Interfaith and the Future

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The modern interfaith movement can be said to have begun a hundred years ago at the Chicago World's Parliament of Religions. This "movement," as we have been calling it, simply consists in a new willingness of people of many religions to meet peacefully together, to talk together, to learn about one another's faiths, and to see what comes out of this. It is a matter of following the Spirit where it leads. I want very briefly to speak about where this movement has led thus far, and then very briefly about the possibilities for the future. We all inevitably speak on these matters from a particular point of view, which in my case is Christianity, but I want to speak from the point of view of a Christianity which is consciously part of the world-wide religious situation of humankind.

At the World's Parliament of Religions perhaps the greatest impact was made by the representatives of Hinduism and Buddhism. Since 1893 the new western awareness of Hinduism and Buddhism, and also of other ancient eastern traditions such as Silibism, Taoism and Confucianism, and such newer religions as Bahá'í and the Brahma Kumaris, has grown tremendously. Dialogue between Christians and Hindus and between Christians and Buddhists has developed and now reached quite an advanced stage of mutual understanding. As a typical example, I have myself during the last decade been involved, with mainly North American theologians, in Buddhist-Christian dialogue on an organized international basis. On the Christian side we have all found that some of our assumptions have been challenged by the impact of distinctively Buddhist ideas. For example, selfhood is not an enduring substance but a fleeting consciousness of part of the ever-changing universe from one point within it, what becomes of

the
doctrine of perfected persons eternally enjoying the life of heaven; and, even more
fundamentally, what becomes of the doctrine of God as an eternal personal substance? In these and a number of other ways there are profound contradictions
between Buddhist and Christian thought, and yet at the same time many of us have
found an illuminating power in the Buddhist ideas which makes it impossible simply to dismiss them. We have to ask whether our substantialist conceptions are
inherently Christian or are a legacy of the Greek philosophy which early Christianity absorbed. And on the other side there has been evident among many of
our Buddhist colleagues a recognition that, for example, the political activism of
contemporary liberation theology has something important to offer to Buddhist countries. These are examples, then, of the way in which, at some points at least,
interfaith dialogue has progressed far beyond mutual politeness and goodwill to an
openness which will inevitably affect the future development of each tradition.

Less prominently at Chicago in 1893, but much more prominent today, are the relations between the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
During the present century, long-festering European, and basically Christian, anti-Semitism erupted in the Holocaust, the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jewish
people. In the wake of this immense calculated human evil, horrific beyond description, the remaining Jewish community, both in Israel and in the Diaspora,
has naturally had survival as its most pressing concern. In Israel the threat hitherto has come from its surrounding Arab neighbours. I think we may realistically hope that this threat has now definitively passed and that a peaceful
regional settlement is at last in the process of being achieved, including an autonomous Palestinian state on the west bank of the Jordan and the Gaza strip. In
the United States and Europe, the threat felt by Jews is the gradual attrition of
the young marrying outside the Jewish community. All this inevitably means that interfaith dialogue, as a religious truth-seeking exercise, is not generally a top
priority for many Jews today, although relations with their Christian and Muslim
neighbours are always important, and it is never difficult to find Jewish

participants for interfaith events. But that their interest should generally speaking be more practical than theoretical is natural, not only in view of the pressing survival issue but also because Judaism has in any case always been more concerned with communal practice than with theological speculation.

Islam was barely represented at Chicago in 1893. This was regrettable. But there have been major developments in the Islamic world since then which concern us all. Until the end of the second world war almost every Muslim country had been for more than a century under foreign colonial domination. Since then they have experienced the first enthusiasm of a new national freedom and then the multiplying problems of internal conflicts, revolutions, the failure of the power of oil to bring prosperity to more than the traditional ruling classes, continuing conflict with Israel, and finally the Gulf war and its destabilizing aftermath. Islam is thus a great and ancient faith and civilization which is today in turmoil, striving to renew—as I am sure that in due course it will—the religious and cultural glories of its golden age in the seventh to thirteenth centuries. At the same time it now counts approximately a billion adherents and is expanding rapidly through population growth, and is likely in the first quarter of the next century to come to outnumber Christianity. Most Muslims live in traditional societies that are culturally remote from the modern secularized West, and think in terms unaffected by the 18th century European Enlightenment which produced what we call modernity. Because of this Islam is often seen in the West as something disturbingly different. There is a perpetual temptation to fear that which is different, and Islam has suffered from this in its persistent "demonization" by the western media. It is regularly presented as inherently violent, aggressive, and "fundamentalist," despite the fact that there are immense internal variations within the Islamic world, and that the great majority of Muslims live peaceful lives pursuing the universal human goal of well-being or happiness, seen in a life lived in submission to God. The distorted picture lodged in the western imagination is mirrored by an equally distorted perception in many Islamic countries of the Christian West as violent, aggressive, and morally decadent. Each of these perceptions does contain an unfortunate element of truth mixed with a large proportion of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. But between them they can generate dangerous confrontations which are in the interests, on the one side, of medieval-style Muslim rulers in need of an alien threat, and on the other side, of western politicians and arms manufacturers who

