

## Dialogue between religions: new challenges for the future



*A Buddha statue is seen during the consecration ceremony of a Buddhist funeral site installed on a cemetery in Dresden, Germany. - EPA*

*(Vatican Radio, 22 October 2015) The Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Msgr. Indunil Janakaratne Kodithuwakku, has given a lecture at a conference at the Confucius Institute at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan.*

### **The full text of the lecture is below**

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### THE SILK ROAD AND RELIGIONS

Indunil Janakaratne Kodithuwakku

(Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue),

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

It is a great joy and honour for me to address this assembly of eminent scholars and distinguished guests and I am grateful to the organizers for the kind invitation extended to me. I also bring to you the esteem and fraternal greetings of H. Em. Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and of its staff.

The Silk Road, an ancient network of trade helped to integrate the old Chinese, Indian, Persian, Arabian, ancient Greek and Roman cultures and promoted the exchange of the Western and Oriental civilizations. The history of the silk Road is replete of prophets of peace and non-violence as well as warmongers and ruthless rulers. Today, some of the old Silk Road countries, like in the past are faced with religious fundamentalism, armed conflicts

with religious overtones and the archaeological terrorism threatening regional and international stability and security.

What are the new challenges for interreligious dialogue today? What can we learn from the Old Silk Road to foster dialogue? The current challenge of religion and violence is related to polarized perspectives of "otherness". Accordingly, religion is used to enhance by people or groups for their violent perspectives or to justify their violence. It is no exaggeration to say that the role played by religion in conflict situations, is explicitly or implicitly linked to other issues such as ethnicity, culture, poverty, tradition, gender, language and politics. Within this context emerges the dual role of religion: building up bridges or putting up walls in human hearts and relationships. Since religion often shapes our attitudes and world views, the perception of our realities become filled with religious judgements about good and evil. The dehumanisation of the other results in the inability to see the other as other and to take the other as equal.

How can we change this situation? Can we educate people for peace and nonviolence? What role religion can play? As we saw above the present culture of violence is based on distrust, suspicion, intolerance and hatred. The solution depends on replacing the culture of violence with a new culture based on non-violence, tolerance, mutual understanding, solidarity and peaceful conflict resolution. Besides, durable peace depends on the following areas: i). Education for peace, human rights, democracy, international understanding and tolerance. ii). Promotion of human rights and democracy and the struggle against discrimination. iii). Promoting cultural pluralism and intercultural dialogue. iv). Working for conflict prevention and post-conflict peace-building.

Religion is a force for good and love in the world. Therefore, it has the potentiality to convert enmity to amity through the transformative power of its spirituality. Religion can enhance the re-socialisation of people by healing their distorted relationships in post-war and post-conflict zones. It can encourage people with traumatic past, to make a journey from victim to survivor and to victor. By encouraging the victims and perpetrators to deal with wounded memories, through forgiveness, reconciliation, and restorative justice, religion can bring about a new life for them. This process requires overcoming the fears of dominion by one group over others, memory healing, power sharing, avoiding any instigation by external forces. History is the Greatest Teacher. The worse enemy of peace is despair. Let us examine a few political and religious figures from the Old Sick Road countries to see how they have contributed to build a culture of peace as well as a culture of violence.

Dialogue and diplomacy to avert blood-baths

Dialogue is a panacea for conflict resolution. There is high drama in the meeting of the founders of the two empires, Seleucus I of Persia and Chandragupta of India. About 305 B.C. Seleucus marched east across the Indus River into the Punjab. Chandragupta stood to meet him with an army of a half a million men and nine thousand elephants, and Persia and India were on the brink of a gigantic war. But there is no report of any battle. Instead, the two reached an understanding, perhaps even a marriage alliance. ( Cf. L.W. Brown, *Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, p. 51) Here, dialogue and diplomacy contributed to avoid a bloody conflict.

Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254) dispatched the first Catholic missionary, John of Plano Carpini and another to the Mongols in 1245. The missionaries were given two commissions:

a political one, to avert further onslaught on Christendom by the invaders, and a spiritual one, to preach Christianity to them that they might be converted. (Cf. S. H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. I, Beginnings to 1500, pp. 406-7)

### Policy of nonviolence (ahimsa) and Religious Tolerance

Notra Aetate notes “Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: ...” (NA n.1). We ought to promote dialogue and harmony between and within religions, recognizing and respecting the search for truth and wisdom of our religious neighbours.

Ashoka (c.304–232 B.C) last emperor in the Mauryan dynasty of India during his reign (269–232 BCE) paved the way for Pax Indica. He renounced expansion through armed conquest after the Kalinga war which incurred around 300,000 casualties and adopted a policy called “conquest by dharma” and proclaimed himself as a “righteous king” dhammaraja. He attempted to create a just and humane society pursuing an official policy of nonviolence (ahimsa). Even though Ashoka became the patron of Buddhism, his Rock Edit n. XII assured religious liberty to all.

“One should not honour only one's own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honour others' religions for this or that reason. So doing, one helps one's own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs the grave of one's own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honours his own religion and condemns other religions, does so indeed through devotion to his own religion, thinking "I will glorify my own religion". But on the contrary, in so doing he injures his own religion more gravely. So concord is good: Let all listen, and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others”.

Another example of religious tolerance which emerges from China is the reign of Emperor T'ai-tsung (627-649 A.D.) He tried to balance the competing claims of China's three major faiths, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism and also other foreign religions. In 638 he issued an edit of universal tolerance as follows:

“The Way had not, at all times and in all places, the self-same name; the Sage had not, at all times and in all places, the self-same human body. (Heaven) caused a suitable religion to be instituted for every region and clime so that each one of the races of mankind might be saved. Bishop Alopen of the Kingdom of Ta-chin, bringing with him the Sutras and Images, has come from afar and presented them at our Capital. [...] This Teaching is helpful to all creatures and beneficial to all men. So let it have free course throughout the Empire (As quoted in S. H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, pp 292-3).

### Transcontinental trade and exchange of ideas and cultures

Political stability is directly linked to economic prosperity and they together pave the way for cultural movements. The culture of encounter, denouncing exclusion and isolation, contributes to nurture positive relations based on mutual understanding, respect and the common search for paths of development and peace. Chinese peace of the East, kept transcontinental trade flowing along the Old Silk Road about 106 B.C. Again, when emperor Ming-ti came to power (A.D. 57-75), China once again advanced into Central Asia. The

continental unity helped the missionaries of Buddhism to enter China between 50 B.C and A.D. 50 along the Silk Road.

It is mentioned that at request of a delegation from India reached Alexandria in 179 or 189, centre of Egyptian Christianity, and its most famous scholar, Pantaeus, head of the theological school in that city, was sent to India “to preach Christ to the Brahmins and philosophers there” (Jerome, *Epistola LXX ad Magnum oratorem irbis Romae* (in Migne, PL, chap. 22, col 667).

Persian Nestorian missionaries reached the capital of T’ang-dynasty China along the Old Silk Road in 635. The emergence of Pax Mongolica in 13th century also facilitated the cultural borrowing, interactions of civilizations, and the development of new economic institutions and technologies to facilitate commerce in Asia and beyond.

Dialogue promotes respect, mutual understanding and collaboration

Culture of encounter fosters pluralism and intercultural dialogue. NA notes that “The Church, [...], exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, [...] [to] recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men” (NA n.2). When the Emperor Taizong of Tang (598-649) discovered that new faith the Persian Christian missionaries had brought was the religion of a book, he was immediately interested. He received Alopen as an honoured guest and ordered him to translate the Christian Scriptures into Chinese.

