

Contemplation and Interreligious Connections: Hope for Peace

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An address delivered to the Community Prayer Breakfast of the Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues, November 2, 2006

I am honored to be invited to speak to this Community Prayer Breakfast of the Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues. I believe strongly in interfaith dialogue and cooperation and have taken an active role in both throughout my career. Every day my heart overflows with thanks to the Eternal God that my career in teaching began with the installation of Angelo Roncalli as Pope John XXIII in 1958 and has continued through this era of ever-widening ecumenism which his advent prefigured. I cannot address the topic I have chosen to speak about, however, without acknowledging also my indebtedness to Thomas Merton--monk, poet, prophet--for the basic perspective which I will share with you. I took the first students I taught church history to the Abbey of Gethsemani on November 7, 1960--not to meet him, whose name I barely knew, but to expose students to the middle ages. Merton was our bonus. From that day onward, he and I set out on an ecumenical pilgrimage. At the start I may have been a little ahead of Tom, but he quickly took the lead and charted a path for interfaith dialogue and cooperation which I have sought increasingly to follow since his untimely death December 10, 1968.

A Realistic Hope?

You may wonder whether there is anything more than fantasy or superficial optimism in the title of my address this morning, for the world's religions, especially the Abrahamic faiths, seem to represent more the problem than the solution today.

Everywhere you look, you can see Jews, Christians, and Muslims at war with one another. Just a couple of months ago, Israelis waged a fierce battle to rid southern Lebanon of the Muslim Hezbollah; daily they fend off attacks of Hamas in their own land and in the West Bank. The United States and a handful of allies with at least nominally Christian credentials pursue a deadly and ill-advised war for the Americanization of Iraq, while Shiite and Sunni militias slaughter a hundred or more fellow Muslims a day in an uncivil war. In Afghanistan, meantime, the Taliban, who gave aid and comfort to Osama bin Laden, are making a comeback against allied Christian forces headed by the U.S. Nigeria is a tinderbox of tensions between Muslims and Christians ready to be ignited by the slightest spark.

I can appreciate any pessimism you may hold, but I think a few things can be said in favor of some hope as to what our religions can do to bring an end to these conflicts. First, being at the center of the problem not only puts these religions in a place where they *can* address the problem but where, if humankind is to survive, they *must* address the problem. We cannot stand by and “Tsk! Tsk!” as if none of this had anything to do with us. We *are* the problem! And we had darn well better start trying to figure out *how* and *why*, so we can come up with something which will do things that make for peace.

Now I happen to believe, secondly, that, all of the faults of our faiths notwithstanding, the world’s religions do possess in themselves some inherent qualities, nay, I would say *energies*, which can and should bring an end to these disastrous conflicts. *Shalom*, *eirene*, and *Islam* are central to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith. On his eightieth birthday just after the Second Vatican Council ended, Arnold Toynbee, the great metahistorian, perceived a “new spirit of mutual charity and appreciation”

among the world's religions which put them on track to help human beings achieve their "quest of ultimate spiritual reality."¹ Were they to succeed, he believed, the religions would help humankind avert the grave crisis brought on by technology run amok and not subordinated to a higher purpose. "The higher religions alone can help [hu]mankind save itself from itself by helping it to regain contact with the ultimate spiritual reality which is the ground of being and the source of salvation. . . . The change of heart is the heart of the matter."²

Against the backdrop of all the conflicts going on around our world today it would appear that "the new spirit of mutual charity and appreciation" Toynbee spoke about has withered and died. It may well have done so for some. Perhaps it never existed for many. But I would contend that it is alive and well *despite* the guns and bombs and suicide bombers. It is alive and well in groups such as you who have convened here on November 2, 2006. We gather in assemblies such as this in order that we can share our knowledge and insight into the lapsing of energies for peace in our faiths, and we gather in assemblies such as this in order that we can generate new energies which can change our relationships and our world. In an address given at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1965 Abraham J. Heschel said something which might serve as our point of constant reference:

I suggest that the most significant basis for meeting of men [and women] of different religious traditions is the level of fear and trembling, of humility and contrition, where our individual moments of faith are mere waves in the endless ocean of [hu]mankind's reaching out for God, where all formulations and

¹ Arnold Toynbee, *Experiences* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 330.

² *Ibid.*, 328.

articulations appear as understatements, where our souls are swept away by the awareness of the urgency of answering God's commandment, while stripped of pretension and conceit we sense the tragic insufficiency of human faith.³

In that statement I think we can perceive both the matrix of our problem and the beginning of a long road toward its solution.