point to Islam as the great external enemy after the demise of Communism.

However when Jews, Christians and Muslims meet to talk about religious issues they discover a great deal of common ethical ground. And Jews and Muslims discover a common approach to religion in their reverence for what is roughly but rather inadequately called law, and also in a common distance from the doctrines of incarnation, trinity, and atonement developed by the Christian church. This comes at a time when there is considerable discussion within Christianity itself about the right way to understand these traditional ideas. Recent work on first century Judaism has shown how thoroughly Jewish a figure Jesus was. Within biblical Judaism the phrase "son of God" was a familiar metaphor both for Israel as a whole and for the special status of ancient Hebrew kings and for the religious status of pious Jews in each generation who were truly dedicated to doing God's will. But the original discipleship of the early Jesus movement to one who was, in this Hebraic metaphor, a son of God, came to be at odds with the Hellenistic development of Christianity which eventually won the day and provided the version of Christianity contained in most of the New Testament documents, though not without many evidences of the still active struggle. But the original but eventually suppressed Jesus movement had a continuing influence outside what became the mainstream church. The New Testament scholar Adolf Schlatter tells us that "the Jewish church...had died out only in Palestine west of the Jordan. Christian communities following Jewish customs still survived in the eastern regions, in Decapolis, Batanaea, among the Nabataeans, on the edge of the Syrian wilderness, and over towards Arabia completely severed from the rest of the Christian world and having no fellowship with it."[Quoted by Hans Küng in Hans Küng et al., Christianity and The World Religions (New York: Doubleday, 1986) 123.] Some scholars (including no less a figure than the great Adolf von Harnack) have suggested that this Jewish Christianity was still known in the Arabia of Muhammad's time, and that the Qur'anic picture of Jesus as a great prophet reflects this earliest Jewish Christian conception of him. I do not feel competent to offer a judgment on this fascinating suggestion. But regardless of the presence or absence of an historical link between the original understanding of Jesus in the early church and the Qur'anic understanding of him, there is today a small but growing minority of Christian theologians and New Testament scholars

for whom christology is no longer a central point of issue with Muslims and Jews.
Their view is of course strongly contested by others, and is not the position of the orthodox establishment. I venture to think, however, that something like the original Christian understanding of Jesus, as in the metaphorical sense son of God, is widely spread in the Christian world, to some extent within the churches and to a greater extent outside them. This stands in contrast to a traditional Christianity which insists upon the sole saviourhood of Jesus as God incarnate, with its implication of the unique superiority of Christianity as the only religion to have been founded by God in person. I thus foresee both traditional and non-traditional forms of Christianity existing side by side in the coming century.

Returning to the interfaith movement as a whole, I think we may say that in the last hundred years what has come about is a mutual recognition and a mutual respect which makes possible events such as this commemoration today and makes practical co-operation possible; and the major interfaith effort today is rightly directed towards developing this practical co-operation in the face of the pressing need to achieve peace and justice on earth within a sustainable global economy. The most significant development here is the attempt, led by the German Catholic theologian Hans Küng, to formulate a common basic global ethic, about which we shall be hearing more in the coming months. For many involved in dialogue, this practical focus means leaving on one side the thorny question of the conflicting truth-claims of our different traditions. Many hold that we are still not ready to tackle those questions, and should not risk contention by bringing them forward.
My own view is that genuine questions of belief cannot be avoided and that we must prepare ourselves to face them—not instead of matters of practical co-operation but, for some of us at least, as well as these.

