

Dialogue as Encounter

"In spite of difficulties, the Church's commitment to dialogue remains firm and irreversible." This statement is from *Dialogue and Proclamation* (DP 54), the Holy See's latest word on the importance of dialogue with cultures and religions other than our own. It also serves as a fitting introduction to this issue of *Tripod*, in which we explore the dialogue between Christianity and the major philosophies of China: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. There is no doubt that, since Vatican II, East/West interreligious and intercultural dialogue has made great strides forward and the Church's latest affirmation of its commitment to dialogue gives cause to hope that the future will bring even greater progress in our efforts to achieve further mutual understanding and respect.

Dialogue is, without doubt, one of the best means to encounter another's religion, culture and traditions. This is as true for China, as anywhere else where the cultural and religious dimensions are deeply rooted in the people's philosophies of life.

Many factors are responsible for the profound attitudinal changes which have taken place in recent years both in the East and the West to make interreligious/intercultural dialogue a fruitful and rewarding experience. Among the intellectuals of China, there is much soul-searching. Their search may, or may not, be fundamentally religious in character, but they have rediscovered the enduring values of their own humanistic traditions which they now see as beneficial for the modernization of the new China. They have also found something deeply relevant for their society within the context of our Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Pope John Paul II, for his part, has made it a point, when speaking of China, to stress those traditional values inherent in Chinese philosophies which are still alive even after long years of attempts to obliterate them. Traditions which influence one quarter of the world's population must be taken seriously by the Church and the world outside.

There are other factors operative on a worldwide scale that work in favor of dialogue on all levels of life. There is the heightened awareness that the way of the future is through our acknowledgement of human interdependence, and only by

means of international cooperation and mutual understanding can our planet hope to survive.

The Catholic Church, which often projected an image of intransigence in the past, now shows signs of conviction that cultural and religious pluralism is a fact of life whose existence can neither be ignored nor denied, but should be dealt with in a positive way.

Vatican II, of course, is largely responsible for the dramatic change in attitude among Catholics in their approach to dialogue. Much credit must also be attributed to Christian missionaries who have made their own distinctive contribution. For over 30 years they have been articulate about the need to enter more deeply into the cultures of the people to whom they are sent in order to be able to share the Good News with them on a more profound and meaningful level. New words have entered the missiological vocabulary to describe this process: indigenization, inculturation, mutual evangelization, etc. These concepts have served the Church by helping to open its eyes and mind to new ways of being in, and doing mission.

Difficulties, of course, remain. There are those who look on dialogue with suspicion. They are afraid that people will compromise their traditional values to preserve an atmosphere of friendship and openness. Others feel the path of dialogue will only lead to confusion. They caution prudence and, in certain cases, organize themselves into lobbying groups set on putting an end to the movement itself.

To engage in fruitful dialogue, the participants must be well-grounded in the cultures, philosophies and religions under discussion, and have an understanding of the beliefs and practices of others and finally, a conviction of the worth of dialogue itself. An understanding of the socio-political factors which have contributed to the burdens of negative history is also essential if the suspicions and intolerance bred by the past are to be alleviated and eventually overcome.

The Word came into our world, divided and torn by enmities, disunion, and disbelief, to reconcile it to God. This is the salvific mission begun by Jesus which the Church must continue. Gospel values proclaimed, shared, recognized, and lived, and enmities dissolved through mutual respect and understanding, can only serve towards the extension of the reign of God.