

“Only a person who has been engaged in interreligious dialogue for so many years and at the deepest level of spirituality as Pierre-François de Béthune can write this kind of book. It is not only full of theological insights and historical information, especially on the past giants and pioneers of interfaith dialogue, but also suffused with profound wisdom, especially on interreligious prayer. I cannot recommend this book enthusiastically enough, for those who are beginning to undertake the journey of being religious interreligiously as well as for seasoned practitioners of interreligious hospitality.”

— Peter C. Phan
Ellacuría Chair of Catholic Social Thought
Georgetown University

“The author’s experience in daringly crossing the theological and ecclesiastical borders of his own faith in order to enter into the inner sanctuary of another religion—without intruding impolitely but allowing himself to be welcomed as a humble learner—is an art that the Son of God taught us when he took our flesh in silence and mystery. This Son later received God’s visible and audible confirmation of his ministry when he humbled himself before John, the most revered Asian Guru of the time, and became his disciple. This is an aspect of Jesus’ life that is seldom witnessed to. Fr. Béthune—whose writings I have always read with spiritual profit, and whose experience as described here is an encouragement to those of us Asians who yearn to be or have already been baptized in the Jordan of Asian religiousness—offers us a valuable theological catechesis on the discipline of dying into and rising from the faith of our neighbors.”

— Aloysius Pieris, SJ
Tulana Research Centre, Sri Lanka

MONASTIC INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE SERIES

Welcoming Other Religions

A New Dimension of the Christian Faith

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Foreword by
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Foreword

In *Welcoming Other Religions*, Pierre-François de Béthune offers an extended reflection on his personal experience and the experience of other Christians who discovered new dimensions of their own faith when they encountered another spiritual tradition (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam . . .). But what kind of “experience” is he speaking of? There can be the experience of those who take up a practice developed by a tradition other than their own in order to better their lives—whatever they might mean by “better their lives.” There is also the experience of those who give themselves, heart and soul, to a different religious path and then, with a sense of genuine abandon, are willing to be led to inner realms they could never have imagined on the day they embarked on this new way. The experience of Pierre-François de Béthune and of all those he speaks of is of this second kind, and that is what makes his reflections on interreligious dialogue so significant.

Ever since his baptism almost eighty years ago Pierre-François has been a follower of Christ, the one who calls himself “the Way” (John 14:6). Very early in life—at least by contemporary standards—he determined that for him to follow the Way of Christ meant becoming a monk. He entered the monastery of Saint-André in Bruges, Belgium, and he was sent to Rome to study theology and then to a monastery

founded by Saint-André in the Congo. Inspired by the example of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, he thought of remaining in Africa for the rest of his life, but eight years later he returned to Europe, believing that the time had come for Africans to determine their own future. However, his experience of learning an African language and adapting to the local culture played a major role in his decision to do everything he could to help Westerners open their eyes and hearts to other cultures and religions.

On his return to Belgium, he became part of the Benedictine community at Clerlande, near Brussels. Several years later he was elected prior. In the meantime he had made another important discovery. When he returned to Rome for further study, he met a Japanese tea master, Michiko Sōmei Nojiri, who introduced him to the tea ceremony (*chadō*), a spiritual “way” that is so characteristic of Zen Buddhism. His experiential discovery of Buddhism led him to Japan where he was received by Suzuki Sochū Rōshi, the master of Ryūtaku Temple at the foot of Mount Fuji. He was able to spend some time there with the *unsui* (novice monks) and make what might be called a second novitiate. This experience led him to a profound realization that every authentic spiritual path, if followed with dedication, can lead one to amazing discoveries of hitherto unrecognized dimensions of the Christian faith.

As Henri Le Saux did in India, Pierre-François could have remained in Japan and let himself be totally penetrated by this culture that was so profoundly marked by the “way of tea,” *chadō*; the “way of the Buddha,” *butsudō*; and so many other ways—*shintō*, the “way of the *kami*” (Japanese divinities); *shodō*, the “way of the brush”; *kadō*, “the way of flowers.” Once again, he decided to return to his monastery. He recognized the importance of immersing himself in the spiritual quest of his Western contemporaries and of offering them the testimony of a Christian who was resolutely open to the spiritual traditions of other religions. By “resolute openness” I

have in mind those Christians who are “prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions” and to accept that “the way Christians sometimes understand their religion and practice it may be in need of purification,” words taken from “Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹

When he was back in Belgium, Pierre-François became one of the founders of DIMMID, *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique*•Monastic Interreligious Dialogue,² and then its secretary general for twenty-two years. In this capacity he was named a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, which, along with the Council for the Evangelization of Peoples, produced the above-mentioned document. He also took part in regional organizations for interreligious encounter, especially Voies de l’Orient.³

The experience of Pierre-François shows that many of those who engage wholeheartedly in interreligious dialogue feel that they are called to go further, even to the point of allowing themselves to be transformed by what they discover in the

¹ Nos. 49 and 32. The document was published conjointly by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in 1991. Accessible on the website of the Holy See: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/intereleg/documents/rc_pc_intereleg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html.

² See its website, www.dimmid.org.