In the area of beliefs and truth-claims I see two contrary possibilities. One is the conclusion that our respective doctrines are simply contradictory and irreconcilable, and that this sets a final limit to the developing relations between the different religious traditions. And, on the face of it, this does seem to be a

likely conclusion. How can the eternal, infinite reality with which religion is ultimately concerned be both personal and yet not personal; be both a trinity and yet unitary, be both the God of Israel whose chosen people are the Jews, and yet also be the God of the Qur'an, whose primary historical intervention was in seventh century Arabia; be both the Vishnu and the Shiva of theistic Hinduism; and be both the eternal nonpersonal Brahman, and the universal Buddha nature of all things, and the transcendent and yet immanent Tao? It does seem on the face of it impossible that the great world faiths can all be responding to the same ultimate divine reality.

But there is also another possibility. Let me point to it by means of a series of three analogies. Consider, first, a puzzle picture like, for example, the page made up of an apparently meaningless jumble of lines and squiggles drawn at random, and then as you look at it you suddenly see within it the outline of a face. Or, better, consider the famous duck-rabbit picture used by the philosopher Wittgenstein. This is an ambiguous diagram which can be seen as representing either a duck looking to the left or a rabbit looking to the right, and the mind tends to flip back and forth between these two ways of seeing it. Now suppose there is a culture in which ducks are a familiar sight but rabbits are completely unknown and have never even been heard of; and another culture in which rabbits are familiar but ducks are completely unknown. When people in the duck-knowing culture see the ambiguous figure they naturally report that it is the picture of a duck. And, of course, it is the other way round with the rabbit-knowing culture. Here it is manifestly a rabbit, and there is again no ambiguity about it. The people of these two cultures are fully entitled to affirm, and to proclaim, that this is the picture of a duck, or of a rabbit, as the case may be. And each group, when told of another group who claim that the picture is of something entirely different and alien to them, will maintain that that group are confused or mistaken in some perhaps inexplicable way.

But Wittgenstein would be able to offer an account of the situation according

to
which each group is right in what it affirms but wrong in its insistence that the
other group is therefore mistaken. They are both, he could point out, right by virtue
of the fact that what is actually there is capable of being equally correctly seen in
two quite different ways, as a duck and as a rabbit, though not both by the same
person at the same time.

The analogy that I am suggesting here is of course with the religious experience
component of religion. And the possibility to which I want to point is that the
Real, the Ultimate, is capable of being experienced in terms of many different sets
of human concepts, as Jahweh, as the Holy Trinity, as Alláh, as Shiva, as
Vishnu, and again as Brahman, as the Dharmakaya, as the Tao, and soon.

A second analogy may help to suggest how this might be possible. This is the
wave-particle complementarity in physics as expounded by Niels Bohr in the
1950s. To quote Professor Ian Barbour, "Light in some situations (for example,
interference effects) behaves as a wave, in others (for example, photoelectric
effects) as a particle." [Ian Barbour, Issues in Science and Religion
(Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966) 282] The essential point is that
"No sharp line can be drawn between the process of observation and what is
observed." [Ibid.] Thus if, in an appropriate experimental situation,
one acts upon light in one way, it is observed to have wave-like properties, and if
in another way, to have particle-like properties. The properties it is found to have
depend upon how the observer acts in relation to it. The analogy that I have in mind
here is with spiritual practices—prayer, meditation, sacraments, common worship.
In these practices we act in relation to the ultimately Real. In devotional and
petitionary prayer we expect to, and we do, encounter the Real as a personal
reality with whom we stand in an I-Thou relationship. In advaitic Hindu meditation
people expect to, and do, experience the Real as the infinite non-personal reality
of Brahman. In Buddhist Zen meditation people expect to, and do, come to transcend
the ego point of view and experience the Real as the universal Buddha-nature of a
universe which in itself is empty of everything that the human mind projects im
the activity of perception. And so on. Putting it in familiar Christian language,

revelation is a relational matter, taking different forms in relation to people nurtured by the different religious traditions, with their different sets of religious concepts and their different kinds of spiritual practice.

