

Theosophical Association Aarhus in Dialogue

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1. RELEVANCY OF DIALOGUE

It is the vision and the decision of Theosophical Association Aarhus (TAA) to be a partner in dialogue with human beings of different faiths and philosophies with the purpose of building bridges for greater understanding. TAA wants to carry out this dialogue in many different ways inside as well as outside holistic circles in order that the spiritual climate may grow and ripen towards greater capaciousness of mind and an extending ability of co-operation and inspiration across borders. In the following information will be given of the nature and the possibilities of dialogue as well as a series of useful advice as help and inspiration to anyone interested.

The World Needs Dialogue

We are living at a time when it is more important than ever to build bridges and to establish brotherly communication. Any process of peace is opened up by dialogue. Dialogue is able to heal separating chasms and dialogue may lead to mutual inspiration, creativity and co-operation across any imaginable borders. In the religious field, the numerous wars and indescribable sufferings of the past were caused by irreconcilable dogmas and total lack of understanding. Therefore, to-day spiritual dialogue between religions, organizations, groups, and individuals is more important than ever before. The world is suffering from a widespread absence of true conversation and willingness to understanding. And yet, several new initiatives concerning solution of conflicts and peace work are indicating the progress of a new mentality. Prejudice, extremism and separatism can only be decreased through direct contact and personal experience of "the other part". Then "the strange" will seem no longer only threatening but instead become a sound expression of the diversity characterizing all that exists. Falsity must be replaced by a clear perspective. Rumours, gossips and their sequela: prejudice and polarization - must be replaced by an access to life which is of a wider spectrum. For this dialogue is necessary and TAA has devoted itself to this work.

What Is Dialogue?

Dialogue is a meeting between human beings. It is conversation and being together in a way where the participants are listening to each other, are exchanging points of view and experiences, are learning from each other, and are developing confidence. In order that conversation may be possible, mutual respect and a willingness to listen and to learn are required. You must be willing to try to see the other person as a potential friend, or at least as a fellow human being with the same rights as yourself. Recognition of equality - which is the condition of dialogue - involves willingness to see

the good in the other person and to allow for oneself to be influenced. Out of this, human appreciation may grow and so the possibility of perceiving the unique qualities of the other person. Dialogue requires dissimilarities and the purpose is not to obtain agreement in everything. On the contrary, the purpose of dialogue is to attain greater mutual understanding. If there is a true mutual interest and a sincere wish to explore and to learn, dialogue may lead to surprising discoveries.

Interreligious Dialogue with Whom and about What?

The interreligious or spiritual dialogue is relevant between any kind of human beings having a certain belief or religious conviction as well as it is relevant between human beings who do not consider themselves as religious but having a humanistic attitude. On a large scale, dialogue is important between the world religions. In the Western World dialogue is important between Christianity and the alternative forms of spirituality (New Age, Holism, New Spirituality) such as dialogue with Islam has become important. In the same way as the oecumenical work of dialogue within Christianity has brought about greater understanding between the various Christian churches and movements, increased dialogue between the alternative organizations and groups may also bring about greater understanding in that field. So, dialogue is simply needed across all borders in the field of spirituality or religiousness.

2. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Conditions and Directions

Spiritual dialogue is a special Art based on certain conditions and requiring certain abilities from the makers which must be developed through practice and the experiences obtained by exercising this practice. True dialogue is not possible in a too firm framework which is set up in advance and does not allow for spontaneity and improvisation. On the other hand, it is important that the dialogue meeting has a well defined topic which is clear to all participants. Dialogue is not possible in environments with hidden agendas like e.g. one party wanting - whether unconsciously or not - to persuade the other party to assume his point of view or e.g. if someone is not putting his cards on the table. Prejudices and attitudes assumed in advance may also make the situation diffuse and so be a hindrance to true dialogue if they are too prevalent. Besides, a profound personal uncertainty may be a hindrance because it produces a - conscious or unconscious - position of defence. A reluctance to deal with special subjects may also make dialogue difficult as it will always be attempted to avoid the taboos. One of the most serious hindrances of true dialogue is demonizing another person where the person in question is made representative of "the wrong" or "the evil". In that way the other person is made an object and is no longer seen as a human being.

