Under One Roof: University Chaplaincy and Multi-Faith Dialogue

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> Multi faith dialogue ... invites the Christian Churches to consider each religion to be an equally valid human attempt to grapple with the meaning of life (O'Murchu 1992).

University chaplains need to engage in inter-religious dialogue. Most chaplains, although appointed by a denomination find themselves working in ecumenical situations. Many chaplains are still coming to grips with what it means to be ecumenical, but in the multi-cultural setting of a secular university are now challenged to move further forward and embrace their multi-faith context.

Of the 191 university chaplains listed in the Australian Tertiary Campus Ministry Association Directory, the majority describe themselves by a single Christian denomination or religious group and are appointed by their denomination or by the university on the nomination of their religious group. Many of these, particularly in the larger (or older) universities, find themselves sharing space with chaplains of other denominations. Most consider themselves to be working ecumenically or cooperatively in a team approach. Precisely what is meant by this varies from occasional meetings to working in a coordinated manner with the other chaplains on the campus.

Six of the 191 chaplains listed nominate themselves as ecumenical chaplains where the appointment is made by a number of churches acting together or by a committee representing such churches (and one is a university employed ecumenical chaplain)[1].

Universities while having over time made some agreement, formal or otherwise, with mainstream Christian churches for the provision of chaplaincy are nevertheless interested in having the needs of all their students met. Increasing interest in attracting full-fee paying overseas students has led to a sharper awareness of some of the religious requirements of these students (and incidentally to a greater awareness of the multicultural and therefore multi-faith nature of Australian students and their needs for religious space on campus as well).

Conversation about the multi-faith nature of Western society may in some ways be considered to have begun with the Parliament of the World's Religions at the Chicago World Fair of 1893 which had the aim of proclaiming the unity of all peoples under God (Bainbridge 1997:180), a unity meant to display "... Gratitude to

God for the Brotherhood of Man (sic)" and whose overriding theme was "Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us?" (Bainbridge 1997:181). To the dismay of the organisers, the representatives of Asian religions received a more favourable response than anticipated. An Anglican minister, at the Parliament, declared "The fact is, all religions are fundamentally more or less true and all religions are superficially more or less false. And I suspect that the creed of the universal religion, the religion of the future, will be summed up pretty much in the words of Tennyson ... 'the whole world is everywhere bound by gold chains about the feet of God'." The Hindu speaker who followed embraced the minister's ideas and proclaimed the Hindu religion as "the mother of all religions, and the one which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance" (Bainbridge, 1997:181). Organisers of the World Parliament of Religions may well not have intended to have begun the process which opened America to pluralism (Bainbridge 1997:187).

A hundred years later the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religion in Chicago appeared to have had a very different aim of establishing ongoing dialogue (Kurtz, 1995:xi) and, in a "multicultural global village full of conflict and violence as well as promise," hoped to provide some ethical guidelines which would have sufficient common norms and values to provide the basis "to order our lives together" (Kurtz 1995:2). The venue for the next Parliament of the World's Religions in December 1999 is to be South Africa. (Martin 1998:4). The shift from Chicago may reflect an awareness of the shift in centre of world religions.

Theologians have long argued about what is possible by way of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and about the desired outcome of such dialogue. Hans Küng, for instance, holds that "Christians can accept the truth claims of other religions only conditionally" and bases his argument on the Christian belief in the "normativity and finality of Jesus Christ as God revelatory event" (Küng 1996:ix). Küng takes issue with the teaching of the pre-existence of Christ in God and "argues that these doctrines are one of the principal obstacles to inter-faith dialogue between the three great monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, all of which share the same faith in the one and the same God of Abraham" (Munro 1996:12).

Rahner's ideas herald the end of an exclusive[2] approach at least of the Roman Catholic Church which to that point proclaimed that Christianity was the final revelation or absolute truth and saw 'dialogue' as something that led to conversion to Christianity. Rahner proposed an inclusive[3] model where people of goodwill were somehow seen as included in Christian truth.

