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Dialogue with Traditional Religion

This is the third series on dialogue. Earlier I/D's on the subject had been Dialogue with Non-Christians Religions especially Islam and Dialogue with Modernity. This I/D will carry forward some of the reflections of the Chevilly Meeting on First Evangelization in so far as they touch upon dialogue with traditional religion.

1. The Situation of Traditional Religion.

Among the **Bassa** (Middle Belt of Nigeria) no one does anything alone. If a member is sick, others will plant his seeds, harvest and sell for him, and bring him the proceeds.

The **Hamar** of Southern Ethiopia have no verb, "to possess", or "to own". To see is to have. Whatever is available is for all.

It so happens that some peoples who are almost 100% traditional religionists enshrine certain Gospel values in a high degree, but may have other beliefs and practices contrary to the Gospel, for example, twins may be exposed to death because they are thought to be against the order of nature. In one place, dialogue with Christianity led the people not only to accept twins but to see them as a blessing.

Whatever good is found sown in the minds and hearts of men or in the rites and customs of peoples, these not only are preserved from destruction, but are purified, raised up and perfected... (LG.,17; AG, 9).

2. What is Traditional Religion?

Whereas other religions have known founders and dates of foundation, traditional religion enshrines the cumulative religious search and

endeavours of generations of "ancestors". It represents mankind's basic search for God and its straining towards the Infinite, although in the concrete it is diversified according to localities and situations. The gods in one place may be gods of lightning, in another of fertility, but in each place they relate to local needs and are prompted by the phenomena and the history of the people. Traditional religion precedes Christianity and the founder-religions, and these latter take local colour by borrowing from, and transforming elements in, the traditional religious expression. As it regards Europe, for example, Christmas re-interprets the traditional seasonal winter celebration of the day of the Sun.

3. Survival of Traditional Religion.

Traditional religion is indeed in crisis in many places because it is not seen as adequately catering to modern needs and answering questions of the moment. However, in many other places it is not only still intact but is re-organizing itself. In Africa, traditional religionists still outnumber Catholics; some peoples, like the Sacalav of Madagascar, have to date proved almost impervious to modern and Christian influence. There may be borrowing as with the other religions, but it is only in few cases that this degenerates into syncretism, usually where the adherents are no longer in their natural and social environment.

The expression of faith is in continual

dialogue with underlying traditional religiosity especially in the younger Churches. It affords the framework within which the content of faith is interpreted and related to everyday living.

We strive in every way we can for a fruitful coming together of local cultural and religious traditions with the Gospel of Christ. (SRL, 16.1)

It has been found that, as underlying both the actual Christian beliefs and practices and those of the other religions of an area, for example, Islam, traditional religiosity is often a facilitator of dialogue between the two.

4. Attitudes to Traditional Religion.

Augustine of England was perplexed as to what to do with the pagan temples upon the conversion of the people, and what to make of their sacrifices. Gregory the Great answered:

Destroy the idols but asperse the temples with holy water, let them make booths around the temple, kill and eat. For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke. In the Old Testament, God allowed sacrifices to Himself which were formerly to devils.

Until recently the **Leonine Prayer for the Conversion of Africa** painted a picture of traditional religionists daily falling into hell. It was common to see in traditional religion nothing but deviations and the work of the devil. Study and increased modern contacts are leading to changing attitudes. Traditional religion is now numbered among the great world religions. This positive re-evaluation has made it possible to talk of respect and dialogue.

5. Perplexities.

The new attitude has brought in its train a series of questions and perplexities. Is traditional religion merely a "preparation for the Word"? Is it a locus of divine revelation to "ancestors" comparable to revelation to the patriarchs of the Old Testament? Or is it a means of salvation in its own right, such that traditional religion would stand in a parallel

line with Christianity, and dialogue would mean simply helping it to transform itself? Then there are perplexities of a pastoral kind. For example, how far can the Church go in dialogue with traditional beliefs and practices of marriage? What is the attitude to adopt towards witchcraft and the witchdoctor? Should mission emphasize continuity or rupture? Is dialogue appropriate to one of the other great world religions, for example, Hinduism, but mission to traditional religion?

6. Mission and Dialogue

Many seem to be within who are in reality without, and others seem to be without who are in reality within (Saint Augustine).

Dialogue can be viewed in two ways - as an attitude and spirit which must underlie every Christian form of mission, and as a specific activity expressed in many ways.

The spirit of respect and dialogue is fundamental to mission. It leaves room for the other's identity, his models, his values. We reject every attempt to induce or force conversion in any way, through gifts or other material advantage, through the force of a dominant culture...Mission is best carried out as a mutual search for truth and for an answer to life's mysteries, in full respect of each other's dignity and religious experience.

Partners enter such dialogue in strict fidelity to their own tradition, but with a common commitment to a future horizon of truth. The Christian even in dialogue presents "an account of the hope that is in you, but given in gentleness and reverence" (1 Pt. 3:15); he cannot but present Christ as the norm for God's self-manifestation. For the interlocutor, accepting the demands of Truth may sometimes mean conversion, first as a heightened religious life within his own tradition, and then perhaps, with the grace of God, to acceptance of Christ and visible membership of the Church.

Dialogue as a specific activity may be expressed in four ways - dialogue of life, dialogue of deeds, dialogue of specialists and dialogue of religious experience. The goal is not necessarily conversion, even if it cannot be excluded from the dynamic of the mutual

encounter. A confrere became initiated as an elder among traditional religionists, and was in this way able to participate in decisions which affected people and culture. It is sometimes possible in similar ways to help the progress of a religion or to bring light to bear on decisions and options in a manner that direct preaching may yet be unable to do because of the paucity of believers. Another missionary underwent the full training and initiation as an **nganga** (medicine-man cum witchdoctor). The intention is not to recommend this, but simply to note how far the desire for dialogue can go.

