

Interreligious Prayer: Prospects and parameters

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INTRODUCTION

The coming together of people of diverse religions to plan and engage in an act of shared spiritual experience – such as interreligious prayer – is something that is still comparatively novel and relatively rare. Yet the impetus for acts of interreligious prayer, or other shared liturgical acts, is increasing. Cross-religion engagements and dialogical encounters occur as communities encompassing religious diversity address issues in common, or respond to crises that affect all. In this paper I explore the issue of interreligious prayer, although what is discussed can also apply to a wider range of liturgical, devotional, or other allied activities.

There are many examples of everyday life-situations wherein we may find ourselves necessarily encountering, at some depth, people of other faiths. These range from the more personal level of, for example, inter-faith marriages – with concomitant religious diversity impacting upon the extended family – to corporate co-operation in some common cause, such as human rights violations, opposition to the proliferation of casinos, and so on. Shared community tragedies and disasters, or occasions of communal celebration, also often provide contexts where people from across a variety of faiths seek to join together in a suitable religious response. My own interest and thinking arise primarily from personal involvement in inter-faith matters, including shared events such as combined “prayers for world peace” and suchlike, together with my participation in a combined World Council of Churches and Vatican study project during the 1990s.¹ This involved the Office for Inter-Religious Relations (OIRR) of the World Council of Churches, and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) of the Vatican, undertaking a co-operative project on the question of interreligious prayer.² It is not my purpose to rehearse or summarise the outcomes of this particular consultation.³ However, it has stimulated my own thinking and prompted further development of lines of inquiry and reflection. The questions which lay behind this co-operative venture remain live ones today, and require continual reflection and fresh thinking. When the natural human response is to pray, and the context of that response is multi-religious, what can we do together? How can we do it? Indeed, ought we to do it? And if we do, on what basis may we proceed? What justification can we give in respect of our own faith? What are the issues to be addressed? How, if at all, may they be resolved? In response to such questions I here explore some key phenomenological and theological elements of interreligious prayer.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER

It is important to delineate at the outset just what might be meant by the term “interreligious” as applied to the context of prayer, or some other such experiential event – by which is meant a multi-religious occasion that may embrace more than just elements of prayer; but where prayer, and/or meditation, for example, forms part of an overall act of interreligious liturgical engagement. And, indeed, we need also to explore what is meant by the term “prayer” in the multi-religious context. A preliminary phenomenological reflection discerns four possible modes of meaning and usage of the

term “interreligious” which yields four models, or paradigms, of interreligious action in the sense of a prayer or worship type of event.

First, and most simply, a so-called “interreligious” event can in fact be a *shared multi-religious* act wherein there is presentation, in some sort of serial or simultaneous fashion, from a number of religious traditions or groups, without necessarily presupposing any depth of co-ordination, nor implying any particular level of mutual acceptance or agreement. The diverse offerings are simply allowed to be; they are passively “observed” rather than actively received or apprehended by others participating in the event. There may be a common theme or occasion to which the various contributions are oriented, but no attempt made to co-ordinate the contributions so offered. It is a matter, simply, of spiritual or liturgical pot-luck as to the smorgasbord-like spread of differently sourced religious items contributed to the worship or prayer event, or such-like liturgical act.

Second, there is the possibility – amply demonstrated, for example, in the two World Days of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi at the invitation of Pope John Paul II in 1986 and 2002 – of a *contiguous multi-religious* act. Here the principal event is constructed along the lines of having different religious traditions engage in their own prayer, or liturgical act, each in their allocated “space” – whether a different location for the purpose, or some other form of spatio-temporal demarcation. There is no intermingling of principal acts; full integrity of religious identity and the authenticity of specific actions are maintained. But at the same time this spatio-temporal demarcation is also bounded: the diversity of actions is held together by virtue of some manifest contiguity. As at Assisi, it might be by way of being held within a uniting time- and-place location: the same town on the same day. Furthermore, and again as at Assisi, there may be a shared opening and closing action. Conjoined through being hosted in the context of temporal and geographic contiguity is the essential purpose and meaning of the event. The context is clear: coming together, in order to pray; but doing that separately such that no-one is compromised, and no reductionism or relativism can be imputed. This form of multi-religious prayer is one which is not uncommon in many pastoral situations as, for example, with hospital chaplaincy work where two or more people from different faiths may find occasion to pray with and for each other, but to do so “independently” as it were, even if in the same room and at the same time. There is no suggestion of an overt corporate act of multi-religious sharing; no imputation of creeping syncretism. But there is a context of multi-religious sharing enacted by way of spatio-temporal contiguity: people are together, praying, but they are not engaged in “praying together”.

