

East and West meet — in Church

Interfaith dialogues are increasingly involving Christians in discussions with adherents of faiths outside the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In most cases, however, Christian encounters with adherents of such faiths as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism follow the same ground rules as those for Christian-Jewish dialogues: efforts toward mutual understanding and appreciation of one another's beliefs and traditions, and an avoidance of efforts at proselytization.

Although non-Jewish religions do not have the close historic ties to Christianity that Judaism has, Christian scholars have pointed out that there are some similarities, such as emphases on prayer and spirituality. While focusing on areas of commonality, however, Church leaders have also warned against steps that may lead to syncretism.

Dr. Stanley Samartha of the World Council of Churches, an Indian specialist on Christian relations with Hindus, has suggested several guidelines for interfaith dialogues. They include commitment to one's own faith and openness to the insights of others, and awareness that the objective of such dialogue is not a superficial consensus, but the enrichment of all in the discovery of new dimensions of truth.

Anglican Bishop David Brown of Guildford, an authority on Islam, has said that "understanding other faiths in relation to the purposes of God involves a willingness to believe that many of those who practice other faiths have a living relationship with God and know the power of His grace in their lives. It means also to affirm that the God whom they worship is He whom Christians know as the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, even though their understanding of His relationship with the created universe differs from that of Christians."

A theological basis for Roman Catholic dialogues with non-Christian faiths was set forth by the Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. It stated,

among other things, that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."

In some cases, interfaith dialogues have led Christians to reconsider their traditional stance that the Christian faith is superior to all others. This new attitude has been advocated by Dr. Carl-Friedrich von Weizsacker of Hamburg, a noted philosopher.

At a four-day seminar held early this year in connection with the 70th anniversary of the birth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dr. Weizsacker said that most Christian theologians have traditionally "taken the mistaken view that in contrast to Christianity, other religions are essentially only religion." He criticized this approach as "a defensive wall which, like all defensive walls, has made important elements in Christ's teaching unintelligible."

A major gesture towards Christian-Moslem reconciliation came at the conclusion of an Islamic-Christian conference held in Tripoli this year under the joint sponsorship of the Libyan government and the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians.

Although that conference stirred controversy because of two anti-Israel statements, which were repudiated by the Vatican, in a document issued at its conclusion, the gathering was also highlighted by a dramatic episode in which two Moslem leaders spontaneously embraced a Roman Catholic priest.

The incident occurred when French Father Jacques Lanfri, a White Fathers missionary from Tunisia, asked for "forgiveness" of his "Moslem brothers" for the "misunderstandings, injustices, and erroneous criticisms" on the part of Christians towards the Prophet Mohammed and his followers.

Similarities between Christianity and Islam include their emphasis on monotheism and their respect for Abraham as a prophet and patriarch. With regard to Hinduism, some scholars have noted that the Hindu Shiva Siddhanta movement, like Christianity, has doctrines of grace, vicarious suffering, and interior union with God.

But efforts to blend emphases of Christianity and Hinduism have sometimes led to problems. The Catholic Association of Bengal, India, has expressed "grave misgivings" over efforts to introduce Hindu gestures and symbols into the Roman Catholic Mass.

Indian Catholics who supported the Association's stand said that such changes do not attract Hindus, but repel Catholics and constitute a "move against national integration" which would be disapproved by the Indian government.

The Vatican has taken several steps in recent years to improve its religious relations with Buddhism. Pope Paul has met with the Buddhist patriarch of Laos, the exiled Tibetan Dalai Lama and the leader of the Kagyu-pa order of Tibetan Buddhism and called for closer relations between Buddhists and Roman Catholics.

When the pontiff met with a visiting delegation of Buddhists in 1972, he expressed the hope that "there will be increasingly friendly dialogue and close collaboration between the traditions that you represent and the Catholic Church." Vatican sources said at the time that the Pope's remarks were "probably the warmest reaching out of a hand in greeting and collaboration that the Pope has ever done to members of another faith."

While continuing to hold to the distinctives of Christianity, Church leaders are promoting more and deeper contacts with followers of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. And dialogue participants on both sides are increasingly emphasizing, like Dr. Weizsacker, the German philosopher, that such relations "are not a matter of loving our enemies but of understanding our brothers and sisters."



CYO Dinner

Mgr. George Cocuzzi, vicar of Urban Ministry, right, leads the opening prayer at the first CYO Inner-City Outreach Program dinner held last week. With him is Duah-Agyeman, an Outreach worker. The dinner featured an address by the guest of honor and principal speaker, Councilman Ronald Good.

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