

# THE NATURE OF FAITH IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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**T**HE CONCEPT OF FAITH HAS HAD A LONG and complex history in Christianity: from the New Testament, through the Greek and Latin patristic periods, the Middle Ages, the Reformation and the modern secular era. Each age tended to see a different facet of faith. At times it focused on the intellect – on the acceptance of doctrines not because of the evidence of reason, but because of the teaching authority of God and the Church. At other times it focused on affectivity – on a deep personal trust in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Like all things authentically religious, faith is multidimensional and grounded in mystery. In fact, faith is the doorway that opens the realm of mystery to the believer.

Against this multidimensional background, we can well ask the question: Is there a new dimension of faith emerging in our time? I am inclined to say yes. After several centuries of engaging in dialogue with the non-believers of secular culture, Christians now find themselves in dialogue with believers. This is not a polemical dialogue, a debate against adversaries in which each tries to win over the other. Rather it proceeds in another climate and with different expectations. It respects a plurality of faiths and a plurality of believers. Through interreligious dialogue, we may be entering a new age of faith, an age in which theologies of faith will flourish and cast new light on the accumulated historical understanding of faith itself.

At the present moment we are witnessing the convergence of faith, interreligious dialogue and spirituality. In fact, faith is our passage into interreligious dialogue as a spiritual process. For interreligious dialogue is more than a meeting on the personal and social levels, more than a discussion of beliefs, rituals and norms of moral conduct. On its deepest level it touches the spirit of the participants and initiates a mutual spiritual journey. In fact, I believe that interreligious dialogue is the distinctive collective spiritual journey of our time. In order to proceed in this way, we must begin with the relation of faith to spirituality.

*Faith and spirituality*

One of the most distinctive phenomena of the latter part of the twentieth century has been the awakening of spirituality. It was brought to light largely in an interreligious context and has penetrated the process of interreligious dialogue. Zen masters and Hindu swamis, coming to the West in the 1960s, responded to the deep spiritual hunger of many westerners and provided them with teachings and practices that guided them into the spiritual journey. Interreligious conferences then drew upon the same spiritual resources as fuel for dialogue.

New publications disseminated spiritual wisdom. In the 1970s the multivolume series *The Classics of Western Spirituality* began to appear, and in the 1980s this was complemented by the series *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*.<sup>1</sup> In preparation for the planning of the latter series, the following definition of spirituality was sent to the editors and contributors. This project was completely interreligious with both the editors and the contributors chosen from the world's major religious traditions. I present this definition here not only to clarify the meaning of spirituality, but to provide the spiritual ground of faith and thus link faith with interreligious dialogue.

The series will focus on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions 'the spirit'. This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to a transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. The series will explore the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development and its journey to the ultimate goal. It will deal with prayer, spiritual direction, the various maps of the spiritual journey and the methods of advancement in the spiritual ascent.

Although focusing on spirituality, the series will have a cross-disciplinary perspective, drawing from psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, theology and other disciplines where these intersect spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

Note that the definition focuses on the deepest centre of the person and identifies this as the locus of spirituality. One could say that this is the point where the divine Spirit touches the human spirit. However it was thought best to avoid the terms 'divine Spirit' or 'God' in the definition since this statement was sent to all editors and contributors who included Buddhists, who do not make a positive metaphysical affirmation of the divine. Hence it was deemed wise to focus on the human person and not directly on the divine or transcendent realm

since on that level there is considerable diversity among the religions. Yet the orientation of this centre of the person to the transcendent was thought absolutely essential to the definition even though the term 'transcendent' was left unspecified.

It is here at this juncture of the human and the transcendent – or we could say the human and mystery – that faith resides. It is faith that grasps and affirms the mystery – beyond the verification of our senses, beyond the logic of our reasoning. The mystery may be mediated by divine revelation, by the wisdom of saints, prophets and philosophers, by sacred texts, by the teaching function of the believing community. Then the communication of the mystery – this doctrine, these beliefs, these values – are received by the believers at the centre of their being, in the ground of their spirit, through the gift of grace and with loving trust and gratitude. It is here at the deepest level of the person, then, that faith is seeded and comes to fruition in the fullness of the spiritual life.

#### *Sharing of faith*

This precious gift of faith should not be hoarded but shared in interreligious dialogue. How can this be done? For most of us the best path to follow will be personal encounter with members of other religions. We should meet them not merely in the routine of their social and business lives, but on the level of their faith, in the deep sense of faith described above. On this level they and we can share not merely an abstract understanding of our beliefs and practices, but also the spiritual meaning of these beliefs and practices in our lives.