Third, and potentially the most problematic, interreligious prayer can be taken as the intention to have a *combined multi-religious* act. In this case the aim is to create, out of the resources of a multiplicity of religions involved, an act or event on the basis of a “blended” or otherwise “combined” content that may be effectively “owned” by each of the participating groups, or religious representatives. Although syncretism as such is not intended, there is a risk of it being assumed, nonetheless. Discerning the lowest common denominator is the usual modality: the distinctive and particular is shorn in order that a baseline of harmony and acceptability may prevail. In some cases, the negotiation involved – in dialogue – to achieve such an outcome may itself be quite considerable, as well as beneficial to those involved, even if, from the perspective of any one participating tradition, the combined outcome seems rather banal and overly simplified. However, such prayer and allied liturgical activity can be criticised as a reductionist and necessarily relativising enterprise: all the fearful concerns of syncretism mounted against the cause of interreligious dialogue could come home to roost.⁴ Indeed, I suspect that this is often the assumption, and the limitation, as to what the term “interreligious prayer” means for many people, and so a reason given by some for avoiding it.

Fourth – and seemingly reflecting the best of the reported experiences of interreligious prayer as such – is the occasion of prayer that has been carefully planned, but not as in a syncretistic-type

blending. This we might call *coherent-integrated interreligious* prayer, wherein from the contributing religions there is a thematic and critical interlinking of prayers, or co-ordinating of allied liturgical items. These are selected and rendered mutually congruent around a particular event or need, or appropriate common communal point of reference. The intention is that of attaining a sense of underlying unity, or internal coherence, to the outcome. Yet it is one where the real differences, unique dimensions and contexts, as well as the different content, of the contributions and the religions from which they are drawn, are mutually respected and upheld. There is no intention of presupposing, or enacting, some form of uniting the participating religions; nor subsuming them under some inclusive umbrella of any one of them. There is no attempt to blend the rich diversity of contributions into a kind of spiritual porridge; nor is the outcome marked by the happy randomness of a smorgasbord. No religious tradition is compromised, no reduction of essence or denial of the religious self-identity of the participating traditions occurs. Yet, some sense of greater wholeness may emerge nonetheless; an intuition of a larger context, a wider or deeper sphere wherein a unifying spirit is at work, may be discerned. Again, this is without prejudice to the particular sensibilities of any of the contributing religions; yet it can allow an acknowledgement and affirmation of the result by all as authentic to the occasion. The Assisi events I have referred to above did not pursue this model, of course. Nevertheless, something of it was implied, even if only by virtue of an inchoate sense of the Spirit being at work in and through the shared valuation, across the different religions, given to the witness to and for Peace.

Now, if the term “interreligious” may be interpreted in terms of the four modes, what may we say about “prayer” itself? Keeping in mind the context of interreligious engagement, how may we understand the phenomenon of prayer? What might the term mean for us in respect of the recognition of the plurality of religions? Prayer, as a category of religious phenomena, is universal. That is to say, “prayer” *per se* is a phenomenological category of religion: all religions may be said to include some kind of activity that would be classified as prayer. There would be no religion which, arguably, does not have some act and utterance that can be reasonably identified in this way. It may be seen as basic to all religions insofar that it manifests a variety of elements, not necessarily all together, but certainly encompassed within the broad range of the prayers of a given tradition. These elements might include vibrant expression of particular religious experience and perspective on the one hand, and the implicit and explicit intention toward harmony and at-one-ness, both within community and with respect to the Centre of Being, or Transcendental Other (however that is articulated), on the other. Modalities of encounter with that “Other” or spiritual Centre-point; a measure of reflectively critical self-encounter and the realisation of human contingency or dependency upon the Other; a reflective response to the encounter or experience of the world as it really is; communication with, to, and from, the “Other”; and what may be called an “oikumenal” intent: namely, wholeness and well-being for all the earth, for all life – all these also comprise elements of prayer that may be found across religions.

