



Writings & Essays

# Inter-religious Dialogue



Laurence Freeman OSB

What is dialogue? What is it for? What does it mean for us today? Dialogue between religions is a defining characteristic and a pressing challenge of the modern world. But it is not a modern invention.

The great Silk Road, for example, continuously brought together very diverse religious practitioners and mingled beliefs and practices in a flowing stream of cultural and religious dialogue. Trade and culture have always been the matrix of philosophical and religious ideas and exchange. The Silk Road originally brought Christianity to China. There is extensive evidence of monasteries, churches, books and other artifacts of Christian life at the oasis towns in the wilder regions of northwest China. The rulers of the Tang dynasty were attracted to the beliefs of the Nestorian Christian monks from Persia whom they invited to settle with and dialogue with their Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist neighbors. The Taoist-Christian Church, however, died out from the mid-ninth century because of dynastic change, the loss of Chinese power over central Asia and their defeat by Arab Muslims. Chinese leadership became more reactionary and Christians and Buddhists were eventually proscribed and persecuted as Taoists regained control of imperial influence. Dialogue thrives in periods of tolerance that are upheld by economic and political stability; but the same social forces can change and lead to religious persecution and warfare based on conflicting religious identities.

Along the Silk Road, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, Taoists, shamans, practitioners of the Bon religion and many others met, talked and traded not only material goods but their experience and insight concerning the one transcendental Good. Around the eighth century, the Buddhist Bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, of the Lotus Sutra, underwent another transformation. Originally a male deity of Indian Buddhism, he became the prominent

salvific figure of Chinese Buddhism changing sex in the process to become Guanyin. Guanyin, goddess of mercy and compassion, often shown holding a child, is the most widely worshiped deity of any religion in China today. She is the only female in the Buddhist cosmology of China, but is equally venerated by Taoists. Her existence in the hearts and minds of many millions, like the Vietnamese boat people who experienced a vision of her as their boat drifted perilously on the ocean, probably owes a great deal to the veneration of the Virgin Mary brought by Chinese Christians. Dialogue changes the symbolic life of humanity at the deepest levels.

Dialogue is not primarily an academic enterprise. It is the result of the interaction of ordinary people as they go about their daily lives. It is not bare ideas that are primarily shared in these encounters, in pubs, restaurants and peoples' homes. Dialogue in these places is at a much lower intellectual level than in universities or religious centres. The ideas of religion are shared and form new compounds at the levels on which religion matters most to most people, that is, as a way of helping to cope with the difficulties and enigmas of life. In this basic form of dialogue, religious ideas are not abstracted from human experience, but inseparably embedded in symbolic language and ritual practices. The primary interest and driving force of dialogue at this level is not intellectual but, practically, soteriological. Do these religious feelings and experiences contribute to the feeling of ultimate salvation? Do they lead to spiritual growth and enlightenment? Do they offer authentic consolation for the death of a child? Or the loss of one's hopes or persistent fear of the future?

Early Jewish Christians were forced by trade and politics, as well as by the command to share the good news of the gospel, to dialogue with pagans, especially the Greek philosophers. Among the

Christian thinkers who responded to this challenge, some were more fundamentalist. Some said that the Greeks had nothing to contribute to Christian understanding, but others were more open to find truth in other traditions predating the historical Jesus. These more dialogue-friendly theologians expressed their ground for dialogue in the idea of the pre-existent Logos. The Logos existed from eternity and wherever truth, beauty or goodness existed it was because God had manifested himself through the Logos. Jesus was the Logos made flesh. With this universal key Christians could now validly find Christ in other religions and respect the holiness and truth in other traditions. As Christianity spread globally, the demand on this more open and tolerant attitude to dialogue increased. Tensions that were present from the days of the first church in Jerusalem between those ready to dialogue and those frightened or angrily resistant to listening and sharing in friendship and equality with other believers developed. However, the sudden identification of the church with political and economic power structures in society steadily strengthened the belief that loyalty to the doctrinal orthodoxy of the church was equivalent to patriotism. Theological heterodoxy threatened the status quo of society as a whole. The loss of social power by the Christian church in modern times has restored it to the freedom to dialogue, and so to contribute and learn from other traditions that it has not had for many centuries.

So we are in a new or a renewed age of inter-religious dialogue. It presents all religions with new and disturbing encounters. The basis for the new age of dialogue is not only religious encounters, but it involves dialogue with science and other areas of modern knowledge and global concern such as ecology, the peace movement, human rights and holistic psychology. All these encounters and the dialogue with religions which they engender lead back to the root question about the nature of dialogue: How do human beings relate to each other with all their differences? Is dialogue about persuasion and conversion? Does it lead to unity or uniformity? Even more disturbing for religious people are the questions about religion itself that modern

people are asking: What is religion? What is religion for? Is it worth the trouble it seems to cause?

