

The Call to Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract: *The paper explores the contemporary call to interfaith dialogue from the Christian – especially Roman Catholic – perspective. Although there is focus on dialogue among the Abrahamic traditions, some attention is given to dialogue with indigenous and secular humanist traditions. The paper proposes various theological bases for dialogue in Vatican II and subsequent Church teachings, and in newer theologies which focus on the role of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit. Some attention is given to the insights of Raimon Panikkar including his emphasis on intra-religious dialogue and a spirituality for dialogue. Various levels of dialogue – life, action, theology and religious experience – are discussed along with other practical aspects of dialogue. Challenges and promises of interfaith dialogue are explored in the Australian context with emphasis on its possible contribution to tolerance, reconciliation and the transformation of culture.*

Key Words: interfaith dialogue; intra-faith dialogue; Raimon Panikkar; Church – mission; Holy Spirit; Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue; culture

Dialogue is an indispensable step along the path towards human self-realization, the self-realization both of each individual and of every human community. Although the concept of "dialogue" might appear to give priority to the cognitive dimension (dialogos), all dialogue implies a global, existential dimension. It involves the human subject in his or her entirety; dialogue between communities involves in a particular way the subjectivity of each (John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, Encyclical Letter [1995], no. 28).

The focus of this presentation is on the role of interfaith dialogue from the Christian—especially Roman Catholic—perspective in the Australian context. My argument is that interfaith dialogue is not a luxury for the few but a requirement of the many, and that its implications reach well beyond establishing positive relations among the religions themselves to being a catalyst for personal, social and cultural transformation. This is particularly the case with the prophetic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam whose teachings espouse peace, justice and reconciliation among peoples, and yet whose actions have not always followed these precepts in their relations with one another nor with people of other traditions including, for example, Australia's indigenous peoples.

Let me begin with some presumptions I bring to this presentation:

- (1) We live in a post-modern world in the sense that no single religion, culture, system or ideology has any convincing claim to be the one voice of truth;
- (2) We live in a democracy so that everyone has the right to present and defend his/her own system of beliefs and practices - even if we consider these to be inferior or in error;
- (3) We live in a secular society which is, at best, ambivalent about the role of religion – especially organized religion – in politics and the affairs of state;

- (4) We live in a global world in which our national identities in no way preclude our responsibilities for the well-being of all humanity and the one earth we share;
- (5) We are yet to grasp the full reality that Australia is a pluralistic, multicultural, multi-religious society in which dialogue among people of different traditions and with indigenous peoples is a requirement of social cohesion;
- (6) Spirituality, truth and goodness are not the domain of religion alone so that the religions need to be open to dialogue with indigenous, secular and non-religious voices; and
- (7) The religious traditions have a particular responsibility in promoting strategies that enable dignity and justice for Australia's first peoples and other marginalized groups (including more recent victims of governmental policy such as refugees, asylum seekers and the mentally ill).
- (8) Finally, dialogue is rooted in the nature and dignity of the human person and is "an indispensable step along the path towards human self-realisation... both of each individual and of every human community."¹

Religions are like people and cultures: they are forever dynamic, evolving, changing, growing.² In particular, they change and grow through historical contact with other traditions – often in opposition or rejection, sometimes through incorporation, of ideas, symbols and rituals of those traditions. The principle is more easily recognized within single faith traditions such as Christianity where the Reformation defines itself in relation to the Catholic tradition which, in turn, understands itself in relation to both Reform and Orthodox traditions. Likewise, there is no Christian or Islamic tradition understandable without the unique and privileged but also difficult and complex relation to Judaism. Moreover, while we speak in terms of the three prophetic traditions, we know immediately that there is no such thing as Judaism, Christianity or Islam - since these religions are all fragmented by the vicissitudes of human history and in the emergence of multi-minor traditions through which they express themselves in the midst of human ferment.³

I would also like to provide a post-modern context for this discussion by introducing what David Klemm calls the postmodern challenge defined as discovering "what is questionable and what is genuine in self and other, while opening self to other and allowing other to remain other."⁴ Unless we accept that we have something to learn as well as to teach, interfaith dialogue has little prospect. Equally, interfaith dialogue does not intend to erect the new one-world religion. We accept that religious diversity is with us to stay, but we wish to learn to work together cooperatively for the future of the world rather

¹ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 28.

² Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 85-102.

³ The three Abrahamic traditions, stemming from the same historical root, understand themselves in terms of their primordial revelations; but they too often define themselves in opposition to the other traditions. Speaking for Christianity, the truth of our understanding of the fullness of divine revelation in Jesus Christ has been used as a battering stick against other traditions--especially Judaism and Islam--whose primordial religious experiences could not and do not allow for belief in divine incarnation nor, its corollary, a trinitarian God. See Gerard Hall, "Interreligious Perspectives on Incarnation," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 76.4 (1999): 430-440.

⁴ David Klemm, "Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55.3 (1987): 456.

than adopt an attitude of isolation, conflict or competition.⁵ In my opinion, we are only at the beginning of this process of understanding let alone implementing an authentic praxis and theology of interfaith dialogue. Nonetheless, important theoretical and practical steps have been made, some of which I hope to cover in this presentation.

Theology of Interfaith Dialogue

From a Catholic-Christian perspective, there has been a foundational shift in the understanding of Church and mission that enables - in fact requires - a changing approach to and the emergence of a new theology of engagement with the world.⁶ Central to this thinking, evident in Vatican documents beginning with the Council, is the recognition that other religious traditions contain "elements which are true and good," "precious things both religious and human," "elements of truth and grace," "seeds of the Word" and "rays of that truth which illumines all humankind."⁷ Moreover, as expressed by Pope John Paul II, there is but "one Spirit of truth" uniting all religions.⁸

From this more positive evaluation of other traditions, there emerges a greater openness and the call to dialogue which is quite explicit in official Church documents beginning with the Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. Here, Christians are called on to "enter with prudence and charity into dialogues and collaboration with members of other religions." The motivation for dialogue includes overcoming divisions, fostering friendly relations, achieving mutual understanding and working creatively for peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.⁹ Another reason for dialogue is given in the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity which encouraging missionaries to dialogue in order to "learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations."¹⁰ In all this is recognition that Christians have something to learn as well as to teach in dialogical exchange with representatives of other traditions.

In subsequent Church documents, it becomes clear that interfaith dialogue is not to be seen as something Christians do in addition to evangelization. Rather, interfaith dialogue is one element of the Church's evangelizing mission.¹¹ Other elements are:

⁵ See, for example, David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) who distinguishes four ideologies for interfaith encounter: ideology; hostility; competition; partnership.

⁶ For a discussion of the Church's changing relationship to the world, especially other religious traditions, see Gerard Hall, "Catholic Church Teaching on its Relationship to Other Religions since Vatican II," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 1 (August 2003): aejt.com.au; accessed 28 July 2005.

⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (hereafter *LG*); *Gaudium et Spes*, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (hereafter *GS*); *Ad Gentes*, The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (hereafter *AG*); *Nostra Aetate*, The Declaration on the Church's Relations with non-Christian Religions (hereafter *NA*). See *LG* 16; *GS* 92; *AG* 9, 11, 15; *NA* 2. Documents available in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport NY: Costello, 1975).

⁸ See, for example, John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, Encyclical Letter (1990), no. 6; <http://www.wf-f.org/RedemptorHominis.html>; accessed 28th July 2005.

⁹ *NA*, nos. 2-3.

¹⁰ *AG*, nos. 11.

