Foreword

Reflecting on global religious pluralism and interfaith relations is an important task in today's world, so torn apart by its many conflicts and crises. When we consider the immense diversity of religious faiths, about which we have more awareness and information than any previous generation, we have to ask ourselves, what is the significance of this diversity? How can we achieve greater mutual understanding and work more closely together towards a greater unity of humanity? How can the development of better interfaith relations help us to work for peace and justice, so that the human community can flourish locally, regionally, and globally, and human-Earth relations are kept at a sustainable level?

These questions involve many choices which have to be exercised responsibly. If we want to foster a more equitable, more peaceful, and less violent world, we have to take a constructive approach to our religious diversity, not one of mutual opposition and exclusion. We must choose between building *one* interrelated human global community or destroying ourselves and the Earth. Some Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders of the Interfaith Just Peacemaking project have rightly stated that

> The twenty-first century is shaping up to become the century of the world's religions. Key religious elements are influencing most major conflicts and misunderstandings between peoples and nations around the world. Globalization has not only increased business connections, it has increased religious interactions. To date, these interactions have mostly been used as a means to instigate and inflate conflict. At least that is what has made news. . . . But it is also true that the opening of the religious borders can reveal unprecedented religious opportunities for addressing conflicts in creative

ways. Indeed, many are responding to current crises by demonstrating interreligious respect and by developing more peaceful relationships.[1]

In fact, at the present moment there exists a special urgency to ask ourselves how we can use the multiple resources of different faiths for the good of the human community rather than its violation and destruction. This is ultimately a profoundly ethical and spiritual question that opens up a compelling vision which can energize us into action. But it requires openness and dialogue, the willingness to listen to and learn from each other, which is often a hard task. To be open to dialogue is to be open to adventure and risk, to the challenge of transformation.

Religious pluralism is here to stay, but what do we do with it? How can a greater awareness and acknowledgement of religious differences be used as an opportunity to widen the doors and windows of our minds, so that we learn to appreciate the faiths of others and overcome dividing differences by the transforming powers of understanding and love? Faced with religious pluralism and an extraordinary diversity of beliefs and spiritualities, we have to reflect on the deeper meaning of this situation. How can we discern not only the existence of diversity, but also become aware of the spiritual contribution that the world faiths, each in their own way and also all together, can make towards solving some of our contemporary problems, not least the problem of constructing a meaningful and dignified human life for more people on the planet?

The great faith traditions of the world are not isolated, fortified territories of an exclusive kind; they are homes of the Spirit in which our whole being can be nurtured and strengthened. If we do not look at religions exclusively from the outside, seeing nothing more than their defective institutional settings and structures, but discover their deeper spiritual resources, we become aware that all the spiritual traditions together present us with an immensely rich, global heritage which belongs to all of humankind. They are part of our human planetary inheritance, but also so much more – a rich revelation of an inexhaustible divine ocean of love, compassion, and mercy, and of the possibility of human dignity

1. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, ed., *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

and wholeness. We can also see that the ethical codes of different faiths can help us to discover what has been called a "global ethic" for conflict resolution, for the overcoming of violence, poverty, and inequality, and for learning the art of peace-making.

Much has been written on the conditions, methods, and problems of interfaith communication in recent years. The missionaries, religious thinkers, and theologians from East and West that are discussed in this book provide excellent examples of how attitudes, in-depth enquiries, and understanding have changed over time, but especially during the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dialogical concerns have grown so much over recent years that we now even speak of a "dialogue of civilizations." Numerically the believers of different faiths engaged in the experimental and experiential process of dialoguing may still be comparatively few, but the knowledge of and interest in interfaith relations has spread much more widely around the globe and is steadily growing now.

The ground-breaking work of early pioneers and path-finders was initially followed by the setting-up of such organizations as the World Congress of Faiths, founded in 1936 by Sir Francis Younghusband in London, and later by the efforts of the Temple of Understanding, the World Council of Churches' subunit on "Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies," and the Roman Catholic initiatives in interfaith dialogue encouraged since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Besides these there have been many individuals and groups fostering dialogue at a grassroots, rather than an official, level. Thus the interfaith movement, as it is sometimes called, has gained considerable momentum since its beginning, which is often dated to the year 1893, when the first Parliament of the World's Religions was held in Chicago. The contemporary interfaith movement gained new momentum from the centenary celebration of this Parliament in 1993, followed by other regular Parliaments since then.

