A New Spirituality for a Religiously Plural World[1]

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There was a time when the majority of Christians did not take any notice of other religions. Even if they knew about their existence, this knowledge did not affect their spirituality. The very few who were concerned about Non-Christians usually regarded other religions as more or less dark and hostile forces, as something that should be overcome by Christian mission. Inter-faith encounter, if it existed at all, was primarily seen as an opportunity to communicate the Christian gospel. As Karl Barth expressed it only fifty years ago: Christianity "alone has the commission and the authority to ... confront the world of religions as the one true religion, ... to invite and challenge it to abandon its ways and to start on the Christian way."[2]

I remember quite well a conversation with one of my former theological teachers when I was a postgraduate student. At that time I was writing my thesis on Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and the Professor of Mission tried to convince me of Christianity's superiority. As one piece of evidence he claimed that in no other religion the high ideal of loving one's enemy could be found. I contradicted and told him about the Buddha's parable of the saw, where the Buddha exhorted his disciples that even if someone came with a sharp saw to cut them into pieces bit by bit, they should stay free from any hatred or malevolence and embrace that person with undiminished love and compassion (*Majjhima-Nikâya 21*). The Professor was impressed by my objection, but then he responded: 'This makes dialogue with Buddhism even more difficult.' Obviously the only objective of inter-faith dialogue that he could think of, was to demonstrate to the other the superiority of the Christian gospel.

I must confess that I could understand my professor, for there had been a time when I felt alike. But through my encounter with Buddhism my attitude had changed radically. Today I believe that the time for such a mentality has gone. I am well aware that this mentality is far from being extinct. But I am convinced that it is no longer adequate. Or to be more precise, it never was adequate, but nowadays this has become more apparent than ever before. What we now need to develop is an attitude which permits us to let Non-Christians and their religious traditions becoming a positive part of our own religious consciousness, that is of our

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[2]   Barth, Karl: *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (§17 no.3). Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1975, p. 357.

spirituality. The new spirituality for a religiously plural world needs to be an inter-faith spirituality. In what follows I would like to sketch some major features of this spirituality by what could be called its *seven virtues*.

The first virtue is *confidence*: confidence or trust in the basic goodness of the deeper nature or structure of reality; confidence that there is an ultimate reality underlying and transcending, but also permeating surface-reality which suffers from so many obvious limitations and partly horrendous evils. If this confidence is justified, if an ultimate reality really exists, then this gives reason for what John Hick has called "cosmic optimism"[3]. Being our highest good ultimate reality is the decisive factor for our understanding of reality in general and for our view of our fellow humans in particular. As it is said by Paul in *Acts* (*17:27*):

> "God is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist".

As Paul admits, this has not only been affirmed by Christians. Indeed, what within Christianity is called the "universal salvific will of God" (cf. *1Tim 2:4*), has a number of parallels and functional equivalents in other religions. In Islam, the *Holy Qur'an* (*16:36*) proclaims

> "For We assuredly sent
> Amongst every People a messenger
> (With the Command), 'Serve Allah, and eschew Evil'..."

In Hinduism we find the deep conviction that God is present in the innermost self of all beings, and that, as Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavadgîtâ* (*9:23*):

> "Even those who are devotees of other gods, worship them with faith - they also sacrifice to Me alone ...".

In Buddhism there is the widespread doctrine of a universal Buddha-Nature, that is the view that all beings have the potential for realizing enlightenment and ultimate salvation, and in the famous *Lotos-Sûtra* (*5:45f*) the supramundane Buddha exclaims:

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[3]   Cp. Hick, John: *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent*. Houndmills: Macmillan 1989, pp. 56-69. *Idem.*: *The Fifth Dimension. An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*. Oxford: Oneworld 1999, pp. 47-73.

> "As the rays of the sun and moon descend alike on all men, good and bad, (...)
> So the wisdom of the Tathâgata (the Buddha) shines like the sun and the moon,
> leading all beings without partiality."

The goodness of ultimate reality is of universal significance, and hence we find throughout the religions various expressions of the confidence that the saving presence of the Divine is not confined to one's own religious community. This is also the tenor of biblical passages like *Amos 9:7* where we read the powerful message, that Israel is not the only elect people, and that God has liberated other people from their own captivities as he has done with Israel. A similar confidence is expressed in Jesus' vision of the great eschatological feast, a banquet which will assemble the "many who shall come from east and west" (*Matth 8:5-11*). And there is the deep and bold statement of John's first letter (*1 John 4:7*) that "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God". The confidence that the saving presence of Divine reality is not confined to one's own faith community leads me to the second virtue of inter-faith spirituality, which is

