The Meaning of Interreligious Dialogue

The gift of God in Christ, the Gospel message, is meant for all people and the Church is sent to the entire world to communicate this message. The need for the Church to communicate with all people in the world calls for dialogue, for it is through dialogue that one can establish a genuine exchange between the Church and the world.¹ As the Word of God is best understood when it is spoken in relation to the word of humankind for whom it was meant, the Church has the responsibility to listen to the people of the world as they speak from their life and experience rooted in their socio-cultural and religious traditions. The effectiveness of the communication of the Gospel message depends in part on the Church’s awareness and response to their religious meanings and questions.

The inadequacy of monologue for communication is borne out by experience. The effectiveness of communication must certainly be judged at least in part by the hearer’s response in his own terms. It is useless to complain about the theological and religious illiteracy of the people themselves, for any method of communication has to take into account the meanings that people bring and see to it that they understand the message properly in the light of their ability to communicate in their own words. Monological communication is doomed to failure as it is not responsive to the patterns of experience and understanding to which people are accustomed when they are to receive the message. In monological communication the speaker is so preoccupied with himself that he loses touch with his listeners and becomes blind to their needs and to their search for meaning.

Besides, monologue arises from the false assumption that we know all and that we have only to declare it to others in order to tell people what we think they ought to know. Further, monologue implies a closed mind and supposes that our way of thinking and experiencing is the only way and the best way, and thus prevents any in-take from others. On the contrary, the dialogical word is an open word, a word of expectation inviting response. In speaking the word of

¹ Howe 1969 contains profound insights on dialogue. This book gives excellent indications as to how to achieve true dialogue in families, the Church, and even the international arena. The chief concern of the book is expressed in his statement that it is imperative that a Christian be a dialogical person through whom the Word that gives life is spoken.
dialogue a person puts himself at the service of others and becomes the servant of God. It is a word in relation, giving meaning and eliciting meaning, conveying understanding and receiving understanding, removing all barriers of meaning and understanding in the meeting of minds, in the meeting of life-situations. It is an interpersonal word, deriving its power not merely from what is spoken but from what is borne out in life, life corresponding to truth and truth drawing its power from life. As the dialogical partner becomes the servant of truth, he becomes the servant of God; as he experiences God's communion with the other, he is constrained to communion with others. The meeting of human being with human being involves an implicit meeting with God. As Martin Buber puts it, "In each Thou we address the eternal Thou" (Buber 1958: 63).

The dialogical approach in preaching as well as in all other activities of the Church has been explained time and again in the documents of the Vatican II and more fully elaborated by Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical Ecclesiæm Suam.² The post-conciliar Church has reflected much on the issue of interreligious dialogue which raises many important questions.³ What is happening on the religious frontier today which invites a religious dialogue? What in fact have people of other faiths to offer? Is it in any way different from what Christians in the past have conceived it to be? If the essence of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel message and not to promote a certain form of spiritual experience which would be added to those the world already knows, what is the exact role of interreligious dialogue in such a perspective? (Visser't Hooft 1964: 156). On what ground, theological or otherwise, should the Church express a greater ap-
precipitation of other faiths? These questions engage Christian thinkers in a responsible manner and it is in this context that the problem of relationship between religious dialogue and evangelization arises. The Christian engagement on the religious frontier is threefold: the prospect of co-operation with people of other faiths to promote justice and peace in the world; the engagement in communication or witness to the Gospel message; and the engagement in religious dialogue. The last two engagements and their mutual relationship are the main points of this essay.

The Meaning of Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is a coming together of two persons or groups of different religions as religiously committed persons with the view of enriching, deepening and broadening their own religious life through mutual understanding of one another’s convictions and witness. Dialogue involves a serious and genuine address and response between two persons or more, in the process of which the being and truth of each is encountered by the being and truth of the other. The two partners of dialogue try to enter into significant relationship with each other, i.e., to communicate between themselves. In any process of communication there is a flow of meaning between two parties in spite of all the obstacles which may prevent such a relationship. Dialogue is an attempt to communicate, to explain, to enlighten, to understand (Aagaard 1969: 133ff.).

