and, arguably the more complex, and foundational, one, why has interreligious dialogue become so important within the Church that its most senior figures raise their voices in its support? It is hardly a coincidence, too, that Cardinal Tauran chose to quote in the final sermon of his visit the very person whose election he announced from the balcony in St. Peter’s Square: “[the Church urges all Catholics] to promote interreligious dialogue as a catalyst for efforts to build peace... to build bridges connecting all people, in such a way that everyone can see in the other not an enemy, not a rival but a brother or sister”¹. These words echoed his predecessor’s address to the Roman Curia on the last Christmas before his resignation: “In man’s present situation, the dialogue of religions is a necessary condition for peace in the world and it is therefore a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities”².

A multi-faceted answer

Why, then, are all these senior figures stressing the importance of interreligious dialogue? The answer is a multi-faceted one, which has been addressed in a number of important Church documents, and in its fullness particularly in the document on interreligious dialogue that emerged from the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (“In our time”). English-speaking Catholics also have an excellent and succinct summary of the teaching of the Church on interreligious dialogue at their fingertips, in the teaching document “Meeting God in Friend and Stranger. Fostering respect and mutual understanding between the religions”, launched by the bishops of England and Wales in 2010, which is available for free download, and also as a booklet published by the Catholic Truth Society. It can be ordered online or bought in specialist bookshops.

From this summary of teaching, three main foci emerge on why every Catholic is

called, by baptism, to engage in interreligious dialogue. It goes without saying that, in our time, there is a need for interreligious dialogue that emerges quite naturally from the situation we find ourselves in, particularly in such a richly-diverse country as ours, simply by going about our daily lives. We find ourselves in closer contacts with believers who follow a religion different from ours simply by living in a world where people are more mobile, and where physical divisions are easily bridged by digital means – in many ways, our world has become smaller. It is no coincidence, too, that alliances between the religions form precisely in the most personal spheres, as evidenced by a recent study day at Heythrop College that dealt with Catholic-Muslim marriage, organised between the College, the Bishops’ Conference, and the Christian-Muslim Forum. While these practicalities of our linked lives are important and interesting, it is interesting, too, to view this situation as a spiritually challenging one. If we follow what our bishops urge in their teaching document, *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* (MGFS), namely trying “to discern something of the meaning and purposes of God within contemporary events and circumstances” it is by no means too far-fetched to conclude that God calls us contemporary Catholics to dialogue with members and structures of other religions in a way that no generation before us has been.

One focus of interreligious dialogue is, certainly, the creation of an atmosphere of peace and cooperation, a labour of love that leads us to be co-workers in the same vineyard, united in our determination to contribute to the common good in the unique manner that comes with our shared rootedness in a transcendental dimension to our lives.



Inter-faith dialogue in action

Or, as Benedict XVI put it at Twickenham: “As followers of different religious traditions working together for the good of the community at large, we attach great importance to this ‘side by side’ dimension of our cooperation, which complements the ‘face to face’ aspect of our continuing dialogue”.

This is not by any means the only motivation. In fact, delving deeper into the heart of the motivation of the Church, it is precisely in dialogue that the Church shows what is at the very core of her mission. By its very nature, our Church is a Church that is in dialogue – the dialogue that brings us ever closer to fulfilling God’s will for His Church, which Pope Paul VI called the “dialogue of salvation” in *Ecclesiam Suam*, his encyclical on the Church: “The whole history of man’s salvation is one long, varied

dialogue, which marvellously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways." The "call by the Church [to interreligious dialogue and engagement] is also a response to the God who calls to the Church" (MGFS). The very nature of the God whom we proclaim, who is Three and One, implies relationship and dialogue; accordingly, when we enter into dialogue with followers of religions not our own, we also enter into the heart of our own faith and our own calling.

Spiritually enriching

The third focus, beside the fact that we are seeking to work towards shared goals with people of goodwill, and the fact that we are called to continue the dialogue into which God has entered with us, is the one on interreligious dialogue as spiritually enriching. A Catholic engaging in this dialogue truly follows in the footsteps of Jesus, who sought truth and holiness through very personal encounters, and in places many of his contemporaries were not prepared to look, so that they missed out on the fullness of God's engagement with the whole of humanity. The way in which Jesus behaves in these encounters, fully engaging, and taking seriously, the person He meets and their circumstances, and bearing witness to His closeness to the Father in a way that speaks to them without forcing any conclusions on those he is in dialogue with, shows a truly Christian way of encounter – for "a Christian, interreligious dialogue is a profoundly Christ-like work" (MGFS).

"Sharing our spiritual riches" in interreligious dialogue, as Pope Benedict XVI put it in his Twickenham speech, will also mean that each participant comes out of the conversation with a richer understanding of their own faith. Taking only a few examples from a meditation on the spiritual riches of other religions that is available on the website of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, all of the following can, from the observation of followers of religion not our own, lead us back to an enhanced appreciation of our own spirituality: The importance that Islam assigns to a prayer life that sanctifies each day and re-orientates the believer towards God and His will five times a day, the deep respect that our Jewish sisters and brothers show towards the word of God in its physical, written form, by placing it at the entrance of their homes, and the Sikh engagement for justice and peace that is symbolised by the carrying of a ceremonial dagger, the kirpan.



