Seven Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection

Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences

These theses on interreligious dialogue were prepared by the Theological Advisory Commission of the Roman Catholic Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC). The commission is composed of members from all the Bishops’ Conferences of FABC. This first joint presentation represents the work of the members of the commission and of other theologians over a period of two years, finally approved in their meeting in Singapore, April 1987. The theses are offered solely as a basis for discussion with the wider community of pastors and professional scholars, prior to restudy and revision. Due to space limitations, the commentary on each thesis has been omitted here. Requests for the full report, along with comments and criticisms, may be sent to: FABC, G.P.O. 2984, Hong Kong.

Introduction

Dialogue is an integral dimension of human life. The human being alone is capable, not only of reacting to stimuli but also of responding to the other through language and symbol, and in this manner, of building up community. While the increasing facility and rapidity of communications and the growing economic and political interdependence favor mutual relations and fellowship, the symbolic systems that structure human life, like language, culture and religion, combined with the human desire for domination, seem to be causes of conflict and division. But their desire for peace and fellowship urges people to a dialogue based on their common destiny and on mutual acceptance of and respect for each one’s dignity and freedom. The religions are called to provide a special role of leadership in the process, oriented as they are to the ultimate, and therefore capable of transcending the limiting and divisive factors in human history.

Pope John Paul II has emphasized “the importance and the need which interreligious dialogue assumes for all religions and all believers, called today more than ever to collaborate so that every person can reach his transcendent goal and realize his authentic growth, and to help cultures preserve their own religious and spiritual values in the presence of rapid social changes” (Address to the Secretariat for Non-Christians, 3 March 1984).

The community of God, one and triune, and the communion of his Kingdom, to which God calls all peoples and of which the Church is the servant, make dialogue an integral dimension of the mission of the Church. The story of God’s People in the Bible is an inspiration as well as a beginning of such dialogue. Israel in the Old Testament, as well as primitive Christianity in the New, were, both in their origins and through most of their historical life, heterogeneous mixtures taken literally from the nations. Encounter and dialogue with other religious and cultural traditions was a frequent phenomenon in the history of Israel and the Church.

Israel in the land of Palestine had to face new realities, to answer new problems and, therefore, was forced to enter into a cultural and religious dialogue with Canaan. As a result, in all spheres of its existence Israel had to learn and borrow from the Canaanites. This cultural and religious encounter affected in a positive way the faith of Israel, as can be seen from its creed, cult and code of the Covenant. The ultimate result of this encounter for Israel was a new experience of Yahweh and a deeper understanding of earthly realities as integral parts of their faith in Yahweh.

When Christianity confronted Judaism and Hellenism, it developed a new and inclusive vision of the Christ-event and of the Church, as manifested in the New Testament, especially in Paul and John.

Paul was fully conscious of becoming a Jew to the Jews to win the Jews, and a Gentile to the Gentiles to win the Gentiles (cf. I Cor 9:19–23). In his speeches at Lystra (Acts 14:25–27) and on the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–31) Paul develops the Christian message in such a manner that it forms the logical conclusion of the Gentile history of religion. As the history of Israel leads up to the coming of Jesus Christ, the history of the Gentile world also prepared itself to welcome the Christian message by leaving a place for the unknown God which the Christian proclamation tried to fill up.

The language of John, using a terminology which awakened echoes in Hellenistic language and thought, was the bridge between the essentially Palestinian Gospel tradition and the vast world which lay within and beyond the Hellenistic world. The dialogical approach of John is indicated in the Prologue of his Gospel (Jn 1:1–18) in which he describes the Christ-event. If in the first half of the Prologue he describes it in general terms such as “logos,” “life,” “light,” “world,” etc., which are understandable by and in common with the surrounding religious traditions, in the second half he describes it in specifically Christian terms, such as “Jesus Christ,” “grace,” “truth,” “only Begotten Son of God,” etc. In presenting Christ as the “Word” mediating the mysterious reality of God’s presence to the world, John is implicitly admitting the presence of God’s self-revelation in other religious traditions. The fact that John presents the Christ-event as an experience which is not reduced to the compass of his individual and ecclesial experience but which transcends any particular form of expression and can be identified in the universe at large, shows that the Johannine Church was prepared to enter into dialogue with the surrounding religious traditions.

