

# Interreligious Dialogue Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Introduction

Today the world is in crisis. The word crisis, nonetheless, according to David Bosch: “Is the point where danger and opportunity meet, where the future is in the balance and where events can go either way”<sup>1</sup> All people, nations, cultures and religions are affected by the situation. Different groups and sectors all over the world are doing and contributing their knowledge and resources to minimize, if not to completely stop, the effect of Covid-19 Pandemic. The world has turned global and that even the world’s anxiety brought about this dreaded disease has also turned global. The global village has a global sickness, and if the world has a global problem, we look forward to a global solution and global opportunity.

Religion can lead humanity towards world and human flourishing. Amidst the darkness brought about by a pandemic we can still see light. Religion gives meaning to life beset with problems that seem to be without any answer. Humanity has thought of a world that is free from any sufferings and problems while modernity, through science and technology, made it more conceivably possible. Yet, humanity once again faces a challenge. It is argued that: “Much of these suffering need not happen if not for the oppressive actions, malevolent decisions, greed, contempt, and ill will of some.”<sup>2</sup> The problem is too big that now it spreads all over the global village. Interreligious dialogue opens the door to the opportunity of unity than diversity in dealing with the Covid-19 Pandemic.

## Interreligious Dialogue

Mega-urbanization and mega-migration make the world global, plural and diverse. People migrate to cities making half of the world’s population residing and working in the cities. As people move they bring with them their culture and religion. That, today, according to Antonio Pernia: “People from different cultures not only are in much contact today, often time they are forced to live alongside each other.”<sup>3</sup> Religion, nonetheless, is the heart of culture, and if cultures are found around all over the world, so thus religion. Multiculturality and multireligiosity are realities of today’s world.

The multireligiosity of the world which is a fact of life, is a reality that we have to accept and acknowledge. The presence of different religions has been with us for a very long time and will continue to stay with us. This is very much true especially in Asia, which is a cradle of many and different religions. Asia is a home of different religions. There exists a variety and diverse religions in Asia such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, Jainism,

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Chia, ed., *Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia* (Bangkok: FABC-OEIA, 2001), 183.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio M. Pernia, “The Theological Significance of Multiculturality,” *Missio Inter Gentes* 2, no. 2 (July 2016): 3.

Judaism, Shintoism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism. Asia is the birthplace of the major religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. While we find the major religions of the world in Asia, Christianity is only a minority in Asia. The question is, as a minority religion how can we proclaim Christ in a multireligious context? The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* states that interreligious dialogue is part of the Church's evangelizing mission.

Interreligious dialogue and proclamation, though not on the same level, are both authentic elements of the Church's evangelizing mission. Both are legitimate and necessary. They are intimately related, but not interchangeable: true interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue. The two activities remain distinct but, as experience shows, one and the same local Church, one and the same person, can be diversely engaged in both.<sup>4</sup>

Multireligiosity is to be found also even in Western countries, and that, "Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhist rub shoulders on every street."<sup>5</sup> The said proximity of different religions with each other may bring them towards openness. In the context of religious plurality, the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* also states:

In the context of religious plurality, dialogue means "all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment", in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions. It is in this third sense that the present document uses the term dialogue for one of the integral elements of the Church's evangelizing mission.<sup>6</sup>

Interreligious dialogue does not only happen among scholars of different religions. They do not but just share the reality of their religions within the confines of the walls of conference halls. Interreligious dialogue can be also called interreligious relationship and interreligious friendship. "One's study of another religion comes alive in new ways as one encounters it as a lived reality in the life of the religious other bringing greater understanding, depth, and meaning to the religion one is studying."<sup>7</sup> Interreligious dialogue, thus, can be an impetus to world peace, harmony and human flourishing.

The world's problems are being addressed by the different religions realizing that they have to join hands together in battling the issues. These are ecological destruction, sufferings, wars and violence in the name of religion to name a few. Today, however, there is a war that needs to be

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<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and The Proclamation of The of the Gospel of Jesus Christ *Dialogue and Proclamation* (21 June 1991), no. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 475.

