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Encounter with Other Religions

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Encounter with Other Religions

Theological conditions for journeying toward the truth of faith and the revelation to salvation

For many centuries Catholics held the so-called exclusivistic position (“outside the church there is no salvation”). You can add the Protestant variation: “Outside Christianity there is no salvation.” This is still cultivated partially in a mission perspective – though not any longer so notoriously under post-colonial conditions.

In the end the inclusivist positions nevertheless patronize a higher Christian understanding with regard to other faith traditions (Hans Küng and Walter J. Hollenweger, for example, despite their dialogical openness). The phrase of Karl Rahner calling people of other religions *anonymous Christians* is as well-known as problematic. The main obstacle with the inclusivist position lies in the Christological demands imposed on other faith traditions even when they are expressed in good form (according to whether it is the “strict” or “soft” form of inclusivism). Inclusivism continues to consider it obligatory to maintain the superiority of Christianity, because otherwise the others will not need the cross and resurrection of Christ for their salvation.

On the other hand, a (Christian) theology of religious pluralism, attempts to recognize the validity of each religious tradition and would accept them as independent paths to salvation. Paul Schwanenau, a theologian who passed away in November, 2006, formulated it this way: “All religions need one another, not only in what they have in common but also in their differences. In this way they complement one another. In our own religion we want to feel we are in our own home, and in the other religion we want to feel we are guests, not strangers.”

Taking up this attitude of dialogue leads us to abandon the idea that the other is a stranger, and through encounter, becomes aware of

what is held in common and what differentiates us without this becoming an obstacle for the different paths to salvation. Besides, encounter happens all the time between human beings. Its way of taking place is often a more precise indicator than the theology or philosophy. The more one insists on dogmatic positions, the more difficult it is to have a peaceful encounter leading to a good relationship between religions.

The pluralist positions of religions as forums, not in the sense of a faith according to my tastes, but in order to make it easier to go beyond the borders and experience in that way a mutual enrichment. We have to deliberately awaken an awareness of tolerance and reconciliation among religions. To that end, the following theses might help:

- Dialogue can only take place between equals.
- *Absolute claims* by any religion (including Christianity) can only be valid within that faith itself. Inclusivist proposals—whether explicit or hidden—that consider other traditions as inferior, are not allowed, nor are inclusivist positions. This includes considering, for example, others as “anonymous,” whether Christian, Buddhist or Muslims.
- The understanding of *mission* (especially in the Christian faith) must therefore be interpreted in the sense of personal testimony and engagement without trying to convert the other to one’s own expression of faith.
- The different religions do not express the ultimate truth. They are linguistic, ritual, and spiritual approaches to the transcendent. Their message is temporary in nature, and requires revisions.
- Religions form part of various cultures and different ways of thinking. Therefore they have to be understood as different ways to salvation.
- No religion can live in a globalized world for itself, but only in relation with others. Interreligious encounter is therefore at the same time a challenge and an enrichment. In other words, the other religious views are necessary in the sense of complementing one another.

Reinhard KIRSTE

Interreligiöse Arbeitsstelle (INTR°A), Germany

www.interrel.de