³ Voies de l’Orient is an independent organization but always in liaison with those responsible for the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church of Brussels. In May 2014 Voies de l’Orient organized its sixth conference on the theme proposed by Pierre-François de Béthune, namely, interreligious dialogue as a “way of interior transformation” (what Raimon Panikkar called “intra-religious dialogue”). Its final message can be found on its website, http://www.voiesorient.be/?page_id=3653, in French, English, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish.

interior space that has been fashioned by a deep encounter with what is life-giving for their dialogue partners. This is where interreligious dialogue becomes intrareligious dialogue. Those who open themselves to the latter set out on a journey that is both difficult and risky (every such journey is risky!) but also rewarding for those who are sufficiently prepared to enter such unknown and uncharted territory.

The author has come to know this territory well. Taking us by the hand, he gently leads us, showing us routes that are trustworthy and those to be avoided. He begins with the history of the development of the church's attitude toward other religions, mentioning significant events along the way—especially the Second Vatican Council, which showed how important it was to welcome and be in dialogue with the beliefs of others—and also the attempts that have been made to help us better understand what is needed for such dialogue. Convinced as he is that experience is all-important in this area, he introduces us to the life of the great pioneers of religious experience: Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktānanda), Thomas Merton, Raimon Panikkar (the first to use the expression “intrareligious dialogue”), Christian de Chergé, and a number of others. It is in the light of their experience and of his own long familiarity with the practice of *zazen* and the “way of tea” that Pierre-François speaks to us.

Having introduced us to the pioneers of inter- and intrareligious dialogue, the author embarks on a theological interpretation of their experience and helps us come to a fuller understanding of its meaning for the churches. In the course of this theological reflection, he draws our attention to the dangers of an exclusively intellectual interpretation of the meaning of interreligious dialogue, one that emphasizes the doctrinal differences that separate the traditions involved (Buddhism or Hinduism and Christianity, for example). A solely intellectual interpretation could render suspect and even dangerous the experience of those who engage in dia-

logue at the level of spirituality. This is the reason the author gives so much weight to the kind of life the pioneers actually led, seeing their lives as a model for authentic inter- and intrareligious dialogue. His reflections on “evangelical hospitality” are especially moving.

In his reflection, Pierre-François does not always make use of technical theological language, but the terminology he does employ is often very biblical. He speaks of “new paths for theology” because, in his view, theology cannot ignore the experience of a growing number of Christians who are open to what is most profound in the experience of the followers of other religious traditions. In this regard, he stresses several aspects of this openness: “a new way of seeing” (the act of being “resolutely open” to others in the sense described above); “a welcoming of poverty” (recognition of the fact that our knowledge of others is very limited and that they can help us deepen our own faith); “an unconditional sharing” (the reciprocity of all sharing at the level of spiritual experience). Making these attitudes, especially “a new way of seeing,” one’s own is no easy matter, but those who do succeed will discover new ways of thinking about, expressing, and living their Christian faith.

Those who speak or write about interreligious dialogue—and especially about intrareligious dialogue—cannot fail to take into account the witness of those who were intensely involved in it. Because this book does, in fact, take them into account, the reader will here find pertinent reflections on inter- and multireligious prayer, trans-religious meditation, the dialogue of silence, and a *lectio divina* of other religions. Talk of this kind frightens those who are especially concerned about the dangers of relativism and syncretism. However, these are false enemies that can divert us from the real danger, namely, the failure to remember that no expression we give to our experience of God can adequately say who God is *in se*. How we understand the truth of God, the truth of Christ,

and the great truths of the faith never completely coincides with these truths. Fearful people do not sense any need for dialogue, but for those of us who do, genuine dialogue, by calling our attention to others and their experience of the Ultimate, allows us to go ever further in our efforts to plumb the depths of Truth. In the end, that is what Pierre-François is talking about, and by doing so, he offers each of us the possibility of entering more fully into the dynamics of the Gospel. He also helps us see that it is not necessary for us to become like the pioneers of dialogue. What is necessary is making our own the humility and courage of these pioneers by opening ourselves completely to others, confident that God is also at work in the heart of their traditions and that each of them has much to say about the mystery that dwells within us.

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Introduction

The story of the encounter between religions is that of an extraordinary about-face. We have moved from *anathema* to *dialogue*. Such a radical change of mindset has rarely been seen within a community as vast as that of the Christian churches. Over the course of centuries their attitude toward other religions was one of rejection, and now they are disposed to meet them with kindness. What I would like to do here, however, is tell the story of a further evolution by recounting how some Christians have moved from *dialogue* to interreligious *hospitality*. Respectful exchange with a stranger is one thing; it is quite another to welcome the stranger into our home. We take an important step when we engage in cordial dialogue with the followers of another religion, but when we can actually offer hospitality to some of their insights and make them a part of our own spiritual life, our encounter becomes much more decisive. The experience is one that transforms us.

Because it is less well known, this new phase of interreligious encounter calls for study and reflection. Moreover, many Christians who are respectful of other religions wonder just how far their good will should take them. One of the reasons they want to know more about interreligious hospitality is because they are concerned that welcoming certain elements from another religion could pose a risk to their faith.

I will attempt to explore these issues by paying close attention to Christians whose witness to the Gospel involved

welcoming another religion and discovering dimensions of their own faith that were hidden. Among these precursors are the monks Abhishiktānanda and Thomas Merton. In the 1950s they commenced a new way of being Christian by taking the evangelical injunction of hospitality with utmost seriousness. They did not set out on this path of spiritual interreligious encounter to satisfy a taste for the exotic. What inspired them, as we shall see, was their desire to offer Christ more space in our ever-expanding world, much as Teilhard de Chardin had sought to do in the field of science.