Building bridges requires maturity on both sides if they are to succeed in the project. As long as the relevant groups are busy confirming their own identities, they are in reality assuming a position of defence. For two parties to be able to listen to and to learn from each other, each of them must be in possession of a reasonable feeling of his own worth and they must both have some experience if their meeting is to be a success. These conditions of success are quite elementary. And yet, because they are not fulfilled, they are also the reason why many attempts do not end up in success.

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If the meeting parties are mature and deeply rooted in their own spirituality, they do not find “the unknown” threatening. In fact, you can only show true openness if you are deeply rooted in your own values. If you are not, you lack a point of orientation and will become frustrated. In a certain way, opening up a dialogue is a risky project. You must confide in the process and you must be willing to feel your own vulnerability and uncertainty. The purpose of dialogue is not to come to an agreement on everything but to attain greater mutual understanding. When a dialogue meeting is true, no one leaves it without having been influenced and changed. All parties will be coloured and enriched in the course of a true dialogue meeting.

A giving meeting must be based on mutual respect and equality and on the wish to get to know each other, not only as adherents to a certain religion, tradition, or doctrine but as growing human beings. It is a great help if the participants consider each other to be pilgrims who meet and share experiences on the way. Pilgrims are travellers who are on their way to the sanctuary. You may look at man as consisting of a “Forecourt” (the Exterior Self), a “Sacred Room” (the Interior Self, the Soul, the Essence), and the Holy of the Holy Rooms (the Spirit). The pilgrimage is a movement from the Forecourt towards the Sacred and the Holy of the Holy Rooms and in this innermost Room of Sanctuary God reveals himself.

In order to obtain a sound and promising dialogue it may be expedient to lay down some helping rules. If the above-mentioned has been taken into consideration and if the parties involved are serious and truly interested, the following may serve as guiding rules:

1) Clearness of Purpose

Be careful to make it clear in common, what is the purpose of the meeting. Are there special wishes or goals? Must the scope be well-defined or is the case to be dealt with more openly? Are there certain conditions or special expectations? Clearness on this point is important.

2) Appreciation of the Other Party

It is wise to remember that in your dialogue partner you meet first and foremost a human being - a fellow human being - and not only a representative of a system, a faith, or a community. In this state of being prepared to meet a unique individual, possibility is created for the parties to open up their eyes to surprising nuances and new ways of understanding. The dialogue partner is a living human being, not an object. See this living human being so that a true meeting can take place.

3) Respect for Other Values

Show respect for the values of the dialogue partner and for the things which are sacred to him. Even if it may seem strange to you or even impossible for you to relate to. Often hidden congeniality may turn up between things which at first sight seem to be incompatible. And it may occur that discovery of the “strange” gives quite new understanding of the “well-known”.

4) Faithfulness to Your Own Values

At the same time, be conscious of your own values and be faithful to them. This is done by not putting your own values in parenthesis. The other party's respect for yours can only be evoked if you radiate the importance which they have to yourself. You must stand by what is sacred to you and you must let the other party do the same.

5) Free Self-Description

Dialogue partners must have complete freedom to describe who and what they are by themselves. Description by others are seldom doing justice to the party described. When your attitude, your qualifications etc. are described by yourself, perspective becomes as clear as possible and so the best starting position is given. At the beginning it is often difficult to avoid "labels" but to this end a description of oneself can be of great help.

6) The Art of Listening

If you are formulating your own answer while your dialogue partner is describing something, you do not have ideal possibility to hear what the other party is saying. The art of listening requires great attention and capaciousness of mind. When you are really listening, you are extremely open and sensitive. This is the point where a new understanding may shine through and at the same time the other party may experience what it is like to be taken seriously.

7) Sincere Openness

In the course of dialogue it is important that neither serious aspects are retained nor the parties are hesitating to ask questions to unclear points openly. A straightforward attitude ensures not only transparency but also the possibility to ask critical questions. To be open and honest requires courage but only this courage makes it possible to demonstrate mutual respect in the case of dissimilarity and the will to grant all parties the freedom of saying yes or no, to go on or to back out.

8) From Form to Contents

Words, names, and terminologies are outer forms covering inner realities. The inner meaning might be hidden behind several outer layers and not least by prejudices and completely irrelevant associations. In dialogue it is vital to take the necessary time to investigate what is contained in the form and how varied the inner realities often are. Not rarely, very different dictions may point towards the same or a closely related core.

