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MARIO I. AGUILAR

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Towards a Christian-Buddhist Dialogue

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Church, Liberation and World Religions: Towards a Christian-Buddhist Dialogue

Mario I. Aguilar

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This book is dedicated to Glenda Tello
*Fortiter in re, suaviter in modo [memento] coelum
non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt*

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Mario I. Aguilar
St Andrews, February 2012

INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN BUDDHIST DIALOGUE

The visit of the fourteenth Dalai Lama to the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky (United States of America) in July 1996 triggered the imagination of a Christian world that seems to be forever challenged by the developments of modernity, postmodernity and globalization.¹ The visit of the Dalai Lama to the tomb of Thomas Merton, monk and scholar, continued their own previous encounter in India in 1968 and it was a sign of a dialogue that had already started 28 years earlier in Dharamsala, India.² On that occasion, the fourteenth Dalai Lama arrived in a helicopter amid tight security to take part in an event of East–West monastic dialogue organized by the organization Monastic Interreligious Dialogue.³ While visiting Merton’s grave and after a period of meditation sitting on the ground, accompanied by Abbott Timothy Kelly OCSO, the Dalai Lama said ‘I am now in touch with his spirit’.⁴

These experiences and any interest in Christian–Buddhist dialogue seem to be at first an isolated event; however, at least a Roman Catholic experience of this kind of dialogue has been growing since the openings provided by the Second Vatican Council (see Chapter 1). In fact, while less publicized by the media, Christian or otherwise, the experiences of Christian–Buddhist dialogue and indeed the experiences of Christian dialogue with other world religions seems to be more common than suspected and it has not been confined to the Roman Catholic Church only. Thus, it is a fact that while the Roman Catholic Church implemented instances of dialogue after the end of Vatican II, the World Council of Churches (WCC) also explored avenues of dialogue with other world religions.

The WCC fostered a consultation on inter-faith dialogue in Ajaltoun, Lebanon, in 1970 (16–25 March). Those participating were three Hindus, four Buddhists, twenty-eight Christians (including five members of staff of the WCC) and three Muslims; in all representing seventeen countries. Margrethe Brown of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations of the United Presbyterian Church (United States of America) who reported on this meeting finished her report with a challenging comment: ‘It is evident that we have by no means exhausted our understanding of the nature of the Church.’ Shortly after, the WCC started a programme entitled ‘Dialogue with People of Living Faiths’. Following such a programme delegates meeting at

the Nairobi Assembly in 1975 commented on a section of the programme's document entitled 'Seeking Community' which in turn called for new ways to relate to other religions by building a community across barriers of a religious nature. It is important to note that European delegates present at the meeting rejected the idea while delegates from the southern hemisphere were quite positive about these new developments.⁵ Real efforts did not prosper and other ecclesial concerns became part of the antics for the WCC's reshaping of the 1980s.

The Experience of Dialogue

As in the case of Christian and Buddhist monks meeting at the Abbey of Gethsemani interreligious dialogue seems a challenging and rewarding activity in which Christians and Buddhist practitioners share some commonality, conviviality and a sense of joy in their spiritual practices. However, this is certainly not the ordinary experience of most Christians despite the fact that dialogue with the world religions has become a more common experience among the Christian monastic orders. The sociopolitical bases for further religious dialogue are there but social conflict and mistrust sometimes bring the same attitudes to Christians who in fact should be at the centre of fostering dialogue within sectors of society even in the most difficult circumstances. The Church follows the same contradictions in that while she is at the centre of the task of bringing Good News, hope and love of a neighbour, she has also erred at times in keeping to herself and ministering only to those who are following the 'truth' as an exclusive and isolating discourse.