My intention is not to advance my own ideas but rather to make known the insights of these pioneers, which I have gathered and tried to synthesize over the course of many years. I have had the good fortune to meet many of them and experience the social and religious settings in which they lived. They taught me how to proceed from dialogue to hospitality, making me aware of the risks that are involved and, even more, of how rewarding this evolution can be.

Study of the life of these pioneers also enables us to discover how dialogue at the level of spiritual experience can reveal new dimensions of our own faith. This does not mean adding new articles to the creed! The Christian faith is not quantitative; it does not grow by borrowing doctrines or spiritual methods from other beliefs. However, our faith can develop and become more steadfast by engagement with other traditions. This kind of organic growth is similar to the way a person grows through encounter and friendship. We become more human, more ourselves, through engagement of this kind, and we discover that without such encounters, our latent possibilities would probably never have come to fruition.

A similar development is possible for the faith of Christians when they resolutely welcome believers of another religion or another spirituality. I will go so far as to say that such development has become an essential element of the Christian tradition in our time.

1

The History of a Breakthrough

The Situation Prior to the Mid-Twentieth Century

We are witnessing—and are often participants in—a major development in the Roman Catholic Church. A look at the history of past centuries can help us appreciate the importance of the changes that are taking place and participate in them with greater awareness.

However, let us not become too smug when we contrast our current generous openness to other religions with the narrow-minded intolerance of our predecessors. Lest we become presumptuous, we need only remember that we are still en route. We certainly do understand the necessity of dialogue today, but that does not mean we are all that good at engaging in it! The road is long and we still have miles to go. For centuries we lived with an overriding sense of our own superiority, and that led to haughty disdain for all other religions. Then, in just a few years' time, we did an about-face and began to look on the adherents of other religions with respect. We have gone so far as to invite them to enter into dialogue with us—and then are surprised to find they are not as eager for it as we are. Our temptation at that point is to become indignant at their reluctance, failing to recognize that

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our resentment is little more than another form of our old attitude of condescension, even contempt! Would it not be more appropriate to express our respect by patience? After rejecting dialogue for nineteen centuries, we have evolved. All well and good. Now, the least we can do is give others the time they need to make their own way, and at their own pace! The question of reciprocity is certainly more complex and I intend to address it later on. What I want to do here is simply call attention to our tendency to revert to old patterns of behavior. We need to make a constant effort to be humble, for humility is the first condition of clear-sightedness in the area of interreligious relations. That is why it is good to recall what our attitude was like in former times, even if it has been somewhat softened during the past century.

To begin with, we can go back to one of the most egregious texts in the history of the Catholic Church. The ecumenical Council of Florence (1442) was nothing less than peremptory when it defined what Christians should believe:

It firmly believes, professes and preaches that all those who are outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life and will go into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless they are joined to the Catholic Church before the end of their lives; that the unity of the ecclesiastical body is of such importance that only for those who abide in it do the Church's sacraments contribute to salvation and do fasts, almsgiving and other works of piety and practices of the Christian militia produce eternal rewards; and that nobody can be saved, no matter how much he has given away in alms and even if he has shed his blood in the name of Christ [i.e., as a member of another Christian community], unless he has persevered in the bosom and the unity of the Catholic Church.¹

¹Session 11; February 4, 1442 [Bull of union with the Copts]. Online at <https://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/FLORENCE.HTM>.

This conciliar declaration, which expanded on the conviction expressed by St. Fulgence in the sixth century, “Outside the Church there is no salvation,”² stood firm until 1949, when it was mitigated by a declaration of the Holy Office condemning the doctrines of Fr. Leonard Feeney of “the Cambridge [in the United States] group,” noting that “the principle ‘outside the Church no salvation’ has not been well understood or examined.”³

What “no salvation outside the Church” used to mean in practice was that no effort could be spared to convert pagans, because there was absolutely no hope of their being saved by their own religious practice. Eventually, in theological manuals, there was an *excursus* appended to the tract *De vera religione* that dealt with the salvation of infidels and presented a few cases for study. But even at this level the question remained very marginal.

In the area of spirituality, the exclusion of other religions was even more radical. It was unimaginable that a Christian could be guided by any method of asceticism or prayer that was not rooted in the Christian faith. An incident that took place in 1931 at Si-shan, a monastery in China founded by the Belgian abbey of Saint-André, can serve as an example.

One day, while the monks were on a walk, a Chinese novice and former bonze by the name of Wang, claimed that there were similarities between Buddhist and Christian monasticism. Dom Joliet, the prior, felt that the novice had to make reparation and insisted that he get down on his knees and explicitly declare before his confreres that Christian monasticism was unique. The novice did as he was bidden, but a

² *De fide, ad Petrum*, 37: PL 65:703.

³ Letter from the Holy Office to the archbishop of Boston, August 8, 1949. The text of the letter can be found at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=1467>.

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couple of days later he again got into an argument and left the monastery soon after.⁴

Daring to see similarities between Buddhist and Christian monasticism was regarded as a form of apostasy; blindness to what they had in common was held up as a monastic virtue.

In time, however, attitudes gradually began to change.

A Turning Point: Vatican II

The declaration *Nostra aetate* was not on the initial agenda of the Second Vatican Council. Not even the Asian bishops had requested a discussion on how to relate to the religions that completely surrounded their Catholic communities. However, during the course of the council it became clear that the church's relation to the great religions of the world needed to be considered. This document, titled "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," is the shortest of all the conciliar documents, but it has emerged as one of the most significant. It marked a radical change with the past—actually, a 180-degree reversal. However, critics of the declaration were not lacking.

