Spirituality in Interreligious Dialogue: Challenge and Promise*

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Introduction

A common Arab proverb says: "Humans resemble their time more than their fathers". The meaning is that people, living in the same time context, share a mentality which makes them more akin than they are with people of previous generations. This proverb points to an important factor that shapes our lives: time. Time is not only the framework in which we are born and die, but it deeply shapes our interior life.

Interpreting "the signs of times" has become a common topic in Catholic theology since Vatican Council II. It is also one of the main themes of Scripture. God, we believe, reveals himself not in abstract thoughts, but through the events and happenings of human history. Consequently, Christian faith must be in continuous interaction with time and time events, taking them into account as decisive and essential factors for its growth.

The present essay intends to explore some aspects of Christian spirituality in our present historical context which is inescapably one of religious pluralism. This is, surely, a new challenge for Christian spirituality, but it may also turn into an opening to new dimensions and horizons. In the end, it may become an opportunity (in the sense of biblical *kairos*) of becoming more Christian.

1 Pluralism: The Challenge of Our Time

1.1 The Present Context

Understanding our time and the deep changes our world is going through has become a compelling concern among scholars in our day.[1]

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[1] See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, London, SCM, 1983, pp. 1–9; Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, pp. 1–21; Michael Barnes, *Religions in Conversation: Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism*, London, SPCK, 1989, pp. 3–16; Ewert H. Cousins, 'The Nature of Faith in Interreligious Dialogue', *The Way Supplement* 78 (Autumn 1993) 32–41; Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York, Orbis Books, 1997: 'Introduction', pp. 1–19.

The new era we are entering upon is often qualified as being one of a 'global context' or 'globalization'. The accelerating breaking down of economic, social and political barriers is creating a common global market. But along with such an economic expansion, deep cultural and spiritual changes are also going on. Peoples from all corners of the planet are now coming closer. No one, Christians included, can possibly afford to live in seclusion, in cultural and spiritual isolation.

Jacques Dupuis remarks, at the beginning of his book, that: "… the encounter of cultures and religions, which is increasingly becoming a fact of life in the First World countries themselves, has turned the theological debate on other religions into a primary concern in the Churches of the Western world as well".[2]

In short, pluralism at all levels is becoming all the more a permanent feature of the present and future human predicament. Now we no longer discuss world religions as far away entities, belonging to foreign peoples and countries, but we find them on our doorstep. As a consequence, all religions, Christianity included, are now challenged to define their own identity in a plural context, in close interrelationship; this is vital for their future.

Finding the meaning of this new situation of religious pluralism both at the theological and the spiritual level has become a basic concern of theologians. Religious pluralism cannot be seen just as a historical accident, or interpreted only in a negative, pessimistic way. Theology is always called to be open to God's purpose and providence in the important events of human history. Now the question has already shifted from the old topic of 'theology of religions', as separated, distant entities, to 'the theology of religious pluralism', as the title of Dupuis's book clearly declares.

Christianity, in the past, used to live in a world vision in which it placed itself naturally at the centre. In such a vision, the 'other', the non-Christian, was basically seen as either a potential Christian to convert or an infidel whose destiny was not guaranteed. All this was well epitomized in the famous traditional *theologoumenon*: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (*Outside the Church there is no salvation*).

Nowadays we are entering, not without hesitations and refluxes, into a new spiritual situation. For the Catholic Church the turning point has surely been the Second Vatican Council. Since then, a lot of theological research has been dedicated to the topics of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue.

A. Race, for instance, says that: "… the future of the Christian theological enterprise is indeed at stake in the attitude the Christian adopts to the newly experienced religious pluralism".[3]

And D. Tracy adds that: "We are approaching the day when it will not be possible to attempt a Christian systematic theology, except in serious conversation with the other great ways".[4]

[2] Dupuis, *Toward*, p. 1.
[3] Race,*Christians*, p. 4.
[4] Cited in Dupuis, *Toward*, p. 19.

M. Barnes focuses on the fact that we are becoming more aware of the 'other', from all points of view, religious included. We are beginning to take difference seriously. The existence of the other can no longer continue to be peripheral to our faith: we have to exist and coexist in a pluralistic religious context.[5]

Consequently, our spirituality too cannot continue to be isolated, content to live in the secure fold of the Church. In a way, it must come out and meet the other, people of different creeds and faiths, on the streets, next door.

1.2 Spirituality in Our Time

The issue of religious pluralism is not confined to the academic level of theological discussions. It concerns the whole of Christian faith and life, and its spirituality too.