Our Mere Waves in an Endless Ocean

Let us begin by confessing and acknowledging that we have not met one another in the way Abraham Heschel says we must meet--"at the level of fear and trembling, humility and contrition." I will not be so presumptuous as to speak for persons of other faiths on this, but I claim the right to speak as a Christian here to say with deep sorrow and sadness that, far to the contrary, we Christians have for centuries regarded and approached persons of other faiths--Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, the panoply--with arrogance and pride, absolutely sure we have a corner on the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth. From early centuries on, we have laid claim to a platinum-plated commission to spread our particular brand of faith throughout this whole vast orb called earth and even beyond should we discover human existence on other planets. Stating the perspective in a little crasser terms, we have framed a theology which depicted everybody who didn't believe what we believed plunging down a steeply graded chute on the way to an eternal hell. Only our kind would make it to heaven, the city whose architect and builder is God.

In pursuit of such a grand endeavor, our methods for spreading this "good news" have taken cruel and arrogant turns which tell us starkly how we have arrived at the awful set of circumstances in which we find ourselves today. To assure that people grasped our

³ Abraham J. Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XXI (1966), 122.

message aright, we have devised little “quiz shows” we have called “Inquisitions.” When these did not achieve sufficient results, we have mounted “Crusades,” initially against Christians who didn’t have faith right and then against more hardcore “infidels,” Muslims. Usually Jews got massacred as they happened in the path of crusading armies.

There is surely an awful irony in the word “crusade.” It had to do with taking up a Cross. The Cross symbolized the ultimate in humility. As the one time rabbi Saul, who became the Apostle Paul, put it, it meant to “have that mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus”—a servant mind, a humble mind, a self-giving mind which trusts God utterly and unreservedly (Phil 2:5-11). It symbolized God’s non-violent alternative. How ironic and tragic beyond all words that the Cross had come to signify God’s uncontrollable rage and judgment against any who did not believe what Christians believe! Small wonder Osama bin Laden constantly refers to Christians as “the crusaders” as he tries to stir antipathy toward predominantly Christian nations.

If I have portrayed accurately what has brought us to this point, I think we should be able to discern a mandatory step which each and every religious tradition must take if we have even a slight chance of becoming a part of the solution to the dire and deadly situation which now mires us down. We must confess together unequivocally that the God of this universe of more than 150 billion galaxies generates sufficient candlepower to provide light to every people and every religious group on the face of the earth. We may excuse ourselves *humanly* for thinking that others might have greater wisdom and insight if they saw things as we did, but, permit me to be dogmatic about this one thing, we *may* not and we *must* not and we *cannot* believe that the light of God is not adequate to light up any other faith but our own.

Just after the Second Vatican Council, Douglas Steere, a leading Quaker of the 20th century, proposed an approach to interfaith relations which we might find promising in our present tense circumstances. He entitled it “mutual irradiation.” He observed, as I think we will agree, that three past ways of relating will not meet our present needs. They never have succeeded in effecting peace on earth, good will among humankind. (1) *Absolutism*, trying to bury one another, simply heightens resentments and tensions. (2) *Syncretism*, creating a hodge podge, has never worked well except on a limited scale. (3) *Mere co-existence* simply leaves the situation as it stands. In “mutual irradiation” we would let the light of God in us irradiate persons of other faiths, and we would let ourselves be irradiated by the light of God in them. From a practical standpoint, Douglas wrote, “mutual irradiation would try to provide the most congenial setting possible for releasing the deepest witness that the Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim might make to his [or her] Christian companion, and that the Christian might in turn share with his non-Christian friend.”⁴ In 1967 Douglas and Dorothy Steere organized such meetings between Christians and Buddhists in Japan and between Christians and Hindus in India. Douglas Steere called for a “truly functional ecumenism.” Such an ecumenism, he explained,

wants to witness to the world how much God cares, and if this means stopping a war; or trying to learn how to share more equitably the world’s material resources; or meeting an emergency human need, or joining the poor; or sending brotherly teachers and companions to live and share with those in another area; or teaching one another how to meditate, or how to pray, or how to kindle corporate

⁴ Douglas V. Steere, *Mutual Irradiation: A Quaker View of Ecumenism*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 175. (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1971), 8.

adoration, or how to grow in the life of devotion, or how to use the lives of past saints and heroes to re-ignite our commitment; or how great art, painting, sculpture and music can expand the soul; or how personal guidance and therapy may release the deeper life in us; or how the world of plants and animals and water and wind can temper our souls; a functional ecumenism will open us in these and in other areas to the witness of our fellows, whether Christian or the adherents of other world religions.⁵

Contemplation in Ecumenical Encounter

Many, even Christians who have spent much energy seeking to improve relations with other Christians, will hold back when we start stretching the horizon of ecumenism to include persons of other faiths. The two most aggressively evangelistic faiths, Christianity and Islam, face an especially high hurdle here, for they have operated out of a deep conviction about the correctness and completeness of their version of faith. There is no room within which “stripped of pretension and conceit we sense the tragic insufficiency of human faith.” Whether others also find the same true faith is not a matter of incidental moment; it is life or death. We have seen ample evidence in Christian history, including in recent years, that a certain fanaticism easily attaches itself to this perspective.