TWO MODALITIES OF PRAYER

Although the phenomenon of prayer as such is universal, all actual prayers are particular and unique to the religious tradition in which they are located. Prayers found in any one religious tradition cannot be regarded as variants of a species that holds across all religions, in the sense of a common spiritual datum, either in terms of content or form. Yet the occasion of unique and particular prayer is nonetheless an instance of a universal phenomenon. At the very least it is the concrete particular act that may be classified in terms of a more general dynamic typology of prayer – thanksgiving, supplication, intercession, and so on. Prayer may be viewed as having two modalities: personal and communal. In any given event of prayer, both modalities may be operative. In some situations one or other may predominate, or one may be the only operative mode.

In the communal mode, prayer gives evidence of religious identity: prayer is always the prayer of a particular religion, and indeed it may be a form of prayer belonging to an identifiable tradition from within a particular community, or sub-set, of a religion. Communal prayer is a means both by which the adherent of the religion engages in public spiritual participation, and whereby the religion itself perpetuates and sustains its unique identity. However, not all communal prayer carries the same spiritual value so far as religion is concerned. Communal prayer can have a multiplicity of levels, from the relatively general and superficial, to that of expressing treasured depths of spirituality or mystic encounter. This range alludes to the sense in which communal prayer may be a vehicle for plumbing the resources of a religion for the enhancement of the religious life appropriate to it.

In the personal mode, prayer is a private and intimate phenomenon. Personal religious identity and allegiance is expressed; the act of prayer gives evidence of personal commitment and choice. Therefore the person at prayer is vulnerable; the act of prayer in this mode is the spiritual corollary of intimate interpersonal relation. The one at prayer may be likened to the attentive lover; the object or focus of prayer the beloved. Hence the context of prayer as sacral intimacy needs always and everywhere to be respected. Yet, as with communal prayer, there is a great variation in spiritual depth and range of religious value, from the relatively pedestrian or lightweight, to the deeply personal, meditative and self-dispossessing reflection or engagement in which the soul best makes its journey alone. Some forms of personal prayer are such that they can only be engaged in solitude; others can easily occur in the public domain, in company with fellow spiritual travellers, or even in a non-religious setting, in the midst of life's daily demands and pressures.

A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL CASE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER

For theistic revelatory religion, God has already spoken: prayer is in answer. Christian prayer, for instance, is responsive to the Word which precedes prayer. Christian prayer may be said to have its source and goal in the One God, of which Christ is the fullness of revelation. At the same time Christ, the Word of God, is also the effective referent of prayer for the Christian. Prayer is often made "in and through the name of" Jesus, the Christ. Furthermore, prayer may be viewed as encompassing a variety of modalities and dimensions such as personal and relational engagement; times of meditative "waiting" upon the Divine; moments of resting, as it were, in the aloneness of abandonment and the sense of forsakenness; occasions of expressions of joyful praise; periods of heartfelt lamentation. Arguably dynamic parallelisms for these dimensions of a Christian perspective on prayer could be ascertained within the prayers of other traditions.

A Christian theological perspective on prayer may adduce commonality of contextual aim as a criterion for theological legitimacy and a guide to pastoral practice: prayer is, broadly speaking, situated in the context of redemptive transformation of the *oikumene*. Wholeness for all is affirmed and sought for in prayer as, for example, in the paradigmatic Lord's Prayer.⁵ Further, a Christian theological perspective on prayer may discern other undergirding dimensions which provide further criteria for the guiding of interreligious practice. Prayer is the language of love: it is the communion of heart and mind in the context of spirit. In prayer there may be discerned the affirmation of diversity in unity, the promotion of acceptance through active forgiveness and reconciliation. From a Christian point of view, prayer can be a means to a deeper communion with, if not also understanding of, the mystery of the Divine Other. It can also be a moment in which there is a deepening of self-understanding. Thus prayer serves both the cause of interreligious relations as well as self-reflective spiritual growth: in both, prayer embraces a dimension of self-encounter and the transcending of self in order to go beyond self.

