

World Alliance of YMCAs
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Living in Dialogue

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1. Introduction

I come from Bangladesh, a lush green country with mighty rivers originating in the Himalayas and flowing down the Bay of Bengal. Before the tributaries mix with the ocean waters, they pass through the thick foliage and mangroves called the *Sundarbans* (beautiful forest), home of the famous Royal Bengal Tiger. The country's size is only 55,00 square miles, but it has a population of over 140 million. Nearly 86% are Muslims, 10% Hindus, 2-3% Buddhists and the rest are people of other religions including Christians, who are estimated to be only around 0.4%. It has a beautiful language called Bangla, spoken by over 300 million people (as Bangla is also spoken in West Bengal, India). Rabindranath Tagore who earned the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 wrote in this language hundreds of poems, many stories and novels including over 2,500 songs. Many of his songs are deeply spiritual, and they give energy and hope to millions of people every day as they rise up in the morning with his tunes and end the day with the same, even today.

I grew up in the Chittagong city where my father was a school teacher at a Catholic school named St. Placid's, well known in town (also within the country) for its academic standards and its teaching staff many of whom were Canadian Holy Cross Brothers. The school was open to all, irrespective of religions, and so the majority of my classmates and friends were Muslims. There were also Hindu and Buddhist students, reflecting nearly the religious composition in the country at large. Our family was always invited to different religious festivals, particularly the Eid of Muslims and the Puja of Hindus. I loved to attend them. They were joyful celebrations of life. Each festival had a uniqueness to itself, and I witnessed in each celebration love, sharing, concern and devotion. The early morning call to prayer by the Imam from the nearby mosque, as if piercing the darkness, and reaching God with praise and supplication, still reverberates in my heart. That particular tone, that expression in voice, must touch every soul to the core. A little later, I would

hear the cymbals from the Hindu homes, and would see women clad in simple saris picking fresh flowers for worship. The Church bell rang at 6:00 and many a day I too woke up and walked to Church for the morning Mass. I used to visit the Pagodas in the city from time to time, and was enchanted to see Buddhist monks in saffron clothes deep in meditation.

In school one of my closest friends with whom I wrote articles on “how to make an electric bell”, “how to make an electric motor”, or “how to make a gas balloon”, for our school magazine “Forward” was a Muslim who is now an Electric Engineer, owning his own company in Chittagong, making sophisticated electronic gadgets. Even now he visits my ageing parents regularly, like one of our family members.

I consider myself fortunate to have had teachers all through school and college, who belonged to different religious faiths. For each of them, even when they taught mathematics or sociology expressed values – values which they believed in, the morals they followed and the rituals they exercised. Of course, as a Christian student, I attended the early morning Catechism class, where I had more systematic introductions to prayer, liturgy and Bible study through the prescribed books taught by deeply committed religious Brothers.

From early in life, I could sense denominational differences as my mother’s side was Anglican, with two uncles who were Anglican Ministers. They had married my mother’s two elder sisters and had family and children, which made me realise that there are differences in Christianity too, for in our Church the Priests had to be single.

Religion attracted me much and amidst options to pursue careers in engineering or medicine, I decided to study theology. While studying theology, the Bangladesh Liberation struggle of 1971 had started. The then East Pakistan was shattered. Over 3 million people lost their lives. A large number of people were homeless. When I was returning home from the Seminary in Karachi in early 1973, many of the refugees who had taken shelter mainly in neighbouring India, were returning home to find nothing left. Poverty was rampant. The youth, most of whom were engaged in the liberation struggle, were just going back to school. Many of them still had arms. I was to complete the Seminary courses in the Poona Papal Seminary in India, but the idea of being in a Seminary again, far away from home and cut off from the re-building process of society, to me, did not seem to be natural. I decided to stay back and engage in society. At this point, I got involved in the

newly formed Chittagong YMCA. The Ecumenical character of the YMCA attracted me most. Here I saw in the Board people from a variety of Christian denominations and confessions, and the programmes were open to all irrespective of race, caste or religion.