Nevertheless, the experience of globalization as a common search for understanding has been theologically nurtured by the contributions to a more inclusive world by well-known figures such as the fourteenth Dalai Lama (Tibet), Archbishop Desmond Tutu (South Africa), Bishop Oscar Romero (El Salvador) and Mother Teresa (Calcutta).⁶ These religious figures have been assumed as making a positive contribution to a world in which war, international tensions and the abuse of human rights have been significant since the hopeful moments of hope marked by the end of apartheid in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the military regimes in Latin America. I have expanded on the impact of these and other comparable religious and public figures in previous works arguing that there is a clear connection between contemplation as a personal spiritual dialogue and the effects of contemplation and prayer within human communities.⁷ Thus, I have suggested that Christians in their own lives and in their own spaces change structures of death into structures of life by nourishing with an ongoing process

of contemplation their daily contributions to the politics of human life and death.⁸ By contemplating God in the awareness of a political and human world every Christian and every follower of Christ acquires attitudes and sentiments of peace with God that in turn allow for a gentler and compassionate attitude towards others in daily life. Those 'others' include marginalized members of our own social communities, be they religious or political, and those who are very different in life and belief. After all, all human beings are equals in their dignity as the children of God, be they Christians or non-Christians alike.⁹ Thus, this re-creation of God's peace in dialogue and diversity becomes a common experience not only for contemplatives but also for Christian activists and political activists in general.¹⁰

In this work I explore some of the possible theological avenues for the churches' dialogue with the world religions and particularly with Buddhism. I argue for an ecclesiology of service and dialogue instead of one of magisterium and theological separation. I argue that dialogue is a work in progress, a daily movement towards an ongoing movement of service that includes a Christian dialogue with Buddhism as an active dialogue between Christians and Buddhists. I suggest that dialogue is an ongoing part of the self-reflection of a church open to the Spirit in the twenty-first century, a church that within the twentieth century confronted the possibility of a dialogue that had previously been negated by Vatican I with its emphasis on the primacy and centrality of the papacy during the nineteenth century.¹¹

The seminal documents on dialogue with other religions and a secularized world arose out of the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5). At Vatican II the fathers of the council and their advisors asked hard questions about the world, other religions and the possibilities of salvation, dialogue and the action of God in the world as a whole rather than the world as contained within the Catholic Church. In fact, the Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*, 28 October 1965) cannot be understood without looking closely at the church's relocation of herself within the world through the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965) and the reaffirmation of the centrality of human dignity (*Humanae Personae Dignitatem*, 28 August 1968).¹²

John Hick has correctly argued that the occasions for dialogue between people of one faith and another increased within the late twentieth century; however, he also poignantly argued that there is a following step in all dialogue: 'dialogue between people who accept the genuine religious equality of the other, so that they can then benefit freely from one another's distinctive spiritual insights and be free to join together in facing the massive social and economic and political problems of the world'.¹³

Theological Suggestions

This work outlines some of the possibilities for dialogue, that is theological, prophetic and social, particularly the possibilities of a Christian dialogue with Buddhism. Historical aspects of dialogue (or the absence of it) with Islam and Judaism are also explored; such dialogue should be easier because of the common tenet that a Creator God exists. This has not always been an easy dialogue despite the fact that it is a truism to affirm that any dialogue centred on the goodness of God is good and necessary as a central tenet for any religious dialogue. To suggest the tenets of a religious or non-religious dialogue with Buddhism is another matter because Buddhism as a philosophical and religious system does not adhere to a belief in God.¹⁴ Thus, Buddhism does not uphold a belief in a God that creates the world or human life or a God that judges a person at the end of a life or biological span. In theological terms Buddhism does not have doctrines that relate creation or eschatology to human life or death. Further, Buddhists believe in reincarnation and a cycle of life that continues through several human biological cycles based on principles of human suffering, the possibility of human enlightenment and the power of the mind to control the senses in order to perceive human and animal life as common and closely related. In these tenets of philosophical understanding Hinduism and Buddhism continue to be closely related.¹⁵