Criticism was first of all directed to the reasons for including such a document in the acts of the council. Some wondered if a certain opportunism might not have been behind the move to speak positively of other religions. According to these critics, as globalization was becoming more and more prevalent, a statement on the church's positive relation to other religions was issued to let the world know that Catholics shared this vision. It was not difficult to answer this criti-

⁴Henri-Philippe Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet (1870–1937), Un projet de monachisme bénédictin chinois* (Paris: Cerf, 1988), 209.

cism, which was expressed by the most fundamentalist Catholics. An honest consideration of the motivations of those who drafted this text makes it clear that their intentions were not at all political. On the contrary, they were basically evangelical, as will be apparent in the following chapters.

Another criticism came from the other extreme of the Christian spectrum. Some were concerned that this declaration would have little impact on official theology. In point of fact, it seems that *Nostra aetate* and the experiences of those who actually followed the directives proposed by the document contributed very little to the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, which was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000. The reception of a document as innovative as *Nostra aetate* has not always been easy. Openness to other religions has certainly been generous and respect quite sincere, but it has been more difficult to accept all that dialogue implies. There are even some who think that it is not always appropriate to do so.

Thus, in his speech to the cardinals and the Roman Curia on December 22, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI insisted on the importance of interreligious dialogue when he said, "In man's present situation, the dialogue of religions is a necessary condition for peace in the world and it is therefore a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. . . . [However,] both parties to the dialogue remain consciously within their identity, which the dialogue does not place in question either for themselves or for the other."⁵ He nuanced this statement somewhat, but the gist of his thinking was clear: interreligious dialogue must not change the convictions of those who engage in it.

According to this vision of dialogue, *Nostra aetate* did nothing more than propose a change in the way we relate to other

⁵ On the website of the Holy See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia.html.

religions. It did not in any way suggest that there should be a change in Christian theology or spirituality.

A statement like that raises a fundamental question: What kind of dialogue is it that excludes, *a priori*, any significant change in those who engage in it? Can we really welcome otherness without being altered? The pioneers of profound interreligious encounter show us very clearly that the acceptance of the possibility of change is a prerequisite for genuine encounter. In fact, the Second Vatican Council opened a door that allows for a major transformation of Christian thought and life. It is this change that I will discuss below.

I should add, however, that dialogue at the level of spiritual experience, which requires a readiness to change, is just one way to engage with other spiritual traditions. In most cases, interreligious encounter takes place at levels other than that of spirituality and normally does not lead to significant changes. What we need to do, therefore, is situate the kind of dialogue that takes place at the level of spiritual experience among the other forms of dialogue. We will then see its specific place and role, which are limited but emblematic.

Four Kinds of Dialogue

In “The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission,” a document published in 1984 by the Secretariat for Non-Christians (currently called Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue), a distinction was made between four types of dialogue.⁶ This distinction is illuminating, although it should not be applied too rigidly.

⁶ Available on line at <http://www.cimer.org.au/documents/DialogueandMission1984.pdf>. For some reason, only the Portuguese version is given on the website of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

1. Peaceful coexistence or the “dialogue of life.” The basis of all dialogue is tolerance, which should not be underestimated since it is already a major step toward the possibility of dialogue. It can even become a beautiful expression of respect and esteem. However, at this stage religious issues are not at the forefront.

2. Collaboration for justice and peace or the “dialogue of works.” At this stage too religion is not addressed directly. Joint efforts are directed to the social, cultural, or even moral domain. To ensure effective collaboration, any and all religious discrimination must be avoided. Diplomatic dialogue takes place at this level, negotiating agreements that ensure respect for the rights of believers, but religious issues as such are left aside. It should be noted, however, that this type of dialogue leads to the next stage, at least in part, because to work together well, those who collaborate must know one another, even if they avoid speaking of religion directly. Interreligious dialogue should not be limited to this stage, nor to the next, as is too often done when it is said that the aim of dialogue is world peace.

3. Discussion or the “dialogue of experts” is dialogue in the explicit sense of the word. Those involved in dialogue at this level not only try to understand the religions of their dialogue partners but, insofar as possible, strive to arrive at a common understanding, despite the ambiguity of words. The practice of this kind of dialogue often creates strong bonds between those who come together. At the same time, however, they must not let themselves be so fascinated by their study of another religion that they lose the objectivity demanded by this intellectual endeavor. Finally, we note a certain internal contradiction in dialogue at this level. Since the essence of religion is ineffable, an exchange of words can never arrive at what is most central to it. Such dialogue can only deal with penultimate realities. At this level, therefore, interreligious encounter is still incomplete.

4. Complicity or the “dialogue of spiritual experience.” This form of dialogue looks for an interior consonance with another spiritual tradition, and even a certain communion with the movement of the spirit in the heart of a follower of another religion.

This fourth form of encounter obviously presupposes the previous three. At the same time, it is also clear that the dialogue of spiritual experience ensures the very possibility of other forms of dialogue. Indeed, if there were not some sense of the sanctity of other religions and of a certain hidden compatibility between all spiritual traditions, no encounter would be possible, because there would be no hope of any real and lasting accomplishment. The dialogue of spiritual experience must be on the horizon of any interreligious encounter. We can even go so far as to say that it is the keystone of dialogue. If the dialogue of spiritual experience is removed, the entire edifice collapses.