2. The YMCA: Beginning the Ecumenical Adventure

The ecumenical character of the YMCA is well known and widely recognised. It is said that when George Williams who started the first YMCA in London, was discussing about the foundation of the YMCA with three other young men in the drapery business, he exclaimed: “Here we are, an Episcopalian, a Methodist, a Baptist, and a Congregationalist– four believers but a single faith in Christ. Forward together!”¹

W.A. Visser’t Hooft, a YMCA secretary, who later became the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, had identified seven meanings of the term “ecumenical” historically the most advanced being that quality or attitude that expresses the consciousness of and desire for Christian Unity.²

Henry Dunant, who was at the World Alliance foundational meeting in Paris in 1855, had stated, “that Christians of different denominations can and must unite in love, associate with each other, and work together in charity for the glory of God, while maintaining their individual liberty ...”³

Over the years, the YMCA and YWCA played a crucial role in the entire ecumenical movement, as the following quote from a historian clearly shows:

“Leap over a hundred years and study the World Council of Churches platform at Amsterdam, and other such ecumenical assemblies; four-fifths of those assembled on these platforms probably owed their ecumenical inspiration to some connection with the YMCA, with the YWCA, or with the closely-connected Student Christian Movement. John R. Mott began his ecumenical career as a YMCA Secretary, as did W.A Visser’t Hooft.”⁴

John R. Mott, who was a founding leader of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948, was himself filled with missionary zeal. It is said that he was inspired in this calling by two important events, the South Indian Missionary Conference at Madras, India (1900) and the follow-up Missionary Conference four months later in New York. He envisioned a truly ecumenical World

Mission Conference, where participants from all missionary societies and agencies could come together. This vision became a reality in 1910 at Edinburgh, Scotland, where 1,200 delegates discussed on the sense of urgency of mission. Mott's dream was "the evangelisation of the world in this generation", and he talked about the movement as "the decisive hour of Christian mission".

Mott's idea was that missionary societies should coordinate their personnel, resources, and strategies so that everyone in the world who lived at that time would have the opportunity to hear the challenge of the gospel".⁵

S. Wesley Ariarajah (a former staff of the WCC) notes that this meeting was one of the first global ecumenical events where the question of Christian relationship to other religions was discussed with much intensity. In fact, a Commission was set up to examine the "Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions". In preparation of this commission a survey questionnaire was sent to missionaries in the field on their experiences of encountering people of other faiths. There were over 200 responses. Ariarajah notes in this regard:

"Many spoke of their experience of people of other faiths as sincere, ethical and devout persons in some sort of communion with God. The overall emphasis was on finding "points of contact" between the religious life of the people of Asia and the gospel message. J.N. Farquhar summarised the positions in these words: "Christ's own attitude to Judaism ought to be our attitude to other faiths even if the gap is far greater and the historical connection absent."⁶

After that meeting, John R. Mott went around the world strengthening YMCAs, helping to create more Student Christian Movements (SCMs) which later formed the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and also National Christian Councils (NCCs).

It is said that the demand for a different approach to the people of other religions was first made in 1922 at the WSCF's committee meeting held in Peking (now Beijing). For during that time there was within China a growing demand for an indigenous and self-propagating church and a sympathetic study of the leading non-Christian religions.

In 1926, at the World Conference of YMCAs held in Helsingfors (Helsinki) interest was expressed in a new approach and theological assessment of other religious traditions. This World Conference decided to organise a Regional Conference in Asia to address the special issues in the region, including the issues of relationship with people of other faiths than Christianity.

