Interfaith Dialogue is Alive

The “Editorial” in this issue is replaced by excerpts from the Introduction given at the LAUNCH OF THE WOMEN’S INTERFAITH NETWORK, by Dr, Rachael Kohn of the ABC. Her program on ABC National, THE SPIRIT OF THINGS will be known to many readers.

Pauline Rae smm

There are misconceptions about religion – not only by those who blithely dismiss it as an obsolete hangover from the premodern past, but also by those who zealously champion their religion in unthinking and brutal ways.

Traditions have existed for thousands of years, but none of them have done so by remaining pure, unalloyed and beautiful, nor by remaining rigid, blinkered and isolated. Like anything that is alive, religious traditions grow, change, and even periodically die back, like a plant, to be reborn.

But change is by no means a “sure thing”. It can result in injustice as easily as it can promote the opposite. Whatever the sacred teachings by the founders of a tradition, they are always open to misinterpretation and exploitation. Religious tradition is a human institution, even when it champions Divine teachings.

Given the frequent misunderstandings or incomplete knowledge that we often have of our own tradition and history, how much greater is the ignorance that exists about other people’s traditions? In my experience it is not a condition confined to the uneducated classes or even primarily found among them. Quite often simple people understand that there is a common humanity that links them with their co-workers, whoever they are. No, it is a far more staggering fact that intolerance and ignorance often abounds among the otherwise well educated.

That is why interfaith dialogue was born. People who studied violent religious history, people who witnessed it, and who lived through its horrors, vowed that no democratic and free society should succumb to it, or foster bigotry and hatred. Understanding other traditions is an essential preventive measure not, I hope, in a cynical exercise to “know thine enemy.” But in order to enjoy the possibilities that friendship brings.

Like a genuine friendship, interfaith dialogue is a living thing, which necessitates, it if does not spontaneously effect, changes in the way we view each other and the way we view ourselves. There is no genuine relationship which does not change the people involved. Indeed, there would be absolutely no reason for cultivating relationships at all if they did not transform us in some beneficial way.

I believe and always have done that looking afresh at our traditions is an essential responsibility in the business of keeping them vital, meaningful, and accountable, not only to the community of believers, but to the society which has given us the freedom and the space to carry out our traditions un molested and unencumbered. No one today can watch the news and not realise how precious and rare that gift is. We owe society something more than just being good Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. ... We owe to the whole society our commitment to producing harmony, understanding, compassion and above all a great and deep respect for human life and dignity. If we do not, then who will?

This event, and this organization, WOMEN’S INTERFAITH NETWORK, is an important step in that direction. And I am here because I believe in what people can achieve for good, when they really want a better world.

Dr Rachael Kohn

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Donations towards cost of “Bridges” would be appreciated.
THE LAUNCHING OF WOMEN’S INTERFAITH NETWORK

March 22, 2001 will go down in history as a red-letter day in the journey of interfaith relations in Sydney. As foreseen in the last issue of Bridges, the launch of the Women’s Interfaith Network took place in Parliament House, Macquarie Street, Sydney. This was the culmination of the commitment of a group of women who were guests at the Australian Catholic Bishops’ interfaith gathering in August 1999. At that gathering Aziza Abdel-Halim of the Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia quietly suggested that it would be good to have a national interfaith organization. Josie Lacey of the Jewish community took up the suggestion and ran with it. She invited the women who were present at that gathering to start meeting with the view to bringing to birth a women’s interfaith network. The panel introducing the network at its launch came from the Aboriginal, Baha’i, Christian, Muslim, Quaker, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish communities. Dr Rachel Kohn of ABC Radio was the compère. The aim of WIN is:

To bring together women of different faith traditions in order to promote understanding, respect and harmony among followers of world religions.

The women who were guests at the launch are members of other networks. The Women’s Interfaith Network hopes to encourage these women to create their own small networks which in turn will reach out in ever wider circles to facilitate positive interfaith relations.

At the launch, after being welcomed by the Aboriginal people of the area, the members of the panel presented the history of the journey thus far, personal reactions and responses to this journey, current situation and hopes for the future. Then other representatives from each of the eight religions on the panel shared prayer, each from her own tradition.

POPE WISHES TO PRAY IN MOSQUE

For the first time in history, a Pope will visit a mosque. The event should take place 06 May in Damascus, the Syrian capital. Barefoot, as all other pilgrims who enter the sacred place of Muslim worship, John Paul II will visit the splendid Umayad Mosque, in whose interior there is a chapel dedicated to St John the Baptist. Saint John is also venerated by Muslims as the prophet Yahya.

