

## REFLECTIONS ON ARIGATOU AND ITS FOUR INITIATIVES

One of the remarkable features of religious life the last 60-70 years is that, which we today refer to as interreligious or interfaith dialogue. People of various religions, instead of ignoring each other at best or vilifying each other at worst, reach out to each other. There were from the beginning several reasons for this endeavor. For Christians, and Christians were a driving force behind the interreligious dialogue, the struggle to comprehend the relationship between Christianity and the other religions was one overarching reason for their interest in dialogue. A theological concern governed their motivation. There was maybe even a hidden agenda: if we better get to know people of other faiths, we might find easier access into the worlds of Hindus and Muslims facilitating our mission to convert people to the Christian faith.

In a way the beginnings of interfaith dialogue were related to making sense of one's own faith in relation to other faiths. For Christians it definitely had a more theological slant. Christian theologians could also more than others afford it; they were related to power and could afford being theological about things. It is those without power, who have to think of survival before they can spend time theologizing. Other faiths had therefore different reasons. Entering into dialogue was more or less self-serving; Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism had one thing in common: these faith communities had for the last several hundred years been the objects of Western and thus Christian domination and power. The reason for people of other faiths entering into dialogue with Christians took its cue from here. If we, so the thinking went, can get Christians to listen to us, maybe they will realize that we as Jews, Muslims,

Buddhists and Hindus have suffered in different ways from the power of the church. Jews were victims of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism; Muslims were denigrated and humiliated also in the core of their faith. Hindus were looked upon as primitive polytheists and idolaters. Buddhists were considered either as having no religion at all or to be a religion so in fusion with folklore that it could easily be portrayed as the very antithesis to Christianity. It was religions as entities meeting each other. And the dialogue was rather talking at the other explaining oneself.

But even so, dialogue did contribute to creating space for the integrity of each religion and interfaith dialogue would continue beyond theological or self-interested encounters of religions. Outer factors contributed. Increased mobility, large-scale movement of refugees, and economic migrations resulted in more people of diverse faiths living physically side-by-side all over the world and through this, issues and challenges, threats and difficulties became common and palpably concrete. There was a need and opportunity to foster greater knowledge and awareness among people of different religions. They were after all closer to each other than they ever had been. Christians as well as Muslims and Buddhists discovered eventually that there is but one world, where we all live and that this world is threatened as to its resources, as to its life and survival. The dialogue can not only be an intellectual or theological activity, where we present ourselves in our best clothes as Christians and Muslims or where we only address grievances that we hold against the other. Is there not a common agenda?

It is in this perspective that we should see the interfaith vision of Arigatou develop. It is worth noting that this is a Buddhist initiative. I am underlining this, because it was less common. Christian interfaith initiatives were the most common in the interfaith movement. Today it is different: we see many Muslim interfaith initiatives. Countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia are much more present than one would imagine when reading about the situation of religious minorities in both countries.

Arigatou is of course not alone in bringing particular concerns as an issue for interfaith dialogue. There have been religious communities for which a particular concern was its beacon: the struggle against anti-Semitism, apartheid and racism, the solidarity with the downtrodden of the world or in a particular geographical or confessional context, the equality of men and women, the call to peace. Such an interfaith thrust, whatever concern it carries, is propelled to dialogue and cooperation in the hope that that which we can do together, we should not do separately. In so thinking and acting, interfaith dialogue becomes a tool for cooperation or collaboration, synergy and interaction and not only a thing in itself.

In the mid-nineties, we received a visitor from Japan at the World Council of Churches' headquarters in Geneva, Rev. Keishi Miyamoto, bringing a vision of interfaith collaboration to this world Christian body of Protestant and Orthodox churches. Those of us listening to Rev. Miyamoto understood that this vision was deeply rooted in the teachings and spirituality of the Lotus Sutra: that all vehicles are one vehicle, that all beings may become Buddhas, and that faith and devotion matters.