In August 1933, thus, was organised the Far Eastern and India Area Conference of YMCAs in Baguio, Philippines, which broke new ground when it stated that, “We should regard those of other faiths with respect and share with them in a humble spirit the deepest things in life.”⁷

3. Debates on Inter-Faith Relations at World Mission Conferences

Actually, at the second World Mission Conference organised by the newly formed International Missionary Council and held in 1928 at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and attended by around 1,000 participants of which one-third were from Asia, Africa and Latin America (compared to the first conference attended by 17 persons out of 1200), there was a priority focus on “the Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Thought and Life”, for this was designated as the first of seven commissions.

While maintaining the missionary emphasis, the Jerusalem meeting expressed respect for the beliefs of others, putting the emphasis on “sharing the Christian message with “humility, penitence and love”. It also went even further identifying the “noble elements” in religious traditions:

“We recognise as part of the one Truth that sense of the majesty of God and the consequent reverence in worship which are conspicuous in Islam; the deep sympathy for the world’s sorrow and unselfish search for the way of escape, which are at the heart of Buddhism; the desire for contact with Ultimate Reality conceived as spiritual, which is prominent in Hinduism; the belief in the moral order of the universe and consequent insistence on moral conduct, which are inculcated by Confucianism; the disinterested pursuit of truth and of human welfare which is often found in those who stand for secular civilisation but do not accept Christ as their Lord and Saviour.”⁸

Of course, as one would expect, this statement created a lot of controversy and the stage was set for a more thorough discussion on the issue at the Third World Mission Conference held in Tambaram, Madras, India, in 1938. This

was the first World Mission Conference in Asia, and the issue of Christian approach to people of other faiths was the major focus so that a considered theological position could be formulated.

Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch missiologist, was asked to write a volume that would make the case for mission. Thus his work, the “Christian Message in a Non-Christian World”, became the main document for discussion at the meeting in Tambaram. His concept of “discontinuity” argued that the Gospel can neither be the “fulfilment” of any religion nor could it be built on the “noble values” found in other religious expressions. Rather, it challenges all adherents of religions to respond to faith to the unique revelation in Jesus Christ.”⁹

However, the Tambaram Conference, instead of enabling more clarity on Christian relationship with people of other living faiths, created more debate and controversy, as a large number of key leaders from the churches from China, India, England, etc. made “impassioned interventions challenging Kraemer’s position.”¹⁰

This led to a more intensive reflection on understanding the message of Jesus Christ in the respective contexts of the countries and rethinking on inter-religious relationships, and the ecumenical debate became more vibrant.

But, soon came the Second World War, and the focus in Europe went on how Christians could come together to mend a war-torn world – leading to the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam in 1948.

In 1955, the WCC and the International Missionary Council (which then was not yet part of the WCC), decided to jointly follow up on the Tambaram discussions with a fresh look under the topic “The Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men”. It was agreed that the study would be done through the Christian Study centres all around the world. In his reports to the Third Assembly of the WCC held in New Delhi in 1961, P.D. Devanandam who lead the study centre in India, and who had involved people of other faiths in the discussions, proposed “Dialogue” with people of other faiths as the way for the future.

4. The Vatican's Approach to People of Other Faiths

In the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council (meeting from 1962-1965) made key pronouncements in regard to the Christian approach to people of other religious traditions and faiths.

Referring to Hinduism and Buddhism, Vatican II, states “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (John 1: 6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor. 5: 18-19), men find the fullness of the religious life.”¹¹

And furthermore:

“The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.”¹²

In regard to the Muslim religion, the Vatican II states, “ The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men ... over the centuries many quarrels and dissension's have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understandings for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.”¹³

In regard to Jews, it states: “Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this Sacred Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation.” This can be obtained, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions.¹⁴

5. Dialogue as the Way Forward

Thus, both the Vatican and the WCC accepted the concept of “Dialogue” with people of other faiths and established offices to promote the same. In the Vatican, Pope Paul VI created the Secretariat for Dialogue with Non-Christians in 1964. In 1998, Pope John Paul II re-established it with the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue with the following aims: to promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the members of other religions; to encourage the study of religions; and to promote the formation of persons dedicated to Dialogue.