A more detailed look at this fourth type of dialogue indicates that “spiritual complicity” is the fullest expression of dialogue. The word “dialogue” is indeed composed of the prefix *dia*, which means “through,” and *logos*, “word.” Its most literal translation is “through a word.” This implies that the word is not solid or overbearing but porous and hospitable. The implication is that words do not cross over an intermediate space that is neutral, but that, coming from the heart, they cut through to the hearts of the dialogue partners.

What we have, therefore, is an “intrareligious dialogue,” to use the expression coined by Raimon Panikkar. Dialogue of this kind is not limited to something *between* (*inter*) persons. Rather, dialogue is fully realized *within* (*intra*) persons because it brings about an exchange between my inherited convictions and the discoveries I receive from a witness to another tradition and welcome into my own interiority. We can already see the promise and the risks of such an encounter.

What we must do, therefore, is recall what is required for a spiritual experience of this kind. Without a deep spiritual formation, the risk is great that communion will lead to confusion, fusion, or syncretism, with the result that those who indiscriminately undertake this form of dialogue will become completely disoriented. This concern will accompany us throughout our reflection.

These few details about the dialogue of spiritual experience will suffice for the moment. Seeing how it is put into practice will allow us to be more clear about its challenges and implications.

The Pioneers of the Dialogue of Religious Experience

As we look back, we see that significant developments in the practice of interreligious dialogue were possible thanks to a small number of witnesses who were committed to it precisely because of their faith. By studying the route taken by these pioneers, we will see what perspectives can be opened up by this deepest form of interreligious dialogue.

Let us begin by recalling some individuals: Jules Monchanin (1895–1957), Louis Massignon (1883–1962), Hugo-Maria Lassalle [Enomiya Makibi] (1898–1990), Henri Le Saux [Swami Abhishiktānanda] (1910–1973), Louis [Thomas] Merton (1915–1968), Serge de Laugier de Beaucueil (1917–1998), Bede Griffiths (1906–1993), Dominique Van Rollegem (1904–1995), Edmond Pezet (1923–2008), Francis Mahieu [Acharya] (1912–2002), Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010), Vandana Mātāji (1921–2013), Yves Raguin (1912–1998), Cornelis Tholens (1913–2011), Sara Grant (1922–2002), Christian de Chergé (1937–1996) along with the other monks of Tibhirine. In addition to these figures who are well known because of their writings, there are others, especially those who lived according to the spirit of Charles de Foucauld. They are known only

to those who were close to them, but they too contributed to the development of a true intrareligious dialogue. All of them came from similar backgrounds and were marked by the time period in which they were active (between 1950 and 1980; until 1996 for Christian de Chergé). Western students of Eastern religions at that time had relatively easy access to the texts and artistic output of these religions. Think, for example, of Orientalists or Arabists such as Max Müller, Mircea Eliade, Étienne Lamotte, and Louis Massignon, and also of theologians such as Paul Tillich, Henri de Lubac, and Karl Rahner, who began to direct their attention to these religions. Almost all the Christian communities of Asia, on the other hand, remained fairly indifferent, if not hostile, to the great religions around them.

It was in the 1950s, that is to say, before Vatican II, that some Western Christians decided to leave their homeland, not specifically for the purpose of announcing Jesus Christ, but to attempt, in his name, to immerse themselves in a non-Christian milieu. Deeply moved by the example of great Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim spiritual teachers, they felt the need to do more than simply study them. They decided to abandon their own culture and travel abroad to become, to the degree possible, an Indian with the Indians or an Algerian with the Algerians. Where possible, they even became citizens of their adopted country; Father Jules Monchanin is an outstanding example. He was a renowned theologian in France and used to give conferences about other religions, but in 1939 he decided to live in India and there continue his study and ministry.⁷

These pilgrims had already been devoted to the spiritual life. All of them, in fact, were religious or priests who had received spiritual formation in an institute like the Society of Auxiliaries of the Mission. Unlike other pilgrims and hippies,

⁷Françoise Jacquin, *Jules Monchanin, prêtre* (Paris: Cerf, 1996).

who had no particular spiritual preparation, they had already gained great spiritual maturity and therefore could set out with confidence along these unfamiliar ways. Nor were they monks who lived on the margins of their own communities and felt the need to try out something new. They wanted to be obedient to their superiors and remain in communion with them. The living bond they maintained with the church ensured the trustworthiness of their experience. That is the reason their testimony has been widely received in the Christian world.

A final notable feature of these pioneers is the way they evolved. To remain true to their initial motivation, they changed considerably. They never stopped making discoveries and, with their great spiritual freedom, they continuously reviewed their way of relating to other religions. In his journal Father Le Saux regularly notes that he no longer recognizes himself in the books he had written several years earlier and which he is now revising for another edition or a translation.

Immediately after the Second Vatican Council these pioneers were respectfully consulted by the bishops of the dioceses where they resided. Father Le Saux, for example, played an important role in the “All India Seminar” held in Bangalore in 1969.

By the 1980s, in response to the council’s encouragement, the local clergy had acquired training in the field of interreligious dialogue. Consequently, these foreign pioneers were no longer so well received. In 1984, Father Edmond Pezet⁸ was even asked by his bishop in Thailand to return to France. We can therefore say that the time of the pioneers is clearly demarcated. Nonetheless, it deserves to be studied, because it holds a special place in the history of dialogue, encompassing

⁸ *Edmond Pezet: A Priest among Buddhist Monks in Thailand* (Brussels: Société des Auxiliaires des Missions, 2012).

the years immediately preceding and following the Second Vatican Council.