The cultivated philosophers in Alexandria or Rome, the traders and monks chatting at night over their fires on the Silk Road, the peasants watching the prayers of the practitioners of other religions and the effects of those prayers on their lives, were all involved in inter-religious dialogue. But not with the same urgency and sense of crisis as we must learn (or re-learn) to dialogue today. Modern university teachers, business people talking with each other in luxury hotels about their beliefs after they have finished their meetings, young people experimenting serially with Buddhism, ashrams, Tai Chi, church-going—these are all ancient forms of inter-religious dialogue. But today, the arts and the significance of dialogue bear heavily upon the deepest concerns we have for the future of the planet and our hopes for global peace.

If religions—with all their rich diversity and contradictions and all their cultural roots—can learn to listen to each other, to learn from their differences and to share what they have in common, then there is ground for hope that the political, military and economic power-holders in our different nations, states or trading blocks will learn to do the same. Indeed, if religions cannot do this, what hope is there that politicians, multi-nationals and soldiers will ever do it? The stakes for dialogue today are much higher than ever before in history. We also need to ask, however, how we can sustain dialogue and incorporate it integrally and permanently into our local and global culture. As we can see from 9th century China or from the aftermath of the great Indian emperor Asoka, the persecution of Christians in the 17th century, or the present level of intolerance among some Christian sects, the curiosity, tolerance and respect needed for dialogue can suddenly evaporate and be followed by violent moods of religious exclusivism and competition. How can we ensure that modern dialogue is indeed dialogue and not merely superficial syncretism practiced by people who have no basic or serious commitment to any tradition but call tolerance and openness what is in fact their cultural imperative of 'keeping your options open' at all times?

Firstly, what does modern inter-religious dialogue say about the nature of religion itself? This is a particularly modern question that would have been taken for granted in most of the conversations over the campfires on the Silk Road. But today, religion has been polarized against spirituality. 'Organised religion' is suspected of causing most of the wars that have ever been waged. Science seems to have rendered religion into a form of art, poetry or psychology. Religious faith, doctrinal belief and personal experience have for many people lost their links, and, thus, the true nature and goal of religion seems lost.

When we dialogue with other religions, we are touching into the basic truth of religion itself. Human beings are intrinsically religious. Even the materialist believes in a good beyond himself and thus accepts the premise of transcendence, even if that good is located in this world. Yet peace and prosperity and psychological health depend on more than economic cooperation and political control, more even than on a global ethic. A common sense of transcendence and maybe even a common experience of it at some depth is needed for any group to achieve harmony and goodwill towards others outside their immediate membership. No human being living consciously can avoid the need to believe in a good beyond and to relate to it with a basic sense of desire and spiritual hunger.

Religion according to Simone Weil is essentially 'nothing else than a looking'. Insofar as it claims to be anything else, it is inevitable that it should either be shut up in churches or that it should stifle everything in every place where it is found.

This essentially contemplative understanding of religion insists on a fundamental philosophical cleanup of the Judeo-Christian and, indeed, monotheist traditions. A good dose of atheism is needed to purify the diseases introduced into these religions by the projections of collective cultural identity onto images of God.

Religion, insofar as it is a source of consolation, is a hindrance to true faith and, in this sense, atheism is a purification. I have to be an atheist with that part of

myself which is not made for God. Among those in whom the supernatural part of themselves has not been awakened, the atheists are right and the believers wrong

Some of this purification may be provided directly (and has been) by the monotheistic religions encountering the traditions of Buddhism and Taoism. But these encounters will be catalysts for spiritual renewal rather than substitutes for it. The next stage—and we are seeing this in modern Christianity more than in Islam and Judaism—is the rediscovery and widespread practice of the contemplative tradition of these religions. Dialogue immediately begins to mean something deeper and to produce more beneficial and lasting fruits when it is conducted at the contemplative level and by people who are actually practicing it. The dilemma of the polarity between faith and belief immediately diminishes. The meditator sees, like Thomas Aquinas, that doctrines and dogma are not themselves the objects of our belief or worship. They are fingers pointing to the moon, not the moon itself. But they do point in a certain direction and, therefore, have value and meaning. But they speak to some parts of our soul and they are not equally relevant to every part of our minds. The proposition that the Holy Spirit proceeds from Father and Son or from the Father alone, the distinction that divided Eastern and Western Christians, is not the same kind of proposition as saying that the best way to get to Constantinople is by train. The great religious beliefs are true in a particular way of being true. Therefore, they cannot be demanded of a person in the same way as you can reasonably demand that someone believes that  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

Dialogue will naturally address these different doctrines. But the purpose of the dialogue is not to prove one right and others wrong. It will, however, help to expose false doctrines, such as those supporting racial or religious superiority. The purpose of dialogue at this level will be to better understand the subtle and evocative nature of the truth which these conceptual or symbolic formulas express.