Humility. In this context humility means not to confine the Divine reality to our human ways of thinking. God, or the Transcendent, is infinitely greater than all our thoughts, ideas and concepts. For Anselm of Canterbury God was not only that "than which a greater cannot be conceived". But, says Anselm, for being so God must necessarily be "greater than everything that can be conceived" (*Proslogion 15*). Thomas Aquinas joins in by saying that "the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches" (*SCG I 14:3*). Forgetting God's ineffability would be idolatry, that is worshipping an idol created by our own concepts - warns Nicholas of Cusa (*De docta ignorantia I 26,86*). The fundamental insight into the necessary inconceivability and ineffability of the Divine cannot only be found in the writings of all major theologians of the Christian tradition[4], but has also been frequently expressed in other religious traditions. The Muslim exclamation *Allâhu akbar* does not simply mean "God is great" but rather and literally "God is *greater*", greater than everything we could think of. Therefore we should refrain from making any pictures of God, whether with our hands or with our minds. The eastern religions abound with affirming the limitation of human concepts when it comes to ultimate reality. "It is not this, not that" (*Brhadâranyaka Upanishad IV, 5:15*), "there the eyes go not, speech goes not, nor the mind" (*Kena Upanishad 1:3*), say the Hindu Upanishads. And the *Tao Te King* (*1:1*) begins with the famous words

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[4]   It is therefore all the more suprising and deploring that it has been recently renounced by *Dominus Iesus No. 6* in order to safeguard the superiority claims of the present magisterium of the Roman-Catholic Church.

"The *Tao* that can be described is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be spoken is not the eternal Name."

The insight into the ineffable nature of transcendent reality implies that the doctrines and teachings of none of the religious communities can exhaust Divine Reality in its fullness. This should save us from any claims of absoluteness for our own religious tradition.

Transcendent reality is not confined to being transcendent. It is also immanent. Its inconceivability does not prevent that it is present and accessible in the religious experience of humankind. It is apprehends in those limited and variegated ways, which inevitably reflect our own limitations as finite human beings, but mark at the same time the variety and diversity of humanity. Therefore the third virtue of interfaith-spirituality is:

Curiosity. Traditionally curiosity was hardly regarded as a virtue, and in particular Augustin saw it more as a vice. I certainly do not mean any forward, insensitive or indecent curiosity, but rather the curiosity of an explorer or scientist. In an inter-faith context this designates a genuine interest in what God has meant and still means in the lives of other people; the wish to discover "the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations", as it was said by the Second Vatican Council (*Ad Gentes 11*). When Cardinal Ratzinger once was asked by an interviewer "How many ways to God are there?", his reply was "As many as there are human beings".[5] Curiosity as an inter-faith virtue implies to take this seriously. It is the wish to learn more about and from humanity's manifold ways to God. A readiness to enlarge our own spiritual horizon by gaining a better understanding of our neighbours in the other faith-communities, of their experience, their wisdom, their truth. This kind of curiosity will automatically lead to a dialogical attitude, which brings us to the next and central virtue of:

Friendship. The curiosity, I was just talking about, will involve reading and studying the scriptures of other religious traditions, learning about their cultural and cultic expressions and sometimes possibly even sharing in other forms of religious practice. But all that we can observe, study and investigate is only expressive of something more profound, but less objectifyable, that is the faith of real people. We should not forget that the so-called "religions" are not abstract entities. If "a religion" is not the religion of real, living persons, it either no longer exists or it never existed at all. All too often we may have an image of other people's religion which is entirely fictitious, because the religion we imagine is not identical

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[5]   Ratzinger, Josef Kardinal: *Salz der Erde. Christentum und katholische Kirche an der Jahrtausendwende. Ein Gespräch mt Peter Seewald*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt 1996, p. 35.

with the religion that is lived and experienced by them. We can study many facts about other religious traditions, but what these traditions really mean for those who live in them can, at the end of the day, be understood only through becoming friends with them - good friends! Wilfred Cantwell Smith once made the remark that understanding another religion, as for example Buddhism, would mean to see the world, "so far as possible, through Buddhist eyes."[6] Friendship entails a number of good things, one being the effort and ability to understand our friends as they understand themselves. Only when we share their joys and sufferings, we will have a chance to understand how their faith helps them to cope with their sorrow and how it nourishes their hope. This is the kind of understanding which is crucial for inter-faith spirituality and it makes friendship a key-virtue.

Friends *can* be honest with each other. And they *have* to be honest if they wish to stay true friends. Inter-religious friendship therefore entails the virtue of *honesty* - being honest about the religion of our friend as well as about our own one. There is no need to brag and no room for contempt. Let us try to be simply honest and avoid weighing with two measures. For example, not to compare all the nice ideals in the theory of our own religion with all the horrible failures in the practice of the others. Jesus' parable of the speck in our neighbour's and the log in our own eye is highly relevant to inter-faith relationships. If there is any need for criticism, it should be uttered cautiously and with much sensitivity. In Christianity there has been the tradition of *correctio fraterna*, the "admonition among brothers", and I suggest that inter-faith criticism, if and when it is necessary, should be carried out in this spirit.

