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The Urgency of Inter-Religious Dialogue

By Hans Ucko*

“No religion is an island” is a paraphrase of John Donne’s powerful words: “No man is an island”. Many times, I have, heard this paraphrased by the Jewish scholar A.J. Heschel and have often used it. Of course no religion is an island. Islam cannot do away with its links to Christianity and Judaism. There is a bridge between Judaism and Christianity. Buddhism is related to Hinduism and there is an intrinsic link between Jainism and Hinduism. Sikhism is not possible to understand without its context in India.

We witness today many vehement assertions of identity and are constantly exposed to the formation of group identities against a common enemy. A particular politics of identity based on a sense of victimization, reducing identity to a single affiliation, facilitates the creation of "identities that kill", says the French-Lebanese author Amin Maalouf. The resentment towards the West in many parts of the Muslim world, the frustration against the US for its foreign policy in relation to some Arab states and Israel feeds Osama bin Laden and his followers. The perceived humiliation of the Arab nation is an incitement to the creation of an identity, which defines itself as being constantly under attack. The perceived marginalisation of migrants in Europe furthers a self-image and identity, which is but only defined as underdog. The reaction is self-marginalisation and in the end, when there is no longer any hope or future visible, or no light at the end of the tunnel, an explosion of violence.

The problem with identity occurs when it is made into an absolute. Maalouf warns against an understanding of identity, which portrays itself as a sort of fundamental truth, an essence “determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter”. Not to fall into this abyss or pit, we should reject reducing ourselves or being reduced to one identity alone. We are more than our religious affiliations and that is a good thing.

Whenever religious plurality gives rise to communal tensions there is a possibility of religious sentiments being misused. Religion speaks for some of the deepest feelings and sensitivities of individuals and communities; it carries profound historical memories and often appeals to uncritical confessional solidarities. Inter-religious relations and dialogue are meant to help free religion from such misuse, and to present opportunities for religious people to serve together as agents of healing and reconciliation. In a number of countries there are dialogue partners who are able to cooperate, across the religious divide, in concrete efforts of peace making. There are also cases where religious leaders are invited to play a visible role in state-sponsored peace initiatives. It has worked in local contexts but also in some national and regional situations of conflict: I am thinking of Hindus and Muslims working together to heal communalism in Mumbai and in Gujarat. I am thinking of the Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone, which brought an end to conflict in the country. There is potential in dialogue, which we should cultivate.

There are deep disagreements within religions and we know that the dividing lines do not always go between religious communities but often within religious communities. The differences may not be only theological, but relate to social, political, and moral issues. We may for various reasons find ourselves in opposition to some of those with whom we share a common faith. In fact, one experience in dialogue is that one sometimes may feel closer to a person of another faith than to the person next to you in the pew. You may not share the same faith but there is an affinity and relationship that transcends religious boundaries. The saying by Ernst Simon is an experience of many: “The people I can pray with, I can’t talk to, and the people I can talk to, I can’t pray with.”

We come, in many religious communities, across people who seem to be primarily interested in the growth of their own community through various forms of mission and proselytism. They seem to have little interest in dialogue or may make use of it to further their missionary design. Dialogue is their method to get to know the other more in depth, but for a purpose that is not one of dialogue. One wants to learn what is holy in the religious tradition of the other in order to proselytize better. Such situations can be discouraging for people willing to engage in dialogue.

Dialogue need not only be an occasion to come to terms with issues of divergence. Dialogue will wither if we only meet in the context of divisive issues. Dialogue offers also a possibility and space to building alliances on issues of common concern between people of different faiths. It is important to seek such partners and explore ways of rebuilding the credibility of dialogue enabling people to enter a relationship of mutual respect and openness in discussing divisive issues or seeking ways of a common witness.

Inter-religious dialogue needs intra-religious dialogue. It raises also the importance to work intra-religiously with our inter-religious findings, i.e. to inform our community about our findings in and through inter-religious relations in order that we may tell our brothers and sisters about what we have learned from our friends of other faiths: significant is the sensitivities in relation to various religious traditions, etc.

There is also the reality of asymmetry in dialogue. It is not a given that we perceive the same when entering into dialogue and we may not be in the dialogue for the same reasons. One might be in the dialogue because being in dialogue is part of being religious: spirituality and religious commitment is strengthened and intensified. The other may be in dialogue because he wants to address a controversial issue. One wants dialogue for spirituality; the other wants to have the dialogue partner support a need: a Muslim cemetery, the right to kosher or halal slaughter. A Christian will in dialogue with Jews try to find out more about the early church and the first Christians. The Jewish partner wants a Christian support for the politics of the State of Israel.

In dialogue we nurture relations. Building bonds of relationship with those considered "the other" is the goal of all dialogues. Such bonds however are not built easily or quickly. Therefore patience and perseverance are crucial in the practice of dialogue. In dialogue we grow in faith. Dialogue typically drives all communities to self-criticism and to re-thinking the ways in which they have interpreted their faith traditions. Dialogue brings about change in the experience of faith, helping people to deepen and grow in their faith in unexpected ways.

Some would, due to their experience in dialogue, confess that in the relationship with the other, one's faith in God has grown and changed. They have over and over again met with God, and they have learned that God is more, that God is "Allah-u-aqbar" or as Jacob said it, "God, you are here and I didn't know it". They have come to understand that God truly has many mansions. They have come to appreciate that one cannot exhaust God, that God is always "Deus semper maior"; one cannot grasp God, understand God, hold God. "God is unknowable and incomprehensible. The only thing knowable and comprehensible about God is his unknowability and his incomprehensibility", said St John of Damascus.

Participation in multi-religious prayer has become increasingly common as a consequence of involvement in inter-religious dialogue. Concrete situations of everyday life provide opportunities for encounter with people of different religions: inter-religious marriages, personal friendship, praying together for a common purpose, for peace or in a particular crisis situation. But the occasion can also be a national holiday, a religious festival, a school assembly, and other gatherings in the context of inter-religious relations and dialogue. There are various forms of prayer among people of different religions. For some, praying together could be a spiritually enriching occasion, for others it is anathema.

Prayer together is an invitation to friendship. It is an invitation to enter into the mystery of the Ultimate, which is beyond human intellectual grasp and understanding. It is a sign of the unity of humanity. We recognize the reality of religious diversity, which for us constitutes a theological mystery. Inter-religious prayer may be viewed as a relational bridge: between peoples, between faith communities, between religions. Inter-religious prayer may lead us to acknowledge the sacred that is present in the religious experience of the other.

The issue of inter-religious prayer is a fitting end to our walking through potentialities and pitfalls in inter-religious dialogue. The way out is not easily seen. We need each other to remember what sensitivity in relation to prayer, worship and spiritual discipline means. It is however in our deepest relations to God that our embrace of dialogue is to be rooted, in our religious tradition, in our spiritual longing and in our awe that God is making everything new.

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