The historical background of contemporary interfaith relations reminds us clearly, if a reminder is necessary, that interfaith dialogue initiatives are primarily a feature of modernity. They were originally, in their beginning, linked to the western expansion of mind and occurred within a colonial and missionary context, whether in India, China, Japan, North Africa, or the Middle East. It was in colonized countries, opened up to Christian missions, that Christians first encountered religious diversity and were existentially and intellectually challenged to reflect on the significance of profound religious differences. This earlier history

still affects some of the dynamic patterns of interfaith dialogue today, although many contemporary "dialogicians" may not always be fully aware of this colonial and missionary heritage.

The end of colonial rule and of Christian missions from a position of superiority has long given way to engagement and dialogue in the context of an *equal partnership in dialogue*. The contemporary practice of dialogue is itself an event of *religious* significance, and that is why it is also particularly important for contemporary spirituality.

Dialogue is always an ongoing process without closure; it involves mutual discovering, living, studying, working, and worshiping as well as debating together, so that empathy grows and relations are strengthened. It requires a spirit of openness and trust, without any tacit schemes of displacement, absorption, or conversion. Without giving up the particularities of one's own faith, one may nevertheless arrive at a certain "reconception" of each faith, perceived anew through encountering another faith in another person or persons. The experience of dialogue has been described as "passing over" from one's own faith into another, returning back to one's own faith and experiencing it in a new way. Thus interfaith dialogue can lead participants to the existential realization that each faith has received a valuable glimpse of a larger, more complete vision, so that we can learn in and through dialogue to complement each other's insight and disclosure of the divine. It is not a question of competition and exclusiveness, as the fundamentalists of all traditions often seem to think, but rather of a complementarity of different visions which, when related to each other, can grow into greater fullness. Without losing our respective identities, the task of relating our respective visions to each other can enlarge and enrich us all together and give us access to deeper understanding and sharing, so that we may become empowered to work together for a better world.

For many western people the discovery of the religions from the East, especially from India, China, and Japan, and the immersion into Buddhism has been a journey of liberation and enlightenment. Some writers and practitioners of interfaith dialogue even speak of a "double belonging." I would like to argue that such belonging is not yet enough, for we need to become *spiritually multi-lingual* and *multi-focused.* This is not arguing for relativism, but for a *true relationality* in a very complex world, a relationality that is not only fostered between different human beings, different faiths, and different worldviews, but also a relationality that applies between human beings and the Earth. It is a commitment to pluralism without sliding into relativism.

For the Christian believer it is ultimately in communion with God that we can be truly in communion with others, that we can learn to respect and love their otherness in its own right, so that others become transformed from strangers and aliens into friends and neighbors. In actual practice we are all too painfully aware of our brokenness and fragmentation, of oppression and exploitation setting diverse human groups against each other. There exist so many groups of "others" in today's world that we must ask how we respond spiritually and practically to such otherness.

Spirituality has often been described as a quest or journey, but also as an inner struggle, a wrestling with good and evil spiritual forces, or a response to a higher calling, a discipline, a practice, a whole way of life. From the contemporary scientific perspective of the interrelated evolution of life and cosmos, one can also describe spirituality by using the image of the dance – the dance of energy and life in the universe, the dance of life within us, and our life in the world as an expression of the dance and life-giving breath of the Spirit integral to all human flourishing. One definition of spirituality that I find particularly helpful is that of the Hispanic Christian women in the United States who describe spirituality as the *struggle for life.* It embraces all of life, and all of life is a struggle: to solve problems, to make sense of life, and to engage in an ongoing process of discovery, learning, and transformation.

Among the beacons of light on the path to greater creativity and acceptance of interfaith relations that Father Ambrose Mong describes in such illuminating detail here is the twentieth-century French priest, scientist, and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. For Teilhard the active currents of faith around the globe are indispensable for feeding and maintaining the human zest for life. He wrote that when we are "sustained and guided by the tradition of the great human mystical systems we succeed, through contemplation and prayer, in entering directly into receptive communication with the very source of all inner striving."[1]

That is to say, people of faith, people of prayer and spiritual practice, people who are seekers and pilgrims on the path of life, can meet, share, and walk together, respecting each other's spiritual heritage and treasures in new ways unknown to earlier generations. The experience of interfaith dialogue can empower them to work together for greater justice, peace, and equality. Seen from this

1. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Activation of Energy* (London: Collins, 1972), 242.

perspective, the spiritual probing of religious pluralism and the drinking from each other's spiritual wells may indeed be the great spiritual event of our time, full of significance for the future well-being of the entire planet and all its peoples.

This book, with its strong examples of interfaith lives and reflection, invites its readers to discover many spiritual riches that can help and enlighten them in their own lives, and it can inspire and encourage them to work more closely together with others for the greater good of all.

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