¹¹ This is stated unequivocally by Vatican Commissions and in papal pronouncements published in Francesco Gioia (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church 1963-1995* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1994); Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Mission* (1984) (hereafter *DM*); Pope John Paul II's *Address to the Secretariat* (1987) and his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) (hereafter *RM*); the Commissions for Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelization, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) (hereafter *DP*); and Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (2000) (hereafter *DI*). See *DM*, no. 13; *RM*, no. 55; *DP*, no. 6, 55; *DI*, no. 22.

presence and witness; social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; proclamation and catechesis. Although proclamation of the Gospel remains the culmination of mission, the “totality of mission embraces all these elements.”¹² In particular, “all (Christians) are called to dialogue” not only to learn about the positive value of other traditions but as a way of overcoming prejudice, purifying cultures of dehumanizing elements, upholding traditional cultural values of indigenous peoples and, indeed, purifying their own faith.¹³ In other words, dialogue complements proclamation since both are authentic elements of the Church's single evangelizing mission. There is also the explicit recognition that interfaith dialogue can be a means for purifying and deepening one's own faith commitment.

The new theology of engagement with the world is a Spirit-centred theology. It is the Holy Spirit who inspires and directs the *missio Dei* throughout the world as well as being “the principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission.”¹⁴ Since the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit continues to draw people to Christ and so has a special relationship with the Church and her members. Nonetheless, it is the same Holy Spirit who is present and active in individuals, society, history, cultures and religions, animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations of the entire human family.¹⁵ The Holy Spirit is the fount of love and wisdom, the inspirer of peace and justice, the catalyst for truth and reconciliation that empowers the church, enlightens all peoples and renews the face of the earth. The Holy Spirit is clearly not the monopoly of the Christian Churches.

Many contemporary theologians of interfaith dialogue are inclined to seek a Trinitarian basis for their theologies. Jesuit theologian, Jacques Dupuis, develops what he calls a “Trinitarian Christology.” Extending the “anonymous Christianity” of Karl Rahner, he argues that the “unbounded action of the Spirit” and the “non-incarnate presence of the Word” may not only be found outside Christianity, but other religions may be recipients of divine grace and revelation in ways that are unique to them.¹⁶ Like Rahner, Dupuis proposes that all religions are oriented towards the mystery of Jesus Christ who brings salvation history to a climax. However, unlike Rahner, he does not see salvation history as a one-sided process in which Christianity is the fulfilment of all other traditions. Since divine grace and salvation may also exist in other religions in ways outside Christian experience, Christianity may also find its fulfilment through engagement with these traditions. If we are to speak of a fulfilment model in Dupuis' theology, it is clearly a case of “mutual fulfilment” through partnership in interfaith dialogue.¹⁷

Apart from emerging theologies of interfaith dialogue, there is also the need for a spirituality of dialogue, something that arises from the core of one's faith-experience. Panikkar attempts to provide such a spiritual basis for dialogue in his classical “Sermon on the Mount of Intra-Religious Dialogue.”¹⁸ This will form a bridge between this discussion

¹² *DM*, no. 13.

¹³ *DP*, nos. 43-49.

¹⁴ *RM*, no. 21.

¹⁵ *RM*, no. 28.

¹⁶ See Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Gerard Hall, “Jacques Dupuis' Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,” *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 15.1 (2002): 37-50.

¹⁷ Other examples of Trinitarian Theologies of Interfaith Dialogue are: Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973); Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

¹⁸ Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 1.

on the theology of interfaith dialogue and the next section on the practice of interfaith dialogue.

When you enter into an intra-religious dialogue, do not think beforehand what you have to believe.

When you witness to your faith, do not defend yourself or your vested interests, sacred as they may appear to you. Do like the birds in the skies; they sing and fly and do not defend their music or their beauty.

When you dialogue with somebody, look at your partner as a revelatory experience, as you would - and should - look at the lilies in the fields.

When you engage in intra-religious dialogue, try first to remove the beam in your own eye before removing the speck in the eye of your neighbour.

Blessed are you when you do not feel self-sufficient while being in dialogue.