Spirituality is not an easy topic to define. Many different definitions or descriptions of it have been given by scholars.[6]

M. Downey sees spirituality as: "… a way of consciously striving to integrate one's life through self-transcending knowledge, freedom and love in light of the highest values perceived and pursued".[7]

For E. Cousin spirituality is connected with the 'spiritual' in humans: "The spiritual core is the deepest centre of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality".[8]

In short, it seems to me that spirituality is a complex attitude involving a number of different elements: the person concerned, the world context in which he/she finds him/herself, and the transcendent reference of both, the ultimate Reality. All these three dimensions must be part of an integrated spirituality.

For the purpose of the present research it is important to underline that the religious factor, in all its variety and plurality, is part of the spiritual context and must become an integral element of its constitution. In fact, the interreligious context has a special significance for it, being an important mediating factor in inter-human relationships and, ultimately, in relation to the transcendent Reality.

It is therefore important to investigate the way the new, present context of religious pluralism is going to shape our spirituality, highlighting the challenges that a true contemporary Christian spirituality has to face.

Looking to the past, one can say that the traditional spiritual world of Christian saints developed in what one might call a mono-religious context. This does not mean that Christianity existed without inter-action with its context; history witnesses to

[5] Michael Barnes, 'On Not Including Everything: Christ, the Spirit and the Other', *The Way Supplement* 78 (Autumn, 1993) 3–4.

[6] On spirituality in general see: Richard Woods, 'History of Christian Spirituality', in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey (ed.), Collegeville, Minnesota, 1993, pp. 938–946; Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality*, London, SPCK, (1st. ed. 1986) 1996: 'Preface', pp. XXIV-XXVI; Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, New York, Paulist Press, 1997, pp. 6–15; Peter H. Van Ness (ed.), *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, World Spirituality, London, SCM, 1996.

[7] Downey, *Understanding*, p. 15.

[8] Cousins, 'Preface to the Series': in Van Ness (ed.), *Spirituality*, p. xii.

just the opposite. It is a fact, however, that Christian saints naturally sought their perfection inside the Christian fold. Non-Christians could at most benefit from their sainthood, but surely not teach them anything in it.

A good case in point is the great popular modern saint, St Thérèse de Lisieux. She was very sympathetic with sinners and non-believers, to the point of offering for them her life, as victim to the Divine Love. Yet, all this was done by her in the sole perspective of the salvation of their souls so that they too might enter the Christian fold in the end.

Such an isolated spirituality is now challenged by the present context, which is inevitably a pluralistic one. This new religious situation obliges us all to rethink our spiritual way of life, coming to terms with God's presence in our present world and finding a meaning for our faith. One could dare to say that Christian spirituality will have a real future only by becoming a meaningful presence in an expanding pluralistic context, in close encounter and dialogue with other religions. To this purpose, some basic interior attitudes must be developed, going beyond past spiritual and theological positions.

2 In Interreligious Encounter

2.1 The Other: Identity and Difference

A term which is becoming all the more central in our pluralistic culture is the 'other'. There is nowadays a growing sensibility and perception of the specificity of the 'other' at all levels, religious, cultural, racial, etc. This attitude is quite different from what was prevalent until the quite recent past in many world ideologies, such as nationalism, communism and others. A basic trait, common to these ideologies, was the rejection, to the point of elimination, of the 'other', the different, the foreign.

Accepting difference, taking it seriously, may not be easy. A basic feeling of fear of the 'other' needs to be overcome. We are, in fact, always inclined to reduce the unknown to the known, the unfamiliar to the familiar, distorting in this way, consciously or not, the image of the other. Rooted in all human beings there is a basic 'inclusive instinct'.[9]

Barnes, in his article, relates his estranged feeling in hearing his Christian experience kindly reduced by his interlocutor to Hindu terms. The same happens very often to one living in an Islamic context, as I do. However, I find this experience helpful, because it makes us aware that we, in our turn, may make the same mistake of reducing the other to our own terms. This attitude is not infrequent in the theological readings of other faiths: one is always easily tempted to interpret the other in one's own terms.[10] Beyond all good intentions, such attitudes are likely to be perceived by the other as a kind of an imperialistic attempt at assimilation. In approaching the other,

[9] Barnes, 'On Not Including', pp. 3–4.

