

The Significance of Inter-religious Dialogue for World Peace

By Yoshiaki Iisaka

I. A Common Concern

The world today is getting smaller and smaller due to the so-called "annihilation of distance" made possible through the achievements of modern technology and secular culture. It is shrinking into a small province where every man's fate is closely related to that of every other man, so that no one can be indifferent to others. Oneness of mankind, once a lofty idea of imaginative minds, has come to be a tangible reality which ordinary people can easily grasp. They know that a contingent total nuclear exchange might involve all humanity on the face of the earth in a common doom. It is not an idle fantasy but a realistic threat for them. They feel united in fear rather than in hope. This existential situation in which the human race finds itself has posed a challenge to different religions of the world and has prompted them to come closer to each other and start inter-religious dialogue in quest for the peace of the world and the integrity of mankind. Thus, inter-religious dialogue in the contemporary world has been partly activated by those pressures outside religions which have awakened their consciences to the predicament of the human species.

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Through this extraneous impact, the great religions of the world have come to ascertain their basic common elements. Among others, as is pointed out by Arnold Toynbee in his book titled *Christianity Among the Religions of the World*, two elements are shared by them all. One is a belief that "man is not the spiritually highest presence known to man," that is, man's relationship with the ultimate or something beyond him will make man's nature and destiny manifest. Man ought to place himself in harmony with that spiritual presence in the universe that is spiritually greater than man. A second element is that all great religions share a feeling that man ought to take sides with good against evil. These two elements, that is, a concern with the ultimate and the moral imperative or ethical demand based upon this ultimate concern, are the common ground within which the religions of the world encounter each other. They will be united in the understanding that peace in its deepest sense is man's being in harmony with, or in right relation to, the Ultimate Being. Secular ideologies lack this dimension of the Ultimate Concern, even though they show a certain moral orientation. Some religions are concerned only with a mysterious or ritual union with the Ultimate, so that they tend to be careless of the ethical implications of this union. The mystic's union with God so often leads to moral indifference. Thus, when religions meet together in the quest for world peace, they have to recognize the ground upon which they stand in common, the ground where transcendence or the ultimate concern is related to immanence or the immediate ethical concern in an inseparable manner. The *Spannungsfeld* or field of tension between faith and action, theology and ethics, when to meditate and when to do,

is our meeting place. Inter-religious dialogue can take place only on this ground.

Some of us here, according to our religious traditions, may be more concerned with the meditative, quietist, sacramental approach to the problem of peace, putting much emphasis on peace within, while others are more concerned with the ethical, activist, organizational approach to the problem of peace in the world without. Because of this difference in emphasis and approach, we do need a dialogue between religions which implies a process of giving and taking, a process of self-examination and self-criticism. We have to expose ourselves to doubt and anxiety, through which we hope we may come to a clearer understanding of our mission for peace.

II. The Terms and Presuppositions of Dialogue

A common concern must underlie, if inter-religious dialogue is to be fruitfully conducted. Even though religions cannot always speak a common language, the underlying common concern for peace and humanity may overcome this language barrier, because expressed language is only one means of communication among religions as well as among men of diverse racial, national, cultural and other backgrounds.

Difficulties in inter-religious dialogue so far have been derived from each religion's claims to absoluteness and monopoly of truth and justice, its exclusiveness and resultant crusading spirit, its sense of messianic mission, its rivalry in propagation and proselytization and so forth. With these premises, dogma easily leads to dogmatism by absolutizing its own position. The universality and absoluteness of the Ultimate Reality, which

is the unchangeable yardstick with which to measure any historical religion and in terms of which even the religion which acknowledges this Ultimate Reality as its true and only God has to come under judgement, easily tends to be confounded with an historical manifestation of organized religion of a particular kind, thus elevating the organized religion itself unwittingly to the position of the Ultimate Reality. When a certain religion proclaims God's judgement, it must confess that it is also subject to this judgement, and this confession makes God and His judgement truly universal.

