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## CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER WITH WORLD RELIGIONS

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1. Sri Aurobindo Research Academy, Pondicherry, India.
2. Department of Asian Studies, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey, U.S.A.
3. Department of Religious Studies, University of Lancaster, U.K.

By

**DHARMA RESEARCH ASSOCIATION**  
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS  
DHARMARAM COLLEGE  
BANGALORE-560 029, INDIA.

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**Michael Von Bruck**  
*University of Munich*

## **INTERRELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION AND THE FUTURE OF RELIGIONS**

The present situation is certainly marked by increasing inter-religious encounter and discourse. However, it seems to be difficult to judge what actually happens—is there real progress or just a conference-culture, do isolationist tendencies prevail? Yet, unless we achieve a clear analysis of the present social, political as well as intellectual conditions of interreligious encounter all our projections into the future are just wishful thinking. Unless we have at least a vague idea of the end and goal of the way it is difficult to say whether a certain way might be appropriate or not. Therefore, what is necessary more than anything else is a sober and truthful analysis of the present state of interreligious affairs.

### **1. Analysis**

I will not be able to give a comprehensive analysis here (or elsewhere) but would like to show how it might be achieved. First of all there is a worldwide intellectual community struggling in the field of interreligious understanding, hermeneutics and praxis not only over the last 100 years. The first question that is to be asked concerns the very structure of the dialogue itself. What do we mean and intend when we enter into dialogue? Each tradition has to work out a clear understanding in accordance with her basic tenets - Christians call this a Theology of Religions, which is different from analytic Comparative Religion.

Religions present themselves as bearers of a specific truth claim expressed in specific (and not universal) language. Any truth claim in this respect refers to a conditioned set of assumptions and presuppositions which might be understandable and translatable into another set of assumptions and presuppositions, but this is not necessarily the case and requires a careful hermeneutics, anyway. In other words: Whether a specific truth claim is justified or not can be decided only on the logical coherence of a specific pattern. Logical consistency may be universal,

but religious truth claims do not refer just to such a logical structure, for they are dependent on a *specific* myth expressed in a *specific* history of thinking etc. Therefore, in interreligious communication the primary question cannot be whether a specific claim is "true" or not, but it is to be asked *why* a certain group of people holds a certain view and *how* this relates to all other expressions of a given culture. If these two questions are being asked in the context of an exchange of cultures this "why" and "how" needs to be related to the present cross-cultural discourse with all its political, economic and cultural implications.

On the other hand, it will not suffice to proclaim a pragmatic position to work out a "world ethos" independent of the specific credal structure of a given religion, for the details as well as the motivating forces are important in any given situation that calls for ethical discernment. Rather, the internal reflection in each tradition has to show and present the reasons for dialogue: Whether I am an *inclusivist* or a *pluralist* – I do not mention the *exclusivistic* position since it cannot be a basis for dialogue – dialogical communion with the other is possible only, when I recognize the partner as a possible *source* for my truth and salvation or at least of my understanding of it. The other must be taken as a possible medium for my transformation (*metanoia*). Whether that is really so or not is under testing during dialogue. As long as my conviction tells me that I have to "win over" the other one into my camp or that I want to use dialogue as an expedient means to indigenize my truth claim so that the other one can be easily persuaded, there can be no genuine dialogue.

As long as the question whether genuine faith in another religion is sufficient for "salvation" is not decided affirmatively there cannot be real dialogue. We need to be very clear on this point: For if I hold that the other one needs my truth to be saved I need to win him over to my truth – otherwise my restraint in this respect would be unethical; if, however, conversion to my truth is not necessary for the other's salvation I do not need to convert him. The result is, that the dialogue of truth claims would have epistemic and perhaps ethical bearing but not to solve the problem of salvation.

This is not to say that partners in dialogue should not defend the views and ways of their traditions. They certainly should, for

otherwise dialogue becomes boring. They should witness to the truth they experience in their own and specific unique way; but this is more a spontaneous happening than a strategy lest it becomes loaded with second thoughts which might not be entirely truthful.

On the other hand they also need to be open for the truth they might receive mediated by the other partner in dialogue – not necessarily, but possibly. "Mission" is not an enterprise to get people into one's own camp to become more powerful, but it is witnessing to truth in the dialogical discourse and becoming transformed when truth really opens up. Dialogue is authentic only when it comes from the centre of one's own theological convictions.

Right now, however, we seem to be in a painful stalemate. Few people outside the academic community do participate in this kind of exchange and communion building. Spectacular dialogue events are staged from time to time - such as the Assisi peace prayer. But often those people/ religious leaders seem to use interreligious dialogues as a chance to show their social and ecological worldwide engagement, but at the same time they run their own religious affairs with not much dialogical attitude towards those who develop differing ideas and styles of life. The basic question is not whether we need an inclusivistic or a pluralistic theological model (though to advance clear arguments for one or the other is essential as well), but how deeply rooted our commitment to the other as other really is.