Blessed are you when you trust the other because you trust in Me.

Blessed are you when you face misunderstandings from your own community or others for the sake of your fidelity to Truth.

Blessed are you when you do not give up your convictions, and yet you do not set them up as absolute norms.

Woe unto you, you theologians and academicians, when you dismiss what others say because you find it embarrassing or not sufficiently learned.

Woe unto you, you practitioners of religions, when you do not listen to the cries of the little ones.

Woe unto you, you religious authorities, because you prevent change and (re)conversion.

Woe unto you, religious people, because you monopolize religion and stifle the Spirit, when blows where and how she wills.

To be authentic, religious dialogue must always arise from the revelatory experience of one's own tradition which highlights the importance of intra-religious dialogue (both personal and ecclesial) as a prerequisite for inter-religious dialogue. As always, good theology arises out of sound experience and praxis.

Practice of Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is always interpersonal dialogue, that is, the meeting of persons who believe, not the meeting of belief systems. Although this may appear to be splitting hairs, it is most important to emphasize that only persons dialogue, not systems or beliefs. In Martin Buber's terminology, genuine dialogue is an I-Thou (not an I-it let alone an it-it) encounter. In this regard, Raimon Panikkar distinguishes between the dialectical and the dialogical dialogue.¹⁹ The former deals with the coherence of ideas which can be defended at the tribunal of reason; the latter relates to the other as a person who is more than the sum of his or her opinions, doctrines and ideas. Evidently, there is a place for reason and

¹⁹ Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 23-40. See also Raimon Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 232-256.

"Dialogue seeks truth by trusting the other, just as dialectics pursues truth by trusting the order of things, the value of reason and weighty arguments. Dialectics is the optimism of reason; dialogue is the optimism of the heart. Dialectics believes it can approach truth by relying on the objective consistency of ideas. Dialogue believes it can advance along the way to truth by relying on the subjective consistency of the dialogical partners. Dialogue does not seek primarily to be duo-logue, a duet of two logoi, which would still be dialectical; but a dia-logos, a piercing of the logos to attain a truth that transcends it" (Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, 243).

dialectics which have pride of place in theological dialogue. However, even here, interfaith dialogue is always a meeting of hearts as well as minds.

Consequently, the practice of interfaith dialogue requires that people of diverse religious backgrounds meet in a spirit of mutual openness, honesty and trust. Procedures for dialogue include the following: sincerity and honesty on both sides; willingness to listen and learn as well as to speak and correct; presumed equality of dignity; a spirit of mutual trust; ability to be self-critical regarding one's own religious tradition as well as questioning of the other; being prepared to explore new manifestations of the divine mystery at work in the world as well as respecting tradition; allowing discussion and debate as clarifying moments within a larger conversation; recognizing that symbol and ritual mediate the divine mystery more powerfully than doctrines or beliefs; respecting the place of silence in religious experience and interfaith dialogue; allowing time for the fruits of dialogue to grow.²⁰ There also needs to be a certain robust honesty mixed with a realism of expectation: conflicts of interpretation and misunderstandings will be common. There is sometimes a danger that interfaith dialogue groups are "too polite" - if there is no disagreement, we are in difficulty!

Interfaith dialogue is human communication that seeks to establish (or develop) a world of shared meaning (and possibly shared action) among the dialogue partners. It is also a sacred communication in which participants witness to the truth of their own faith as well as being open to a new experience of truth in the encounter. This is not to assume an uncritical approach to another tradition; but it does espouse a willingness to set aside premature judgments that arise from prejudice and ignorance, the twin enemies of truth and understanding. The other enemy of truth may well be one's own ego, the supposition that oneself or one's own tradition is the final arbiter of all that is true. In reality, as we discover in interfaith dialogue, Yahweh/God/Allah alone is absolute, so that all our human efforts, theological formulae and religious systems fall far short of describing or naming the Ultimate Reality.