Preparation for dialogue must start with contrition and confirmation of common concerns to be shared by different religions. Peace, in the sense of man's being in harmony with the Ultimate One, is certainly such a common concern for any religion of the world.

One short-cut approach to inter-religious dialogue is to conduct it on the level of religious philosophy or so-called comparative religion. At best, this approach is, so to speak, an effort to try to communicate through a medium of religious Esperanto, an artificially manufactured common language of simple nature, at the cost of each religion's rich and unique traditions and historical identity. It may make a communication of expediency but never inter-religious dialogue in its fullest sense. It aims to elicit a lowest common denominator and the broadest generalizations. It may become a religious cosmopolitanism but never a religious internationalism which makes possible a dialectical process of enriching each individual religion's identity as well as the fellowship of religions.

The philosophy of religion is a monologue lacking in a revela-

tory element indispensable to religious faith. Comparative religion is a discipline of science and, as such, it has to be distinguished from religious faith. Religion or faith expresses a different dimension from that of philosophy and science. Religious dialogue is a dialogue among men of living faiths, but not that among academicians and dilettanti. Philosophy and science may render a service for religious dialogue but can never supersede living faiths which give life to religious dialogue. Thus, the philosophy of religion and comparative religion approach to inter-religious dialogue can only be a supplementary means.

Then, what are the presuppositions of true inter-religious dialogue through which a creative encounter among religions takes place? At this point, Paul Tillich is very helpful, I would say. In his book *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, he points out those presuppositions for inter-religious dialogue as follows. I will summarize them in my own words.

Such a dialogue (inter-religious dialogue) first presupposes that the participants of the dialogue acknowledge the value of each other's religious conviction so that they consider the dialogue worthwhile. Secondly, each of them must be able to represent his own religious basis with conviction so that the dialogue is a serious confrontation. Thirdly, the dialogue presupposes a common ground which makes both dialogue and conflicts possible, and fourthly, every side must be open to criticisms directed against his own religious basis.

These presuppositions are, after all, those upon which a man as a person meets, encounters with, another man respecting his unique individuality and affirming their common humanity.

While each is being true to himself, all have to stand on a common ground which makes not only acceptance and agreements, but also rejection and conflicts, possible. The important part of this common ground is a basic concern for humanity which is tantamount to a concern for peace.

III. Peace in Religious Understanding

To grasp the religious implications of peace, it will be helpful to reflect upon the Judeo-Christian interpretation of peace, *shalom* and *eirene*. *Shalom* in its original sense is said to represent completeness, perfection, or perfect harmony. Peace is not a negative and static state of not-war, but a positive, dynamic concept of living together in harmony and fellowship. A state of not-war is a minimal condition for peace, but not a sufficient one. Peace understood in this positive sense of being in perfect harmony has a four-fold dimension. First, peace is referring to man's relationship with God. Reconciliation, regaining of lost harmony for man through God's grace is peace in its ultimate form. This transcendental or vertical aspect of peace is fully comprehended by those who have concerns for the ultimate reality, by those who quest for the ultimate meaning of life. It is the par excellence religious dimension of peace which secular ideologies cannot understand. To establish a harmonious relationship with God may be translated into the life situation of this world, assuming three different but related-to-each-other levels. Reconciliation with God will be overtly expressed in man's reconciliation with himself, man's reconciliation with his fellowmen, and man's reconciliation with Nature.

The transcendental religious dimension of peace may be ex-

pressed by different terms such as Nirvana, Eternal Life, the Kingdom of God, etc. It has been a most appropriate subject of dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity in the past. The imperishable nature of man has to be reaffirmed in the presence of an onslaught of secular ideologies which degrade man's dignity and its transcendental root.

Man's reconciliation with himself has been a much discussed subject in religions and philosophies. In religious terms, it is the emancipation from one's sin, overcoming of one's self-centeredness, the state of a new man, etc. In philosophy it is the problem of self-alienation and self-realization. Recently, psychology and psychoanalysis have come to grapple with neurosis and related problems which imply conflicts within oneself. To deal with this aspect of peace, religion has been and is able to converse and cooperate with these secular disciplines. The horizon for religion has been extensively widened in this cooperative work.