[10] Compare the reading of the Hindu concept of '*saccidananda*' in Wayne Teasdale, 'The Mystical Meeting Point between East and West', *in Mysticism: Medieval and Modern*, ed. by Valerie M. Ligorio,

one has to come to terms first of all with the 'other in its otherness', taking differences seriously.[11]

A common prejudice to be overcome in this process is that of picturing other religions in abstract terms, as closed systems of beliefs either to be accepted or rejected in their entirety. J. Lipner argues against such an attitude highlighting that religions are always polycentred phenomena. Particularly in day to day life there is always a human space in which people interrelate, bridge over to one another beyond fixed dogmatic patterns. For this reason, he calls for a basic attitude of 'constructive empathy', oriented to creating 'an open-ended mode of being'.[12]

Such an attitude helps people to be open to the presence of God in the other. To counter the 'inclusivist instinct' one has to become aware that God acts in all religions: "One must at least allow for the *possibility* of God's action outside the known boundaries".[13] Accepted with such an open mind, the other ceases to be a menace to one's own self, becoming, on the contrary, an essential factor of one's own identity. Self-identity is not obliterated but enhanced through the openness to the other. There is a mutual fulfillment in a true interfaith encounter. D. Lochhead, for example, relates how he was personally enriched in overcoming a mentality of hostility towards his Catholic environment, crossing over to an attitude of understanding and partnership. He concludes saying that now his life cannot do without a 'Catholic' component, and this has been for him an unexpected enrichment.[14]

This is what is hoped for from a sincere interreligious dialogue. Change must not be required as a prerequisite of it, but it must surely be one of its outcomes.

In this way, the other ceases to be seen as an opponent, but turns into a catalyst that helps in deepening one's own religious experience, becoming part of one's own identity. Having lived for a long time in an Islamic context, it has now become impossible for me to think of my Christian faith and practice without having in mind the Islamic view and sensitivity to it. For example, picking up a book of Christian prayers or songs, I spontaneously ask myself: what would my Muslim friend get from such expressions? Would they help him/her in understanding something of Christian faith or make it more obscure to him/her? In some way, the 'other', the 'Islamic predicament', has become an integral part of my daily life and reflection, say, of my own identity.

This way of acceptance of the other, in his/her otherness and difference, is often designated as 'intra-religious dialogue' and proposed as the premise for a true 'inter-religious dialogue'. The other is no more a foreigner, but a guest in our journey

Salzburg (Austria), Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1986, pp. 109–117, with the understanding of the same concept in Dupuis, *Toward*, pp. 274–279.

[11] Julius J. Lipner, "The 'Inter' in Interfaith Spirituality", *The Way Supplement* 78 (1993) 64–70; *id.*, 'Seeking Others in Their Otherness', *New Blackfriars* 74 (March, 1983) 152–165.

[12] Lipner 'Inter', pp. 64–70; 'Seeking', pp. 155–160.

[13] Barnes, 'On Not Including', p. 5.

[14] David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative — A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter*, London, SCM, 1988, pp. 66–70.

of faith: we let the other's belief and life question and test our own belief and life. This openness will add depth and breadth to our own understanding of Christian faith.[15] Dialogue, in fact, is not, in the first place, dealing with abstract systems of thought, but with concrete persons in their quest for truth, a quest in which each partner must become a 'thou' for the other. Eventually, we all are called to journey together from hostility to 'partnership' (Lochhead), or 'relation in mutuality' (Cousins), or 'mutual conversation' (Barnes). In any case: "Dialogue probes both partners in all aspects of their humanity and religious commitment".[16] In conclusion, a common ground of mutual esteem and understanding, an intra-religious dialogue, should be fostered before meeting in an exterior dialogue. Experience proves that there is no meaningful and fruitful interreligious dialogue if it has not been prepared by an intra-religious one. However, this attitude cannot be just taken as a pragmatic way of getting along with people of other faiths, but must grow from a new theological vision of God's presence in the world.

2.2 On Paradigms and Beyond

Finding the meaning of the contemporary pluralistic religious context has become one of the major issues in modern theological reflection.[17] In 1973, John Hick with his book *God and the Universe of Faiths*, launched his 'Copernican revolution', calling for a 'God-centred' theology of religions as a radical departure from the traditional 'Christ-Church-centred'. Since then, the debate has been focused on the so-called religious paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism.

This division, however, is becoming obsolete, as we are moving beyond paradigms.[18] Proposing a 'common idea of God' to be shared by all religions, as the supporters of the pluralistic view pretend, is seen as an over-simplification of differences, leading to a dangerous religious reductionism and relativism. In fact, all religious reflection is situated in a specific 'faith context', and only in it can be properly understood. There is no Christianity without Christ, no Buddhism without Buddha, no Islam without Mohammed. On the other hand, exclusivist and inclusivist paradigms do not seem in tune with the new perception, emerging from the present situation of religious pluralism.