9) Patience and Confidence

Dialogue takes time. It is a living process which is gradually unfolding new layers and new aspects. There may be crises to be overcome or thresholds to be surpassed. Or there may be openings to ever greater depths. Dialogue is human relations which might bring about friendships and lasting contacts. Therefore, it is important to have patience and to contribute to inspiring confidence in order that new ways and new possibilities may be found and prosper.

Different Forms of Dialogue

Experienced dialogue participants distinguish between different variations or types of dialogue, which may be advantageous. Four basic types are pointed out but it must be remembered that a dialogue meeting is often of a mixed form.

1) Everyday Dialogue (Dialogue of Life)

This form of dialogue is the meeting of human beings of different faith and philosophy as it is taking place in everyday life. It is sharing the joys and sorrows of daily life with, living in neighbourhood of, or receiving in one's family, members of another faith and so perhaps be a witness of or take part in other festivals than one's own. Or it might be a meeting with other cultures at work or during spare time. In this process it is possible to meet and to get closer knowledge of different perceptions of life and in this connection dialogue may take place.

2) Co-Operative Dialogue (Dialogue of Action)

Co-Operation dialogue is the form of dialogue taking place where people of different faiths are joining in concrete common efforts to promote development, peace, justice or improvement of social conditions. It may be the creation of common projects or tasks which are to be carried out in the near environment. Here too, dialogue may be developed as part of the practical work.

3) Comprehension Dialogue (Intellectual or Academic Dialogue)

This is the form of dialogue which is based on study and understanding and where the doctrine, the theology, or the structure of values which form the person's philosophy of life are explored in common. In this form, dialogue is about exploration of terminologies, symbols, dogmas, and the fundamental ideas and their many ramifications.

4) Spiritual Dialogue (Interreligious Dialogue About Inner Experiences)

Finally, there is a more direct form of spiritual, interreligious dialogue where personal, existential experiences and values are in focus. It may be experiences of conversion, mutual connection, unity, and other states of consciousness or it may be the importance of faith in everyday life and experiences about prayer, meditation, and rituals.

Possible Goals

To where can dialogue take us? In what can dialogue result? And quite concretely, what actions can be taken? First of all, dialogue is a goal in itself because it brings about greater understanding and replaces ignorance by insight. Besides, dialogue may lead to friendships and establish networks where people are beginning to draw upon the competences and the know-how of each other. Quite

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concretely this may lead to voyages and visits, invitations to co-operation concerning important issues (e.g. questions of ethics, milieu, peace, social conditions, and human rights) or it may result in conferences with dialogue, group work, and common efforts in order to eliminate ignorance in the respective home areas. This again may lead to books, articles, feature articles, and debate in the near environment and on a larger level. The effect of dialogue may find expression in common meditation and common prayer or - as suggested and practiced by Dalai Lama - in common pilgrimages. In fact, only phantasy and courage to make experiments are fixing a limit to the practical consequences of dialogue. After all, it is a question of furthering, through good will, right human relations, creativeness, mutual responsibility, and the work for a peaceful world in which exist unity as well as multiplicity, connections as well as differences, individuality as well as community.

Quotations From the Bible and Statemens From Other Religions

At a time a Quaker is said to have declared: "God did not put all fruits on one branch." In other words God's abundance is not only given to Christians but may be seen everywhere in the multiplicity of the world. This abundance finds expression through spiritual inspiration in the various cultures and religions. As religion Christianity has previously attached great importance to the fact that on the whole the wisdom and the love of God has found expression in the Christian culture. To-day this picture is changing and now the Bible is often used by Christians to support the work of dialogue and interreligious contacts. As Christianity is often regarded as exclusive and uncompromising, it is the special intention by the following to quote from the bible statements which support dialogue and the acceptance of different believers.

