

Protagonist Corner

Summons to Dialogue

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It is time for the Christian community to become more serious about dialogue with men and women of other religious faiths, and readers of the *Journal for Preachers* may have a unique responsibility to be aware of the challenge. Alan Geyer reported in *The Christian Century* (101, 40) of a meeting in Bellagio, Italy, late in 1984, which brought together physical scientists of the International Council of Scientific Unions, and leaders of a number of the world's religious traditions to discuss their common responsibility in face of the threat of nuclear war.

There is no question but that the threat of nuclear war and the final nuclear winter has finally intensified the urgency for inter-religious dialogue. Our religious beliefs, customs, and rituals have largely kept us apart for centuries, except as persons have been sent forth as emissaries to other countries and faith communities. Now for the first time in history, representatives of the world's great religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Shinto, and Buddhism are breaking down their isolating walls, and coming together in the name of peace to discuss the issues of disarmament, development, human rights as well as trying to deal with the animosities arising from human blindness and ego with which it is one of religion's basic functions to deal. They are trying to take account of the fact that the grave injustices in the world today have a close connection with the weakness of faith, trying to discover in the backgrounds and approaches of the different religions the common resources conducive to the peace and well-being of the human community, and trying to find ways to call men and women in a common voice to the change of heart and life so urgently needed.

This past summer, the Fourth Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace met in Nairobi, Kenya. Six hundred persons, from sixty countries, and representing all the world's religious traditions, gathered for almost two weeks addressing a matter they all saw to be of common concern, religious responsibility for human dignity and peace. This World Conference is now thirteen years old. Its work at the recent meeting was intense, but what happened in the space between listening to papers, drafting reports, and shaping projects was equally important as Hindus came to know Buddhists, Christians encountered Sikhs in warm interchange and growing mutual respect, Muslims spoke with Jews, and representatives of traditional people's religions from one country talked to traditional healers from another. Buddhist monks, Shinto priests, Jewish rabbis and laity, Christians of all denominations, Muslims, and Hindus led in morning worship, each from their own tradition each day, and participants shared with each other over meals, during breaks, and late into the evening. Many spoke of the deep, intense, and indeed spiritual significance

of their frank, open, and caring conversations with persons of other faiths, and witnessed to a heightened awareness of spiritual resources in their own faith as a result. I spent a number of hours, along with Robert Smylie, of the Program Agency (PCUSA) in New York, talking with key representatives of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, asking them, on behalf of the Presbyterian Church's Mission Design Committee, about their perceptions of the role of the U.S. Christian community in their part of the world, and what suggestions they had for action we might take to strengthen ties with people of other faiths in behalf of the struggle for peace and justice. We queried them regarding our mutual responsibility in the face of rising forces of secularism and materialism. Most spoke of the crucial spiritual dimension of life which they thought they could help us strengthen in interreligious dialogue and life, as well as the "social responsibility" they could learn from Christianity. They had much to say about appropriate ways to relate to them as people of other faiths, and pled for increased conversation and sharing of life.

There have been, in addition, other conferences recently: a World Conference of Religions held in Cochin, India in 1981; an Inter-Religious Peace Colloquium held at Lisbon, Portugal in 1977 on "The Changing World Order: Challenge to Our Faiths." There are no doubt others. The modern encounter of Christian faith with other world religions has its roots in the great World Missionary Conferences of Edinburgh, Jerusalem, and Tamboron. Especially at the latter, in 1938, the questions raised by Hendrik Kramer, author of *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, came to dominate the conference and the thought about the relationship of Christian faith to other religions for decades to come, precipitating a tragic break in the dialogue that is only now being overcome. Today the dialogue is beginning anew, centered not alone on the issue of the finality of Jesus Christ or on the relation of Christianity to non-Christian experience, but also on 1) the place of Jesus Christ in secular history; 2) the reality of powerful, healing, spiritual forces embodied in non-Christian traditions that cannot be denied; and 3) the common responsibility of the world's religions in the face of the universal process of secularization, the profound impoverishment of the human spirit, the grave injustices of the world, and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Readers of the *Journal for Preachers* need to begin a renewed engagement with these issues. Any guide to religious periodicals will point to the articles describing what is happening. Someone has said that three most fundamental needs of the human race—and therefore of the church—on the edge of the twenty-first century are: 1) the balancing of our spirituality through contemplation; 2) the task of peacemaking, holistically understood; and 3) the encounter in transforming depth of the great faith traditions. Though I might word it a little differently, I largely concur, and believe that along with nourishing personal faith and wholeness, there may be nothing more important than training people of nonviolent resistance to the forces of destruction in a nuclear age (a subject that would require another article, but for a starters see Ronald Sider and Richard Taylor, *Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope: A Book for Christian Peacemakers*), and, as I have argued here, preparing ourselves and our congregations for transforming encounter with members of other faiths.