If there is inter-faith friendship and honesty, one will not only learn to see the world through the eyes of one's friend. One will also begin to see oneself and one's own religion through the eyes of others. I think it is a clear sign of a maturing inter-faith relationship, if we as Christians start to perceive ourselves through the eyes of our Non-Christian friends.[7] This is certainly a challenging experience, but it has the potential to become a transforming and enriching one. The virtue it requires is:

Courage. We need to be courageous in order to expose ourselves and our own religious background to the insights coming from another religious tradition. Seeing oneself through the eyes of the other can help to overcome misunderstandings and misperceptions. But it will

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[6]   Cp. Smith, Wilfred Cantwell: *Towards a World Theology. Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*. Maryknoll: Orbis 1989, p. 82.

[7]   Se for example: Griffith, Paul (ed.): *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*. Maryknoll: Orbis 1990; Ridgeon Lloyd (ed.): *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*. Richmond: Curzon 2001; Schmidt-Leukel, Perry (ed.): *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus*. St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag 2001.

also call us out of our usual ways and can at times be quite irritating. Let me give just one example: The Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod has once pointed out that for all Christians, whether conservative or liberal, the name Jesus and the symbol of the cross evoke uplifting sentiments; for Jews, however, they are "not a source of comfort but of fear".[8] What does it mean for us, as Christians, if we become aware that the cherished name and symbol, which mean so much to us, can and sometimes do have such a contrary meaning for our friends from other faiths? Seeing ourselves and our own religious traditions through the eyes of others will inevitably make us aware of a number of all too human shortcomings and limitations and will help us gaining a far more realistic self-understanding.

Inter-religious dialogue, if it is genuine and serious, leads therefore to an "intra-religious dialogue".[9] Intra-religious dialogue starts when we allow ourselves being challenged by the insights coming from our friends from their religious backgrounds. Do their insights require a change in my thinking, my feeling, my believing? Courage implies the readiness to draw any spiritual consequences which naturally result from an honest exposure to a religious tradition other than one's own. It's a courage for change. A number of people who seriously entered into inter-faith dialogue, inter-faith encounter, inter-faith friendship have felt that after many years of such an exposure they became significantly transformed - some even to the degree of now feeling a kind of "double" or "multiple belonging"[10]. That is, in their own personal spirituality they are no longer nourished by one religious tradition alone. No doubt, this is a substantial transformation, but in the sense of an existentially or spiritually crucial enrichment leaving those who made the experience with a sense of deep gratitude.

Gratefulness is the last in my list of seven virtues of inter-faith spirituality. Gratefulness for the other, gratefulness for what we have in common as well as for our differences. I remember reading a review where the reviewer blamed a certain author for being "unsure of whether the good thing about the world faiths is that we are all the same or whether it is that we are all

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[8] Wyschogrod, Michael: "A Jewish Postscript". In: St. Davis (ed.): *Encountering Jesus. A debate on Christology*. Atlanta: John KNox Press 1988, pp. 179-187, here p. 179.

[9] Cp. Panikkar, Raimundo: *The Intrareligious Dialogue*. New York: Paulist 1978.

[10] Cp. Cornille, Catherine (ed.): *Many Mansions? Multiple Belonging and Christian Identity*. Maryknoll: Orbis 2002. Kasimow, Harold; Keenan, John P.; Klepinger Keenan, Linda (eds.): *Beside Still Waters. Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*. Boston: Wisdom Publications 2003. Phan, Peter: 'Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church'. *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 495-519. While multiple relious belonging is a realtively new phenomenon in the Western religious traditions, it is of course far more familiar in the East. Hence it is not surprising that the issue is particularly raised in dialogue with Eastern religions. See for example: Berthrong, John: *All Under Heaven. Transforming Paradigms in Confucian-Christian Dialogue*. New York: SUNY 1994, 165-187.

different."[11] What a wrong alternative! Let us rejoice in both, in our unity *and* in our diversity. Let us be grateful for both.

If gratefulness is deep and profound it implies what German mystics have called *Gelassenheit*. The term covers meanings like calmness, equanimity, and letting go or not being attached. Detachment is of course a major spiritual feature of the eastern religions, while the religions of the west have primarily emphasized loving involvement. Detachment and involvement are different, but not antagonistic. A closer look into the spiritual traditions of the east and the west exhibits that both are not only compatible but complementary. Without loving involvement detachment will pervert into unconcerned self-indulgence, without detachment loving involvement will degenerate into spiritless activism or even ideological fanaticism. Inter-faith spirituality may help us - not only 'us Christians' but all of us - to better learn and understand how both can be kept together. For our own sake and the sake of the world.

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[11]   Holdswarth, Kelvin: "Songs designed to make you think". In: *The Scottish Episcopalian*, June 2003, no. 221, p. 6.