At several places in the Bible, the text may be read as a clear expression of God having revealed his might and inspiration to others than the Christians. In The Old Testament it says: "For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts." (Malachi 1,11). This understanding is supported by Peter in the Acts of the Apostles where he says: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." (Acts 10,34). In this connecton the contact to God does not seem to depend on a special creed but on being righteous and humble. Jesus himself says to the woman of Samaia: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (St. John 4,24) Here it seems to be central to worship in spirit and truth and not whether you profess a certain religion or not. This is confirmed so as to leave no room for doubt in the gospel according to St. John where Jesus is speaking of the many groups of people in the world: "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold: Them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." (St. John 10,16) The other sheep are not of this fold which means that lawfully they are where they should be. Jesus also speaks of a Roman officer who has not professed Christian: "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." (St. Matthew 8,10).

In his conversation with Nichodemus Jesus speaks the famous words "The wind bloweth where

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it listeth....” (St. John 3,8)”so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” In other words, the inner inspiration or help cannot be fixed or classified. The spirit of God is acting in surprising ways, and there, too, where it might seem impossible. After all, being a disciple of Christ might not be a question of conversion to a special faith but of practicing love: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (St. John 13,35) If, according to the Master, you work for true peace and good human relations, you are in the best hands. “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” (St. Matthew 5,9). And after all, everything leads in the direction of unity in variety “...that God may be all in all.” (1 Corinthians 15,28).

In other religions you find corresponding statements which clearly and without doubt show the great importance of dialogue and peaceful co-existence. On the Muslim Fethullah Gülen’s internet page (see: www.fethullahgulen.org) he tells about the absolute necessity of dialogue:

“The goal of dialogue among world religions is not simply to destroy scientific materialism and the materialistic world view that have caused such harm; rather, the very nature of religion demands this dialogue. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even Hinduism and other world religions, accept the same source for themselves, and, including Buddhism, pursue the same goal. As a Muslim, I accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. A Muslim is a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and all other Prophets, upon them be peace. Not believing in one Prophet or Book means that one is not a Muslim. Thus we acknowledge the oneness and basic unity of religion, which is a symphony of God’s blessings and mercy, and the universality of belief in religion. So, religion is a system of belief that embraces all races and all beliefs, a road that brings everyone together in brotherhood.”

- Fethullah Gülen (the Muslim).

In its essence Jainism also holds deep tolerance and acceptance of the many different forms of faith: “Mutual understanding and tolerance heighten the joy of social and ethical life to pave the way for fellow-feeling and brotherhood. With that end in view, Jain thinkers propounded....the doctrine of many points-of-view to infuse the spirit of tolerance and breadth of vision, enlightened by generous outlook on other religions and their principles....” (from J.K. Tukol in Religion in the Struggle for World Community, Proceedings of WCRP III, ed., Homer A. Jack, New York, 1980, p. 234, printed in the book “My Neighbours Faith - and mine” by the World Council of Churches.) Correspondingly, Hinduism has a clear and obliging view of dialogue being a natural necessity in this era of globalization: “Traditional theology, developed in religious isolation, has now become inadequate, if not obsolete; it does not permit the different religious traditions to live side by side in friendly co-operation. Religious conflict has become tragic and pointless; no single religious tradition can expect to displace all the other religions. As far as we can see, human community will continue to be religiously pluralistic. Each religion should come to terms with this fact, and attempt to do justice to the religious experience of mankind as a whole. By a deep and a thorough investigation of its respective heritage, each tradition should open up a new spiritual horizon hospitable to the faiths of other people. The future usefulness of any religious tradition depends on its ability to cooperate with other traditions.” - K. L. Seshagiri Rao (the Hinduist).

Dalai Lama has always acted as a warm spokesman for interreligious dialogue and as the ambassador of Buddhism he is a living and powerful example of how this is put into practice. In his latest works Dalai Lama has strongly emphasized the importance of dialogue especially through his work for global ethics of the 21st century. In his book “Transforming the Mind”, published 2000, he writes : “Therefore, it is necessary to use more energy in making sure that all big world religions are using human potential for the best of humanity - to serve humanity and to save the planet - while we make simultaneous attempts to solve the conflicts which are causing struggles in the name of religion.” (page 159). Dalai Lama emphasizes especially 3 fields where much work can be done: 1) To arrange meetings between scholars from the various traditions in order to discuss differences and likenesses, 2) To arrange meetings between serious exercisers of the various religions where they may exchange spiritual experiences, and finally 3) To undertake multireligious pilgrimages which means that a group of people from different religious traditions are visiting together the holy places of the different religious movements and if possible are praying together or are sitting still in meditation.”(Translated from the Danish edition).