We make an effort to study the language and understand the people's ways and customs. We respect and accept their human experience in all its depth.
SRL, 16,2.

7. Some Themes of Traditional Religion

We can here only barely sketch the fairly common and widespread traits.

Traditional religion interprets religious experience within the context and environment of each society. Its gods are usually defined by local needs and questionings. It is usually not missionary. God is acknowledged as Creator or as an impersonal Force or Numinous, but generally the greater religious attention is given to spirits, ancestors and other mediators with the divine. The sense of the sacred is very strong; there are sacred places, sacred times, sacred persons, and these are considered as foci in some way of the divine. The "priesthood" particularly, or in some cases kingship as mediating between the divine and the human, is considered central for welfare and for equilibrium in creation. Religion generally covers the totality of life and often merges with culture. Hence social and moral living receive religious sanction, and religion itself often caters for peace, reconciliation and community building. This sometimes leads to the type of sense of solidarity and sharing evidenced at the beginning of this I/D. Symbolism and ritual bridge the spheres of the sacred and profane, and afford a unified view of reality. Health is generally seen as holistic and covers all the dimensions of man in his various relationships - with himself, with others and with the unseen world.

8. An adapted Starting-point

The starting point should respond to a pressing need or a burning issue in the culture, religion or mind-set of the people. The Chevilly meeting mentioned above discussed this under the rubric of what is Good News for whom? For the **Borana** (South-Ethiopia), the Good News is the experience of forgiveness, forgiveness from God, forgiveness of each other and of the enemy tribes. For the **Alago** (Nigeria), the Good News is about hope. They say, "rescue the chicken from the kite before you condemn it for straying". Hope is freedom from witchcraft. For the **Hamar**, the Good News is total harmony - harmony with creation and the environment, harmony within oneself, harmony in all relationships. The **East Pokot** (Kenya) have a tradition that "in the beginning man cursed himself". A woman threw dung into the waters and said:

*when the moon dies, let it return,
when man dies, let him go away forever.*

Man has never since found an answer to death which became the ultimate power never to be mentioned except in euphemisms. The starting point would be to re-awaken the desire for renewed life which finds its fulfillment in Christ.

9. Dialogue and Lifestyle.

Dialogue sometimes challenges the Christian interlocutor to adopt certain attitudes or incorporate certain values. The missionary must not be found lacking in qualities and values which mark a culture or tradition, or which are included in its profile of a "man of God", otherwise his dialogue with the traditional religion may be aborted from the start.

The Christian interlocutor must also be open to conversion in the sense that he is sometimes challenged by certain values among the people which may express aspects of the Gospel in a concrete and novel manner.

A confrere recounts. When a poor woman brought her sick child to the mission, I gave her money for medical care at the clinic. She threw away the money saying, I have not come for medicines but for your blessing to chase away the evil spirit from my child.

In the traditional worldview, sickness is rarely only physical; it is also a condition of the spirit. An interlocutor must deal with the situation in a holistic manner, attending to both body and spirit and to problems in relationships.

10. Some Theological Reflection.

We shall merely indicate the theological context which has made possible the new attitudes sketched so far. The following are nothing but currents and threads for an ultimate synthesis still in the future.

(a) The Holy Spirit at Work

The Holy Spirit sows the "seeds of the Word", and leads human cultures and religions from the inside. He is at the very source of man's questionings, a questioning which is occasioned not by contingent situations but by the very structure of man's being (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, 54). Thus every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is so mysteriously present in every human heart (*Redemptoris Missio*, 29).

(b) Possibility of salvation for all.

Until barely thirty years ago, good "pagans" and children who died without baptism were supposed to go to limbo. Then came Vatican II which re-stated that "God wills all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tm. 2:5). This altered the motivation for mission and caught some missionaries off guard. Since Christ died for all men and women, grace is active, not only in Christians but also in the hearts of all men and women of good will, bringing to them the same interior renewal as to Christians. We believe, therefore, that in a way known only to God the Holy Spirit offers all men and women the possibility of sharing in the paschal mystery of Christ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that members of religions share in the one salvation in Christ. (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 29).

(c) Revelation and Traditional Religion.

Recent theology understands revelation, not so much as a series of propositions but as God's self-communication through the experience and history of peoples. This self-manifestation and self-communication of God happens in the fundamental postulates of the lives of human beings and societies, in the questionings posed by man's success and failure, love and hope, joy and fear, yearnings and frustrations...In this connection, Tertullian talks of *anima naturaliter christiana*, that is, of the human soul as christian in its deeper desires. As social institutions which englobe man, the religions mediate both the attraction of the divine upon the human heart and the cumulative response of earlier generations as a context for the religious search of the individual.

11. Leave Mission out? Why Mission?

If the followers of traditional religion can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the Church, why mission? Why try to call men and women into the Church, what is the role of the Christian community?

There is progress from the "seeds of the Word" already present in traditional religion to the full mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 70). It is the same Spirit who is at work in cultures and religions that was at work in the death and resurrection of Christ; since he "will take of what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn. 16:14), his action draws men and women, cultures and religions, forward to Christ. Hence true dialogue implies the desire to make Christ recognized, better known and loved, and so it remains oriented towards proclamation. On the other hand, proclamation implies in its essence dialogue based on God's own manner of relating to men.

The Christian community is meant to be "the light of the world, the salt of the earth" (Mt. 5:13). Christ is the truth of man, and the Christian community by imaging Christ is meant to show that truth of man in the concrete; without its witness the very insights of the religions may wither, even though it too profits from certain values in the religions of humankind which mirror for it in a concrete manner some of the values of the very Gospel which it preaches.