After the Uppsala Assembly (1968), the WCC formed the Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Religions and Ideologies (1971). In 1979 it produced a booklet on Guidelines on Dialogue and established a permanent programme within its structure.

6. YMCA and Inter-faith Relations: Learning By Doing

We are aware from the Bible about how Christianity spread in its very early days. As Christianity went into different continents, it encountered other cultures. Coming from Asia, I am conscious of the fact that although there was a presence of Christianity before the colonial period, actually most of the churches in Asia today are the result of Christian Missions from Europe and North America. So, most of the Christians in these lands, came from other religions, and the Christian missions completely separated them from ongoing religious-based relations with their neighbours. In the long-term, this created a “psychological alienation” between the Christian community and the larger community. As a result, the Christian community in these lands “did not see themselves as part and parcel of national communities of Asia” almost until the end of the colonial era.¹⁵

As the countries became independent from colonial rule, the local Christians began to give more focus on their cultural identity and the meaning of following Jesus Christ within their national contexts. Gradually, increased interest emerged in new theological explorations in the context of cultural and religious plurality, inculturation of the liturgy and inter-faith dialogue.

Since 1965 as a college student, I myself got very involved in the inculturation process of the liturgy, as I was translating into Bangla, texts for the Mass, and composing Bangla hymns in our native and sub-continental music. Of course

in the beginning, there was a negative reaction from the faithful as we introduced the music and local instruments in our churches, because they were used to only western tunes, played in an organ. However, gradually people not only accepted these new endeavours, they expressed a liking for them.

In the YMCA, a new thrust in participating with people at the grassroots came during the early 1970s, as the United Nations focused on the Development Decades. The 6th World Council in Kampala, Uganda in 1973 adopted an interpretative statement of the Paris Basis, for the first time, giving importance to Development engagement in response to our Christian mission. As a follow-up, I recall having attended the first Development Seminar in Chiangmai, Thailand in 1976, organised by the then Asia Alliance of YMCAs. It stated:

“While there were many reports from national movements indicative of their participation in plans of national development, a genuine concern was expressed that in the main the YMCA remained fettered to its buildings and tied to its traditional programmes. Perhaps the Seminar was held in the very nick of time so that the YMCA could be broken out of its walls for its new tasks in the field of development at the grassroots level ... The YMCA must recognise that social justice, the economic order, political organisation, the development of culture, are all things which have their place in the vision of God’s presence upon earth.”¹⁶

In 1981, at the 8th World Council of YMCAs the question of Dialogue with People of Other Faiths was an important concern, affirming that “the YMCA is an organisation founded on Christian principles. Therefore, the movement towards openness and partnership with people of other faiths is rooted in the understanding of the Christian concern for all people.” It pointed out that 1) dialogue with people of other faiths was important as an occasion for the clear and thoughtful expression of our own faith; 2) as an opportunity to study the faith of others’; 3) as a means by which we engage in meaningful cooperation with members of other faiths ...¹⁷

That same year (1981) the then Asia Alliance of YMCAs held a discussion on the issue of relationship with people of other faiths in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, but this time the focus was more on “partnership” and grassroots action together with people of other faiths in addressing the common issues and problems of society.

In 1986 the World Alliance and Asia Alliance jointly held a Seminar on “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious Context” in Chiangmai, Thailand, which I was responsible to conduct as an Executive Staff of the Asia Alliance. We had invited outstanding speakers from all major religions to share their perspectives on life, on God and how we relate with each other, from their respective religions. The Consultation focused not only on understanding each other’s theological positions, but more on country-level engagement, particularly on matters relating to human rights and working for justice and peace.

During this time (1980s) the World Alliance also encouraged, through the Africa Alliance of YMCAs, the African movements to initiate discussions on the “Ecumenical Task of the YMCA in Islamic Societies”.