There are at least three movements that block interreligious dialogue more and more:

- a) *conservatism*,
- b) *nationalism*,
- c) *intellectual and religious-existential decay*.

If we want to analyse these threads to interreligious dialogue we realize immediatly that the dialogue-problem is very much embedded into the general state of affairs of our respective cultures.

a) *Conservatism* is not necessarily bad. It becomes an obstacle to development only when it absolutizes certain forms or relative expressions of religious tradition. Conservatism today is very much a reaction against the uncertainty and complexity of modern societies, it is a result of fear. There is no intellectual arguing against fear.

What helps is only intense spiritual practice. And those new possibilities we have in this field are precisely a fruit of cross-cultural encounter. *Therefore, dialogue on the level of spirituality seems to be the basis on which everything else is to be built.* We do not have to push for any specific form – prayer, meditation, music, arts in general are all expressions and ways of spiritual transformation. All over the world in our respective places we need to emphasize and foster spiritual practice and exchange. Instead of investing too much resources into academic studies and comparisons of our religions, as important as this may be, we should spend ourselves and our resources more than until now in this field. Otherwise, there will be no interreligious future but – nearly a socio-psychological necessity – a falling back into all sorts of provincial parochialism.

Perhaps it is useful to give an example from my own field of work in Germany which might be interesting to others:

About 20 years ago the German born Jesuit Fr. Enomiya-Lassalle started a centre for Zen practice in Germany. Later it came under the direction of an other Catholic priest who got married and the centre was removed from the place which was owned by the church. Those who were already enrolled as practitioners started an independent society and contributed and raised funds. After some time an old abandoned mill was bought and reconstructed. Since 15 years this place is called "Ecumenical Centre for Meditation and Encounter." Those who direct the meditation-courses come from all walks of life – there are Zen sesshins, yoga, physical therapy, eutony, work with gems, fasting, Tibetan meditation (Kum Nye), Chinese Tai Chi, prayer of the heart, reflective meditation on the gospels etc. People come for a weekend or a week and afterwards return to their places where they usually join practice groups which are part of a growing network all over Germany. Every year we have about 3000 participants in the courses of this centre. Everything is built around the eucharist once a week as central Christian practice down in the chapel. Daily there is a silent peace meditation, sometimes closed with songs from the Taize community. But the courses and their spiritual framework are independent. Course leaders and participants may join the worship or not

in addition to their own practice (*sutra* chanting etc.). Participants are Christians, Jews, but also quite a number who were converted to Buddhism or Hinduism. Most of the participants are German middle class people (it is quite expensive). They discover their Christianity (which most of them had lost) in a much deeper way and at the same time in a spirit of total openness for the encounter of other traditions. Interreligious encounter here is neither a theoretical concept nor a social practice in living together of different communities, but a spiritual experience. Perhaps it is a kind of "laboratory situation" for it is exceptional from every day life insofar as there is no pressure of fighting social and political identities. This is precisely the danger for you could easily escape those pressures. Everybody, however, is encouraged to counteract such a tendency in his/her ordinary situation at home – and there are beautiful examples of courage and engagement in the social and ecological struggles in everyday life. Yet I suppose you have to have those situations here and elsewhere, too, in order to build mutual trust on inner experience. It is an investment into a more peaceful future, after all.

b) *Nationalism* needs to be distinguished from the search for a national, cultural and religious identity which seems to be innate in human beings. In Europe – in the process of the European integration – we are just trying to learn how to balance out local (regional), national and supranational identities. If you neglect one of these levels you will trigger counter-reactions which might be violent and harmful. Nationalism is the absolutization of the genuine national identity which kills both the regional identity and the identity that is reaching out beyond the national, finally to all humankind and perhaps the cosmos. The more sophisticated and educated a person is the more he/she might (not necessarily) be able to reach out and realize his/her identity in and with the cosmos, but for most people this is too abstract and they cling to a national identity. We might argue, of course, that this clinging is false. But if we want to build an interreligious future we better start from a clear analysis of the reality.