Paul Knitter while agreeing with Rahner that "Christians not only can but *must* look upon other religions as 'legitimate' and as offering 'ways of salvation'" (1996:5), accepts Küng's criticism of Rahner's notion of the 'anonymous Christian' but queries Küng's position on the 'finality of the Christ event' (1996:7).

The pluralist[4] model for a dialogue or theology of religions views all religions as differing but equally valid versions of the same experience (Knitter 1996:24). Knitter prefers to talk of a "correlational dialogue among religions, a dialogue in

which all sides are able to hear and be challenged by the others and at the same time to speak to and challenge in return" (1996:24). The approach to theology within the different religions would need to be 'comparative'. Such dialogue and theology would, he insists, need to be globally responsible (Knitter 1996:24).

Knitter describes interreligious dialogue as the "confrontation with utter, bewildering, often threatening *differences* and at the same time, the *trust* that such differences are, for the most part, friendly rather than hostile, fruitful rather than barren". In dialogue, he says, "one faces the utterly other and trusts that one can speak to, learn from, even work with that other" (Knitter 1995:1). Yet he warns of the danger of proclaiming a "common essence" or a "common core" (Knitter 1995:2).

John D'Arcy May of the Irish School of Ecumenics warns that in working on the "complementarities among the ethical teachings of the various religious traditions" (May 1995:25), we must face "our unresolved religious differences" and ask ourselves what we are doing when we accept pluralism. In working towards a 'global ethos' proposed by Hans Küng, it would, he says, "have to be inclusive of the particularity and apparent mutual incompatibility of cultures and religions, presenting its ethical credentials precisely in its sensitivity to differences and its solidarity with the marginalised" (May 1995:28). May is critical of the 'unitive pluralism' of Paul Knitter which he says is difficult to attain. Dialogue, he feels, must be committed to truth and transformation" (May 1995:28).

Marcus Braybooke at the North American Interfaith Network meeting in 1997 suggested that "since the 1993 Year of Inter-religious Understanding and Co-operation, the focus of interfaith work had changed from trying to get people of different religions together to discovering what people of faith can do together for our world" (Martin 1998:3). Perhaps the challenge is as Braybrooke suggests, "that the circle of dialogue needs to grow to include minority voices, spiritual movements and more conservative members of faiths" (Martin 1998:3).

In addressing possibilities of dialogue between Buddhists and Christians, Dr Mischio Shinozaki pointed out that the starting point of any dialogue with others would be a "more meaningful and creative understanding" of his own tradition (Martin 1998:2).

For Elizabeth Harris, the central issue is the tension between the "urge to create unity between religions, to integrate, and the need to respect difference" (Martin 1998:2). She spoke of her own "journey towards Sri Lankan Buddhism... which... did not lead to conversion but did manifest irrevocable change in her understanding of Christianity" (Martin 1998:2).

Eck tells us that for interreligious dialogue, a level of public religious literacy and a willingness to actively engage with other religions is necessary (Eck 1992). Gaining religious literacy requires constant effort for religions are not "fixed entities that are passed intact from generation to generation, culture to culture. On the contrary, religions are more like rivers ... dynamic, ever changing, splitting, converging" (Eck 1992). She also remarks on the fact that few people undertake

academic study of world religions at either secondary or tertiary level and consequently few have a fundamental literacy which would be foundational for interreligious dialogue and she notes that even people training for leadership in Christian or Jewish religions are not taught basic facts about other religions (Eck 1993).