These reflections and theological investigations are marked by my personal experience as a Roman Catholic, as a theologian and a contemplative hermit living a call to prayer and inter-religious dialogue within the Benedictine tradition of the Camaldolese Benedictines.¹⁶ The Camaldolese Constitution expresses this desire for communion and dialogue with other world religions as follows:

The whole world is aware of a new ecumenical climate which is creating, or enhancing the condition for dialogue among believers of the great living faiths. Catholics, Christians of other confessions, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and all persons of good will are seeking new ways of growing in the truth and in communion.¹⁷

Such *koinonia* between the different faiths and religions is only a reflection of the communion between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the fact that God is Love (1 Jn 4.8, 17).¹⁸ Thus, this work presupposes an experience of Church and it is aimed at an experience of dialogue that arises out of a Christian experience within the Church fostered by theaggiornamento of the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council. It argues for a return to the spirit of Vatican II: a spirit of openness to the possible surprises of God's action in the world. It is a theological exploration that discusses critically the attempts by Pope Benedict XVI's to

problematize the nature of churches to the detriment of years of inter-faith dialogue by the Catholic Church. I refer here to the publication of *Dominus Jesus* in the year 2000 by Cardinal Ratzinger, later to become Pope Benedict XVI. *Dominus Jesus* deals with the relation of the Catholic Church with other churches and other religions and strongly suggests that other faiths and other churches are imperfect and incomplete in relation to the Catholic Church. In the words of Leonardo Boff there exists in this document a 'Roman Catholic fundamentalism' as the document puts forward the view that 'the Roman Catholic Church is the only Church of Christ'.¹⁹

This work argues that dialogue with the world religions presupposes that, as outlined by Erik Borgman, 'theology has always had to deal with the fact that its object – for classical theology that is God – is beyond comprehension in our limited attempts to rationalize reality'.²⁰ It is with this somehow limited understanding of a supra-reality that the experience of dialogue does not become normative or authoritative but an expression of a wider conversation about divine dialogues and human manifestations. This sense of a wider protocol of religious significance challenges any exclusion or exclusivity in the religious imagination and adheres to an ever-increasing exploration of the world religions assuming the Church as not being the religious norm but as a partner of human and divine realities. This work argues that dialogue does not come from seeking mutual understandings; instead it assumes mutual differences in answering questions, or better in asking questions, about the beginning and the end of one's life. These questions remain human questions that aided with a theological reflection point to a God who loves all human beings equally and offers grace, freely given, to all, within and without the Church.

Human Dialogue and Ecclesial Experience

In his assessment of the dialogue with other religions forwarded by Vatican II Donald Nicholl has argued that 'the fact is that inter-faith experience for most human beings is something strange and almost entirely unprecedented'.²¹ All human beings as human beings are nurtured and nourished by a particular family, group, society and state with customs, ideas and common understandings that become assumed as 'truths' – be they sociocultural, historical or religious. The family becomes the unit of divine manifestation and the 'truths' passed unto the children a way of life for them throughout their lives.²² Thus, social and cultural truths become personal truths to be reaffirmed against other beliefs, other cultural truths and other mores. This passing on of truths is a classical Christian theological vision that creates a notion of a Church that teaches, leads the way and is the recipient of divine and human truths.

This vision of a church at the centre of the world evolved over centuries and was not there within the early Church. For at the start, under the Roman persecution and the Greek influences on the churches founded by the apostle Paul, the followers of Christ were part of a movement labelled the Way within the Acts of the Apostles. The movement was small and the followers had to navigate the tensions with a Jewish cultural tradition, the possibilities of knowing and gnosis in a Greek world and the challenges of a Roman imperial religion based on the emperor and not on the Christ. Within this period of encounter by Christ's followers Christian churches showed certain diversity and were not able to exercise any religious or political power over others. Thus, Leonardo Boff has clearly argued that the beginnings of the church, what he calls the 'ecclesio-genesis', carried with it a diversified ecclesial tension between the local churches and their cultural milieu that was rather different than the growing centralized political and social influence exercised by Christianity later on. From the fourth century onwards Christianity became the official religion of the empire of Constantine and later of Europe as well as the religion of the colonies of European colonial powers in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