What has been said here can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to the religious situation. Suppose, you have an identity as a Hindu. What

does it mean? On a certain level of identification – especially when you face a Muslim or a Christian – you are a Hindu with all the characteristic marks that compose “Hinduism.” But in your daily life you are a Saivaita or a Vaisnava of a certain caste. Living uprooted in the city you might lose this identity, but many people still long for it or find surrogates. As a Hindu you do not speak Sanskrit but your local language, and this is what gives identity. Similarly as a Christian: You are not just a “Christian,” but a Protestant or a Catholic or whatever. Even here, your religion is not abstract but very much localized, and this shapes your primary religious identity. Most people go to worship and hear sermons not to be instructed on the globally abstract Christian tenets, but they are shaped by narratives that represent a local identity. Even migrants try to build up a new regional identity in sticking to a socio-religious group that guarantees the continuity of the regionalized religious identity. The United States are a good example. What I am trying to say is: To counter-balance nationalism or its equivalent, i. e., the absolutization of Hinduism, Christianity etc., we need two emphases – the local-regional identity and the global identity of one humankind. Often interreligious parlance takes care only of the second aspect, but it is too abstract in many cases and lacks the warmth and real living relationship that you have in your village or your neighbourhood.

But the problem of identity is also a source of fear. We already touched on the fear that is generated with regard to the problem of uprooting from one’s tradition and value system. I argued that only spiritual experience will overcome and heal this fear. The other source of fear is the possible loss of national identity. Europe – and Germany in particular – is an excellent case for study: There are so many migrants into Europe that irrational fear is generated in all strata of society. It is not that most of these people would hold basically an anti-foreigner view. They feel just threatened by too many immigrants. The reason for immigration is the economic disaster in Africa, Latin America, Asia and elsewhere. Unfair and unjust international economics, financial and trading conditions are one of the reasons for this problem (besides inefficiency, corrupt bureaucracy and undemocratic power-struggle in those respective countries themselves). Therefore: In order to build an interreligious future we need to eradicate a nationalism that is born out of fear of foreigners and foreign control. This is possible only when thousands (or, better, millions)



of possible migrants find decent living conditions at home, which requires a change in the international economic and financial order. This problem, therefore, is *intrinsically* connected with our search for an interreligious communication toward a future of religions! If we neglect it, we are just engaging ourselves in pious talk which will be futile.

Identity, therefore, is not static. We live in different identities depending on the context. And these identities change. An *interreligious identity* for the future is not a substitute for the other identities, but an *additional dimension* that informs and changes other identities but does not remove them.

Having said this emphatically, I need to add: The level of interreligious identity, that might be mediated by spiritual practice, has influence on the local and regional identity, and we have to make conscious efforts to link these different levels. But they are not the same and should not be confused. To embrace a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist in an interreligious conference that radiates a certain intellectual and spiritual climate, is something else and different from embracing a Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist in my neighbourhood. It is not just different because different aspects and socio-political influences play a role, but it is different insofar as different levels of identity are being touched. This needs elaboration and a whole course in intercultural psychology and learning. Here it is sufficient to make this point: In order to build a lasting interreligious future without provoking new tensions we have to keep in mind these different levels of identity and give them their proper place.

c) *Intellectual and religious decay.* Due to many different factors which are at work not only in industrialized societies we can observe both: an increase of the people participating in different educational systems and at the same time a decrease of what one would call in the West the "humanistic values." The broader educational system is very selective concerning the type of knowledge and education it mediates. What is lacking nearly totally is a training in intercultural communication. This would require a more careful attempt to relate the assumptions and underlying myths of a culture to the present day problems, patterns of thought and behaviour of people, for without clearly understanding what motivates your own thinking and action you cannot meaningfully relate to different value systems and

behavioural patterns. This is one of the reasons for the need to deepen the practice and understanding of one's own tradition in order to be fit for interreligious dialogue. Therefore, a non-sectarian religious education is probably one of the most pressing needs for building an "interreligious future."

I do not know how the authorities (at UNESCO level or wherever on the national levels) can be persuaded to embark on such a path that is certainly difficult. By non-sectarian I mean an unbiased (as much as possible) appreciation of all that is meaningful in different religions. To discern the meaningful from the meaningless or even dangerous aspects in our traditions the scholarly task of an appropriate interreligious hermeneutics is still to be given more emphasis.

## 2. Projections

a) To envisage a possible future of religions in deeper interreligious communication (and communion, perhaps?) requires much more than a scholarly approach to the problem. An intellectual (linguistic, historical, methodological) analysis describes and relates to each other patterns of the past in order to construct a present. The future, however, is not the business of the scholar. It requires the artist, the poet, the mystic visionary to see what is already at hand in a nutshell and to project images as guiding principles for possible ways. In other words: Our interreligious concern needs more visionary and poetic impulses! The poet might be informed by an academic study of historical patterns and paradigms – and this would be the ideal case, because it helps to distinguish visionary quality from escapist phantasy.