In the course of the last two thousand years the Church has encountered and dialogued with various peoples, cultures and
religions, with varying levels of success. Today, however, especially in Asia, in the context of the Great Religions, which are in a process of revival and renewal, the Church is aware of a markedly different situation. We do not ask any longer about the relationship of the Church to other cultures and religions. We are rather searching for the place and role of the Church in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world. This changed situation has given rise to various doubts and questions regarding the identity and mission of the Church in Asia today.

The following Theses... do not claim to provide an exhaustive treatment of these questions. We have limited our attention to religions in order to gain greater clarity and focus in discussion, while being open to extend these considerations, mutatis mutandis, to humanistic movements. However, the relationship between two religious believers is different from the relationship between a religious believer and one who does not profess any belief in any religion. The Theses seek to offer a new paradigm, a new way of looking at the whole and at the interrelationship of its various elements. We hope that they will facilitate a new insight into the identity of the Church in a religiously pluralistic world, and a renewal of its mission, so that it may be at the service of the Spirit, who is leading the whole world to a unity.

**THESIS 1**

In the developing, multireligious societies of Asia, struggling towards liberation and wholeness, all religions are called to provide a common and complementary moral and religious foundation for this struggle, and be forces for growth and communion rather than sources of alienation and conflict. They can do this only through dialogue and collaboration. The religions have a prophetic role in public life. They should not become victims either of those who seek to keep them apolitical and private, or of those who seek to instrumentalize them for political and communal ends.

**THESIS 2**

Dialogue with other religions, which are significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation, is an integral dimension of the mission of the Church, which is the sacrament of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. In Asia today, Christians, though they are a “little flock” in many places, animated by the Spirit who is leading all things to unity, are called to play a serving and catalyzing role which facilitates interreligious collaboration. This call challenges all the churches to common witness as they grow together towards fuller ecumenical communion.

**THESIS 3**

Interreligious dialogue is a demand of our Christian faith in the Trinity, which is a mystery of communion in interpersonal dialogue. The unique and definitive action of the Father to save all peoples who have him as their origin and goal is leading all of us to a unity. Christ in whom God is reconciling all things to himself is urging the Church to be the servant of this communion. The universal presence and action of the Spirit is calling everyone to the realization of the oneness of the Kingdom. As a response to this mystery, dialogue is a process of growing into the fullness of divine life. It is a participation in the quest of all peoples for the full realization of the Truth. It is LOVE for people which seeks communion in the Trinity.

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**THESIS 4**

Interreligious dialogue is a communication and sharing of life, experience, vision and reflection by believers of different religions searching together to discover the work of the Spirit among them. Removing prejudices, it grows towards mutual understanding and enrichment, towards a discerning and common witness and towards commitment to promote and defend human and spiritual values leading to deeper levels of spiritual experience. It is a journeying together in a communion of minds and hearts towards the Kingdom to which God calls all peoples.

**THESIS 5**

Interreligious dialogue takes place at various levels, and involves both individuals and communities. Moved by the Spirit and proceeding from exterior to more interior aspects of life, it leads to more profound levels of communion in the Spirit, without detriment to but deepening each community’s specific religious experience. Such communion finds expression through common prayer, reading of the Scriptures and Holy Books, celebration of festivals and common liberative action in a common animation and transformation of culture and society. Religions may feel closer to some than to others because of a shared history and other reasons. Owing to human imperfection and sinfulness, all religions are called to an ongoing renewal under the judgment of the Spirit and their own mutual critical challenge. This renewal will involve mutual forgiveness and reconciliation.