How can we reach this level? By 'passing over' into the value consciousness of another religion and 'coming back' enriched into our own. In his book *The way of all the earth*, John Dunne describes this process. He writes in his preface:

Is a religion coming to birth in our time? It could be. What seems to be occurring is a phenomenon we might call 'passing over', passing over from one culture to another, from one way of life to another, from one religion to another. Passing over is a shifting of standpoint, a going over to the standpoint of another culture, another way of life, another religion.

According to Dunne, passing over leads to a return: 'It is followed by an equal and opposite process we might call "coming back", coming back with new insight to one's own culture, one's own way of life, one's own religion'. Dunne sees this process as characteristic of our time: 'Passing over and coming back, it seems is the spiritual adventure of our time. It is the adventure I want to undertake and describe in this book.'<sup>3</sup>

I believe that we all have a capacity for empathy with another's spiritual values. I call this a 'shamanistic faculty'. In primal religions the shaman has the power to leave his body and travel to distant places, acquire knowledge, and return to pass this on to the community. In a similar fashion, in interreligious dialogue with our shamanistic faculty we can, as it were, leave our distinctive forms of consciousness and enter by way of empathy into the consciousness of others. In so doing we enter into their world of spiritual values – into their realm of faith – and experience this from the inside. Then we return enriched, bringing into our own world these values and a larger horizon of awareness.

I would like to illustrate with a personal experience the process of passing over and coming back. In 1956 I had the opportunity to spend some time with the Sioux Indians on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. I remember the day, while I was talking to a group of Sioux, when I felt my consciousness, as it were, extend itself out of my body and pass over into their consciousness. From that moment I felt I could see things from their perspective and experience their values from within their world. Also I could look back at my own world and see its values in a clearer light – but also its limitations! The insight of the moment grew over the following weeks. I became increasingly aware of human values that the Indians preserved and that we had lost: their love of the land, their organic harmony with nature, their strong tribal ties, their sense of time as a flowing process rather than a static continuum to be divided into endless schedules, their immersion in myth and ritual, whose language and dynamics they understood with a primordial wisdom. I perceived also their religious sensibility: their awareness of the presence of Wakan tanka, or God, in nature and in their lives. Nature as a whole was sacred to them, as was life in all its dimensions.

When the passing over becomes mutual, a very special spiritual process is activated. I believe this is sparked by the dialogue partners touching each other's faith at the very core of their spiritual centres. Perhaps the most striking example of this for me occurred in the yearly dialogues on Hinduism and Christianity held at St Bonaventure University in Western New York State. In planning this project we decided on a specific strategy. Instead of treating Christianity and Hinduism in a general way, we chose to focus on the bhakti, or love, tradition of Hinduism and the Franciscan tradition in Christianity. We knew in advance that there were many similarities, but all involved were surprised to discover the scope and depth of the similarities. We entitled the discussion 'The Spiritual Path of Love in Hinduism and in the Franciscan Tradition'. The common theme of love, the theistic meta-

physics, the doctrine of incarnation, and the varied techniques of practising devotion became clear in a new way in the comparison. Even the differences were clarified in the light of the common path of love. The Franciscans discovered in Hinduism a method of prayer remarkably similar to the meditations on the life of Christ which were developed in the medieval Franciscan milieu.

Although there is an advantage in choosing similar spiritual paths for dialogue, the strategy of selecting diverse paths can also be rich. I have found this to be the case in the ongoing dialogue I have had with R. Balasubramanian in preparation for a book we are jointly authoring entitled *Mysticism: Hinduism and Christian*. Although he is very familiar with the bhakti tradition in Hinduism, his own specialty and personal position is that of advaita or non-dualism. Although the dialogue does not overcome the basic differences in the positions, it does establish a relatedness through our mutual inquiry through faith.

#### *The global context*

So far I have been concentrating on the inner aspect of faith and spirituality. Now I would like to see things from a global perspective, for our experience of faith and of interreligious dialogue have been shaped by forces that have been building up for centuries – forces that are not regional but global. Let us, as it were, travel into outer space and like the astronauts look back at the earth as a whole.