It is important to realize that interfaith dialogue may occur at various levels and degrees of formality. These are neatly summarized in the two Vatican Documents, *Dialogue and Mission* and *Dialogue and Proclamation* as:²¹

- (1) The dialogue of life in which people share their hopes, aspirations and daily problems in a cordial manner;
- (2) The dialogue of action where practical collaboration aims to confront situations of social injustice or oppression and promote values such as peace and reconciliation;
- (3) The dialogue of theological exchange in which theologians explore together the understanding of each other's doctrinal beliefs and spiritual values; and
- (4) Shared religious experience through dialogue in or about prayer, liturgy, contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

These different types of dialogue are presented as neither mutually exclusive nor in any particular order of priority. My own experience in Christian-Jewish and Catholic-Muslim

²⁰ See Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 61-71. In summary: it must be free from apologetics (in relation to one's particular tradition or religion in general); one must be open to the challenge of conversion; the historical dimension though necessary is insufficient; it is not merely a congress of philosophy, a theological symposium, let alone an ecclesiastical endeavour; it is a religious encounter in faith, hope and love; intra-religious dialogue is primary.

²¹ See *DM*, nos. 28-35; *DP*, no. 42. See Gioia (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church*, 566-579, 608-642.

Dialogue leads to the conclusion that my own area of interest, theological dialogue, is not high on the list of most others drawn to the dialogue, and that the better place to begin may well be the dialogues of life and action. Australian pragmatism would also tend to suggest these are the preferred starting points. Nonetheless, each dialogue group needs to establish its own preferred starting points, strategies and outcomes as part of the dialogue itself. These will develop and quite possibly change throughout the life of the group. Proceedings may begin with a possible short prayer, a reading from the various or common Scriptures and/or a short period of contemplative silence. This highlights the reality that this is first and foremost an inter-faith experience.

Various proposals are made by practitioners of dialogue including style of leadership, number of participants, regularity and length of meetings, closed or open membership, meeting rules, decision-making processes and practical objectives.²² Although answers will differ from group to group, I would like to highlight three strategies that seem important for the success of most groups: the desirability of a regular core group of eight to twelve members (providing structure and leadership); openness for others to attend on a less regular basis (providing new ideas and vision); more or less equal representation and equivalent educational background among the diverse religious groups (providing balance and equality in the service of dialogue). As a way of challenging some current interfaith groups, it is worth indicating that the optimum size of recommended dialogue groups is often set at between twenty-five and forty attendees. The issue of the religious make-up of the dialogue group needs further reflection with respect to narrow focus (for example, Roman Catholics and Turkish Sunni Muslims) or broad spectrum (for example, all Abrahamic traditions). There is also the "sleeping question" of dealing with fundamentalist representatives of any religious tradition who are incapable of genuine dialogue and are probably there to disrupt the dialogical process.

There has been a recent change in terminology from "inter-religious" to "interfaith" dialogue. An advantage of the new terminology is that the emphasis is placed on "faith" rather than "belief." Panikkar makes a seminal distinction between "faith" and "belief": faith is integral to our humanity, "the primal anthropological act" whose object is not doctrines or beliefs but "the ever inexhaustible mystery beyond the reach of objective knowledge."²³ This opens the way for interfaith dialogue with non-religious - agnostic or even atheistic - partners who are not without faith, but whose faith is expressed in terms of reason, truth, evolution, science or some other 'thing'. One may prefer to call such dialogue - that does not presume explicit belief in some ultimate, transcendent Other - inter-ideological dialogue. However, the reality is, especially in the increasingly secular West, that dialogue needs to occur not only among the religions but also with those of no explicit religious belief. One of the earliest Vatican documents promoting dialogue with so-called non-believers was *Humane Personae Dignitatem*²⁴ which sets out the nature, conditions, justification, rules and directives for such dialogue. This is one of those neglected documents which deserves much more attention in terms of Christian dialogue with the secular, post-Christian world.

