

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Engaging in interfaith dialogue

BY NANCY MOLIN LONGATAN

Hindus are fatalistic. Buddhists are spiritual. Christians always try to force their religion down your throat. The tragedy and dilemma of our times is that, although we live in a smaller world, where travel is easier than ever before, we still rely on outdated and inaccurate stereotypes when thinking about and even meeting other people.

Can we learn to work together on common goals? Can we discuss problems without acrimonious debate? Can we be open to others without watering down or compromising our own faith?

Some have suggested a process of interfaith dialogue as a way forward in our pluralistic world. However, the whole notion of interfaith dialogue has become a conflict ground in itself, with different meanings and different potential outcomes seen by people with different perspec-

tives. Do we posit dialogue as a substitute for the proclamation of Christ? Is it just a play of ideas for academics with no connection to ordinary life? Is anyone else interested in dialogue, or only a few liberal Christians?

In my own experience working in other lands with people of many faiths, interfaith dialogue is not an option and not a sterile academic pursuit. It is a vital part of any job, and it can help us all live better. How? Come with me to Nepal and see ...

Life goes on

In 1991, anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista published a book titled *Fatalism and Development* (Sangam Books), about the culture of Hindu Nepal, saying that there will never be development there comparable to that of the West, unless Hindus abandon their fatalistic attitude. The book ignited a storm of controversy, not least because Bista was himself a Nepali Hindu. Everybody had a different point of view about it, and for a while “fatalism” was the word on everyone’s lips.

About that time, a great tragedy occurred in the town where I was living. A boy of 15, the only son of the town’s doctor, was sitting on the ground in the schoolyard watching a volleyball game. The ball bounced across the yard and hit him on the head. Although it hadn’t seemed like a heavy blow, he was momentarily stunned. Within a few days, he started having convulsions and was taken to the national university hospital for CAT scans and treatment. Soon after, he died.

A few days later, I was walking in the marketplace with Suman, a Nepali engineer on our project, and we met the mourning father. We paused to offer a few words of condolence.

“I guess it must have been written that this would happen,” Suman said.

The father nodded his acceptance of the gesture and walked on.

As we continued our walk, Suman laughed a bit sadly and said, “I guess I’m a fatalist, too. But what else can you say to a person in a situation like that?”

As a missionary, as an anthropologist, as a friend, I had no alternative to give him. The whole incident is equally absurd if you believe God grants free will to creation. Either way, a child has died before his time and a theological doctrine is cold comfort.

But that is the work that doctrines are supposed to do: They tell us how to live well in a complex, mysterious, and sometimes tragic world. Doctrines are not formed to be dialogued about, they are formed to teach us how to live, how to offer comfort, how to plan community improvement, how to share our blessings, how to go forward when the way is obscure. People of every culture and faith have experience of how to live well, and we can all enrich ourselves by sharing our experiences.

My brother works in a high-tech company in Texas doing artificial intelligence work, and many of his colleagues

come from around the world. He told me recently that an engineer from India told his friends that he would be going home to get married, and would be back at work in a few weeks.

“Married!” they cried, “What’s the lucky girl like?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “My parents arranged it. I’ve never seen her.”

Shock! Consternation! My brother said the consensus among his American colleagues was that arranged marriage just doesn’t happen in the twenty-first century. But apparently, the guy’s parents hadn’t heard about the consensus.

So how do you offer congratulations and best wishes in a situation like this? Plan an office party and spring for the salad server set with matching cruets? Or quietly drop the whole thing? In today’s globally connected society, interfaith dialogue goes on all around us all the time. It’s not the preoccupation of specialist theologians that everyone else can just ignore.

Dialogue is not persuasion

It should be clear by now that we can say more about what interfaith dialogue is *not* than about what it is. It is not persuasion. Generally, people don’t make a faith commitment on the basis of someone’s persuasive explanation of doctrine. And talk is not usually what motivates people to convert to a new way of knowing God. In fact, dialogue is not aimed at changing the participants in any way. Dialogue is getting to know each other better and thinking through some problem or shared project together.

My friend Pastor Ramos, a Lutheran minister from rural Indonesia, told me of a plan he and some colleagues had made in response to inter-religious violence in his country. They decided to have a picnic for everyone in town, Christian and Muslim alike.

“We spent a lot of time planning it, the pastors and imams together,” he explained. “We had to be especially care-

Disciples on interfaith dialogue

For a particularly Disciples take on all things interfaith, consult a masterful report produced by the Council on Christian Unity titled, “Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement.” The report was received by the Disciples’ 2007 General Assembly, along with a resolution meant to encourage congregations, regions, and all Disciples organizations to engage in interfaith work of one sort or another.