I have to be short here and would therefore just like to give an example: Carrin Dunne's "Buddha and Jesus" (Templegate, Springfield/ Ill. 1975). This booklet contains talks between the two masters which the poet (who is a scholar in religious studies) imagines. She does not claim some kind of "historical proof" but projects basic impulses from these two human beings and their traditions into the field of reference of our present day questions. The result is a very touching drama that reflects the questioning heart of present day secularized (or not yet secularized) human beings who live in doubt of their own and humankind's future. In short, a creative translation of our respective

traditions is called for, not just a repetitive pattern to perpetuate what we believe is the glorious past.

b) This touches on the hermeneutical problem. Again, much has been written and said, and the process of clarification is going on. I do not think that any method has been really satisfactory so far, and I do not have an answer either, of course. The basic problem is: How do we really understand the other without imposing our own structure of language, meaning and psychology on it so that it remains the other, yet understood by us, which means, it is by no means any more the other, for understanding is an act of integration!

Recently, one of the most thorough attempts in this field has been published in Germany (Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Den Löwen brüllen hören." Zur Hermeneutik eines christlichen Verständnisses der buddhistischen Heilsbotschaft (Listening to the Lion's Roar: Towards a Hermeneutics of a Christian Understanding of the Buddhist Message of Salvation), Schönigh: Paderborn, 1992, 788 pages). After discussing (and mostly dismissing for good reasons) so many hermeneutic attempts of the past and present the author suggests: We have to start with the basic human experiences (such as suffering, death and relationship) because they can be found in all traditions yet stand in a specific hierarchy, which is different in Buddhism and Christianity. Whereas Buddhism takes off from the experience of impermanence and suffering, Christianity starts with the experience of personal (and person-making) relationship. All other concepts of God/the Ultimate, the religious path, the understanding of the human situation etc. are derived from this basic concept.

Such an hermeneutic attempt sounds well grounded, and it is not the first time that it is suggested. The problem is: Even those basic experiences of the humanity mediated by our traditions. They are experienced not independent from the conditions that are shaped by the respective history and language of any tradition.

Therefore I suggest: The hermeneutic basis for interreligious communication is not in the past, it is not the search for an original historical pattern or whatever, but it is the present. Precisely in this moment where I speak and a follower of another tradition who speaks his/her own different mother-tongue, listens, or where he/she speaks and I hear (speaking in the sense of an all-comprehensive communication,

not just by words), the field of communication is created and the proper hermeneutics is being worked out by trial and error in the very process of communication, not before. In interreligious encounter we do not rehearse the past and present it to the outsider, but we together create a *new interreligious situation* that is informed and conditioned by different pasts. We do not find out "as it really has been" and relate these *bruta facta* to each other, but we are much more imaginative – and the rules for the process are being formed *in the process* itself. The motivations of each partner and in each case for entering the process might be different, but via communication gradually there emerges communion, fragile and not ultimate, but again and again undertaken as part of the cosmic play of mutuality and interrelationship which we can observe on all levels of the evolution of reality.

c) Call for humbleness and humility. What I have been saying so far could be put into more philosophical (and precise) or even mythic language. But the problem is that we easily and readily identify with "our" philosophic/traditional parlance, are proud of our heritage and regard interreligious communication as an opportunity for self-staging. Interreligious endeavour, however, requires more than anything else *humility* in face of the ever greater mystery; honesty in facing my (and my tradition's) real state of affairs in past and present; and a kind of awe over against that which I do not (yet) and can not understand. We may say that this is the way of the cross or *kenosis* or a mutual conditioning envisaged by the concept of *pratityasamutpada* which helps us to overcome clinging to our own substantialist concepts – or deconstructed symbols; we might call it an act of total and unconditional surrender *Islam* – more important than the name is that the concept really becomes an attitude that shapes our life, including our interreligious relations and interpretations, as this has to do with the spiritual level I started with. The ways of silence and engaged love and of communion in psychologically manageable groups are building blocks for an interreligious future nobody of us is able to describe. We do not need only a call for more (and better) institutions, we do not need to speculate whether religions (and languages) will merge or stay apart, whether learning from each other and mutual transformation (John Cobb) touches the identity of the present religious traditions in such a way that they disappear or that they become even more self-conscious. After all, all our religions have appeared in time, changed in time and they may disappear or transform in time. We do not know and

do not need to know. All what is required is honesty, simplicity and an integrated approach (perhaps in similarity with Gandhi's model) to shape ways for an interreligious concern that are genuine (measured according to the basic insights of our respective traditions) and helpful (measured according to the present-day real liberative impulse in a holistic sense).

What is required is that we recognize our different identities which are always "soft", flexible, in the making, relational. I have called this the process of building identity in partnership (*Identitätspartnerschaft*). This, again, is possible only on the basis of a strong and unconditional faith in God, the Ultimate Good which supports us even if we fail, or better: precisely in our failures and errors.