**THESIS 6**

Dialogue and proclamation are integral but dialectical and complementary dimensions of the Church’s mission of evangelization. Authentic dialogue includes a witness to one’s total Christian faith, which is open to a similar witness of the other religious believers. Proclamation is a call to Christian discipleship and mission. As a service to the mystery of the Spirit who freely calls to conversion, and of the person who freely responds to the call, proclamation is dialogical.

**THESIS 7**

An authentic dialogue with other religious traditions is the task of a local Church, fully involved in the life and struggles of the people, especially the poor. It is also an integral element in the process of building up authentic local churches in Asia.

**PASTORAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Preamble**

Religious, cultural and socio-political situations in Asia are so different from country to country that it is very difficult to present concrete and adequate pastoral recommendations which
could apply equally well to all our countries. If our churches, however, are to become truly local churches, then, interreligious dialogue is indispensable and imperative. Hence, in each country, careful analysis and reflection on its situations are called for in order to decide on concrete steps to be taken.

In the light of the foregoing considerations we submit here some suggestions as pastoral recommendations.

1. Spiritual Renewal Through Common Prayer

A sincere and authentic renewal of our mind and heart is called for with regard to our mission of witnessing to the Gospel by showing the face of Christ in our multireligious situation. We should seek for opportunities to come together to pray with people of other religions.

A week of prayer and fellowship with people of other religions could be organized at the diocesan and parochial level. Could we make this an annual practice throughout the FABC region, perhaps in relation with the CCA [Christian Conference of Asia] Asia Sunday?

2. Conscientizing Toward a New Catechesis

There is a need for a renewed Trinitarian theology in catechesis:

a) on Revelation and the universal salvific plan of God;
b) on the nature and mission of the Church as servant of God’s Kingdom;
c) on the uniqueness of Christ;
d) on the all-penetrating action of the Spirit in and beyond our churches;
e) on the meaning of proclamation, dialogue and conversion as understood by the Church today.

We need to be conscientized and helped to free ourselves from prejudices, attitudes of self-defense, and of seeking merely our own benefit by becoming open to the positive values in other religions, and ready to learn from them.

With regard to interreligious dialogue an updated theology and catechesis must be incorporated in the programs for seminaries, houses of formation and pastoral centers. Study and feedback on this document by agencies and people are desired.

Because people of other religions are our fellow travellers in a common search for truth and on a common pilgrimage to the Kingdom, the interreligious dialogue should be seen as mutually enriching, and a new pastoral approach is called for. Implications of this paradigm shift need to be discussed.

3. Interreligious Dialogue Through Common Witness and Action

Our churches are to be encouraged to come together as often as possible with other religions to share life experiences and to promote and to defend human and spiritual values, such as solidarity with the poor, justice and peace.

We are to develop our sense of coresponsibility to participate actively with all men and women of good will in responding to the socio-cultural and political needs of our people.

Steps should be taken to build mutual confidence among Christian churches so as to promote common witness and collaboration for human welfare.


Symposia, colloquia, seminars and exchanges on the problems of religions and interreligious dialogue should be encouraged at the diocesan and parochial levels.

Research centers are needed to study the various aspects (socio-cultural) of life in our societies. The actual role of religions, the meaning of religious symbols, the conditions favorable to religious dialogue, the obstacles facing such dialogue, and other questions, are issues for further research at national levels.

The question of the membership and participation of the Catholic Church in the National Councils of Churches and in action-oriented associations of other religions is to be seriously considered.

New structures that facilitate contact and cooperation with other religious groups in specific areas of common concern should be set up at diocesan and national levels.

5. Questions for Further Animation

What has been and should be the place and role of our Church in the multireligious context of our country?

Are we identifying ourselves adequately and meaningfully with the religio-cultural traditions of our people? How do we approach people of other religions within those traditions?

As a minority Church, are we playing a role of mediation among diverse groups and exercising a prophetic role of reconciliation? Or do we privatize religion and fail to play a prophetic role expected of us? Do we get instrumentalized as a means for the powers that be?

What is our present understanding of mission, proclamation, evangelization, conversion, etc., in view of the growing imperative of the Church for interreligious dialogue.

What can be done? What can we do as a group?
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