

CARMEL IN ASIA: Prospects, opportunities and hopes for inter-faith dialogue

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I have been asked to address the topic of Carmel in Asia: prospects, opportunities and hopes for inter-faith dialogue. It was also emphasised to me that I should share the practical aspects of inter-faith dialogue based on my experience especially with Carmelites. I, therefore, shall not spend much time on the theoretical and theological aspects, although these aspects cannot be absent from any presentation. I must also add here that I shall not deal with each of the concepts of prospects, opportunities and hopes separately as these are interrelated and often interact, but hope that all of these concepts will be touched upon.

Interfaith dialogue

When we hear the word dialogue, most of us think in terms of meetings, discussions, propositions and possible resolutions, sharing words, concepts and ideas. In the context of inter-faith dialogue this kind of dialogue is certainly very important at the level of international, national and local leadership. However there is another kind of dialogue which is at least as important as that of sharing words and ideas at the leadership level, and that is the shared living experiences in everyday life of ordinary people of various religions living side by side. This sharing of living everyday experiences is, perhaps, the most common as well as a very effective form of interfaith dialogue that has been going on in Asia for many centuries. This is also where interfaith dialogue begins since resolutions or decisions taken at leadership level are only as good as the acceptance they receive at root level.

In the countries of the Asia-Australia region where we Carmelites are present, when we speak of inter-religious dialogue we are speaking specifically mainly of dialogue with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam in India; Buddhism in Vietnam; Islam in the Philippines; Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in Indonesia; various forms of Buddhism in China; a small number of Muslims in East Timor; and all of these religions, as minorities, in Australia. We must not forget that in almost all of the Asian countries there is a not insignificant presence of traditional-ancestral religions.

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On frequent occasions I have visited all of these countries and lived in Indonesia for 23 years. My experience has shown me that for centuries, ordinary people of various religions have lived side by side peacefully while respecting each other's beliefs and customs. There are fundamentalists in all religions, including Christianity. These are not a threat nor are they a problem in themselves alone. They have a place in mainstream religions. It is the extremists that are the problem and threat, because they are exclusive and violent. Until recent times, the Asian people of the areas where Carmelites are involved, there were fundamentalists but no extremists. These extremists came from Middle Eastern countries and found fertile ground among people ready to be indoctrinated from among some fundamentalist groups. However, I believe that extremism goes against the grain of the Asian ethos that seeks harmony and peace on the universal as well as on the individual level.

The Asian person is generally of an eclectic nature, seeking the good and integrating it in his/her life from whatever source and in whichever form it comes. Western thinking is principally concerned with the search for truth, from the time of Plato and Aristotle, through Thomas Aquinas and the philosophers of the middle ages, the age of enlightenment and down to our own day. Just notice how often the word "truth" appears in the prayers of the our daily Eucharist. Whereas Asian thinking is more concerned with the good as evidenced in the Vedas, Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, writings that have influenced much of Asia, from India through all of Southeast Asia to China, through Hinduism and Buddhism since long before the Christian era. Islam and Judaism, as two of the three Abrahamic religions and much under the influence of Greece and Rome, are closer to the Western way of thinking and looking at the world and humanity. It is important to keep these considerations in mind when engaging in any form of interfaith dialogue. We cannot dialogue with Hindus and Buddhists in the same way we dialogue with Muslims. This leads us to the place of inculturation in the matter of interfaith dialogue.

Inculturation

Inculturation means that we must recognise a plurality of theologies, philosophies and spiritualities among faiths and within any one faith. In the Catholic Church we need to be aware of the predominance of Euro centrism, which through the almost universal influence of Greco-Roman philosophy and way of thinking, and the imposition of the Roman rite and the uniform content of the teaching carried out in seminaries has to a large extent "Romanised" or "Westernised" all the local Churches in Asia and Australia.

One notable exception for us Carmelites is the Syro-Malabar church in Kerala, India, which has kept its own rite, but which has also fallen under the influence of Roman thinking through the teaching in its seminaries. The local churches need to rethink, reformulate and live anew the Christian faith. Pope John Paul II, in *Catechesi Tradendae* says as much, and in 1982 he established the Pontifical Council for Culture. It is disappointing when seminaries in Asia seek affiliation to Roman institutions such as the Urbaniana, Gregoriana or Antonianum, and thus come under the influence and control of these Roman institutions, rather than develop their own rich traditions and cultures in the light of the Gospel.