3. OECUMENICAL PARTNERS

Development of the Work of Dialogue

As already mentioned, in this context special focus is set on Christianity as its cultural and historical importance has been quite dominant in the Western World. In the following a historical outline will be given of the development of oecumenical work and of the work of dialogue within Christian churches. Christianity is the most widespread religion in the world having nearly 2 milliard (billion) adherents. As next follows Islam with 1,2 milliard, Hinduism with app. 770 million and Buddhism with app. 360 million adherents. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Christian churches were in a situation of serious internal disunion. At a synod in Edinburgh 1910 the beginning was made of what has later become known as the oecumenical movement.

The original meaning of the word “oecumenical (Greek = “oikumenikos”) is “concerning the inhabited world”, i.e. universal. The word stands for the joint ecclesiastical co-operation all over the world. During the twentieth century, Christian churches have been working oecumenically, i.e. the churches have made efforts to heal the wounds which have so dramatically disunited the Christian societies. Catholics and Orthodoxes, Protestants and Anglicans, and all the many other major or minor groupings have obtained important results and the big ecclesiastical joint organizations to-day bear witness to a work of reconciliation of great extent. This work has been done especially in the fields of emergency, development, and catastrophe aid, aid for education, and in the work for peace and human rights. But also in the very field of theology increasing approaches have been made over the decades.

However, concurrently with the development of the internal work of reconciliation, the question gradually arose how Christianity was to relate to other world religions. At the end of the Second World War it was more evident than ever that a world at peace is an absolute necessary aim to everybody and ecclesiastical joint organizations were built. The Lutheran World Confederation was established 1947, The World Council of Churches was founded 1948 and The Conference of Euro-

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pean Churches saw the light of day 1950. This vision of peace requires not only that the various religions are “tolerating” each other but also that at a deeper level there is mutual acceptance and respect for the cultural and spiritual values of the religions. How was Christianity to cope with this situation with a commandment of mission demanding to make all Non-Christians into Christians? And how stay a Christian when accepting, or even appreciating Non-Christian religions? Indeed, a big mouthful to a religion which to an exceptional degree has been colonizing the world and “converted” heathens to “the right belief” - by voluntary as well as by involuntary means. Now the questions are asked more and more often: Does God only listen to prayers from the Christians? And has God only revealed himself within the Jewish-Christian history and culture?

Realization of the importance of dialogue influenced the World Council of Churches at the beginning of the 1960`s and the need to extend the oecumenical work of reconciliation to include other religions broke through in the 1970`s. However, already 1965 important changes took place through the Second Vatican Council where Pope Paul VI brought dialogue into focus and stood behind declarations which in the recognition of other faiths went much further than had been the case before in the history of the Church. In *Dignitatis Humanae*, the declaration about religious liberty from 7th December 1965, the Catholic Church ratified that every human being has religious freedom and that this freedom has its source in human dignity. Two months earlier, *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration concerning the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Non-Christian religions was finished. In this declaration the Vatican went so far as to acknowledge that the Church should consider with “sincere respect” the manners and customs, precepts and doctrines of other religions which “reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people.” The declaration impelled the believers of the Church to “dialogue and co-operation with the adherents of other religions” and to recognize all the good moral and spiritual aspects which are found among these people. Indeed, these were new tones and it contributed in a high degree to the acceleration of the new break of the frost within the Christian Churches.

“The Church therefore, exhorts her sons that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men....These religions....often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”

(Pope Paul VI, The Second Vatican Council, 28th Oct. 1965, “*Nostra Aetate*”, Part 2.)