But doctrinal discussion is only one kind of inter-religious dialogue. As we saw in the "Way of Peace" initiative, there is also the dialogue of visiting each other's sacred sites, simply meditating together, working together in the cause of reconciliation and peace. All of these require different kinds of spiritual intelligence and creative discrimination. Sharing in each other's religious rituals, for example, does not demand that conventional disciplines proper to each religion should be abandoned in a misguided attempt to be hospitable. Discretion, the mother of virtue, according to St Benedict, is also the mother of true dialogue.

Although intellectual, academic dialogue is only one, and not the most important form of modern inter-religious dialogue, ideas do matter. People trained in handling and clarifying ideas can contribute to a better social environment for coexistence and collaboration. Challenging the idol that the monotheistic religions often make of their God is one area for this kind of dialogue. Is our God a true God or an idol? is a question that believers need to ask continually and it is a question driven not only by discussion or worship with friends from other traditions, but, and primarily, by our own practice of meditation. Through that practice, we see the distinction between our desire for God and our desire for egotistical gain or consolation. The true God we meet in meditation does not intervene in this world. He is present always and equally to all. God has no favorites. Religion is not another power center in the world if God is disinterested love. Knowing this is experience rather than belief. Simone Weil said that faith is the experience of the intelligence enlightened by love.

Religion goes astray when it becomes merely a source of consolation or cultural identity. Only the practice of the contemplative disciplines within the religion can prevent this. Equally, though, dialogue gets nowhere if it does not respect the primacy and centrality of the contemplative. What's the point in just going to church? What's the point in just talking about religion?

The purpose of inter-religious dialogue is not to mix up the diversity and create a super world religion. Nor is it to provide a buffet selection for individualistic practitioners, though it will always fall into these errors in the hands of some. The true purpose is to restore us to a clearer and deeper sense of the mystery of the common ground that is nameless yet eternally and everywhere present. The unity of that mystery is a tenet of all religions in some form. It grew out of an intelligence enlightened by love in the founders. The insight of the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, the experience of advaita by the rishis and anonymous authors of the Upanishads, the revelations of Moses and Mohammed, and the experience of the Resurrection of Christ—all these point, in unique ways, to the common ground that humanity shares, and to which we have given many names, and yet that is best called the nameless.

Around 600 BC a remarkable convergence of human consciousness took place in the expansion of Buddhist teaching, the Hebrew prophets and the sages of the Himalayas. A great shift from the external to the internal dimensions of consciousness happened. Sacrifice was perceived to be less a matter of external ritual and more the practice of inner attention. We do not know the social or cultural links that may have helped catalyze these eruptions of spiritual intelligence. But we can feel that today a similar contemporaneous spiritual evolution is occurring that will bring us all closer to the original experience, the experience of God and our common ground of being that led to this axial moment in history. Progress may often be more a matter of recovering what has been once gained and then lost than of discovering something for the first time. Humility is needed if we are to grow beyond our present limits. Nothing makes us more quickly humble than dialogue with people whom we recognize as having different beliefs but the same humanity. We see, then, that prayer, tolerance, doctrine are all illumined within our own tradition by sharing deeply with members of other faiths. And what we all recognise is that religion is about looking. It is about ways of living rather than about abstract believing

But for this kind of dialogue to work, an even more radical humility needs to be practiced: the humility of meditation that brings us personally, one by one and collectively, to self-knowledge and self-acceptance. These two ways of knowing and accepting ourselves at the deepest level is both the goal and purpose of religion and the precondition for the many human tribes living at peace, in the love of God, together.

Laurence Freeman OSB  
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Laurence Freeman  
Monastery of Christ the King, Cockfosters, London

Laurence Freeman OSB is a Benedictine monk of the monastery of Christ the King, Cockfosters and the Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation. His most recent book is 'Jesus: The Teacher Within'. For further information on the work of the community you may write to The World Community for Christian Meditation, St. Mark's, Myddelton Square, London EC1R 1XX.



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