<sup>6</sup> Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Karen B. Enriquez, "Seeing a Friend in the Stranger and the Stranger in the Friend: The Practice of Christian Hospitality through Interreligious Dialogue and Solidarity," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 38 (2018): 154.

fought by not a single nation or single religion. The existence of Covid-19 Pandemic signaled a world crisis that needs a global answer. Religions of the world have to raise their voice and join hands together so that enrichment of spirituality and active service towards human development and flourishing maybe achieved. Spirituality is important today especially in the presence of uncertainty.

### **Covid-19 as an Impetus for Interreligious Dialogue**

Death and suffering move man towards anxiety. Uncertain of the total effects and end of the Covid-19 Pandemic people are moved to ask different questions. The tragedy of death makes people ask for an ultimate meaning other than what is obvious and tangible. “The arbitrariness of suffering causes people to want an explanation; the world should make sense, it should have some ultimate meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, “one of religion’s functions is to address issues of meaning.”<sup>9</sup> Usually when people have nothing to hold on to, they resort to holding on to a transcendental Being who is greater than any worldly problems. Thus, Covid19 Pandemic which is a deadly and contagious disease heightens the consciousness of one’s relationship with the Divine. Adding to its notoriety is the fact that vaccine has not been developed for the said disease.

Religion’s role in the society and culture has been seen in history. Some scholars prophesied the natural death of religion though some of them recanted. Peter Berger who once believed in the decease of religion states that: “in much of the world there has been a veritable explosion of religious faith.”<sup>10</sup> Further, he mentions that: “Modernity is not necessarily secularizing; it is necessarily *pluralizing*.”<sup>11</sup> Modernity, thus, did not kill religion, rather religions, worldviews, and beliefs became all the more plural, diverse and global because of migration and urbanization. As such, no society would exist without religion. It is because religion answers what science and technology could not answer.

The face of the world, without a doubt has been changed by the Covid-19 Pandemic. The Pandemic in an instant halted the world, and people were stopped in their activities and movements. Airports, and land transportations have been temporarily stopped. Temporary because nations of the world are already preparing for the reopening of their countries so as to sustain their economy. Globalization, however, has not been impeded. The new-normal will continue to connect people and with social distancing. We do these through the use of the internet, and with this we can still say that “the religious others are in our midst, studying, living and working *among* us and *with* us.”<sup>12</sup> It is true that we can still build and establish friendship even during time of Pandemic through social media. The reality of the use of social media or the internet characterizes the global and diverse world even while the Covid-19 Pandemic stays with us. Indeed, the use of internet is a global solution to a global problem.

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<sup>8</sup> Keith A. Roberts and David Yamane, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc. 2012), 293.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Peter L. Berger, “Secularization Falsified,” *First Things* 180, February (2008): 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Edgar G. Javier, “Religious Pluriformity in God’s Global Community: Challenges and Prospects,” *Missio Inter Gentes* 1, No. 1 (January 2015): 3.

Religious plurality as a global phenomena may also help man alleviate his/her anxious condition. Each religion has something to contribute to the world during the time of Pandemic. Each religion should now support each other and should open their doors all the more to learn from the other. Religion has something to contribute because “religions reduce anxiety by explaining the unknown and making it understandable, as well as provide comfort in the belief that supernatural aid is available in times of crisis”<sup>13</sup> Christians nonetheless may learn from others as *Nostra Aetate*, The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, states that: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.”<sup>14</sup> Truth can be found in other religions, Edmund Chia opines: “While this truth which is ineffable mystery, absolute and eternal, transcends all religious boundaries, it is at the same time contained in them.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Role of World Religions Amidst Pandemic**

Today we see people of different faiths join together in prayer and in their action in fighting the Covid-19. In Nigeria, for example, Christians and Muslim join in prayer together Thursday of May 14, 2020.<sup>16</sup> The Committee of Human Fraternity which was established last year 2019 as a concrete response to the Document on Human Fraternity signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, during the Pope’s Apostolic Journey to the United Arab Emirates in February 2019 also designated a day of prayer also on May 14, 2020. The committee calls “for fasting, works of mercy, prayers, and supplications for the good of all humanity” to fight Covid-19 Pandemic.<sup>17</sup>

It is argued that religion is an instrument to establish relationship with God and with people. “Religion is primarily a relationship between God and the human person in community. It is not simply a system of dogmas, rituals, and institutions.”<sup>18</sup> The Church document Dialogue and Proclamation mentions the forms of dialogue, such as: the dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange and dialogue of religious experience.<sup>19</sup> These four kinds of

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<sup>13</sup> Edgar G. Javier, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2006), 55 .