Even though, at the beginning of the council, the existence of other religions was not a major concern of the bishops, these pioneers had already made great strides in interreligious dialogue during the previous decade. They were never very numerous, but by their writings, they had a positive influence on the church's reception of the council's teaching in this area. Their experience showed that the openness to other religions expressed in *Nostra aetate* was not simply diplomatic, since an in-depth encounter was both possible and beneficial.

In reality, these pioneers internalized the sea change of Vatican II. They not only achieved a profound intellectual transformation but underwent a true conversion. Every conversion, in the biblical sense of the word, is a discovery of God, as can be seen in the lives St. Augustine, Blaise Pascal, and Blessed Charles de Foucauld. We can say the same thing about Abhishiktānanda or Christian de Chergé. The shock of an encounter with the faith of other believers, Hindu or Muslim, renewed their Christian faith. They were taken aback and challenged when they came into contact with these beautiful spiritual traditions, not merely enriched by them, as they had expected. Their profound encounter with these religious traditions led them to rediscover the Gospel of the Beatitudes.

Reading their writings continues to be timely because they give us not just their ideas but, above all, their experience of discovering new dimensions of their own faith. One might even compare them to the Fathers of the Church, whom we still read today precisely because they devoted their whole lives to searching for the truth for their time. These "Fathers of the Church in dialogue" paid the price that was needed to show that the word of the Gospel is a word that also speaks to and supports the work of dialogue.

Two Emblematic Figures

Two individuals made especially remarkable contributions to the evolution of dialogue. What follows will not be a complete account of the work of these pioneers, but rather will indicate how their interreligious encounters became an intrareligious dialogue that transformed the way they lived out their faith.

Henri Le Saux—Abhishiktānanda (1910–1973)

Father Le Saux deserves special study because in his own life he dealt with most of the ideals and difficulties the other pioneers had to face.⁹ He is well known through his many books, including four that are autobiographical.¹⁰ Moreover, since his experience is emblematic, he has been and continues to be the subject of numerous studies.

Henri Le Saux was thirty-eight when he left France for India. He had already been a monk for twenty-one years at Kergonan, a Benedictine monastery in his native Brittany. Those years of formation and maturation were decisive for the rest of his life. Moreover, during his studies he acquired a taste for theological reflection that stayed with him throughout his life. He never renounced his membership in the Benedictine monastic tradition, even when he lived as a wandering *sannyāsi* (a gyrovague!) thousands of miles from his monastery.

⁹ Shirley Du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktānanda* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

¹⁰ *Une messe aux sources du Gange* (Paris: Seuil, 1967); *Guru and Disciple: An Encounter with Sri Gnanananda, a Contemporary Spiritual Master* (Chennai: Samata Books, 2012); *Souvenirs d'Arunâchala* (Paris: Épi, 1978); *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948–1973) of Swami Abhishiktānanda* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998).

His fascination with India had already begun in 1934, so he had to show great patience to fulfill a dream that seemed very strange to those around him. But thanks to a contact he made with Father Monchanin, he was finally able to leave for India in 1948, never to return. He lived there for twenty-five years, becoming an Indian citizen in 1960.

On arrival, he proposed to found a Benedictine monastery that would be receptive to Indian culture. He wanted to enrich the centuries-old Benedictine tradition by situating it in a new cultural framework. More broadly, he wanted to prepare the way for “the leaven of the Gospel to permeate the rich dough of Indian monasticism.”¹¹ On July 11, 1950, the feast of St. Benedict, Father Monchanin and he inaugurated the Saccidānanda Kulitalai ashram on the banks of the Kaveri River in Tamil Nadu. To publicize this project, they wrote a book titled *Ermîtes du Saccidānanda (Hermits of Saccidānanda)*, which appeared in 1956.

By that time, however, Father Le Saux, who had taken the Indian name of Abhishiktānanda, no longer believed in this project! Moreover, no serious Indian candidate came forward to join this community. In the meantime, he had discovered a much deeper dimension of Hinduism: the ideal of *advaita*, non-duality. His meeting with the great sage Rāmana Maharshi had not only fascinated but deeply shaken him. He asked for some time to reside in the caves of Mount Arunachala, where the sage lived. During several stays at this mountain, between 1952 and 1956, he had a religious experience so profound that it called into question his understanding of his faith, while at the same time strengthening him in his commitment to the Gospel.

¹¹ Jacques Winandy, “Introduction,” in Jules Monchanin and Henri La Saux, *Ermîtes du Saccidānanda* (Paris: Casterman, 1956), 14.

When he returned to Shantivanam (another name for the Saccidānanda ashram), his conversations with Father Monchanin made it clear that their approaches to Hinduism differed considerably. While Father Monchanin was always struck by the gulf that separated Hinduism and Christianity and that seemed to render illusory the possibility of any in-depth rapprochement, Abhishiktānanda always saw that it was precisely in this abyss that one could discover the God who was beyond all formulations, whether those be of Hinduism or of Christianity.

But this inner evolution was not without a great inner conflict. We must not forget that this was ten years before the Second Vatican Council, a time when a heavy cloud of suspicion hung over any theological or pastoral research, as individuals such as the theologians Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, along with the worker priests, knew only too well. Moreover, the very traditional theological education that Le Saux received at Kergonan provided little help in resolving his dilemmas! Prayer alone allowed him to keep his eyes open to the whole of reality, without giving in to fear.

