

**PASTORAL ATTENTION  
TO  
TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS**

**Letter of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue  
to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences  
in Asia, the Americas and Oceania**

*Your Eminences/Excellencies,*

1. The idea of writing a letter on the need to pay greater pastoral attention to Traditional Religions emerged in the course of the last Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (November 1992). Assessment of the work of the PCID included a discussion on dialogue with the followers of Traditional Religions. A letter has already been written on this subject to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (March 25, 1988 - *Bulletin* 1988/XXIII/2).

It was felt that since Traditional Religions are present in different forms not only in Africa, but also in Asia, the Americas, Oceania, it would be useful to call the attention of the Episcopal Conferences of these continents to the importance of pastoral attention to the Traditional Religions and the usefulness of an exchange of reflections and experiences in this field.

**THE NATURE OF TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS**

***2. What is meant by Traditional Religions?***

By Traditional Religions we mean those religions which, unlike the world religions that have spread into many countries and cultures, have remained in their original socio-cultural environment. The word 'traditional' does not refer to something static or unchangeable, but rather denotes this localised matrix.

There is no agreement on a single name to be used when referring to these religions. Some names (e.g. paganism, fetishism) convey a negative meaning and, in addition, do not really describe the contents of these religions. Nowadays, even a term such as animism is no longer commonly acceptable. Whereas in Africa these religions are ordinarily referred to as "African Traditional Religions"; in Asia they are called 'Tribal Religions and Folk Religions', in America 'Native Religions and Afro-American Religions', and in Oceania 'Indigenous Religions'.

***3. Elements of the Traditional Religions.***

Traditional Religions generally have a clear belief in One God, in a Supreme Being Who goes by such names as Great Spirit, Creator, the Great One, the Mighty Spirit, the Divine, the Transcendent, the One who lives above, Heaven etc.

There is also a belief in other beings which are above humankind but are less than the Supreme Being. They may be called spirits and some experts on the Traditional Religions sometimes call them "deities" or "gods", with a small "d" or "g". Deceased adult relatives, i.e. ancestors, are also objects of belief.

Cult or worship in Traditional Religions is directed generally to the spirits and the ancestors and sometimes to God. It takes the form of prayer especially in the family, worship at shrines and communal sacrifices. Fear of the evil spirits or ancestors motivates many acts of worship.

The moral code is regarded as that which has been handed down by past generations and sanctioned by the spirits and the ancestors, and occasionally by God.

Traditional Religions do not generally lay claim to revealed books. Nor are they articulated in theoretical statements of a theological or philosophical nature. The riches of their contents, and their many values, are more often found in their celebrations, stories and proverbs, and conveyed through attitudes, customs and codes of conduct. It is rare that a traditional religion traces itself back to a founder.

#### ***4. Some Major Values in Traditional Religions.***

In many traditional societies there is a strong sense of the sacred. Religion permeates life to such an extent that it is often difficult to distinguish between strictly religious elements and local custom. Authority is not seen as something secular but is regarded as a sacred trust. People of Traditional Religions show great attention to the earth. They respect life and celebrate its important stages: birth, entrance into adulthood, marriage, death. There is a strong sense of the family, which includes love of children, respect for the elders, a community link with the ancestors. Symbolism is important for interpreting the invisible world and the human being's relationship with it. There is an obvious love of ritual.

#### ***5. Shadows in Traditional Religions.***

Traditional religions also have their negative elements. Examples can be given: inadequate ideas about God, superstition, fear of the spirits, objectionable moral practices, the rejection of twins (in some places), even occasional human sacrifice.

#### ***6. Traditional Religions in a Period of Change.***

Traditional Religions have in the past formed one piece with the cultures of the people who practised them. Among these peoples the same word was often used for religion, custom and culture. These forces and values held their societies together.

The meeting with Christianity, other religions and also with western culture, and especially with modern science and technology and urbanisation, has affected these societies and their Traditional Religions. Nevertheless the influence of Traditional Religions remains strong, particularly at moments of crisis.

### **REASONS FOR PASTORAL ATTENTION AND DIALOGUE WITH TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS**

7. Traditional Religions constitute the religious context in which a good number of people live or have lived.

Many recent converts to Christianity come from a background of traditional religions. This is true not only in those Churches where the Gospel has been preached only within the last century or so, but also in some countries where the Church has been established for many centuries. Many of these converts live in cultures and contexts influenced by these religions. This is proved by the fact

that at some important moments in their lives (such as sickness, danger, marriage, birth of a child, funeral of a relative) they tend to have recourse to practices of their traditional religions or to prayer houses, healing homes, witch-craft, "prophets" or fortune-tellers.

It is to be noted that in Latin America the descendants of the people brought over as slaves from Africa in the 16th and 17th centuries have not lost everything of the religion and culture of their ancestors. Within the great variety of Afro-American cults, there are some that have kept very near to their original forms, such as Candomblé in Bahia (Brazil) and others that are rather syncretistic, as can be found in Haiti, Cuba and Jamaica.