<sup>14</sup> Vatican II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* (8 October 1966), no. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Chia, *Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia*, 182.

<sup>16</sup> Benedict Mayaki, Nigeria: Christians and Muslims join in Prayer Against Covid-19. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-04/nigeria-interreligious-prayer-initiative.html> (accessed May 4, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Vatican News. Day of Prayer Sees Humanity United in the Fight Against Covid-19. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2020-05/day-of-prayer-for-humanity-covid-19-participants.html> (Accessed May 14, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Michael Amaladoss, *Making All Things New: Mission in Dialogue* (Gamdi-Anand, India: Anand Press, 1990), 373.

<sup>19</sup> Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 42.

dialogue can be the basis of concrete ways of mission dialogue with non-Christians even today as we face the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Today, amidst the Corona Virus Disease 19 Pandemic, we can still engage and are called to dialogue with religious-others. It is an urgent call for everyone to realize that: “Working together is in a sense an imperative for the survival of the species and of the planet.”<sup>20</sup> Not that we only engage into dialogue because we are only duty bound. We engage into dialogue because we perceive the *other* as another self a person with God’s semblance. The other is a friend one whom we can rely to in good times and bad. In our friendship with them Enriquez points out:

In coming closer, treading on ground made less contentious through dialogue, the stranger becomes the friend. And this friend becomes our teacher—that wise sage—who brings us new ways not just of understanding and loving the other, but of understanding ourselves, of making friends with our own selves. It becomes the basis for the expansion to other friendships, building global interreligious communities of friendships that are sorely needed today.<sup>21</sup>

People today are not only praying together but they are also helping each other in concrete ways. Dialogue of action does not recognize anymore ethnic and religious backgrounds. We see that even frontliners such as health workers are extending their services to those who are in need. People of different religions in the same way offer their services in caring for the sick and providing material assistance to the poor. We see now that religions work for the common good and are “seen as an institutions not so much for the service of each own religious community as for the service of life and society in general.”<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Both science and religion give their own answer to life’s sufferings and misery. Medical experts, scientists, different religions and all people in the global community should work in collaboration and partnership in facing the problem. People of different faiths, nonetheless, help alleviate sufferings through their “liberative praxis, promoting human integral human and cosmic development”<sup>23</sup> They can move to the transcendent being away from the problem of the secular world, yet religions do not but just flee from an obvious problem. People of different religions are movers of life working to emancipate man from poverty and misery the best that they can, showing real service to life. Covid-19 as a pandemic has something to teach us. Javier says that: “The magnitude and volume of human and ecological suffering suggests that dialogue is imperative as no religion can possibly do it alone in this battle against human and ecological suffering”<sup>24</sup> Dialogue Interreligious dialogue can unite people together in healing the world in facing the battle against Covid-19 as one humanity of one global community.

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<sup>20</sup> Chia, *Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia*, 183.

<sup>21</sup> Enriquez, “Seeing a Friend in the Stranger and the Stranger in the Friend,” 155.

<sup>22</sup> Chia, *Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia*, 184.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>24</sup> Javier, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today*,” 2.

God continues to extend His help to us amidst difficulties and trials. He is extending Himself to us to build a relationship. We can learn much of this in the encyclical of Pope Paul VI *Ecclesiam Suam*, he states that: "The dialogue of salvation was opened spontaneously on the initiative of God: "He (God) loved us first;" it will be up to us to take the initiative in extending to men this same dialogue, without waiting to be summoned to it."<sup>25</sup> God even today dialogues with us, amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic. We can listen and learn from God as we can listen and learn from people of other-faith through interreligious dialogue.

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<sup>25</sup> Paul VI, Encyclical Letter on The Church *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 August 1964), no. 72.

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