The mosque, also known as the Great Mosque of Damascus, was once an Aramaic temple. In the first century it became Roman temple, and later a church dedicated to St John the Baptist. The visit to the

Umayad Mosque will be the occasion to appeal for sincere dialogue with Islam, in memory of the decades from 636 to 705 when this Christian Church dedicated to the Baptist, was shared with Muslim worshippers, before it was replaced by the grand mosque.

The Pope will lead the Christian side of the prayer and Syria’s mufti, Sheikh Ahmed Kataro, the Muslim side.

Zenit, 05 March 2001
BBC News, 05 March 2001

WORLD CONFERENCE ON RELIGION AND PEACE

In November, the World Conference on Religion and Peace celebrated its 30th birthday. Pope John Paul II in his message of congratulations, said: “In recent years, the World Conference on Religion and Peace has been particularly involved in reconciling communities, which are divided due to conflicts and wars. Your efforts to heal those affected by hatred and violence express a truth that I, too, have sought to affirm on many occasions: that religion is not and must not become a pretext for hostility, in particular when religious, cultural and ethnic identities coincide. ... Collaboration among the different religions must be based on the rejection of fanaticism, extremism and mutual antagonism, which lead to violence. We are aware of the importance of education as a means for promoting mutual understanding, cooperation and respect.

MESSAGE FOR THE END OF RAMADAN

Cardinal Francis Arinze of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue greeted the world’s Muslims as they celebrated the feast of Id al-Fitr 1421, at the end of Ramadan. He reechoed the call of the Pope for education for dialogue, as a duty for Christians and Muslims. Recalling the Interreligious Assembly in Rome in 1999 he reiterated the call of the Final Report of the Assembly to make education the key to promoting interreligious harmony through respect for different religious traditions. “It is a process which enables one above and beyond the knowledge of other religions, to come to an appreciation of others through real attentiveness and true respect. Is it not the noblest of arts to learn to respect and love truth, justice, peace and reconciliation?”

Continued on page 4.

News in Brief
The Relationship of Christianity and Islam in Society: Australia

A summary of a Paper delivered by Professor Johns at a St Catharine’s Conference in Association with the Altair World of Islam Trust, Windsor, U.K., June 2000

In the pre-World War era of high colonialism, Australia was able to ignore the world of Islam to its near north, in the territories of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, South Philippines and South Thailand. This cluster of nation-states is home to the largest community of ethnically and linguistically related Muslims in the world, more numerous than that of the Arabs and speakers of Arabic.

The first Muslims entered Australian history in 1866 with the arrival of 124 camels and 34 Afghan attendants to assist in the exploration of the desert interior. However, it was not until the 1950’s with the emergence of the new nations to the north of Australia, that large numbers of Muslims began to enter the country. In particular there was a growing Asian diplomatic community and considerable numbers of students coming to Australia and New Zealand under the Colombo Plan. In 1960 a Mosque was opened in Canberra, the National Capital, and it was about this time that increasing numbers of academics were appointed to Australian Universities to teach the languages and cultures of Muslim Asia.

In 1968 an immigration agreement was signed with Turkey, the first to be made with a non-European state. This was followed by the abolition of the White Australia Policy in 1972, which meant race was no longer a barrier to acceptance as a migrant. The Australian government up until that time had regarded assimilation, a blending into Australian society as it then was, as a natural response of migrants to their new home. The tacit assumption being that, as a matter of course, “They will become like us”. After that date, Government policy began to recognize the value of diverse cultural traditions and provided opportunities for giving voice to different, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious minorities, and a policy of multicultural pluralism was established, due in large part to the representations of migrant communities.

All migrants to a new country face problems of adjustment and adaptation. For Muslims it was not simply the case of moving from majority to minority status; they had come from an environment in which religion was part of the air they breathed, giving shape to every rite of passage. There was a tendency to look down on Muslim people. The fact that Islam is a religion requiring visible signs of commitment was sometimes disconcerting. Women wearing the veil was often felt to be an ostentatious intrusion of religion into public life. The image in Western folklore was of Islam as a religion of violence, and indeed political commentators still highlight what they regard as the potential for violence in Islam. Current affairs programs, when presenting social problems in Muslim countries, attribute such problems to Islam itself rather than to socio-economic conditions in countries in which Muslims live. Such negative emphases reinforce latent resentment towards Islam and Muslims. It is not hard to feel compassion, and more, for the hurt that these images and attitudes cause to Muslims who are citizens of Australia or New Zealand, and, guided by their religion, lead exemplary lives.