The salvation of non-Christians is no more the central issue in the interreligious debate. Contemporary theology feels to be called to focus on: "… the meaning in God's design for humankind of the plurality of living faiths and religious traditions with which we are surrounded".[19]

[15] D'Costa, *Theology*, pp. 117–125; Barnes, *Religions*, pp. 160–164.
[16] Barnes, *Religions*, p. 164.
[17] Besides the above bibliography, see Ian Markham, "Creating Options: Shattering the 'Exclusivist, Inclusivist, Pluralist, Paradigm", *New Blackfriars* 74/867 (January 1993) 33–41, and the response of Gavin D'Costa, 'Creating Confusion: A Response to Markham', *New Blackfriars* 74/867 (January, 1993) 41–47.
[18] Dupuis, *Toward*, pp.180–201; Barnes, *Religions*, pp. 111–131.
[19] Dupuis, *Toward*, p. 10.

Many theologians, such as Barnes and Dupuis, think that instead of starting from a preset theological paradigm it is better to build a theology of dialogue on the basis of an actual interreligious encounter. They propose theologies in conversation (Barnes), or in dialogue (Dupuis), or in interpenetration (R. Panikkar). No religion, meeting the others, can start by setting itself or its views on the top of them all, fixing an *a priori* theological pattern, even if a pluralistic one. There is an increasing awareness that in interreligious dialogue each partner should start rethinking his/her own faith in an unprejudiced openness to the others.

Each religious tradition, in fact, should develop from within itself an open and dialogical attitude in relation to the others. The two aspects, commitment to one's own tradition and openness to the other's faith, should not be contrasted, but strictly and faithfully conjugated together by all partners. This is surely a positive spiritual attitude to be developed and a workable premise acceptable by all sides.

It is to be remarked that the official documents of the Catholic Church do not discuss at length the theological status of non-Christian religions, but give just some practical guide-lines on how to enter into dialogue with them indicating the four basic levels of, life, works, thought and spirituality.

In fact, an open, dialogical attitude can be developed only through an actual experience of dialogue. Dialogue, in fact, does not involve only theoretical thinking, necessary as it may be. It must be, in the first place, a meeting at the level of spiritual life and religious experience which are the heart of all religions. It seems that in the present interreligious context a spiritual person, or saint, should not be such only in the limits of his/her own religious tradition, as it has been in the past. He/she should gain a sort of recognition beyond strict confessional boundaries if his/her sainthood is to be contextualized in our present historical situation. Recently, we have witnessed some holy persons, such as Mother Teresa (d. 1998) and Bede Griffiths (d. 1993), gaining appreciation and recognition beyond their confessional boundaries, by people of other religious traditions. Their way of life, opened to the pluralistic religious context surrounding them, had a tremendous impact, opening paths of mutual understanding and esteem among people of different religious traditions.

This seems to be now the type of sainthood fitting for our present pluralistic context, and this is what the people of our time expect: an interreligious way of sainthood, one could say.

3 Entering into Dialogue

3.1 A New Spiritual Vision

Entering into a dialogical attitude is not an easy task. A radical interior change is required. Accepting the 'other', not as an opponent, but as a partner in one's own journey of faith, implies a growth towards a new understanding of one's own faith. This attitude may be summarized as a basic openness to two mysteries: the mystery

of God's love working in all creation and human history, and the mystery of the human person in quest of ultimate truth and love.

One must grow first in the conviction that God speaks through the other and must be 'allowed' to do so. One has to recognize that the other, too, has a truth from God which may complete one's own truth. No religion can claim to possess the full truth about God, or the full comprehension of God's mystery. Dialogue, in fact, is: "… a matter first and foremost of coming to terms with the mystery of what God is doing in the world".[20]

On the other hand, one must be open to the mystery present in every human being. The human being is defined as essentially self-transcendent, in a perpetual quest of truth and love beyond any particular situation or predicament. In this sense, no paradigm can fully express such a dynamism of self-transcendence which starts from within a given tradition but reaches out beyond it to the unknown. Religions are not just fixed patterns of beliefs. In each religion there is an inner life, a dialectic between prophetic dynamic aspects and institutional static ones. These are openings for mutual encounter and exchange.[21]

Moreover, religions exist in communities of people, living in particular historical and social contexts. Every believer feels to be called to the double task of fidelity to one's own faith and openness to the others. In a true interreligious encounter or dialogue, the two moments are not contrasted, but always interrelated: in a sense, they grow together.

For this reason, Barnes prefers the term conversation to that of dialogue among religions. Dialogue seems to suggest rather a dialectic of words, while conversation indicates a direct meeting of people. In fact, he insists, entering into dialogue one must turn from an 'idea-dominated' relationship into a 'person-centred' one. The common ground of dialogue is not, in the first place, a given general idea about God, but the common human quest for God. A true encounter, based on this premise, is bound to bring a new and enlarged understanding of one's own faith.