²² Although not dealing explicitly with interfaith dialogue, an interesting presentation of optimum conditions for dialogue and desired outcomes is provided by David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Brunner-Routledge, 1996).

²³ Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 41-59.

²⁴ Secretariat for Unbelievers, "On Dialogue with Unbelievers" [*Humane Personae Dignitatem*], promulgated by Paul VI (1968), in Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II*, 1002-1014.

The most important practical dimension of interfaith dialogue may be the intra-faith moment when one is forced to integrate the fruits of the dialogue with one's own faith tradition.²⁵ It is not just religions that change and grow but our own faith is potentially transformed in response to new challenges, experiences and insights integral to any genuine interfaith encounter. Moreover, if the interfaith dialogue is authentic, one has to allow for the possibility of genuine conversion, both "a deeper conversion of all toward God" and even in exceptional cases the leaving of "one's previous spiritual or religious situation in order to direct oneself toward another (tradition)."²⁶ There is also the possibility of dialogue practitioners finding themselves belonging to dual or multiple religious traditions.²⁷ In the Australian situation, it is indigenous people who have led the way in their double embrace of their own spiritual traditions and European, especially Christian, faith. This is the Australian interfaith story that is still largely unwritten.²⁸

Promise of Interfaith Dialogue

The claim was made at the start that interfaith dialogue can be a catalyst for personal, social and cultural transformation. Many individual religions have performed - and continue to perform - the role of providing individuals, societies and entire cultures with meaning, purpose and cohesion. We also know that as societies change through increasing secularism, mass migration, effects of globalization and the reality of religious and ethnic pluralism, single religious traditions such as Christianity - even with their own pluralistic expressions - are less able to perform this pivotal role. We also noted that the religious voice tends to be marginalized in democratic, secular cultures such as Australia. The pluralistic nature of cultures such as ours requires us, in Paul Knitter's felicitous phrase, "to be religious interreligiously."²⁹

In the wake of the devaluation of the religious voice in the public arena, there are pragmatic as well as theological reasons for the religions to join together as a common voice. This was the kind of thinking that gave rise to the Chicago Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions (1993) in its formulation of a global ethic on the basis of the spiritual and ethical resources of the religious traditions.³⁰ The document pleaded for commitment to a new world culture consisting of: non-violence and respect for life;

²⁵ Importantly, Panikkar's book is entitled *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*. He emphasizes the importance of the intra-religious preparation for the dialogue and then the intra-personal soliloquy that follows the interfaith dialogue with the other(s).

²⁶ *DP*, no. 41. Panikkar also stresses that interfaith dialogue involves the risk and challenge of conversion. As he states, the truly religious person is not a fanatic who has all the answers but a pilgrim who is open to the experience of grace and truth. One may lose one's life or even lose faith in one's own tradition--but one may also be born again and one's own tradition transformed. Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 62f.

²⁷ See Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2002); and Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 60-81. Some thirty-five years ago, Panikkar expressed his religious situation in the following terms: "I 'left' as a Christian; I 'found' myself as a Hindu; and I 'return' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian." See Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 42.

²⁸ As one example of Indigenous-Christian dialogue, see Joan Hendriks, "Indigenous and Christian: An Australian Perspective" in Damien Casey, Gerard Hall and Anne Hunt (eds.), *Foundations of Christian Faith* (Melbourne: Social Science Press, 2004), 171-177.

²⁹ Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 10; Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 78.