The Arabs swept in Persia in 636 and it badly affected Christians as well. Yet, history records mutual collaboration among Muslim Arabs and Nestorian Christians. For instance, an eighth century Christian bishop had travelled to China with an Arab envoy. Furthermore, it is reported that Nestorian missionaries accompanied Arab ambassadors to China in 7th and 8th centuries (Cf. S. H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, p. 297).

Inter-monastic dialogue and cooperation occurred in 8th century is another example of friendship among Buddhists and Christians. The famous Buddhist missionary, Prajna, from northern India had arrived at the Chinese capital in 782. He was asked to translate the Buddhist sutras he had brought with him. Prajna did not understand the Chinese language at that time so he sought help from a Persian Nestorian monk-bishop and missionary scholar Ching-ching (Adam) of the monastery of Ta-ts’ in with the translation. It is said that the two missionaries had translated seven volumes. (Cf. Yoshiro P. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, p.113).

Dialogue vs. Debate

Dialogue is a two way communication – speaking and listening, giving and receiving – with the aim of mutual growth and enrichment. This dialogue shortens the distance between persons and strengthen the fraternity. On the contrary, debate is oppositional and attempts to prove each other wrong and thus creates a closed minded-attitude, generating a culture of confrontation.

William of Rubruck, a Flemish Franciscan missionary and papal envoy to the Mongols reached Karakorum in 1254. By command of the Khan, a debate between Manichaeans,

Muslims, Nestorians, and Rubruck representing Roman Catholicism was held. The Buddhist spokesman clashed with Rubruck's doctrine of one, omnipotent God,

Buddhist monk: "Fools say there is only one God, but the wise say there are many.

Rubruck: Are there not many lords in your country, and is not (Mongke Khan) a great lord?"

Buddhist monk: " You choose a foolish example ..., there is no comparison between man and God..."; Rubruck asked the Buddhist, "Is any God omnipotent?" "No", said the Buddhist. "Then", said Rubruck, "no one of your gods can save you from every peril, for occasions may arise in which he has no power. Furthermore, no man can serve two masters" " So how can you serve so many gods in heaven and earth?" he concluded. The Buddhist refused to reply, perhaps fearing he had compromised his loyalty to the Khan ( S. H. Moffett, A History of Christianity in Asia, p. 412)

### Use of Religion to Support Violence

Peace and violence come from human heart. Religious people have too often betrayed the high ideals they themselves have preached. Unfortunately, it has happened along the Old Silk Road yesterday and it is happening even today. Timur the Great, known as Tamerlane (1336-1405) destroyed "infidels because they were not Muslims and Muslims because they were not faithful". At Tana on the Black Sea, Muslims in the city were spared, while the Christians were killed, sent into slavery, or ransomed at enormous price. (René Grousset, The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia p. 442). No religion is free from such atrocities. "However, what makes them even more heinous is the tentative of justifying them in the name of religion" ( Message for the Month of Ramadan 2015, PCID, n.3).

### Conclusion

In a world, where many regions suffer from increasing tensions, conflicts, violence and other social and environmental ills, religions have an inherent mission to transform this culture of violence to a culture of peace and encounter. Culture of violence emerges due to the failures of religions. Religions on occasions have lived up to their values and principles and have transmitted it to others. Yet, the same religions, at times, have failed to abide by their teachings and thereby have failed in their mission. Jesus says that "For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come" (Mark 7.21). Buddha teaches that "Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without." Human personality can undergo radical transformation because "In the heart of every man and woman is the desire for a full life, including that irrepressible longing for fraternity which draws us to fellowship with others and enables us to see them not as enemies or rivals, but as brothers and sisters to be accepted and embraced" (Message for World Day of Peace 2014, n. 1). Along the Old Silk Road, we encountered some political and religious figures who have fostered fraternity and dialogue and they shine like bright stars in this dark period of our history. Waking on their footsteps, through dialogue with respect and friendship, let us contribute to a culture of encounter and co-existence!

Thank you for your kind attention, and I wish you very fruitful conference!