I would not want to mislead anyone by suggesting that we can persuade everyone to lay aside their absolutist mentality, which is what fundamentalism is, and come to the ecumenical table. A deep fear of apostasy and betrayal of the faith will hold many in thrall. As evidence of the grip fundamentalism has on many, there is an organization named Fundamentalists Anonymous, which tries to rescue people from fundamentalism

⁵ Ibid., 16.

in the same way Alcoholics Anonymous tries to free them from addiction to alcohol. Certain verses of scripture, all of which is viewed as inerrant, are invoked to back up the absolutist perspective. Among Christians it is John 14:6: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." That is always the "I gotcha!" when I remind Baptists how urgent it is that we hear the many reminders of our sacred writings that "God shows no partiality" and accepts all who fear God and do what is right (Deut 10:17; Sirach 35:12f.; Acts 10:34-35; Rom 2:11; Ps 15:2-5, et al.). So we should not expect to convince everyone in our different traditions to believe that God is something of a universalist, a reckless Lover who "causes the sun to shine on both evil and good and the rain to fall on both righteous and unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). We humans much prefer to have an Almighty who sides with us in our games, our wars, our views--a God just like us and one whom we can control. It takes a huge leap of faith to admit that a God we can control and to whom we can give orders can't help anybody.

Participation in and observation of others in ecumenical dialogue and cooperation has convinced me that the persons best equipped for encounter with others "at the level of fear and trembling, humility and contrition" are those whose roots run deep experientially in their tradition. They are persons who have drilled their wells down to the rich streams of Wisdom which condition the soil around those roots. They have gotten to know God as a God of infinite compassion and are unafraid to let their deep convictions stand alongside and be tested by those expressed by others. Out of such convictions they can join others in common concerns affecting the welfare of their communities and their world.

I don't know whether I dare say it, but I feel that I must do so at this gathering. The crisis into which the world's religions, especially the Abrahamic traditions, have plunged civilization may bear in itself an alarm loud enough and jarring enough to shake us awake and to thrust us down on our knees in humility and contrition alongside one another. Forty-five years ago, in a similar moment of crisis, Thomas Merton wrote an unequivocating apology for Christians to lay aside their sense of self-sufficiency and to engage in dialogue with the world's great religious traditions. Westerners desperately need to learn from easterners the importance of contemplation to inform and direct our action. Presciently, he added, "We have to gain new perspectives, and on this our spiritual and even our physical survival may depend." Christians can no longer shrug off eastern faiths, for they offer values in the realm of spiritual experience which is not unlike "supernatural wisdom itself." In conclusion, he wrote,

At least this much can and must be said: the "universality" and "catholicity" which are essential to the Church necessarily imply an ability and a readiness to enter into dialogue with all that is pure, wise, profound and humane in every kind of culture. In this one sense at least a dialogue with Oriental wisdom becomes necessary. A Christian culture that is not capable of such a dialogue would show, by that very fact, that it lacked catholicity.⁶

At the time he sounded this call for dialogue Merton was already engaged in an exchange of correspondence with Abraham J. Heschel, who visited him on July 13, 1964, and with a Sufi from Karachi, Pakistan, Abdul Aziz, who first wrote Merton on November 1, 1960.

⁶ Thomas Merton, "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom," *Catholic World*, 195 (May 1962), 72-79.

How would contemplation help to dissolve or resolve the tensions between our faiths? If you mean “contemplation” as throwing up a few rinky dink prayers, I’m not sure it will help. By contemplation I mean response to God’s love energies that brought our world into being, sustain our world, and direct our world toward some meaningful end. By contemplation I mean opening like a flower to the morning sun to allow God’s love energies to pour into us. That kind of contemplation can give us some reasons to hope for peace among ourselves and in our world.

First of all, if we can open just a crack, God’s love energies can enter and help us bring under control those two blood brothers, fear and anxiety, which cause us to react with suspicion and to lash out with violence. This is very urgent. Since 9/11, 2001 politicians have manipulated us with fear. They’ve kept their fingers on our anxiety buttons. Will fear win? One early Christian insisted that “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). I can’t believe that he meant it would eliminate all fear. Insofar as I can see, the only people who have no fear are in cemeteries. He meant, rather, that God’s love can transform our fear into positive energies, those that do things which make for peace. So, too, Paul reminded some in his day who sound just like we do. “Stop worrying about everything! In every circumstance in prayer and entreaty, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God and the *shalom* of God, which surpasses all human comprehension, will throw a guard around your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7). Note *shalom*. God’s *shalom* can create deep down security essential for us to deal with the challenge we face.