Dialogue is an intensely personal activity and is the means of achieving personal existence for human beings. As Martin Buber puts it:

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some thing for their object .... But the realm of Thou has a different basis. When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every It is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others. But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds. When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation. (Buber 1958: 4)

The personal relationship that is established between two human beings is further explained by him as follows:

4 Dialogue is a meeting of the being and truth of one with that of the other because dialogue is a positive effort to attain a deeper understanding of the truth through mutual awareness of one another’s convictions and witnessing.

5 ‘Relation’ is a key word in Buber’s terminology; it is not an epistemological generality but bears a characteristic and specific sense. Relation is properly applicable in the case of the second primary word only, I-Thou; It-It is the relation of subject-object in the realm of knowledge, and not properly a relation in the full sense.
The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*. The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* makes its appearance as individuality and becomes conscious of itself as subject (of experiencing and using). The *I* of the primary word *I-It* makes its appearance as person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity (without a dependent genitive). Individuality makes its appearance by being differentiated from other individualities. A person makes his appearance by entering into relation with other persons. The one is a spiritual form of natural detachment, the other the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connexion. (Buber 1958: 62)

The action of dialogue is one in which a person not only makes himself available to others but also becomes conscious of others as persons. Hence, dialogue implies complete openness and trust in order that a real meeting of meaning and understanding can take place between the two partners. In such a relationship the participants experience the other as other and both communicate and learn. Each dialogic partner speaks out his convictions to the other who has different convictions of his own with genuine interest in them (Davies 1967: 28-29).

The partners make a sincere effort to listen and learn; to seek for meaning and to try to understand the truth and life of the other in openness and mutual trust. This process of communication in dialogue is not easy, for there can be mental and psychological barriers which hinder communication. We shall outline a very common pattern of misunderstanding which may arise not merely from lack of clarity in expressing oneself but also from one’s misevaluation of what is taking place when two people are talking together (Roethilsberger 1962: 41-46). Misevaluation of the process of communication consists of certain assumptions that create barriers to communication such as these: that what is taking place is something essentially logical; that words in themselves apart from the people involved mean something; that the purpose of the interaction is to get someone to see things from one’s own point of view. These assumptions create a chain reaction of perceptions and negative feelings which block communication. On the contrary the factors that facilitate communication are the following assumptions: that what is taking place in a dialogue is an interaction of reason and sentiment; that the person more than his words means something; that the object of the interaction is to give the other person an opportunity to express freely his differences. Because of these factors a chain reaction of perceptions and feelings in favour of communication is engendered and a reciprocal relationship is established. In the first case a person’s individual uniqueness is being denied; his integrity put in peril, he becomes defensive and even belligerent. In the second case the person feels himself understood and accepted as a person; hence he expresses his own views freely and sees the partner as a source of help. Thus it becomes evident that the partner’s capacity and willingness to see and accept points of view different from his own in a face-to-face relationship are essential to personal communication. The biggest block to personal communication is
one's inability to listen intelligently, understandingly and skilfully to another person.

Having explained the obstacles to communication, now we shall distinguish the different types of communication (Condon 1966: 87-107). (a) When we say something and something happens as the result of our speaking, then our communication is instrumental in causing this event to happen. For example, “Shut the door,” and the door is then shut. Some statements are instrumental in intent or effect, without being phrased as such. For example, “The food needs salt.” That is, one may request salt directly or one may comment that the food needs salt and thus indirectly be instrumental. We can call this instrumental communication. (b) We can also communicate merely to inform someone about something; it is the case of the most neutral exchanges of information, of messages without intent to be instrumental. For example, “The next train leaves at 10 p.m.” We can call this type informative or transmitting communication. (c) The non-affective language of fact and description or the language of clear and explicit requests is not sufficient in interpersonal communications. Delicate feelings, desires, wishes are expressed or hinted at with the attitude of the whole person who is speaking. We can call this affective communication, for it is based on love or emotional feelings of the speaker towards the other person. It is also a convincing communication, for a person may not do what he is asked to do directly; he could see reasons that he might not be able to accept. What is implied in affective language is that affective communications in a variety of situations 'move' the listener in a way that a direct request would not. (d) Finally, in communication there are certain relations which pass between persons which are more than words. These are cues, hints, suggestions, that indicate how the spoken words are to be understood or interpreted. These communications about communication can be called meta-communication cues. Vocal inflections, gestures and circumstances provide cues for interpreting the message correctly; these cues may reinforce, alter or nuance the meaning of the words used; sometimes they may even contradict what the words seem to mean. Another function of this meta-communication is that of feedback; namely, the speaker is able to detect the reactions of the listener which are non-verbal.