The most fruitful of the spiritual exercises that emerge from interreligious dialogue is, however, arguably the engagement with the Other as a sister or a brother, without giving in to the temptation of either the extreme of constructing them as strangers, or trying to deny their

difference, pretending that all religions are the same, and that everyone following them has identical beliefs. This being able to be with difference is something that can and should be rooted in Christian spirituality – after all, an active prayer life explores exactly this tension between being very close, and, at the same time, never being able to fully understand or define the partner in the dialogue of prayer.

Being with difference in interreligious dialogue can also have an eminently practical purpose: engaging with people that follow religions not our own can be an eye-opener, in that no religion is a monolithic structure without any differences within itself. It is easy to make the assumption that, while, from own experience, the denominations within Christianity vary by large degrees, other religions are one, non-varying unit. Practically, this can lead to confusion about identification and responsibilities. For example, it is often expected of British Muslims to apologise for acts of terror abroad with which they are not connected in the least. A useful parallel is to think about the actions of members of certain Christian churches – say, threats to burn the holy writing of other religions – and asking whether or not I as a Catholic should be held responsible for them, and whether an apology would be expected of me were such threats to be carried out. I suspect that most, if not all, Catholics would feel, quite strongly, that this would be an unfair expectation, and would not be willing to accept responsibility for hateful acts of a Christian minority.

This is not to say that work that prevents religious extremism within Britain is not important – quite the opposite. Both efforts must, and do, go hand-in-hand. It can be argued, quite convincingly, that all extremism is rooted in a readiness to see the other as precisely, and only, that: *other*. In dialogue, the other is always encountered in the fullness of individuality, and precisely not reduced to a label, positive or negative. Practising a mindset of dialogue, then, is a reliable and useful tool against extremism in all situations, and every religion. Very practically, it is hard to demonise a friendly neighbour, a colleague, or someone who has become part of one's own family by marriage: good relationships between the members of different religions prevent a "them and us" mindset which is the breeding ground for hatred and violence that seeks to sow divisions along the faultlines of religious belonging. In a dialogue that strikes the right balance between familiarity and respect for otherness, the distinct religious identities of each participant are not threatened, but strengthened.

Not conversion, but understanding

Pope Benedict XVI summed this up as follows in one of his last addresses to the Roman Curia: "It is necessary to learn to accept the other in his otherness and the otherness of his thinking. [...] Dialogue does not aim at conversion, but at understanding. [...] Accordingly, both parties to the dialogue remain consciously within their identity, which the dialogue does not place in question either for themselves or for the other."² This sentiment becomes particularly pertinent in the light of the current situation in the Middle East, where conflict in the name of religions is ripe, and many, including Christians, suffer violence and persecution because of their religious belonging. Into this situation Pope Francis recently echoed the words of his predecessor on his visit to Turkey: "Fanaticism and fundamentalism, as well as irrational fears which foster misunderstanding and discrimination, need to be countered by the solidarity of all believers"³.

It also becomes all the more significant in a situation here in the UK, where statistics about immigration and the presence of members of non-Christian religions are increasingly used to create an atmosphere of fear and distrust. Muslims in particular suffer from this attempt at “othering”, and of overstating the numbers of followers of their faiths with unpeaceful intent: recent statistics show that, while 5% of the population in Great Britain is Muslim, the average person polled by the Ipsos Mori Social Research Institute assumed it was as much as 21%. At the same time, the closeness of Christianity and Islam – the prayer life, the deep respect for Mary (who has a whole chapter dedicated to her in the Qur’an), and the belief in one all-knowing and all-powerful God – go woefully un- or at least under-reported. Interreligious dialogue makes sure that such divisive reporting holds no sway, and helps prevent the atmosphere of fear and all its fruits that can follow on from the unethical editing of news.

It lies in our power, as Catholic Christians, to contribute to peace and understanding in small, seemingly insignificant, acts and gestures that can turn out to be stepping stones towards a more peaceful society for us to live in locally, but also globally, when good relations in our streets and cities reach the ears and hearts of people in areas where peace is more threatened, or broken. We are called to inform ourselves about the faith of others, to show our good will towards them, and to share “our spiritual riches, speaking of our experience of prayer and contemplation, and expressing to one another the joy of our encounter with divine love”, as Benedict XVI went on to say in his formal address that followed the encounter described at the beginning of this article.

Some of the steps that can be taken

This is something we can do today, at very little cost to ourselves, remembering that we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Looking up the dates of the next religious festivals that people around you will celebrate and making a note to send a card, letting someone from a different religion know that you are praying for them, and using the links provided with this article to learn about the religions whose members you encounter on a regular basis, are just some of the steps that can be taken by any Catholic, even amongst the bustle and business that has come to shape our lives. In this, we are encouraged by successive popes, and by the power of the God who is One and Three in our lives: “In dialogue we must not be surprised, but actually expect to find that God is already there, and that Christ has gone before us [...]. It is in dialogue that we meet and are moved to collaborate with the same Holy Spirit we have received ourselves.” (MGFS)

¹ Audience with the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, March 22nd 2013

² Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI on the occasion of Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia, December 21st 2012

³ Pope Francis’ address to the President of Religious Affairs in Ankara, November 28th 2014

This article is based on a talk given to the Coventry Circle during 2014. Katharina Smith-Müller is the Inter-Religious Adviser for the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.