The Native Americans who have become Christians want to remain authentic Native Americans. The Holy Father encouraged them in his speeches to them at the shrine of St. Anne de Beaupré in Canada on 10 September, 1984, and at Phoenix, Arizona, on 14 September 1987. He encouraged the Native Australians or the Aborigines of Australia in the same way at Alice Springs on 29 November 1986. Also worthy of mention are the two more recent encounters the Holy Father had with the Amerindians and the Afro-Americans in Santo Domingo on 12 October, 1992.

All this is a clear indication that the herald of the Gospel should pay great attention to the traditional religions and the cultures which go along with them. Christianity should aim at influencing the whole of life and producing integrated persons, rather than have people live parallel lives, at different levels. The encounter of Gospel and culture, including its religious element, will involve a careful sifting out, a discernment, which is not always easy.

### ***8. Inculturation for Better Proclamation.***

The Church respects the religions and cultures of peoples, and, in its encounter with them, wishes to preserve everything that is noble, true and good in their religions and cultures. To the extent that Traditional Religions are better understood, Christianity will be more suitably proclaimed. As Pope John Paul II states in the encyclical 'Redemptoris Missio': "The process of the Church's insertion into peoples' cultures is a lengthy one. It is not a matter of purely external adaptation, for inculturation 'means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures'. The process is thus a profound and all-embracing one, which involves the Christian message and also the Church's reflection and practice". (RM, 52).

Elements of both a religion and the culture influenced by it can enrich catechesis and liturgy, and therein attain their fulfilment. Necessary is an in-depth study in order to discover those elements Christianity can adopt or adapt, ennoble and purify, and those which must be rejected (LG 13), with constant attention to the danger of syncretism.

With those who wish to become Christians, and those who have already converted from Traditional Religion, dialogue must be understood in the broadest possible sense, namely as the pastoral approach to traditional Religion in order to present the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the most appropriate manner so that the Church may have deeper roots among that people. In this regard, during the recent encounter in Santo Domingo, the Holy Father delivered an address to the Afro-American representatives in which he said: "Evangelization does not destroy your values but is incarnated in them; it consolidates and strengthens them. It causes the growth of the seed scattered by the Word of God who was in the world as 'the true light that enlightens every man' (Jn 1:9), before becoming flesh to save and gather up all things in himself" (GS 57). (Holy Father's Address to Afro-Americans, Santo Domingo, 12 October, 1992).

## **9. Dialogue**

With those who adhere to Traditional Religions and do not wish to become Christians yet, dialogue must be taken in the ordinary sense of encounter, mutual understanding, respect, discovery of the seeds of the Word in this religion, and the joint quest for God's will.

Dialogue should be understood here according to its different forms (cf. *Dialogue and Proclamation* 42). Particularly important in the context of Traditional Religions will be the "dialogue of life" and the "dialogue of action", or collaboration in the field of integral human development.

There remains some difficulty with regard to this dialogue. In some cases there are secret elements to these religions, and open contact is not desired. In other cases the lack of structures makes organised dialogue more difficult.

Nor should one overlook the ambiguity of this dialogue. To indiscriminating persons it can sometimes seem as if a stamp of approval is being given to these religions. Yet in all cases respect and openness are needed. Dialogue with the adherents of Traditional Religions is an expression of charity which knows no boundaries.

## **THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

10. Vatican II recommends in-depth theological investigation with a view to a profound Evangelization (AG 22). The pastoral attention to Traditional Religions which this letter seeks to encourage is a step in the direction of this in-depth theological reflection.

11. In the study of Traditional Religions and cultures and in the reflection on how Christianity can ensure the desired pastoral approach, some key doctrinal points must be kept in mind, namely: the revealed nature of the message Christ has brought to us, the central role of Jesus Christ, the irreplaceable role of the Bible and Tradition, the unity of the Church, the role of Peter's successor in the communion of the Local Churches with the Church of Rome and among themselves. All this provides the necessary framework within which the riches of the Traditional Religions can attain their fulfilment. It is important to guarantee the unity of the Catholic faith throughout the entire world, even if the manner of expressing that faith can vary from one people and culture to another.

## **ACTION BY THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES**

12. Since this investigation and the subsequent pastoral action are truly important for the apostolate of the Church, and bearing in mind the delicate nature of the undertaking, the major responsibility in this field pertains to the Episcopal Conferences of each country or region.

13. As has already been done in such a praiseworthy manner by several Episcopal Conferences, it would be opportune for each Episcopal Conference to appoint a small group of competent and skilled people eager to undertake this research in close co-operation with the Episcopal Conference and, through it, with the competent Dicasteries of the Holy See. Ecumenical collaboration in this field is to be encouraged. Likewise, it would be advisable to promote the study and knowledge of Traditional Religions as part of the formation programme in seminaries, ecclesiastical institutes, and religious houses of study.

14. In conclusion, I would like to stress the readiness of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to sustain, encourage and co-operate with future endeavours geared towards a better

knowledge of suitable pastoral approach. At the same time the PCID is ready to act as a clearing-house for the exchange of knowledge and information among the Episcopal Conferences if they would send us, when available, information on studies already carried out or in progress, relevant publications, names of experts, and anything else that could contribute to fruitful co-operation.

*21 November, 1993*

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