Dialogue as communication is not just an exchange of informative facts or certain ideas but is concerned with humankind’s fundamental convictions about life and death and about humanity’s place in the universe. Religious dialogue as communication is concerned with a common witness to God, with our relationship of dependence on and love to him. Each partner in this dialogue desires to communicate to the other what is specific and personal in his own religious experience and desires to hear from the other his authentic religious experience with great respect and sympathy. Not that ideas are unimportant, but they are not decisive.

Interreligious dialogue is of the nature of affective communication. We can say that love is to dialogue what blood is to the body. The body dies when there
is no flow of blood; so also, when love stops, dialogue ends. When dialogue ends, if not hate and resentment, certainly, isolation and exclusivity will result. In fact, it is the relationship of love involved in the dialogue that brings together people of two different religious convictions in a meaningful personal relation. The basis of communication is a shared feeling. And failure of communication is ultimately due to lack of common feeling or experience to share. Once people begin to love one another, they will want to explore each other's minds and share their experiences. It is through love that one gains a deeper knowledge of another person and enables him to penetrate more deeply into the secrets of the other person. Authentic religious truths are manifested in persons and not in abstract propositions and it is through eyes of love and empathy that one discovers that the dialogic partner does not merely communicate his religious message but that he is his message. As A.D. Lindsay remarks,

The question as to the nature of justice was one which it was natural for Socrates to ask, and impossible for him to answer ... And so Plato has given the Republic this curious form, because he believed that Socrates in his person and his life offered the real answer to the questions he propounded, and which his teaching never solved. (Lindsay 1950: XV, XVI)

In other words, if dialogue is determined by affective communication, it addresses itself to the very being of humanity and as such it is bound to result in insights that might be missed otherwise.

This personal relationship expressed in love between the partners is essential to dialogue and hence we must say that interfaith dialogue involves religious persons rather than religious systems. Systems of belief provide subject matter for discussion and conversation but it is living faith that makes an encounter. In brief, it is in the experience of love between the two religious partners that serious attempts can be made to empathize and get inside another religion (Young 1970: 169ff.). Terms like religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Primitive Religions, etc., should be understood concretely in the sense of historical-cumulative tradition and the personal faith of men and women who follow these religions. Attempts to describe religious experience in terms of an impersonal identity called religion miss the personal element of faith (Smith 1962 and 1964). As religious phenomena imply experience and expression, one must be sensitive to the particular character of the individual's involvement as he expresses himself in prayer, ritual or social responsibility. This does not mean that we have to ignore the religious systems. We have to note that it is not certain that even intelligent and well-instructed believers are fully acquainted with their own faith or understand it sufficiently. However imperfect the ideas of religious systems, we need them as valuable tools at hand.

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6 See Howe 1969: 3f. On personalism in dialogue, see Buber 1947 and 1965; in these two studies he presents his most important and recent ideas on dialogue.
Intimately connected with the personal aspect of dialogue is the respect for the partner as he is and as he believes. If the partner is by dialogue merely directed and used, he will be treated as a thing or object and not as a person. Partners are to be respected and valued for what they are in themselves. When we really try to know the other partners for what they are and to speak to them with respect and in all sincerity and honesty, then we are honouring them and inviting them to respond in a way that becomes a person; then only can we meet as persons in our communication. Any relationship, communication, even love that is not dialogical, will exploit and seek to appropriate, and will become consequently destructive.

It is also important to distinguish between dialogic principle and dialogic method (Howe 1969: 40ff.). The dialogic principle or the principle of dialogue consists in one’s openness to the other partner and willingness not only to speak but also to hear and to be changed by what one hears, if necessary. The dialogic method is the servant of the principle and can take many different forms: individual encounters, discussion in a study centre, lecture in the form of dialogue; in brief, any method by which one partner is attentive to and activates the meanings of the other in relation to what he is saying. But at times the group process could take place in the form of manipulating people cleverly into a predetermined point of view; though such a process might look like a dialogue, it is actually only a form of brain-washing.