³⁰ "We assert that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions and that these form the basis of a global ethic". Hans Küng & Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 14.

solidarity and a just economic order; tolerance and a life of truthfulness; equal rights and partnership between men and women. In the preamble to the document, it is stated:

As religious and spiritual persons we base our lives in an Ultimate Reality, and draw spiritual power and hope therefrom, in trust, in prayer or meditation, in word or silence. We have a special responsibility for the welfare of all humanity and care for the planet Earth. We do not consider ourselves better than other women and men, but we trust that the ancient wisdom of our religions can point the way for the future.³¹

One senses in the declaration both a sense of urgency and co-responsibility for the emerging global order as well as a note of humility not always characteristic of religious declarations. This suggests to me that representatives of the religions at the Chicago Parliament were actually engaging in a type of interfaith dialogue with secular culture, speaking not so much with the voice of hierarchy that is used to being listened to, but with the voice of authenticity and willingness to engage the non-religious other on equal terms.

Of course, if interfaith dialogue is to be a catalyst for personal, social and cultural transformation nationally and locally, such dialogue needs to take place at all levels. It is certainly important that official interfaith dialogues sanctioned by the various religious communities continue and grow. It is perhaps even more important that less official and more informal dialogues occur at the level of local temples, churches, mosques, schools, civic functions and wherever people congregate. There are significant challenges in developing effective dialogues. The first is what I would call a complex cultural ambivalence of the dominant Australian mindset that: sees itself as egalitarian, supporting the underdog and giving everyone a fair-go; and a history of presumed "European"/"Christian" superiority with its undercurrent of racist, at times xenophobic, attitudes. This ambivalence regarding the foreigner and stranger continues to be played out in current policies, debates and decisions in regard to Aboriginal Australians and predominantly Moslem refugees and asylum seekers.

It is at the practical level of joint action for peace and reconciliation that the religions will learn to engage in effective dialogue with one another and with the wider community. I would want to argue that contemporary secular values of justice and freedom are in fact biblically based. But I would also have to admit that the three biblical traditions have not always been models for living such values. The important thing is to live these values today, and the best way we have to do this is through interfaith dialogue and action, especially in joint commitment to personal freedoms, ecological sustainability, social justice and cultural transformation.

Where interfaith dialogue actually works, something very challenging is happening. This is what Panikkar calls the "revolutionary character" of dialogue that subverts the predominance of dialectical thinking in arriving at workable solutions for human, cultural and religious issues.

[Dialogue] challenges... many of the commonly accepted foundations of modern culture. To restore or install the dialogical dialogue in human relations among individuals, families, groups, societies, nations, and cultures may be one of the most urgent things to do in our times threatened by a fragmentation of interests that threatens all life on the planet.³²

³¹ Hans Küng and Helmut Schmidt (eds.), *A Global Ethic and Global Responsibility* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 9.

³² Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 32.

Interfaith dialogue provides the opportunity for an expanded human and religious consciousness³³ that, far from diluting one's commitment to his or her faith tradition, is able to deepen and extend that commitment. In the global world of the third millennium, only those traditions that engage with other religions and cultures in the pursuit of justice, peace and reconciliation will survive. Their survival will not depend on their social position or political power, but on the authenticity of their lives embedded in the particularity of their own traditions and open engagement with the pluralistic world. The Abrahamic traditions are especially called to be beacons of interfaith dialogue and action, to heal wounds, promote understanding and encourage human well-being and community. Surely this is the ethical and prophetic role of the followers of Abraham who make up over half the world's people. In the Australian situation, the dialogue needs to be extended to include indigenous peoples whose cosmic and earth-centred traditions remind us of the sacred reality of the land in which we dwell and which we share, regardless of the particularity of our ethnic, cultural or religious identities.³⁴

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³³ Panikkar calls for a "cosmotheandric" or "new religious consciousness." The foundations for this growth in "divine-human-cosmic" awareness are developed in his *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

³⁴ Among accessible publications dealing with this theme from an interfaith dialogical perspective are the following: David Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1995); David Tacey, *Re-enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 2000); Rod Cameron, *Alcheringa: The Australian Experience of the Sacred* (Homebush: St Pauls, 1993); Rod Cameron, *Karingal: A Search for Australian Spirituality* (Homebush: St Pauls, 1995).