The vision itself was to bring together a fellowship of people of all faiths, men and women, lay people and clergy, together with people of different organizations and networks, all devoted to the rights, well-being and security of children. Arigatou appeared on the stage of interfaith dialogue in a way that was different from many other interfaith initiatives: it didn't blow its horns or blast its trumpets announcing its venue. There were few verbose documents or wordy declarations. There were no pontificating pronouncements or imperial decrees on what to do and how to do it. There was an offer from Arigatou to make resources available for people of different faiths and no faith to address together and in dialogue how to best cooperate for the wellbeing, development and security of the child. There was an intention to tease out the best of each religious tradition to offer its spiritual resources and sometimes hidden treasures to contribute to "a world fit for children".

I quote the words "A World Fit for Children" on purpose. As you know they are taken from The United Nations Special Session on Children in 2002, which culminated in the official adoption, by some 180 nations, of its outcome document, called exactly 'A World Fit for Children'. I am anxious to point to the spirit of Arigatou to listen and learn from UNICEF as to how to proceed in working for the wellbeing and security of children. This interreligious initiative does not want to go it itself, it is not thinking it has all the answers; it knows that secular organizations or religiously neutral organizations can very well be tools to improve the work of interfaith movements. This is not always the case in the interfaith or religious world. Here one often thinks one has all the answers oneself and one doesn't need to listen to what the world is saying.

The child is in focus in the work of Arigatou and its interreligious programs. Since our first meeting in the mid-90ies I have been privileged to accompany Arigatou International in its interfaith pilgrimage, to seek and define programs, where people of all faiths, of no particular faith, of good will together could serve the wellbeing of children.

The network GNRC (Global Network of Religion for Children) has encouraged people in quite a few parts of the world to seek ways to address issues of common concern in our various societies, be it the plight of children as street children or as child soldiers or children as excluded from or discriminated against, be it as victims of HIV/AIDS, disability or gender.

The focus on Ethics Education for Children has proved to respond to a need for value-based education, equipping children to better handle the demands and dilemmas of living together in a plural and diverse world as well as to discern in themselves and in others the spirituality that is intrinsic in every one of us, but so often silenced from early childhood on.

The Day of Prayer and Action for Children raises the issue of prayer as a dynamic presence in interfaith relations and it does so to strengthen our common commitment for the dignity of children. In the different ways possible, we state that prayer is at the core of our being together as people of different religions and that prayer is essential for our effort together to eradicate violence against children in all its manifestations. We lift our concern

in prayer and meditation to the Ultimate Reality in the various ways of the numinous presence among us.

Through our being together, from various walks of society and all the corners of the world, we have come to realize that poverty affecting children is our main enemy and thus calls upon us to renew our commitment and to strengthen our resolve: poverty is draining the possibility of children and us all to stand up facing the future with hope. This thrust is now in the making through Arigatou and we hope and pray that it will become a real tool for the betterment of the world.

It is in front of the child that we understand vulnerability. The child is vulnerable; we know how defenseless children are, how easily they become victims and how often they are the first victims of war, poverty, hunger, and violence. But we also know more than in any other encounter that it is in front of children that we as adults also are as the most vulnerable. Can we protect our children, can they trust us, can we show them which way to go, are we strong enough to be their safety and security? Worry accompanies us, parents or not, in the face of children. Nothing can more than children catapult us out of indifference and into chaos, when we see children as victims. It is here that we as human beings are the most vulnerable and sensitive. Children are able to take us out of ourselves and we recognize dimensions in ourselves, in the world, in life itself that go beyond rational categories that hitherto may have been a secure fortification.

Children are mentioned and present in all religious traditions. At the celebration of Passover in the Jewish tradition, there should be a child who through his or her questions prompts the telling of the story about the liberation and exodus from slavery. Jesus made the child an example and said: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Hadiths tell us that the Prophet (PBUH) was fond of children. It is said that Muhammad played games with children, joked with them and befriended them. The Upanishads say that the cosmic process of God creating continues in the birth of every child. Buddha’s method of Dhamma-teaching involves children to take part directly as well as indirectly.

We often say that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the declaration that is most ratified among the different countries of the world. We should not be surprised. Children resonate in us and anything that supports children will more than anything else call upon us. Children have a way with us that bring forth the best in us, that open us for vulnerability, the desire to protect, that makes us think less of our own dignity but more of the dignity of the child.