From its earliest days Islam has been able to transform collections of individual Muslims into communities, and provide these communities with structures so they can govern themselves. Muslims in Australasia have used this inner resource with determination, to establish institutions of learning and worship in their new homelands. There are now Muslim organizations in all the States and Territories of Australia and New Zealand.

It has been difficult for many Christians in Australasia to come to terms with the truth claims of other faith communities when living with them on equal terms in a plural society. The process of adjustment continues to be painful and complex. It can be followed at different levels, from various perspectives. On a theological level Australasian scholars have contributed to exploration of the spiritual and intellectual traditions of Islam. Christian thinkers have been driven to seek a theological explanation for religious diversity which does not down-grade their own faith. Efforts are also being made at the pastoral level, sometimes at the cost of pain, misunderstanding and rejection.

There has also been the challenge for Muslims to re-examine their traditions to discover what is intrinsic to the Islamic revelation, and separate this from what has been conditioned by the temporal and situational circumstances of Muslims over the centuries. It is a search for essential values. Issues include the acceptance of civil society, relations between men and women, a women’s right to choose a marriage partner on her own initiative, legal adoption, interest on investments, speculations on the stock exchange and inter-faith relations.

The central issue to be faced seems clear: how can we rediscover compassion in inter-religious relations? Yet the answer is bedeviled with complexities. It is not even possible to speak simply of Muslims and Christians. A Muslim is never simply a Muslim, and a Christian is never simply a Christian. Neither religion exists in a pure state, without the impedimenta of culture and history.

It is up to theologians to devise ways of justifying mutual respect between religious traditions whose core formulations draw lines that set them apart as mutually exclusive. However, ordinary people do not need the work of theologians to know that in both religious traditions, the God they worship is not the God of philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Without compromising the different understandings each tradition has of the person of Christ and the vocation of Muhammad, there are basic theological principles shared, though the degree to which they are shared is hidden by cultural veils. Both religions proclaim the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting and recognize that the key values for social behaviour shared by both traditions derive their ultimate authority from beyond time.

Professor Emeritus Anthony Johns
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Panikkar is not only an academic specialist in studies in religion; his life experience has been living from infancy in interreligious dialogue within his family. Son of an Indian Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother, Panikkar is a Catholic priest. While this book shows his great knowledge of the science that we name interreligious dialogue, it is also in parts almost autobiographical.

The first chapter offers the reader a chance to acknowledge their own stance in interreligious dialogue, and to recognize their model of ‘doing’ interreligious dialogue. Panikkar then describes various levels of dialogue, which participants may name as interreligious dialogue such as dialectical dialogue and dialogical dialogue. The basic thesis of the book is that in all interreligious encounters ultimately it is the inner person who meets the other. When this happens, openness and trust can release insights that influence and broaden the religious concepts of those in dialogue. These encounters can also bring a person’s vulnerability to the surface. Also in the encounter we may discover how much of ‘the other’ there is within ourselves. To be spiritually enriched in interreligious dialogue, the first and foremost condition is that we know and cherish our own faith tradition.

Panikkar calls for what he names ‘ecumenical ecumenism..

“Ecumenical ecumenism attempts to extend this new openness to the entire human family. The goal is a better understanding, corrective criticism, and eventually mutual fecundation among the religious traditions of the world, without diluting their respective heritages or prejudging their possible harmony or eventual irreducible differences. The task is still ahead of us; but already some fruits can be seen ripening. [104]

“Simply stated, ecumenical ecumenism implies the rediscovery of a basic and enduring task of religions: to contribute to the freeing of a full humanness for humanity.” [109]

This book is not light reading, but is worth time spent with it in coming to touch into our own approach to interfaith relations.

Kathleen Collins SSpS

News in Brief (continued)

A NATIONAL INITIATIVE: MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING

The last issue of Bridges mentioned the planned creation of the Muslim/Christian Liaison Group. The first meeting took place in November 2000. This is the joint initiative of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) and the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA).