The World Council of Churches was founded 1948 and to-day it has its head office in Geneva. This organization represents 337 religious communities in 120 countries and since the end of the 1970`s the council has increasingly been engaged in interreligious dialogue, especially with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jews. 1971 the World Council founded a special unit with the purpose of furthering dialogue with people of different faiths. The World Council Unit for interreligious relations has long ago placed dialogue in the centre and has by now several experiences of fruitful dialogue across religious borders. The attitude is true obligingness and in the “*Directions for Dialogue*” from 1977 the organization stresses the importance of qualities like humility, joy, openness, and vulnerability in the true dialogue with people of different faiths. It is realized that for the church dia-

logue means a painful search for its own heart but that it is also an opportunity to renew the understanding of other religions and of the Christian faith itself. Previously dialogue was met with much resistance and hesitation but to the World Council of Churches it is evident that there is no way back. Dialogue is the only way influencing both parties. The World Council has published an excellent study book: "My Neighbour's Faith - and mine" which demonstrates true respect towards other religions and besides, the ability to ask questions regarding "holy cows" in the Christian tradition. The World Council emphasizes the fact that more than ever it is necessary to develop a "theology of religions."

"While Christianity has a highly developed theology of the unicity and salvific universality of Christ and the Church, it has, so far, an underdeveloped theology of religions... What ultimately matters is that we shall all be united with God. Then, all religions, including the Catholic Church will be superseded. As the Indian saying goes, once the river of life is crossed and the eternal shore reached, the kind of boat that brought you there is no longer of any use."

(Alfred Agius, Westminster Interfaith London.)

Recent Ecclesiastical Declarations

During the latest decade, new declarations and documents have appeared which show the way forward. In the following three central declarations will be illustrated which in different ways show the present situation. These declarations are from the Catholic Church, from the World Council of Churches, and from the Conference for European Churches and they show the direction in which the Christian vanguard is moving.

1) The Declaration Dominus Jesus - Catholic Hesitation

Let us begin with an example of how difficult it can be for a big church to take an important step. In the year 2000 the Catholic Church published an open declaration "Dominus Jesus". According to many persons involved in the work of dialogue this declaration has caused great difficulty because it almost seems to be a step backwards in comparison with the bold statements of the Second Vatican Council 1965. It is obvious in a way that leaves no room for doubt that by this document efforts have been made to consolidate the exceptional position of The Catholic Church. However, at the same time it does not eliminate the fact that the document is also a concession to other religions and spiritual traditions. The document acknowledges salvation to be possible for everybody through the work of the Holy Spirit in all human beings and that other religious traditions than the Christian traditions "contain and offer religious elements coming from God". In other words, other religions are possible ways to God although they are not enjoying the same status as Christianity as being equally possible ways to God.

Therefore, because of the many passages defending the special position of the Catholic Church, the document may be taken as a step backwards but, on the other hand, article 22 quoted above shows the hard ambivalence of the church when it is also saying: "when it is true that the adherents

of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also sure, objectively speaking, that they are in a defective situation in comparison with the ones who have the full means of salvation.” A reluctant but also necessary obligingness is clearly perceived showing that there seems to be no way back any more. Perhaps more than ever, The Catholic Church feels that future will bring big changes, also to the church itself. Many Catholics are deeply involved in constructive work of dialogue and the Society of Jesus, a Catholic order, is showing great respect for other believers. Therefore, it might be more relevant to look at Dominus Jesus as an effort of self-consolidation rather than a serious step backwards as the process of dialogue is continuing.

2) Charta Oecumenica - An Open Invitation

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) is a regional, oecumenical organization uniting 123 different religious movements and 25 connected organizations, also with close relations to the Roman Catholic Church. Together with the Conference of European Bishops (CEB), CEC has worked out an extremely obliging charter, “Charta Oecumenica” which after Easter 2001 will be presented to the public in its finished wording. The purpose of the charter is quite obviously to further the efforts of establishing relations to other religions. In its present outlined form which was made July 1999 in Geneva, the Charter says: “We support the many different forms of Christian-Jewish cooperation. We meet Muslims and adherents of other religions in a spirit of respect and appreciation and we make efforts towards mutual understanding..... We oblige ourselves: to recognize and protect the freedom of humanity in conscience and religion; To recognize every person`s right to seek the truth and to make testimony of this truth in accordance with his or her own conscience; To open up, maintain and support contacts and conversations and to share with societies which have different religious conceptions and pictures of the world.” Charta Oecumenica gives sincere hope for the future and shows the way forward.