A third analogy comes from cartography. Because the earth is a three-dimensional globe, any map of it on a two-dimensional surface must inevitably distort it, and there are different ways of systematically distorting it for different purposes. Thus there are gnomonic, stereographic, and orthographic types of projection, including the familiar cylindrical projection invented by Mercator which is used in constructing many of our maps of the world. But the point is simply that every map is systematically distorted in accordance with a certain mode of projection. However it does not follow that if one type of map is accurate the others must be inaccurate, If they are properly made, they are all accurate—and yet in another sense they are all inaccurate, in that they all inevitably distort. The analogy here is with theologies, both the different theologies of the same religion, and the even more different theologies and philosophies of different religions. It could be that the conceptual maps drawn by the great traditions are all more or less equally correct in their different projections, and more or less equally useful for guiding us on our journey through life. For our pilgrim's progress is our life-response to the Real. The great world faiths orient us in this journey, and in so far as they are, as we may say, in salvific alignment with the Real, to follow their path will relate us rightly to the Real, opening us to what, in our different conceptualities, we will call divine grace or enlightenment or awakening to reality, and which will in turn bear visible fruit in our lives.

The pictures to which these analogies point is that of an ultimate Reality which in itself is greater than all our human sets of ideas, but which is the source and ground of everything, and is such that in so far as the religious traditions are in alignment with it, they are authentic contexts of salvation or liberation. The religious traditions involve different human conceptions of the Real, with correspondingly different ways of experiencing the Real, and correspondingly

different forms of life in response to the Real. Whether they are more or less equally valid human responses to the Real cannot be answered a priori but only on the basis of observing their fruits. In my opinion the true answer is that, so far as we can tell, the great traditions exhibit a rough salvific parity. They seem to be more or less equally productive of the outstanding individuals whom we call saints, more or less equally effective in providing a framework of meaning within which spiritual growth can take place, and also more or less equally unsuccessful in transforming societies on any large scale—for it is, alas, so much easier for evil than for good to be institutionalized.

Let me clarify a point at this stage. There is a sense in which most of us who are engaged in interfaith dialogue feel that our own tradition, whichever it is, is special, unique, and right in a way in which no other tradition can be. For we have—in the great majority of cases—been born into this tradition and have been formed from childhood by it. It has, so to speak, created us in its own image, with the result that it fits us and we fit it as no other religion can. It is thus, if you like, the only 'right' religion for us. But nevertheless we have come to realise in interfaith dialogue that the same holds for the adherents of each of the other faiths. And so I as a Christian know that whereas Christianity fits me and is uniquely right for me, Judaism fits and is uniquely right for Jews, Islam for Muslims, Hinduism for Hindus, Buddhism for Buddhists, and so on. But this is quite different from saying that any one of them is uniquely right for everyone. Each religion is a different form of human response to the Transcendent, the Real, the Ultimate, and each has created in its own image those born into it.

What I have just said is however to some extent an over-statement. I have perhaps made it sound as though every adherent of each tradition is totally satisfied by, and fulfilled within, that tradition. But of course 'fitting' one's religion is a matter of degree. Some are not very well satisfied with their own tradition, or are even highly critical of some aspects of it, without however being tempted to convert to another. And some others are so dissatisfied with their own, and at

the
same time so attracted by another, that they convert to it. But this is a
matter of
individual conversions for individual reasons. No doubt this will always
happen,
and happen in every direction; some Christians, for example, becoming Muslims
and
some Muslims becoming Christians, and likewise between any two traditions. But
statistically this is a very small phenomenon compared with the massive
transmission of each tradition from generation to generation within its own
borders.

What difference does this way of thinking make for religion as we know it? In
one
respect very little, in another quite a lot. If we are Christians we should
continue
so, living in relation to that "face" of the Real that we know as the heavenly
Father
of Jesus' teaching; or, if you think of Christianity in terms of ecclesiastical
dogmas, as the Holy Trinity of later church teaching. And hopefully we should
have
begun, in this nurturing context, to undergo the salvific transformation which
the
religions exist to facilitate. And the same, of course, applies to the people
of the
other great world faiths. Each tradition will continue as its own unique
response
to the Real. And as the sense of rivalry between them diminishes and they
interact
in friendly interfaith dialogue they will increasingly influence one another,
with
each changing to some extent as a result. But nevertheless within this growing
interaction each will be basically itself. In this respect, the pluralistic
vision
makes comparatively little difference to the existing traditions. But in
another
respect it makes what is for some of them a major difference. For in coming to
understand itself as one among several valid human responses to the Real, each
will gradually de-emphasize that aspect of its teaching which entails its own
unique superiority. Such an aspect has grown up within each tradition, though
occupying a more central position in some than in others. And to modify, and
eventually abandon, this implicit or explicit claim to unique superiority will
in
each case involve a development. This will be easier for some traditions than
others, and within each tradition easier for some individuals than others. But
this,
as I see it, should be on the agenda for the coming century.

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