The AFIC representatives led by Mr. Amjad Ali Mehboob, included Mr. Gabr Elgafi, Dr Fazlul Huq, Mr. Hafez Malas and Sheikh Nazeerul Hasan Thanvi. The Christian representatives, led by the General Secretary of the (NCCA), Rev. David Gill, included Bishop Peter Ingham, Rev. Lionel Otto, Mary Pollard and Ms Maureen Postma. The meeting opened with prayers led by Sheikh Nazeerul Hasan Thanvi and Rev. David Gill.

The group’s focus is practical rather than doctrinal, and while either side would be entirely free to raise any matter of concern, the goal would be to deepen mutual understanding and enhance harmonious relationships between the two faith communities. Summary statements explaining each faith tradition would be intended to deepen mutual understanding.

Discussion moved to identifying what may be common problems facing both faith communities.

IVF, youth Discussion moved to identifying what may be common problems facing both faith communities – IVF, youth issues, drugs and media misrepresentation were mentioned. Amjad Mehboob welcomed the opportunity … to create better and proper understanding and thus to remove many of the stereo-type images that have persisted to the detriment of harmonious and brotherly relations that should exist among all peoples who are all creations of the One and the same God.

Cf. Australian Muslim News: December 2000

SENSELESS VIOLENCE

In the City of Greater Dandenong the various faiths of the area work together with the civic authorities for the good of the area. How senseless, then, was the vandalism and burning of a six-roomed premises used by the Muslim community for the welfare of many. This occurred on New Year’s Eve.

Last year the cottage used by the Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia in Auburn was also vandalized. Such incidents are the work of a minority. It is the responsibility of the majority to speak out and act against such incidents. In the Auburn situation, Catholics offered space for the Muslim women to host an interfaith meeting while their place was being repaired.
Increasingly during the two decades of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II has called on Catholics throughout the world to engage seriously in interfaith relations. While challenging them to fidelity to their own faith tradition, he asks them to become aware of God’s action in various religious traditions across the world. The following excerpts are from the section entitled “Dialogue and Mission” in his first encyclical of the new millennium: “Novo Millennio Ineunte (At the Beginning of the third Millennium).” An encyclical is a document from the Pope to Catholics at the highest level of teaching.

Christ is the "Light of the world" (Jn 8:12) and asked his disciples to be “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). It is in this context also that we should consider the great challenge of interreligious dialogue to which we shall still be committed in the new millennium, in fidelity to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. In the years of preparation for the Great Jubilee, the church has sought to build, not least through a series of highly symbolic meetings, a relationship of openness and dialogue with the follower of other religions...this dialogue must continue. In the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread spectre of those wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history. The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace.

Dialogue however cannot be based on religious indifferentism, and we Christians are in duty bound, while engaging in dialogue, to bear clear witness to the hope that is within us (cf. 1 Pt 3:15). We should not fear that it will be considered an offence to the identity of others what is rather the joyful proclamation of a gift meant for all, and to be offered to all with the greatest respect for the freedom of each one; the gift of the revelation of the God who is Love, the God who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). As the recent declaration “Dominus Jesus” stressed, this
cannot be the subject of a dialogue understood as negotiation, as if we considered it a matter of mere opinion; rather, it is a grace which fills us with joy, a message which we have a duty to proclaim.

The Church therefore cannot forgo her missionary activity among peoples of the world. It is a primary task of the *missio ad gentes* to announce that it is in Christ, “the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:6), that people find salvation. Interreligious dialogue “cannot simply replace proclamation, but remains oriented towards proclamation”. This missionary duty, moreover, does not prevent us from approaching dialogue *with an attitude of profound willingness to listen*. We know in fact that, in the presence of the mystery of grace, infinitely full of possibilities and implications for human life and history, the Church herself will never cease putting questions, trusting in the help of the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth (cf. Jn 14:17), whose task it is to guide her “into all the truth” (Jn 16:13).

This is a fundamental principle not only for the endless theological investigation of Christian truth, but also for Christian dialogue with other philosophies, cultures and religions. In the common experience of humanity, for all its contradictions, the Spirit of God, who “blows where he wills” (Jn 3:8), not infrequently reveals signs of his presence which help Christ’s followers to understand more deeply the message which they bear. Was it not with this humble and trust-filled openness that the Second Vatican Council sought to read the “signs of the times”? Even as she engages in an active and watchful discernment aimed at understanding the “genuine signs of the presence or the purpose of God”, the Church acknowledges that she has not only given, but has also “received from the history and from the development of the human race.” This attitude of openness, combined with careful discernment, was adopted by the Council also in relation to other religions. It is our task to follow with great fidelity the Council’s teaching and the path which it has traced.