The discovery of his diary, published in 1986, thirteen years after his death, revealed how intense this intrareligious dialogue had been. Until then, his books, which were published for the general public with the *imprimatur*, explained the issue well, while also offering some indication of what would be involved in a response to the theological questions raised by the encounter of religions. Abhishiktānanda's diary, published under the title *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, finally let us see at what price those responses, always provisional, had been obtained. One can compare the publication of this very personal diary to the publication of the letters of Mother Teresa to her confessor. In both cases we see how much inner suffering was hidden behind a serene countenance.

By 1952 Abhishiktānanda was able to put his finger on the problem when he said, "India's contribution will above

all show itself in what seems most to distance it from Christianity.”¹²

The abyss between India and Christianity is also something fundamental. It is less to be sought in superficial differences, which are, after all, linked with remarkable similarities that are equally superficial. But rather in this: Hinduism is fulfilled in transcending itself, in orienting the best of its adepts toward what is beyond its formulations and rites, in which alone the Supreme Truth resides. For Christianity, the only thing that is beyond understanding is Faith; and Faith is an intellectual adherence. The Christian is not authorized to plunge into darkness.¹³

Therefore,

How can we believe in the absoluteness of a dogmatic formula? of a rite? hence, of a Church? Could God then be shut up in what is created? . . . Why should not the Word, incarnate in flesh in Nazareth, be incarnate at least in “word” elsewhere? . . . Why should the Incarnation in Galilee be the summit of humanity?¹⁴

He concluded, “I remain a Christian so long as I have not penetrated into the ‘Darkness’—supposing that someday I penetrate that far.”¹⁵

Abhishiktānanda’s diary also allows us to glimpse the agonizing struggle he had to undergo to make his way along this path of faith, “From now on I have tasted too much of *advaita* to be able to recover the ‘Gregorian’ peace of a Christian monk. Long ago I tasted too much of that ‘Gregorian’ peace not to be anguished in the midst of my *advaita*.”¹⁶

¹² Le Saux, *Ascent*, 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62f.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

March 21, 1956.

Seventh feast of St. Benedict at Shantivanam. A painful one this year. . . .

Since my return [from the Sri Gñānānanda Tapovanam Ashram] anguish has returned. And the very good physical form in which I was when I came back, which was noted by everyone here, all of a sudden gone. Peace and joy for me are there where I am not allowed to go; and yet it is only there that I have enjoyed them with a fullness never found elsewhere. I can no longer live as a Christian monk here; and I cannot live as a Hindu monk. May the Lord take pity on me and cut short my life! I cannot take any more.¹⁷

At other times, however, he sees the possibility of resolving this tension,

It seems to me I could readily describe my present condition since Arunachala as a dawn, *arunodaya*: even before the sun rises, the sky is lit up. *Jyoti, śānti, ānanda*. The birds are already singing, and my heart is already singing. Await with joy the appearance of the wonderful orb.¹⁸

After 1956 it seems that his anguish subsides, even though the tension remains. Recognizing that his thinking has already greatly changed since his arrival in India eight years previously, he now resolves to be less trenchant in expressing his theological position.

His meeting with Raimon Panikkar in 1957 allows him to put all his questions in a broader context.

The gospel is not another philosophy It is the proclamation of an event.¹⁹

The metanoia [repentance, conversion] preached by Jesus is not a transfer from one *dharma* to another. It is a total turning

¹⁷ Ibid., 147f.

¹⁸ Ibid., 147.

¹⁹ Ibid., 298.

round that amounts to nothing less than reaching the stage of “realization.”²⁰

Jesus is not made greater by refusing to others that which gives him his own glory.²¹

In the last years of his life—he had barely reached sixty years—he was able to transmit the fruit of his experience to some disciples, especially Marc Chaduc (Swami Ajatānanda). On June 30, 1973, he wrote in his journal, “This morning Marc’s *dīkshā* [initiation to the monastic life] in the Ganges at 7:30 with Chidanandaji and Krishnanandaji. It was too beautiful—too powerful. The sign has recovered all its value. . . . The four ‘celebrants’ were simply radiant.”²² A few days later he suffered a heart attack in Rishikesh. He died on December 7, 1973.

The great desire that had called him to India was fulfilled in a way that he could not have imagined, but he could say with the psalmist, “I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding” (Ps 119:32). “Fidelity to Christianity; a heart opened to the dimensions of the mystery of India.”²³

Thomas Merton (1915–1968)

The story of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton is very different from that of the other “pioneers.”²⁴ He spent less than two months in Asia! Yet he also made a crucial contribution to the opening of the Christian tradition to Asian spirituality.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 299. Brackets in the original.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 364.

²² *Ibid.*, 382.

²³ Marie-Madeleine Davy, *Henri Le Saux Swami Abhishiktānanda, le Passeur entre deux rives* (Paris: Cerf, 1981), 193.

²⁴ Gilles Farcet, *Un trappiste face à l’Orient* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990).

He also is well known through his numerous writings, which make it possible for us to have a clear understanding of how he evolved. During the twenty-seven years of his monastic life, he remained in his monastery or in his nearby hermitage, but intellectually and spiritually he travelled far.

When he entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1941, he had already undergone a significant interior transformation. He was intensely involved in the intellectual, artistic, and political life of the United States. After entering the monastery, even though he was now a cloistered monk, he remained in contact with this vibrant milieu and even deeply influenced it through his writings, especially during the time of the Vietnam War.