The challenge of prayer is to listen at depth to that which is within, around, and beyond; to empty oneself of self; to then be open to receive and be filled with "the Other". Prayer can provide a meeting point, an opportunity for significant religious interconnection. Thus it can be a sign of

hope: in many contexts a sense of redeeming hopefulness may be found for a particular disquieting situation in the sheer possibility of interreligious prayer – and what that might portend for improved communal relationships. The very act of coming together, in the full knowledge of religious difference – of holding mutually exclusive identities – yet, in humility, subjecting these differences to the embrace of an inclusive action, may of itself be a vital sign of hope in an otherwise hopelessly fraught situation. The action of, together, acknowledging a universal spiritual “other” that somehow embraces human alterity such that human beings, in their religious diversity, may sense and experience, together, a transcendental grounding oneness, may provide both adequate justification for the hope implied in the action, and confirming motivation for the action itself. On the other hand, the absence or denial of such possibility is an occasion of real despair: if the prospect of appropriate combined prayer is precluded, there is little chance that meaningful reconciliation and relational healing will occur.

If prayer can be thought of as a moment of “dwelling-*in*” – or “indwelling” – one’s faith, then interreligious prayer may be viewed as an occasion of “dwelling-*with*” the religiously other in their own indwelling of faith. Thus interreligious prayer can constitute a relational bridge, as it were, interconnecting peoples and faith communities. Interreligious prayer gives opportunity to acknowledge the sacredness that is presented in and by the other; it affirms and honours that sacredness; it may even evoke and manifest – that is, bring-into-present-being – an overarching sense of sacredness in which the particular moment of interreligious prayer is situated, and which is at the same time not inappropriate to the participating traditions.

MODELS OF RESPONSE AND HOSPITALITY

I suggest it is possible to identify four modalities of encounter and engagement wherein interreligious prayer may occur with theological legitimacy. These include two modes of responsiveness type and two modes of hospitality type of interactions. These types could be thought of as models for interreligious prayer: the one based on situations that evoke response, the other based on a parallelism with acts of hospitality. These basic models, or types, in their various modes, feature as common human experiences. Yet through the mundane and the familiar can be conveyed spiritual insight and novel understanding. The *responsive type* has to do with the “outward facing” situation of humanly reacting to an external situation or event. There is an obvious anthropological element in this as it is in the nature of human being to respond, to react as appropriate to the nature of the event: to provide succour and aid; respond with sympathetic grieving, or whatever the occasion evokes. On the other hand, this type may be the occasion of discerning a broadly pneumatological impulse: the “Spirit” at work in and through the human reaction. The response gives evidence of more than merely anthropological factors at work. The two modes of this type are occasions of communal crisis or other such significant events calling for a specifically religious response; and appropriate occasions of civic celebration offering opportunity for a religious contribution, dimension, and witness. Christians, for example, participate in the religious response – as in an act of interreligious prayer – by virtue of the gospel imperative to love neighbour, and the call to serve others with empathy. Compassion is the enacting of being- or standing-with the other in their time of need; it constitutes the legitimate context for the expression of values of co-operative praxis and sympathetic spirituality.

By contrast, the *hospitality type* signifies events that are “inner-facing”, in the sense of hospitable communal ingathering of persons of different religions on occasions wherein the reciprocal roles of host and guest set the parameters for interaction. This sets the context for mutual respect. It is the respective roles that provide the two modes of this type. As host, a Christian community, for example, invites members of another community to join with it in a specific event wherein the intent is that of offering hospitality as such, whether materially, spiritually, or both. The phenomenological structure of the act of hosting a guest *per se* is the practical guide to the structure

of the event: invitation, reception, welcome, attending to need, offering reassurance and comfort; sharing and interacting; closure. The motif of God being found in the Christ who both goes before us among our neighbours, and comes to us in the guise of the stranger in our midst, provides, in part, a Christian theological rationale for this model. And there are many biblical examples of the exercise of hospitality to stranger and neighbour, with the clear message that in so doing an appropriate response and relationship to the Divine is being enacted. The discharge of hospitality is not just a duty; it is also itself a moment of grace infused with deeper spiritual significance.