A local culture is not just the language, visual arts, poetry, music, clothing, etc. of a particular people. The essential culture is the philosophy, theology and spirituality of a people, grown locally over centuries or even millennia. The philosophy of a people is the manner in which that people sees and interprets the universe; the theology of a people is the manner in which that people sees and interprets the divine; and the spirituality of a people is the manner in which that people sees and interprets the relationship between the individual and groups of people with the universe and the divine. In some cultures one of those three elements will dominate over the others, such as philosophy in the West; and sometimes another, such as spirituality in Asia. A religion is greatly formed by the culture and is an essential part of it. This essential culture-religion then finds its expression in the language, visual arts, poetry, music, clothing, etc. of a particular people.

When considering inter-faith dialogue, we Carmelites need to study, understand and assimilate sympathetically the culture or cultures within which we are working. Our formation must include a study of the cultures-religions (that is, philosophy, theology and spirituality) of our particular region. In our programmes of formation these cultures-religions should be presented by persons who have grown up in, belong to and believe in their own culture-religion. We, on our part, need to be open to such presentations and try to assimilate them sympathetically. Have we ever even tried to read any parts of the Vedas, Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita? Have we ever read the Koran? Yet we sometimes pass judgement on these religions based on uninformed opinions and repeated hearsay! There is a saying that we cannot love that which or whom we do not know. Jesus taught us to love all men and women. Does not this mean also that we must make every effort to know and appreciate others deeply and not just from hearsay or even prejudice and superficiality? And we Carmelites have our origins in Asia among the other two Abrahamic religions.

Roberto De Nobili (1577-1656), the Jesuit missionary who went to India in the early part of the 17th century, is an excellent example of what I am trying to say. De Nobili entered deeply into Hinduism and even took on the practice and habit of a Hindu monk, studied Sanskrit and Tamil, grew to respect and love the Hindu teachings, especially the contemplative dimension, and won the respect of the Hindu community. All the time he remained faithful to his Christian faith and to his task of evangelisation, however, not just by preaching from a distance, but by the witness of his life in and among the Hindus. Evangelisation is quite different from proselytism. Jesus evangelised in that he presented his person and his teachings openly, but he never tried to force anyone into accepting his person and teachings. When we study and enter deeply into other religions, we must always evangelise by our way of life but not proselytise.

Contemplation

We Carmelites define ourselves as a contemplative fraternity in the midst of the people. All our documents, our Rule, our Constitutions, the writings of our many Saints, spiritual writers and Priors General stress the fact that contemplation is at the heart of our very being as Carmelites. If there is anything that stands out in the religions of Asia, it is that they seek contemplation, interiority, transformation into the divine. These are our Carmelite values too. There should be, therefore, much in common between us and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. It is essential, then, that we deepen our own lives of contemplation and union with God and seek occasions to share in prayer and contemplation with our brothers and sisters of other religions and not enter into discussion of principles at this level. I say share, because we have as much to learn from them as they have to learn from us. After all, Asian religions have a vast resource in this field of the inner transformation of self into the divine way of seeing and thinking. Study is good and discussion is good, but study and discussion cannot substitute for a life of deep contemplation on our part to enter into a similar experience of deep contemplation on the part of brothers and sisters of other religions, be they Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim or ancestor worshipers. In other words, we need to be faithful to our vocation as contemplatives and in doing so we shall also be more prepared to enter into experiential inter-faith dialogue.

We may note here what *Ecclesia in Asia* (no.31) says: "I repeat how important it is to revitalise prayer and contemplation in the process of dialogue. Men and women in the consecrated life can contribute very significantly to inter-religious dialogue by witnessing to the vitality of the great Christian traditions of asceticism and mysticism". Among these Christian traditions surely the Carmelite tradition holds a place of honour!

Many years ago, I was studying the writings of a Muslim mystic of the 17th century from Aceh by the name of Hamzah Fansuri. He wrote both poetry and prose. He was a true mystic who, like so many other mystics, was misunderstood and misinterpreted by his co-religionists and was finally put to death for his writings. Today he is recognised as a genuine Muslim mystic, at least by a section of the Muslim faithful and leadership. Whenever I read his writings, I could not help being struck by the similarity of what Hamzah Fansuri was saying and what St. John of the Cross says, especially in their poetry. Both were contemplatives seeking union with the same God, both achieved the same language when speaking of God. They would have made excellent friends here on earth and perhaps are very good friends in heaven now! It is my hope to take up this study once more and try to make a comparison of the writings of these two mystics. I also sometimes use prayers in Arabic taken from the Muslim practice. The first reaction of Muslims is to say, "You, a Christian, cannot use these prayers!" But then I point out that good prayers are good prayers in any language, from whatever source and for anyone. Then they feel better and we thus establish a link! And this brings us to the point of fraternity!