3) The Baar Statement - A Bold Step

The most extensive and obliging document in recent time probably is “The Baar Statement” made by The World Council of Churches about 1990 in Baar near Zurich in Switzerland and which can be found on the home page of the council. It is clear that this oecumenical statement is made by experienced people who have had time to subject other spiritual traditions to a deep study. The document establishes the fact that Christians cannot fix limits to salvation by God. This unique statement is so obliging and far-reaching that it must be quoted in a longer passage:

“We see the multiplicity of religions both as a result of the many ways in which God has connected himself with human beings and with nations, and as a manifestation of the richness and variety of mankind. We affirm that God was present in their search and that where there is truth and wisdom in their doctrines, and love and holiness in their lives, this is - like any wisdom, insight, knowledge, understanding, love, and holiness among us - the gift of the Holy Spirit. We also affirm that God is with them in their struggles together with us for justice and liberation. The conviction of God as the creator of all things being present and active in the multiplicity of religions makes it incomprehensible to us that the salvating power of God would be limited to exclusively one continent, one type of culture, or one group of people....Furthermore, we affirm that it is in the field of the spirit that

we must be able to interpret the truth and the goodness of other religions.....Our recognition of the mystery of salvation in men and women from other religious traditions forms the concrete attitude which we Christians must have as we approach them in interreligious dialogue. We must respect their religious convictions as different as they may be from our own and we must admire the things which God has accomplished and continues to accomplish in them. So, interreligious dialogue is a “road with two tracks” Christians must enter this road in a spirit of openness, prepared to receive from others as well as to bear witness to their own faith. Authentic dialogue opens both parties to a deeper conversion to the God speaking through both of them.”

Dialogue With New Age

Statements like the ones mentioned above give rise to deep recognition of the Christians who are to-day building the vanguard in this religious break of the frost. However, at the same time you may be left with the question how is the position of Christianity towards all the holistic and alternative forms of spirituality coming up outside the world religions and which often strongly wishes to be spared been called religions, religious movements, or religious communities. The New Age milieu with all its ramifications is in its entirety the new religiousness of the people. It is a mingled quantity, difficult to define and without headquarters, leadership, and common directives. However, there are certain leading front groups like in Scandinavia Martinus’ Cosmology, Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy, and the Theosophy. The Christian contact to these widely ramified milieus is of decisive importance in the time to come, as is the dialogue with the increasing number of Muslims. However, this is no easy task as the prejudices and the ignorance is big. On one hand, several people in the new age milieu know nothing about the Christian work of dialogue and on the other hand, too many Christians are still full of prejudices and ignorance towards the new forms of spirituality. The work of building bridges is needed as never before.

Denmark is in a favourable situation as several distinct Christian groups are now deeply engaged in dialogue with the new age milieu. This is true not least of theosophy and its related movements. A prominent place is taken up by IKON (Information and Dialogue Forum for Christianity and New Spirituality) which has many bridge-building activities. Together with the magazine *Nyt Aspekt*, IKON has established Dialog Forum where holistic teachers are meeting active Christians in order to explore each other’s philosophies and pictures of the world. Dialog Forum is the token of a new break-through in the transspiritual dialogue in Denmark. New friendships have been made and various initiatives are planned to further future mutual understanding. The work is now carried further on in Dialogue Forum West and East in different parts of Denmark.

In Denmark “Areopagos” and “I Mesterens Lys” (In the Light of the Master) are also playing central roles in the work of building bridges to the alternative milieu and the new age spirituality. In Norway you find, among other things, the Christian initiative “Emmaus” which have made good experiences in the interreligious dialogue, with Muslims as well as with the new age milieus. In Sweden “Brommadiologen” must be pointed out as a Christian initiative which has established really good relations to the new age milieu and which has set focus on the positive aspects of the therapies and the bodily dimensions of the alternative spirituality. In the autumn 2000 the first European dialogue conference was held at Ry in Central Jutland where Christian participants from Denmark,

Sweden, Norway, Germany and England met and worked with the possibilities of developing an interreligious dialogue for the first time. This initiative was new of its kind and it was the obliging dialogue - not the confrontation or conflict seeking dialogue - which was the gathering subject. Out of initiatives like the ones mentioned, networks are built and friendships are made which result in many new things.

To Where Is Dialogue Taking Us?