As guest, the Christian individual and community, in humility, receives and experiences that which the host offers, and in return shares the gift of the *euangelion*, the “good news”, which, most simply put, states: “God loves you”. The life of discipleship, the witness of Christian grace, may be offered as a contribution to be added to that which the host presents. Here the biblical reference to disciples being sent to seek and respond to the invitation to enter the house of the other, to receive in gratitude and with thanksgiving that which is offered, and to respond with the gift of “good news”, provides another scriptural example to place alongside those of hosting. And as with the host model, there is risk and vulnerability: the prospect of insight gained, or the possibility of indigestion resulting, are equally potential outcomes for which there are spiritual equivalents to the physical.

Furthermore, as a modality of interreligious engagement, the hospitality model provides an inherently asymmetrical pattern of interaction, a correlation of role and responsibility. Hospitality, given and received, offers an opportunity to learn something of, to get to understand better, to sample the cuisine of, another. And just as with cuisine where the act of appreciation of the other implies no necessary or profound change to one’s own culinary customs, so with other aspects of hospitable engagement: the interchange and sampling is for the purposes of mutual enrichment, not conversion. Of course, culinary openness may well lead – indeed often does – to an expansion of cuisine; modifications of eating patterns, perhaps; the acquiring of new tastes. Generally, however, this is in the context of retaining one’s fundamental eating pattern: remaining with the foods that are known to nourish, which are palatable in consumption. But there is now added to that an increased range of options, an expansion of flavours, a wider appreciation of a diversity of nourishment and enrichment. We are broadly familiar with this culinary experience as cultural phenomenon: the realm of the spiritual or religious may be viewed as analogous. Interreligious prayer provides an opportunity, on the hospitality model, to enhance our spiritual being through exposure to a wider diversity of enrichment. There is no need to treat persons of other faiths as proffering an inherently threatening cuisine: the notion of a host forcing the guest to eat that which is clearly unpalatable vitiates the principles of good hospitality, as does the idea that when someone brings their contribution to a shared meal they would expect the table to be cleared of all other offerings. Such exclusivisms would be unacceptable in the culinary realm: they are no less so in the realm of interreligious engagement.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory discussion has adumbrated paradigmatic structures and perspectives as a point of reference for a particular type of interreligious contact. It is based on the notion of discerning dynamic parallelisms across the variety and difference inherent in the prayers and allied devotional activities of religions, rather than seeking for a close, let alone exact, measure of equivalence by way of discerning common denominators – whether in terms of form or of content. Among other modalities, interreligious relations may embrace cognitive engagement found in dialogical conversation on the one hand, and spiritual engagement as in a shared event of prayer on the other. The cognitive and the spiritual are together required where dialogue seeks deeper understanding each of the other, and in pursuit of any deeper being-together in community. Interreligious prayer, especially in the “coherent-integrated” mode, offers opportunity for an appropriate and mutually respectful spiritual event of sharing, an engagement that is itself both cognitive and experiential.

NOTES

¹ See also: Douglas Pratt, 'Parameters for Interreligious Prayer: some considerations'. *Current Dialogue*, 31, December 1997, 21-27. See also: Douglas Pratt, *Rethinking Religion: Exploratory Investigations*. Adelaide: ATF Press, 2003.

² See Hans Ucko, 'Inter-religious Worship and Prayer'. *Current Dialogue* 24, June 1993, 35-39; 'Report on Inquiry on Interreligious Prayer and Worship'. *Current Dialogue* 28, June 1995, 57-64.

³ See the joint publication, *Pro Dialogo/Current Dialogue*, Pontificium Consilium Pro Dialog Inter Religiones, Rome: Bulletin 98, 1998/2, in which are contained a selection of preliminary papers and the formal reports and findings of the study.

⁴ See, for example, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, 108-109.

⁵ See Douglas Pratt, 'Dominical Paradigm for Interreligious Prayer: Theological Reflections'. *Colloquium* 30/1(1998), 45-59.