This situation of Christian establishment was to prevail until the 1960s when a changing and evermore secularized Europe started to challenge the primacy of a Church centred in her, be the church reformed or non-reformed in doctrine and practice. As a result, the Roman Catholic Church which for centuries had proclaimed the dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (there is no salvation outside the Church) found herself challenged by John XXIII's call for an ecumenical council and for the establishment of a church of the poor in 1959. As a result, the advent of the Second Vatican Council opened the Catholic Church to the world not for the first time but certainly at a level of doctrinal hermeneutics in which the world outside the church was seen as positive and creative. Thus, the Catholic Church expressed a very concrete desire of being associated with all human beings and their lives. After all and within this fresh reflection on the world, the Catholic Church recognized that God is associated with all human beings through the very act of creation.

Within this refreshed conciliar reflection religious values and customs remain as signs of a person's human dignity, a person created by God and affirmed by natural rights so that according to *Dignitatis Humanae* 'this right of the human person to religious freedom must be given such recognition in the constitutional order of society as will make it a civil right'.²³ The language of Vatican II opened a reflection towards equality and human dignity within and without the church with clear consequences for intra-religious dialogue and the dialogue with those who profess other faiths and no faith at all. For Vatican II religious, civil and natural rights become interconnected and theological premises inform

a Christian community immersed with a diversity and variety of beliefs united under the umbrella of 'the people of God'.²⁴

The results of this pastoral shift undertaken by the fathers of the council did not change the 'Catholic truths' about God and human beings but allowed for a God-centric emphasis within the Catholic Church. Within this ecclesologically refreshed option God's plan of salvation could be inclusive of other faiths while the Christian option remained Christ-centred in the Church with a Christ in dialogue with all and who embraces different human and spiritual realities. God did not change but the social position of a church evolved from the monarchic institution of Pious XII to the 'church of the poor' of John XXIII and the servant church of Vatican II and Paul VI. While Vatican II took place before the 1968 student riots in Paris, the escalation of the Vietnam War and the secularization of Europe, Vatican II prepared the Catholic Church to be open to the 'signs of the times' and open to a servant dialogue with other faiths and non-faiths searching for the humbleness of a servant church rather than the centrality of a monarchical church.

I have, somewhere else, expanded ideas on the humbleness of a theologian who instead of upholding sacred truths that cannot be further understood examines changes and human realities of understanding and allows for a reflection that encourages inter-religious dialogue rather than exclusion.²⁵ Within this renewed theological work, sets of theological premises uphold within the centrality of dialogue creating the possibility of a common conversation with other faiths and those who profess no faith at all. Within this framework of a Christian-Buddhist dialogue the possibility of a pastoral kindness towards other religions exists. Nevertheless, theological dialogue does not take place when examining creation and eschatology.

Fifty years after Vatican II I would argue that there is now a need to conceptualize those attempts at a theological dialogue. Theology, understood as 'faith seeking understanding', has many tasks and one of them is to foster dialogue between those created in the image of God. If for some theologians the study and reflection on doctrine and tradition is their main theological task, I am more minded to argue with John McDade that the task of theology 'is not to update a previously constituted body of truth – interpretative hermeneutics is insufficient – but to articulate present experiences so that they stand in a creative and critical relationship to the tradition'.²⁶

The articulation of present experiences gives the possibility of a theological reflection on the relation between the Church as instrument of liberation from sin and oppression, from injustice and poverty and from personal greed, and the other world religions as sources of eschatological thinking and ethical acting in return. Jesus Christ liberates from sin, sickness and darkness sharing with the Lord Buddha the possibility of the centrality of a metaphysic reflection