Cousins describes dialogue as a spiritual journey, a crossing over to the other and a coming back, enriched by the other's richness. As has been seen, to this purpose a deep, mutual empathy between the partners is required. Interreligious dialogue is becoming, in his view, the distinctive spiritual journey of our time: "Through interreligious dialogue, we may be entering a new age of faith".[22] One may say that spirituality in our present pluralistic context is becoming all the more a spirituality of openness to the others, or a spirituality of and in interreligious dialogue.

3.2 For a Theology of Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue, however, should not be seen just as a new fashion or cultural mood. It must be grounded in a deep understanding of one's own faith. Christian

[20] Barnes, *Religions*, p. 116.
[21] Barnes, *Religions*, pp. 89–107.
[22] Cousins, 'The Nature', p. 32.

theology is struggling to come to terms with two basic tenets of its faith: the uniqueness of Christ as the universal Saviour and God's love and presence in all religions. Are these two truths in contradiction so that accepting one of them the other is forfeited? This has been the central issue of the theological paradigms. Now a more comprehensive solution can be looked for in a new understanding of the Trinitarian mystery seen as the source of the theology of dialogue. Our human interreligious dialogue is viewed as an image, a participation of the dialogue going on at the very core of the ultimate mystery of Being, God himself. This mystery is, in Christian terms, not just an undifferentiated or amorphous Oneness, but a deep dialogical interrelation in which unity is expressed in and through the distinction and otherness of persons: the mystery of the Trinity. This same mystery is seen to be the source and the model of all interreligious dialogue and spirituality. Also here unity and diversity among the religious partners must be accepted and conjugated together.

Dupuis expands a Trinitarian theology of dialogue centred on the presence of the Word before and outside the limits of the Incarnation.[23]

Barnes develops a Trinitarian theology of dialogue based on the role of the Holy Spirit as the revealer of God's mystery in human history.[24] It is the same Spirit of God who makes the mystery of Christ present throughout human history. In this way, Barnes intends to go beyond both a self-centred inclusivism and a reductionist pluralism. In dialogue, he says, one does not just look for the 'hidden' Christ in other religions but for: "… the way the Spirit of Christ is active, in all religions, in revealing the mystery of Christ — the mystery of what God is doing in the world".[25] God's presence in creation and human history, religious history included, in all its various manifestations, becomes now the main concern of the theology of religious pluralism and dialogue. In a Christian understanding this can be conjugated with the centrality of Christ's revelation.

In the end, however, one must always be aware that God, even in his self-revelation, remains for ever the known-unknown, the present-transcendent, the never exhausted Mystery: "God remains a mystery, but a mystery which seeks to reveal itself".[26]

And in meeting God's mystery, one must know that: "Paradox and dialectic are at the heart of all human religiosity; we only come to know God by being prepared to struggle with ambiguity and insecurity".[27] Faith is never a conquest, but a gift to be received in wonder.

Besides, Dupuis reminds us that interreligious dialogue should take into consideration the actual conditions of humankind. The great world religions extend through areas of the impoverished and oppressed masses of the South of the world. A true

[23] Dupuis, *Toward*, pp. 235–253.
[24] Barnes, *Religions*, pp. 135–156.
[25] Barnes, *Religions*, p. 143.
[26] Barnes, *Religions*, p. 152.
[27] Barnes, *Religions*, p. 178.

interreligious dialogue cannot overlook such a situation of injustice and exploitation, but must always be conjugated with both a theology and praxis of liberation.[28]

Conclusion

The present research is intended to point to the fact that a new spiritual attitude is required by our present context of religious pluralism. From within all religions, an attitude of openness to the 'other in his/her otherness' must be developed. This can be achieved only on the basis of a new perception of God's presence in all religions and cultures. The other, the different should no longer be perceived as a threat, an opponent, but welcomed as a partner on a common journey of faith. Such a deep spiritual change can only be brought about through a new understanding of one's own faith. In a Christian vision, dialogue should not become just a new fashion of our times, but the expression of a deeper insight of the Trinitarian mystery. This mystery is considered the source and model of a spirituality of and in interreligious dialogue.

Such spirituality must, finally, become involved in the suffering of humankind, in the struggle for justice and liberation on behalf of the oppressed. These are, in my view, some basic traits of a spirituality suitable for our time, a time of religious pluralism and interreligious encounter.

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[28] Dupuis, *Toward,* pp. 18–19, 374–377.

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