The report centers its theological framework on Disciples identity, which recognizes the *imago dei*, the image of God, in all of humanity and throughout the world’s religious traditions. Yet as Disciples, we are also decidedly Christian and need not “suspend our deepest Christian convictions” to engage, respect, and learn with and from our neighbors in other traditions.

The report and resolution can be found at www.disciples.org/ga/pastassemblies/05/. Click on “Resolutions” to find “Report 0518: Concerning Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement” and “Resolution 0519: Encouraging Interreligious Engagement.”

The Council on Christian Unity has also developed a study guide for the report, which can be found at www.disciples.org/ccu/resources/.

ful about the food, to make sure that we provided food that everyone could eat.”

That, in a nutshell, is interfaith dialogue: identifying a community problem, (violence); deciding on a way forward (have a picnic); and sitting down to plan the program together — how to live well in a complex world.

Dialogue is respect

It should also be clear that no one enters a dialogue as some kind of blank slate. All of us have a faith that we live by, and any dialogue starts with a position, not floating free in the air. Dialogue recognizes that each person treasures and values the position he or she has come to, and takes place in a context of people with beliefs — beliefs that help them shape their lives within the world as they find it.

When I lived at the Asian Rural Institute (ARI), a Christian, multi-faith community in Japan, we had many fascinating interfaith dialogues. Most young people in Japan today have been raised to consciously have “no religion,” a position that they see as ethical and peace loving. Kisaku, a young college graduate, commented on this aspect:

I thought it was best to have no religion, because religion causes conflict, like in the Middle East. Before I came to ARI, I knew that there are people of many religions here, so I expected there to be a lot of conflict and fighting. I was surprised to see that people of different religions can live together in peace and with respect for other beliefs.

Strangers can open new paths

Although I emphasize that dialogue is not a “back door” to changing or watering down someone else’s faith, it should also be obvious that those who enter into open, respectful dialogue can expect to have their ideas challenged and their eyes opened to new ways of seeing.

I made this point in an article published in the *UCC News* in 1995, in a discussion of declining membership in mainline churches. Someone noted that the average age of United Church of Christ members was “up to” 57. I used this statistic to take off on an imagined dialogue with a Hindu, who sees all of life as a series of *ashrams* or life stages — student, householder, forest dweller, and wandering seeker. From such a context, the relatively young age of 57 is a great achievement for churches: People are being drawn into the religious life even as they are still preoccupied with the cares of life.

“How are you getting them in so young?” I heard my imagined Hindu ask. “How do the older retired people mentor the younger retired people in their roles in the church? And what does it mean for your country that so many of your wisest citizens gather each week to pray for the community and the nation?”

Although this was an imagined dialogue, it still makes the point that our set ideas can be challenged fruitfully and positively by dialogue partners who have perspectives that are alien to us. Change is not necessarily threat or unfaithfulness. Indeed, openness to change can show us the way out of what may appear to be a dead end.

Yuko, another young Japanese citizen at ARI, made this same point:

I used to be very opinionated, and I wasn’t interested in people with different ideas from mine. But here at ARI, there are so many people who come from different cultures and different backgrounds. Their opinions were made by their situations and personalities. Just like mine, I realized. Sometimes I couldn’t understand other people’s behaviors and feelings. What is right? What is wrong? I couldn’t find one answer. Of course, to give one’s own opinion clearly is important. But without making an effort to understand others, it is meaningless.

Christian dialogue

Finally, interfaith dialogue is important for us as a way to gain skills we need in our own church life. American Christians are used to seeing their churches as divided by a gulf between liberal and conservative. We believe that this division is natural in the church and unlikely to be bridged in our generation. But how much effort do we put into dialogue across this gulf?

I was at one big church assembly where a hot topic was being debated. A resolution passionately supported by one side was just as passionately opposed by the other. I was standing in the back with some national staff members.

“Everybody knows the script,” said one, cynically. “All these people always make the same comments at the same stage in the debate. Everybody always knows what everybody else is going to say.”

Just a few minutes later, a man stood up and broke the script.

“I don’t know how I’m going to explain my vote to the folks back home,” he said. “They sent me here to get this resolution passed, but I’m against it now. For the past three days, I’ve been in the study group looking at this, and I’ve heard people telling stories like I’ve never had a chance to hear before. I think we need to spend less time passing resolutions and more time listening to each other.”

“Spend more time listening to each other.” What could be of more practical value in a complex and perplexing world? What better way to demonstrate the love of Christ? How can we afford not to dialogue in our tense and confusing times? ❧

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