Oecumenical means “that which concerns the inhabited world”. Therefore, the deepest and the logical consequence of the oecumenical work is that Christianity must heal the wounds not only in the Christian religious movements which disagree with each other but also the wounds of the other forms of spirituality on our planet. This is a gigantic task but as appears from this text, the work is in full swing. The biggest challenge, however, is not only that most of the leading Christians become conscious of the state of things and take the consequences of it, but also that this new attitude of dialogue is spread to the many Christians in all parts of the society. The rate of propagation in such processes is always slow and so a period of decades must be allowed for until important results will become noticeable. Equally important is, however, that the practice of dialogue is effected in the alternative milieus where there is often serious dissociation from the Christian Churches and from the old Christianity deriving from the previous century which many believe to be the only one existing.

A clear picture is appearing these years of the world religions eventually having begun to meet in mutual respect. Back in 1893 the first “Paliament of the World Religions” was carried through in Chicago (See the article elsewhere on this home page) . A hundred years later, in 1993, the experiment was repeated, succesfully, which resulted in a further assembly already 1999 in Cape Town in South Africa. The representatives of the world religions have started the formulation of new global ethics which will be developed and become visible during the coming years. In the Christian milieus there are several initiatives of dialogue all over he world. At certain places Buddhistic and Christian monks are comparing experiences in visiting each other`s monasteries over longer periods of time. At other places e.g. Muslims, Hindus and Christians get together in concrete relief projects or in co-operation and common studies. In groups with holistic outlook bridge-building dialogue initiatives are taken in the same way. Theosophical Association Aarhus belongs to this growing family.

It is an elevating and inspiring finding that the good wills are laying the foundation of right human relations between the religions and the spiritual traditions of the world, which will contribute to forming the new religious values and new appearing spirituality in the Aquarian Age. Slowly the contours of a new universal spirituality are appearing and parallel to the existing religions, a global spirituality is prepared which has also been called the new world religion.

Links

Articles

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Below are following examples of groups in the world which are working with interreligious dialogue and which have special experiences of great value in various fields:

American Interfaith Institute: www.interfaith-scholars.org

Areopagos & I Mesterens Lys: www.areopagos.org

Association of Interfaith Ministers: www.interfaithclergy.org

Bahá'í: www.bahai.org

Beliefnet: www.beliefnet.com

Brommadiologen: www.brommadiologen.nu

Center for Multireligiøse Studier: www.teo.au.dk/cms

Con-spiration: <http://www.con-spiration.de>

Folkekirke og Religionsmøde: www.religionsmoede.dk

Global Dialogue Institute: www.global-dialogue.com

Global Ethic Foundation: www.uni-tuebingen.de/stiftung-weltethos

IKON-Danmark: www.ikon-danmark.dk

Interfaith Alliance Indianapolis: www.interfaithindy.org

Interfaith Voices: www.origin.org

International Association for Religious Freedom: www.iarf.net

International Committee for the Peace Council: www.peacecouncil.org

International Interfaith Centre: www.interfaith-centre.org

Islamisk Kristent Studiecenter: www.ikstudiecenter.dk

Multifaith Net: www.multifaithnet.org

Museum of World Religions: www.mwr.org.tw

North American Interfaith Network: www.nain.org

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World Parliament of Religions: www.cpwr.org

Religions in Renewal: www.usao.edu/%7Efacshaferi/relren/relren4.htm

Religious Diversity Faire: www.religiousdiversityfaire.org

Religious Tolerance: www.religioustolerance.org

The Interfaith Alliance: www.interfaithalliance.org

The Interfaith Call: www.interfaithcall.com

The Interfaith Council of Greater New York: www.nycinterfaith.org

The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel: www.icci.co.il

The Pluralism Project: www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism

The Soul of Europe: www.soulofeurope.com

The Temple of Understanding – Cathedral of Saint John the Divine: www.uua.org

The Universal Worship – The International Sufi Movement: www.sufimovement.org

The World Community For Christian Meditation: www.wccm.org

Theosophical Association Aarhus: www.teosofi.org

Unitarian Universalist Association: www.uua.org

United Church of Religious Science: www.religiousscience.org

United Communities of Spirit: www.origin.org/ucs.cfm

United Religions Initiative: www.uri.org

Universal Worship Service – Sufi Ruhaniat International: www.ruhaniat.org

World Conference of Religions for Peace: www.wcrp.org