Eck's remarks also apply to Australians particularly to those who felt no need to learn of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism even though these religions have been present in Australia for some time. Although the 1991 census revealed that of the 16.9 million people in Australia 75% of the population still declared themselves to be Christian (Hughes 1997:3) [5], the religious landscape of Australia has changed but the distribution of religious adherents in Australia still does not alert us to the overall world situation where of more than 5 billion human beings, 1.95 billion are Christian; 1 billion are Muslim; 777 million are Hindu; 341 million are Buddhist; 128 million are new religious movements; 99 million belong to indigenous religions; 14 million are Jewish; and 1.1 billion profess no religion (Jesuit GC. 1995. Decree 5:128). These figures provide compelling arguments for interreligious dialogue to be a priority for the third millennium in which Christians will constitute twenty percent or less of the world population.

To be religious today is to be interreligious in the sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement in a world of religious pluralism.

The Faith Centre proposed by this university arises from a realisation of the multifaith nature of its population and the desire to meet the faith needs of many of the staff and students. Although there has been discussion over the last twenty years about the provision of space, it was not until the mid-1990s that the conversation reopened in a significant way when one of the Pro-Vice-Chancellors promoted the project as a matter which had been of interest for years and which would meet the needs for some of the equity target groups while also reinforcing the university's commitment to cultural diversity. A recommendation was made that the University Fund consider the feasibility of accepting a multi-faith centre as a fund-raising project. The early submission envisaged a multi-faith centre as a place for religious observance, hospitality and reflective quiet.

An internal committee was formed to consider the matter and considerable progress was made in that the university allocated space where a building could be located, incorporated this into the master plan, agreed to meet developmental and design costs and to have architects indicate types of buildings that might satisfy requirements. At that stage the possibility of a free standing circular building with a central common area with a number of smaller rooms for individual group worship, meditations or meetings was discussed. Key to the initial concept was the idea of flexible use of space that would allow the formation of a large space once or twice a year and where even outside spill-over areas could also be used to accommodate a large number of participants.

When the current committee of representative of world religions and staff of

the university was formed, the concept developed further and now extends to include the promotion of inter-religious dialogue and education about different faiths. The design of the building has developed accordingly to a stage where the whole of the worship area now rests on a lecture theatre which forms the base of the building and symbolically demonstrates the importance of education as a major strand of the centre. The changes also incorporate the building into the primary function of the university of teaching and learning. To provide programs of the kind envisaged to be run from the centre such as debates, forum, public lectures and seminars, a trust fund is considered necessary and the fund raising target for the whole project has been correspondingly increased.

The Multi-Faith Centre promises to be a step forward for inter-religious dialogue and interaction. It should also be a learning centre, a place for comparative study of religion, for cultural exchange and for the maintenance of culture. The Multi-Faith Centre Committee is working in a pluralist model and solving in a practical way some of the challenges of inter-faith dialogue.

Pluralism asks more of the encounter with one another than simply tolerance. Tolerance because it does not require engagement, understanding or knowledge can be more harmful than useful. If we are to engage in pluralism we need as Eck (1993) reminds us a public space where people from different religions can encounter each other. Where can we cultivate such public spaces? Universities provide ideal sites that are both neutral in the religious sense and safe in that the space does not belong to a particular religious tradition. Universities are already places where cultural exchanges take place and perhaps a secular university in particular offers the ideal venue for dialogue which take account of differences in religions.

While the proposed Multi-Faith Centre at this University will, it is hoped, provide an ideal place for inter-religious dialogue, the very processes involved in its establishment has led to inter-religious dialogue and to exploring practical ways in which different religions can share a common space and happily coexist under one roof.

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Endnotes

1. Two universities mention a Muslim chaplain while eight say they have a Jewish chaplain. The figures here may be misleading as one Jewish chaplain may visit a number of universities.

2. 'Exclusivism' - other religions are false (Knitter 1995:5).

3. 'Inclusivism' - other religions may be true but Christianity is the truest (Knitter 1995:5).

4. 'Pluralism' affirms the possibility that other religions may have just as valid and important a role to play in God's plan of salvation as does Christianity (Knitter 1995:5).

5. While percentages in recent census analysis have changed slightly, they still reflect figures contained in the 1991 census.