Fraternity

When we Carmelites speak of fraternity, we usually mean fraternity within our communities and sometimes extend this to the wider community of the Carmelite family and the people whom we serve in our various apostolates. These are a good starting point but not the full extent of what fraternity should really mean for us. It must extend to all. We need only recall Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan in answer to the question "Who is my neighbour?" Of course, our fraternity *ad intra* must be sound if we are going to share it with people of other religions, but share it we must with these our "neighbours", our brothers and sisters, whom we must love as we love ourselves. *Ecclesia in Asia* (no.31) puts it this way: "Only Christians (read Carmelites) who are deeply immersed in the mystery of Christ (read contemplatives) and who are happy in their faith community (read fraternity) can without undue risk and with hope of positive fruit engage in inter-religious dialogue".

Sometimes it is not easy to share this fraternity with those who look upon us with a certain amount of suspicion or even animosity. The Judeans would not have been happy with the parable of the good Samaritan, nor probably were the Galileans. But we must keep on trying. We need to keep on inviting them and offer to collaborate with them in matters concerning the universe, such as questions concerning global warming, weapons of mass destruction and

terrorism; matters concerning the country, such as matters of economic, social and cultural concern; matters concerning morals, such as abortion and euthanasia, cloning, IVF, etc.; matters concerning good works such as health and education. Continued effort in these fields will bring us in frequent contact with our brothers and sisters of other religions and eventually break down prejudices and false concepts with which we all grow up and which we all need to correct. Such fraternity will also enable members of all religions together to put greater pressure on the local, national and international governments.

Nostra Aetate (no.2) urges us, "The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture".

In the midst of the people

To achieve the above aims, we Carmelites need to live in the midst of the people, not just "our" people, but "the" people, all people, and share in their concerns, their hopes, their sufferings and joys. We need to learn and make it known to them that we celebrate with them when they celebrate and weep with them when they weep, and ask them to celebrate with us when we celebrate and weep with us when we weep. At the time that I was at the Catholic University in Medan, North Sumatra, there were five Muslim universities in the same city. Every year for 'Idul Fitri the Catholic University would send greetings to the staff and students of the Muslim universities. Some of the Muslim universities eventually began to send us greetings for Christmas. A small step, but one that broke down just a little bit of prejudice on both sides and one that made further contacts easier at academic meetings and on other civic occasions.

In our living among our brothers and sisters of other religions, we need to show them that we are there not to proselytise but to serve, to be available to them. This service will lead to deeper dialogue and to further service together, to bring hope to those who suffer discrimination, injustices and for the defence of human rights and moral-ethical concerns. Again in *Ecclesia in Asia* (no.31) we read: "Inter-religious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences. For all this, love of others is indispensable. This should result in collaboration, harmony and mutual enrichment".

What now?

Formation programmes in inter-religious dialogue should be in place in all our Carmelite educational institutions and especially in our seminaries for it is there that future leaders of the Order are formed. But we must not just wait for the future, rather we need to start now with our present brothers and sisters in Carmel to live a deeper life of prayer, contemplation, fraternity and service so that we may be better prepared for a living dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other religions.

The other religions are part of God's plan of salvation for humankind, and together, in humility and mutual support, in a non-judgemental attitude of appreciation of their sincerity and strong faith in the mystery of God, we seek dialogue with them that can enrich us and strengthen us in our faith and help us to see our faith in a new light! We must continue to foster this spirit of encounter and cooperation with our brothers and sisters of other religions.

Inter-religious dialogue should not be seen as simply an optional adjunct to our being Christians and Carmelites, it is an essential and integral part of our vocation and mission. In his exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, Pope John Paul II writes, "Contact, dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions is a task which the Second Vatican Council bequeathed to the whole Church as a duty and a challenge". We live among millions and millions of people who belong to great and rich religious traditions and who sometimes cannot recognise the person of Jesus and his message in us, especially when we exclude, ignore or even malign them. In a spirit of humility we, therefore, need to open ourselves and be receptive to what they can tell us and not just try to tell them, and learn to love them genuinely. We need to be genuine witnesses of Christ, not by word or discussion of the truth or non-truth of some propositions, but rather by loving each other within our communities and extending this love to others so that they can feel such unconditional love. We need to build up fellowship with them by being awake to any possibilities of collaboration and celebration together.

Some years back now, members of the Council of Churches went to visit some Australian aborigines in the outback. The aborigines met these impressive prelates from various churches at the edge of their territory and greeted them with the words: "Tread softly here, because God has been here before you!" #