Secondly, fear and anxiety redirected, God’s love energies might begin to dampen some of our desires which lead to tensions and conflicts and wars. The most Jewish of

early Christian sages, James, asked a question we might well start asking. “From whence are wars and conflicts among you? Aren’t they from here--from your desires battling within you? You want something and you don’t get it; you murder and are jealous and can’t obtain it, so you fight and go to war” (James 4:1-2). Pretty strong, but is it off target in a culture which has made best sellers of Robert J. Ringer’s *Looking Out for Number One* and *Winning through Intimidation*? As Thomas Merton has charged, American culture creates “artificial and contrived needs.” And we won’t take no for an answer.

Thirdly, those same love energies can begin to effect a transformation of our attitudes and outlook toward all persons, including persons of other faith traditions than our own. No story, surely, could confirm this more forcefully than Thomas Merton’s. When he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941, Merton wanted to curse the world and clang the doors shut, never to go outside them again. Life had scarred him badly. His mother died when he was six, his father when he was fifteen. He felt the effects of the Great Depression. Then came World War II, which he escaped only because of poor health, with its terrible devastation. Ten years in what Bernard of Clairvaux called *schola caritatis*, “the school of love,” however, conditioned him for a reconversion to the “world” which had caused him such pain. In the sixties he became one of America’s sagest prophets. In words I cadge from Thomas Kelly, God plucked the world out of his heart and hurled the world into his heart, where he and God together carried it in infinitely tender love.

Fourthly, God’s love energies can prepare persons of every faith for ecumenical encounter. Thomas Merton thought that contemplatives would stand the best chance of

carrying on significant dialogue. In some notes jotted down for an address he was to have delivered in Calcutta in October, 1968 on “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue,” he sounded much the same notes as Abraham Heschel. “True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth,” he said. If authentic, it requires “‘communion’ beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a ‘preverbal’ level but also on a ‘postverbal’ level.”⁷ He warned against the dangers of (1) reducing dialogue to talk, (2) facile syncretism, (3) blurring of differences, (4) losing sight of the real monastic goal--“true self-transcendence and enlightenment,” and (5) preoccupation with institutional structure, monastic rule, etc., or not paying due respect to these. “Above all,” he concluded, “it is important that this element of depth and integrity--this element of inner transcendent freedom--be kept intact as we grow toward the full maturity of universal man.”⁸

Merton spoke here, of course, about conversations which would be carried on in monasteries or by monks. We must recognize, however, that he grew ever more urgent in his concern that we may all become contemplatives. As a result of the phenomenal reception *The Seven Storey Mountain* received when it appeared in 1948, he sensed that the spiritual bankruptcy of the post-war era was making contemplation a necessity, even if most persons flee it. Traditionally, the contemplative life has been lived in monasteries.

But in a broader sense every life can be dedicated to some extent to contemplation, and even the most active of lives can and should be balanced by a

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1968), 315.

contemplative element--leavened by the peace and order and clarity that can be provided by meditation, interior prayer, and the deep penetration of the most fundamental truths of human existence.⁹

The reception he got for his writings, even those written for monks, caused him to extend his pipeline ever farther outward towards the world, arguing that contemplation is essential to meaningful action. The problem of western society, he charged, is that we have made a fetish out of action and lost the sense of contemplation. Our action has thus become purposeless because it does not proceed from authentic being. He warned that a person

who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his [or her] own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He [or she] will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his [or her] own obsessions, his [or her] aggressiveness, his [or her] ego-centered ambitions, his [or her] delusions about ends and means, his [or her] doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.¹⁰

In this last statement we can see how critical our own formation through contemplation would be to prepare us for encounter with persons of other faiths. I believe that those who knew Thomas Merton would rank him at the very top of persons truly prepared for ecumenical encounter. He tuned in on the wave length of others with remarkable ease and precision. He communicated "beyond words and thoughts." Although you could ascribe some of his gift to his peculiar genius and personality, if you

⁸ Ibid., 317.

⁹ Thomas Merton, "The Contemplative Life: Its Meaning and Necessity," *The Dublin Review*, 223 (Winter 1949), 27.

look at his life story, you will not stop with that. His “gift” was poured, molded, and refined by a contemplative life. I didn’t understand his decision to become a hermit at the same time he was speaking so forcefully to the problems which plagued American society--violence and war, racism, autonomous technology. In retrospect, I now know: The farther he extended his pipeline out toward other persons and toward the world, the deeper he needed to drill his well.

No issue is more urgent for you and me today than interfaith dialogue about what lies behind and cooperative effort to bring an end to the bitterness and hostility which exists between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I am fearful that none of us, none of our traditions, has opened ourselves wide enough and urgently enough to the God of this universe of more than 150 billion galaxies to plead, “Fill us with your love, O God! Fill us with your love!” Yet here and now, this moment, we--Jew, Christian, Muslim--can and must make that our hearts’ desire.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1971), 164.