We may know it, feel it but we don’t know what it is that makes children have such an impact on us. They have a different power over us and they make us see things in a different light. Sometimes when we see the new-born baby looking at us, we don’t know how to respond; words fail us, we cannot articulate our feelings and out of our mouths may come words that don’t make sense at all: “coochie, coochie coo”! We shouldn’t be alarmed or embarrassed;

it is a facet of awe. Our hearts are full of feelings that we cannot grasp, love that we cannot pursue and a sense of embrace that we cannot realise.

Awe is a feeling of reverential respect mixed with wonder. It is difficult to define. Young people may give us a hint when they using the word say: “It’s awesome” and it means great, extremely impressive or daunting, inspiring great admiration. The onomatopoeic "wow!" has something of awe in it. This capacity to experience awe is part of being human, whether among religious or secularised men and women: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, agnostic and humanist, Hindu, Buddhist, or New Age. The capacity for awe unites us. Awe may conquer us in different situations and at different times. We are completely unprepared, when awe carries us away. It is a feeling of "interconnectedness" that leaves us with a kind of understanding that we are indebted, mutually accountable and that life must eventually be grounded in solidarity.

Twin hopes constitute Arigatou, said Rev. Takeyasu Miyamoto devising the Arigatou Foundation, “One to protect children—the inheritors of the Earth and the precious treasure of humanity—from armed conflict, deteriorating natural environments and other dangers. The other was to promote their safe and sound physical, psychosocial, and spiritual development.” The motto of Arigatou, “Prayer and Practice” has a bearing on the members of Myochikai, the work of Arigatou and the programs it has launched, the “Global Network of Religions for Children”, the “Ethics Education for Children”, the “Day of Prayer and Action for Children” and the “Mobilizing Faith-Based Resources to End Child Poverty”.

Without imposing prayer or making it a condition for involvement, the motto Prayer and Practice expresses that spiritual dimension that brings together heart and mind and allows space for the hope and vulnerability that children awake in us. It provides space for sensitivity and attentiveness to realise that there is more, always more, that we haven't exhausted and can never exhaust. We may call it by various names: God, the Ultimate Reality, the Divine Presence, or as vague as "there is something". There is this sudden insight that there is always something more, always "Deus semper maior" (God is always greater) or "Allahu akbar", **أَكْبَرُ اللهُ**, (God is greater). It is impossible to close all the shutters and all the doors. Fortifications do not hold. We cannot claim complete ownership; we cannot expropriate it. We cannot produce it; it only offers itself inadvertently as a powerful experience.

The world we live in has changed and with it many of its parameters. It is no longer the case if you are right, I must be wrong,. We live with religious traditions in a world, which offers mutually opposing keys to interpret being, life and death. Ours is a universe of paradoxes and such contradictions are good, they will keep at bay hubris and foster humility. It is for our benefit. And when we get down to the core of the matter, then religion is not first about creeds and speculative beliefs or moral rules. Religion is above all the sensitivity, sensibility and the taste for the infinite.

It seems to me that the golden thread "Prayer and Practice" in Arigatou hint to characteristics of religious experience including but going beyond given parameters and definitions. Realisations of the holy, the sacred, feelings of humility, the sense of gratitude, thanksgiving, the awareness of awe before

anything that captures our attention as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the sense of the divine, facing the ineffable; the sense of littleness before mystery; the quality of elatedness, the sudden awareness of limits and even powerlessness; an impulse to surrender and to kneel; a sense of the eternal and of fusion with the whole of the universe; yes, even the experiences of heaven and hell – all of these experiences with different names suddenly seem as real by religious as well as by atheists.<sup>1</sup>

The message from the First Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) 13 years ago was introduced through a line by the Bengali poet, the renewer of literature and music and the Nobel Prize laureate, Rabindranath Tagore: "Every child born comes with a message that God has not yet despaired of humankind". I want to end with this sentence, which has the potential of nurturing a meaningful and spiritual dialogue between people of different religions and convictions all committed to pursuing work towards a world fit for children.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Abraham Maslow: *Religions, values and peak-experiences*, New York, Penguin Compass, 1994