Man's reconciliation with his fellowmen means a peaceful and harmonious living together of men, freed from oppression, prejudice and anarchy. Marxism has been striving to emancipate man from political, economic and social oppressions. To achieve man's reconciliation with his fellowman, religion has been emphasizing the work of charity and social service. Today, however, it has come to realize the importance of direct social action which aims at social justice through the change of social structures. In this task, religion has to unite its conscientious concern for social justice with the insights into social realities which are provided by the social sciences. A new dialogue is indispensable between religion and the social sciences in order

to find out a new way of collaboration for establishing social justice which is the root of peace in society. In the field of social action, organized religions have been on the whole on the side of the *status quo* or, in some cases, even reactionary, identifying themselves with the privileged class or receding into a position of isolation and maintaining a ghettoist mentality. There is an urgent need for inter-religious dialogue on the problems of political witness and social action. Religion and politics cannot be confounded, but they should not be separated. Organized religions can make strong pressure groups to exert influence upon public policies. A new thinking on social action, responsible participation, readiness to cooperate with each other among religions and even with secular movements, so long as they stand for a common human concern, all these are badly needed by religions today.

Peace has to be established between man and Nature. Western religions and civilizations tend to have neglected this aspect of peace, especially since the introduction of modern technology. Nature has been thought to be a mere object of man's subjection, with devastating effects in the pollution of air and other contaminations of the environment. Thus, man is all the more alienated from Nature, and there is no harmony between man and Nature. On the other hand, certain religions worship Nature and deify it, so that man is left to the mercy of threatening Nature. Because of these different approaches to Nature, religions have to hold dialogue regarding this serious problem.

If religion tries to deal with the problem of peace in its comprehensive dimensions, it has to face the four-fold implications

of peace so that man's reconciliation and self-realization can be complete. Peace is not only the condition for man's living together, but, in its highest sense, the state of man's full realization of himself in community with others.

IV. Religious Cooperation for Peace

Dialogue can only take place where life together starts. Religionists of different backgrounds can have a fruitful dialogue only where they live Truth before talking about it. Religious dialogue is realized not on the basis of academic or scientific exchange, but through existential confrontation and encounter, pointing to the root of life together, subjecting ourselves to mutual correction and edification.

The first stage of religious cooperation, accordingly, is to come together. Religionists' conferences and consultations may have a symbolic meaning of "come and abide together" in a community of human concerns. Now, on the basis of remaining together, belonging to each other, a next stage of religious cooperation begins—"talking together," a process of dialogue. It will be followed by a higher stage of "working together," the original etymological meaning of "cooperation." Religious dialogue has to be action-oriented at its basis, and "working together" for others must be started. Working together may, in turn, consolidate and have an impact on the process of dialogue. Dialectical process will be set in motion between dialogical and operational dimensions of religious cooperation. In this connection, the parable of the Good Samaritan is illuminating. Without extending any help urgently needed by the stricken man, a victim of robbery, a priest passed by.

Because he felt so secure in his own religious tradition, he did not care about the fate of a man who belonged to a religion other than his own. Then the Good Samaritan came and made every effort to help the poor victim disregarding religious and racial differences because he was ready to help any human being in need. The priest and the Good Samaritan did belong to the same religion. Thus, a boundary line will be drawn, in this case, not between the stricken man and the Good Samaritan in spite of their difference of religion, but rather between the priest and the Good Samaritan belonging to the same religion.

The concern for humanity can and must overcome religious differences, while the lack of that concern will make dialogue possible even among men of the same religion. Especially today, human concern can best be translated into a concern for peace. It is a most appropriate ground upon which religious encounter, dialogue, and cooperation can work out a more humane society where each man's self-realization is the condition for that of every other man. Community, a "life together" on the basis of a unity of basic concern, will be the *telos* of religious dialogue, as peace, after all, signifies for religionists the highest form of community.