From our astronaut's position, let us look back in history to another period when the world religions were fundamentally shaped into their present form. If we look at the earth from our distant vantage point during the first millennium BCE, we would observe a remarkable phenomenon. From the period between 800–200 BCE, peaking about 500 BCE, a striking transformation of consciousness occurred around the earth in three geographic regions, apparently without the influence of one on the other. If we look at China, we will see two great teachers, Lao-tze and Confucius, from whose wisdom emerged the schools of Chinese philosophy. In India the cosmic, ritualistic Hinduism of the Vedas was being transformed by the Upanishads, while the Buddha and Mahavira ushered in two new religious traditions. In the same geographic region, Zoroaster emerged in Persia describing the struggle between good and evil. If we turn our gaze farther west, we observe a similar development in the eastern Mediterranean region. In Israel the Jewish prophets – Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah – called forth from their people a new moral awareness. In Greece western philosophy was born. The pre-Socratic cosmologists sought a rational explanation for the

universe; Socrates awakened the moral consciousness of the Athenians; Plato and Aristotle developed metaphysical systems.

It was Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher, who some forty-five years ago pointed out the significance of this phenomenon in his book *The origin and goal of history*.<sup>4</sup> He called this period from 800–200 BCE the Axial Period because ‘it gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be’. It is here in this period ‘that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short, we may style this the “Axial Period”’. Although the leaders who effected this change were philosophers and religious teachers, the change was so radical that it affected all aspects of culture; for it transformed consciousness itself. It was within the horizons of this form of consciousness that the great civilizations of Asia, the Middle East and Europe developed.

What is this structure of consciousness and how does it differ from pre-Axial consciousness? Prior to the Axial Period the dominant form of consciousness was cosmic, collective, tribal, mythic and ritualistic. This is the characteristic form of consciousness of primal peoples. The consciousness of the tribal cultures was intimately related to the cosmos and to the fertility cycles of nature. Thus there was established a rich and creative harmony between primal peoples and the world of nature, a harmony which was explored, expressed and celebrated in myth and ritual.

The Axial Period ushered in a radically new form of consciousness. Whereas primal consciousness was tribal, Axial consciousness was individual. ‘Know thyself’ became the watchword of Greece; the Upanishads identified the *atman*, the transcendent centre of the self. The Buddha charted the way of individual enlightenment; the Jewish prophets awakened individual moral responsibility. This sense of individual identity, as distinct from the tribe and from nature, is the most characteristic mark of Axial consciousness. From this flow other characteristics: consciousness that is self-reflective, analytic, and that can be applied to nature in the form of scientific theories, to society in the form of social critique, to knowledge in the form of philosophy, to religion in the form of mapping an individual spiritual journey.

Although Axial consciousness brought many benefits, it involved loss as well. It severed the harmony with nature and the tribe. Axial persons were in possession of their own identity, it is true, but they had lost their organic relation to nature and community. They now ran the risk of being alienated from the matrix of being and life. With their new powers, they could criticize the social structure and by analysis discover

the abstract laws of science and metaphysics, but they might find themselves mere spectators of a drama of which in reality they were an integral part.

The emergence of Axial consciousness was decisive for religions, since it marked the divide in history where the major religions emerged and separated themselves from their primal antecedents. The great religions of the world as we know them today are the product of the Axial Period. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Judaism took shape in their classical form during this period; and Judaism provided the base for the later emergence of Christianity and Islam.

### *The Second Axial Period*

If we shift our gaze from the first millennium BCE to the eve of the twenty-first century, we can discern another transformation of consciousness. It is so profound and far-reaching that I call it the Second Axial Period. Like the first it is happening simultaneously around the earth, and like the first it will shape the horizon of consciousness for future centuries. Not surprisingly, too, it will have great significance for world religions, which were constituted in the First Axial Period. However, the new form of consciousness is different from that of the First Axial Period. Then it was individual consciousness, now it is global consciousness.

In order to understand better the forces at work in the Second Axial Period, I would like to draw from the thought of the palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In the light of his research in evolution, he charted the development of consciousness from its roots in the geosphere and biosphere and into the future. In a process which he calls 'planetization', he observed that a shift in the forces of evolution had occurred over the past hundred years. This shift is from divergence to convergence. When human beings first appeared on this planet, they clustered together in family and tribal units, forming their own group identity and separating themselves from other tribes. In this way humans diverged, creating separate nations and a rich variety of cultures. However, the spherical shape of the earth prevented unlimited divergence. With the increase in population and the rapid development of communication, groups could no longer remain apart. After dominating the process for millennia, the forces of divergence have been superseded by those of convergence. This shift to convergence is drawing the various cultures into a single planetized community. Although we have been conditioned by thousands of years of divergence, we now have no other course open to us but to co-operate creatively with the forces of convergence as these are drawing us toward global consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