In the wake of 9/11 and the so-called “clash of civilisations” theory, of course, the issue of Christianity and its relationships with people of other faiths and cultures has become a priorital concern. In this regard, I do strongly believe that the YMCA, wherever it is, can make significant contributions towards building communities with all peoples to achieve lasting peace. For, we have a long track record of working together with all peoples, irrespective of their background, race, culture, gender or religion.

Today, it is so heartening to see new milestones being reached by YMCAs around the world. Last year, at the YMCA Europe’s General Assembly, held in Faro, Portugal, I was impressed to see the importance given in regard to relationship with people of other faiths in this region. And, at this Assembly you have given so much time and focus on this important issue of the current times.

I recall vividly a small meeting I had with Heiner Knuss (Asia Desk Staff of the Church Development Service - EED of Germany) and the former General Secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), Rev. Ahn Jae Wong, at the Asia and Pacific Alliance (APAY) office in Hong Kong towards the beginning of 2002 (I was still the General Secretary of the APAY then and EED was supporting some of our development programmes). In view of the emerging crisis that we could see welling up, particularly, in regard to Christian-Muslim relationships, we agreed to endeavour on a joint Programme of education and action at the grassroots level together with people of different faiths.

The outcome was the starting of an inter-faith programme called Inter-faith Cooperation Forum (ICF) organised by these three organisations. The first programme was held in 2003 in Prapat, Indonesia bringing participants from different religions to live together and experience how they can be agents of transformation and just peace. This was followed by two programmes annually. At the first programme, the idea of setting up a School of Peace (SOP) was also generated, which held its inaugural Programme in May 2006 in Bangalore, India, bringing together 40 participants from different countries for intensive discussions and understanding of the issues and looking at ways of living together in peace. The main objectives of SOP are: 1) to encourage individual transformation; 2) to encourage the development of a national strategy for just peace through local action and 3) to encourage the development of a regional strategy for just peace advocacy.

The YMCA's and the other Ecumenical bodies' aim in these engagements is to build community with all peoples. But, let me say here, that it is not at all an easy task. It demands prayer, reflection and strong determination to be in "dialogue". I recall the tremendous efforts we had to put in, when we were moving from Project phase in Development engagement to a "Process" phase in Bangladesh, that is, enabling groups of impoverished and powerless people to organise themselves and take care of their needs. This was in 1989 and we started very small with one or two groups being organised by each of the local YMCAs. We needed constant touch with the facilitators of these works and we had all our facilitators, who were women and men from different faiths in their own localities, at the YMCA Training Institute in Savar regularly for a week-long, in house training. It was there that we had also the trainers of Prof. Muhammad Yunus, to share their experiences in the Grameen Bank. Of course, our attempt was to go beyond micro-credit, towards a wholistic addressing of needs. Thus, a whole range of activities emerged according to the particular situation of the group - landless farmers, marginal farmers, fisher folk, and deprived women's groups.

Those training sessions were, for me, most refreshing and inspiring moments. Every day, I realised how important it is to be in Dialogue. How important it is to listen and to share each other's beliefs with respect. For, there can be so many false notions about each other's religions and ways of life.

7. Our Core Concern must be Spirituality

I do believe that in order to be able to engage in fruitful Dialogue with people of other faiths, we need to be, ourselves, very strongly rooted in our Christian faith. We need to discover who really Christ is for us and for everyone in the world, and discern for ourselves his calling in these times for each one of us individually and collectively, as an organisation, to pursue his Kingdom (the Reign) of God on earth.

I see Spirituality as “response-ability”, that is, the ability to respond.¹⁸ And, I do believe that one grows in Spirituality step by step through prayer and involvement. There could be several stages of response, that is, charitable, project type or process-oriented. The most challenging of course is the process-oriented type, for it tries to address the root causes of the problems of the people in the community, but in this process, one grows in Spirituality, for it demands prayer, reflection and action (witness), according to the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. And, I do believe that in this journey, Jesus Christ is always there to show us the way.

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