According to Teilhard this new global consciousness will not level all differences among peoples; rather it will generate what he calls creative unions in which diversity is not erased but intensified. His understanding of creative unions is based on his general theory of evolution and the dynamic which he observes throughout the universe. From the geosphere to the biosphere to the realm of consciousness, a single process is at work, which he articulates as the law of 'complexity-consciousness' and 'union differentiates'. 'In any domain,' he says, 'whether it be the cells of a body, the members of a society or the elements of a spiritual synthesis – *union differentiates*.'<sup>6</sup> From subatomic particles to global consciousness, individual elements unite in what Teilhard calls centre to centre unions. By touching each other at the creative core of their being, they release new energy which leads to more complex units. Greater complexity leads to greater interiority which, in turn, leads to more creative unions. Throughout the process, the individual elements do not lose their identity, but rather deepen and fulfil it through union. At this point of history, because of the shift from divergence to convergence, the forces of planetization are bringing about an unprecedented complexification of consciousness through the convergence of cultures and religions.

In the light of Teilhard's thought, then, we can better understand the meeting of religions on the eve of the twenty-first century. The world religions are the product of the First Axial Period and the forces of divergence. Although in the first millennium BCE, there was a common transformation of consciousness, it occurred in diverse geographical regions within already differentiated cultures. In each case the religion was shaped by this differentiation in its origin, and developed along differentiated lines. This produced a remarkable richness of spiritual wisdom, of spiritual energies and of religious-cultural forms to express, preserve and transmit this heritage. Now that the forces of divergence have shifted to convergence, the religions must meet each other in centre to centre unions, discovering what is most authentic in each other, releasing creative energy toward a more complexified form of religious consciousness.

This global consciousness, complexified through the meeting of cultures and religions, is only one characteristic of the Second Axial Period. The consciousness of this period is global in another sense: namely, in rediscovering its roots in the earth. At the very moment when the various cultures and religions are meeting each other and creating a new global community, our life on the planet is being threatened. The very tools which we have used to bring about this convergence –



industrialization and technology – are undercutting the biological support system that sustains life on our planet. The future of consciousness, or even life on the earth, is shrouded in a cloud of uncertainty by the pollution of our environment, the depletion of natural resources, the unjust distribution of wealth, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons. Unless the human community reverses these destructive forces, we may not survive far into the twenty-first century.

The human race as a whole – all the diverse cultures and the religions – must face these problems squarely. In this Second Axial Period we must rediscover the dimensions of consciousness of the spirituality of the primal peoples of the pre-Axial Period. As we saw, this consciousness was collective and cosmic, rooted in the earth and the life cycles. We must rapidly appropriate that form of consciousness or perish from the earth. However, I am not suggesting a romantic attempt to live in the past, rather that the evolution of consciousness proceeds by way of recapitulation. Having developed self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness in the First Axial Period, we must now, while retaining these values, reappropriate and integrate into that consciousness the collective and cosmic dimensions of the pre-Axial consciousness. We must recapture the unity of tribal consciousness by seeing humanity as a single tribe. And we must see this single tribe related organically to the total cosmos. This means that the consciousness of the twenty-first century will be global from two perspectives: (1) from a horizontal perspective, cultures and religions are meeting each other on the surface of the globe, entering into creative encounters that will produce a complexified collective consciousness; (2) from a vertical perspective, they must plunge their roots deep into the earth in order to provide a stable and secure base for future development. This new global consciousness must be organically ecological, supported by structures that will ensure justice and peace. In the Second Axial Period this twofold global consciousness is not only a creative possibility to enhance the twenty-first century; it is an absolute necessity if we are to survive.<sup>7</sup>

This, I believe, is the larger spiritual process in which interreligious dialogue is emerging and in which faith can best be explored. This is a global process, leading to global spirituality. In the light of this process we must assimilate our past critically and creatively; and we must share the resources of our faith with others and at the same time be enriched by them. To enter this process calls for not only great spiritual depth but penetrating discernment into the similarities and differences among religions and the complex modes of their interrelatedness. It calls for a new wisdom which will discover that the human race is on a common

spiritual journey, and that it is been on this common journey since the time of its origin.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978- ); World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985- ).

<sup>2</sup> From the brochure entitled 'Advance Information'; the first paragraph cited appears in the preface to each volume of the series.

<sup>3</sup> John S. Dunne, *The way of all the earth: experiments in truth and religion* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1978), p ix.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The origin and goal of history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 1.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The phenomenon of man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p 242.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p 262.

<sup>7</sup> For a more extensive treatment of my understanding of the First and Second Axial Periods, see my book *Christ of the 21st century* (Rockport, Massachusetts; Shaftesbury, Dorset; Milton, Brisbane: Element, 1992).