From his early years in Gethsemani, he was concerned about the future of the contemplative and monastic tradition. Initially, he was inspired by the charism of the first Cistercian Fathers of the twelfth century and wrote a few books to make known the vitality of their spiritual quest. He then wanted to expand his view by studying the first Christian monks, the Desert Fathers of the fifth and sixth centuries. Later still, he discovered Zhuangzi and the Taoists. Finally, he was fascinated by the tradition of Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen. The trajectory of his evolution is remarkable. Father Louis, as he was called at the monastery, underwent a slow but continuous conversion to a fuller living out of his Christian contemplative vocation.

He never thought of going to Asia to live there as a Zen monk and to be known by another name. He did not experience the anguish of being torn between two traditions, but he did undergo a complete transformation. In his youth, he regarded with amusement his college comrades who were enchanted by the East. Later in life, the discoveries he made, mainly through books, but sometimes also through direct contact with such people as Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki or Thich Nhat Hanh, gradually introduced him to a broader spiritual universe.

He also left a journal, written from 1939 to 1968 and published after his death in seven volumes. The one that is of special interest to us here is the last, which he wrote during his trip to Asia.²⁵

He had been invited to participate in a monastic conference in Thailand, and this made it possible for him to organize a trip in Asia that began in October 1968 and was to last a few months. He expected much, and the trip was indeed decisive for him. On his return, he would certainly have written important books on his discoveries. All we have, however, are a few journal entries.

On the first page, written as the plane was taking off from San Francisco, he wrote, "I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body."²⁶ He had a sense that this direct encounter with Asia would confirm his intuitions and seal a vital link with Hindu and Buddhist traditions. He felt that beyond an already fruitful *communication*, he could experience a *communion* between the traditions of East and West. In preparation for a lecture he was to give at a conference organized by the "Temple of Understanding" in Kolkata, he wrote,

I left my monastery to come here not as an academic or even as a writer (it turns out that I am both). I speak as a Western monk who is pre-eminently concerned with his own monastic calling and dedication. . . . I come [as] a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just "facts" about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek not only to learn more (quantitatively) about religion and about monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself. . . . I think that we have now reached a

²⁵ *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

stage of (long overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline or experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life.²⁷

He was able to meet some prominent Buddhists, like the Dalai Lama, Chatral Rinpoche, and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. During his visit to Sri Lanka in early December, he was able to visit the Gal Vihara in Polonnaruwa. There, before the large reclining Buddha, he recounts what he experienced.

I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. The queer *evidence* of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded. . . . The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya. . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has become clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have found what I was obscurely looking for.²⁸

It seems clear that Merton had a profound Buddhist experience.

His accidental death in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, when he was fifty-three years old, made him even more

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 312f.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 233–36.

well-known and emphasized his commitment to the encounter of religions. We especially recall some improvised words of his when he was at the symposium in Kolkata and which were recorded and published in his *Asian Journal*:

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.²⁹

Thomas Merton is at the origin of this desire to recover our original unity, a desire that was then shared by many monks and nuns in intermonastic meetings organized a few years later. The brutal interruption of his pilgrimage did not give him the time he needed to reflect deeply on the experiences he had had. The journal entries he made in Asia evoke the many ways he resonated with Buddhist teaching and experience, their meeting of minds, but he never says how his Christian faith was changed by these decisive encounters.

These two monks and a number of other “pioneers,” whom we will also consider, traveled unknown paths, but in retrospect we can see that their explorations were prophetic.

In the light of Vatican II, Christians have understood that the plurality of religions was a “sign of the times,” and not a manifestation of the devil, who, as the enemy in the parable, goes about sowing weeds in the wheat fields. Christians therefore have sought to come to a better understanding of these religions and to collaborate with them for the good of humanity. They realized that dialogue was necessary; it was even a duty.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 308.

Some people went even further, understanding that the encounter of religions could also be a providential opportunity to rediscover and finally develop certain aspects of the Gospel. The change of heart encouraged by the council implies more than a change of ideas; it can also be the opportunity for a new way of living the Gospel.

Ultimately, we see that the history of interreligious dialogue is not linear. The council did not inaugurate a gradual raising of consciousness. While it was only in the 1960s that some finally became aware of the grounds for respecting other religions and collaborating with them, others had already begun to appreciate the place of other religions in the plan of God for the world, and the grace that could come to Christians by interacting with those religions.

For that to happen, these pioneers, as we have seen, had to depart on a kind of exodus. But it was not a headlong flight, a way of escaping from their own tradition, which had become monotonous and bloodless. They were not desperate about their own religious tradition, but they understood that they had to liberate it from a certain fortress mentality in which it had taken refuge. The Catholicism of much of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe was stuck in nostalgia, and the monasticism that was revived after the French Revolution, both Benedictine and Trappist, was essentially a neo-Gothic form of monasticism. Those who restored Western monasticism in the nineteenth century wanted to make it a conservatory of ancient rituals and customs, isolated from contemporary currents of thought. In contrast to this concern for self-sufficiency, the pioneers of interreligious encounter proclaimed that openness and hospitality were the privileged paths of renewal.

Thomas Merton, always attentive to the deepest aspirations of his time, clearly understood the need to get out of a world that was closed in on itself and self-referential. He sensed that one way to accomplish this was through openness to the

unexpected grace of Asian spiritual paths, which were so different and yet so similar.

Swami Abhishiktānanda, meanwhile, found at the heart of his monastic vocation the intuition that has sustained monks for at least twenty-five centuries, as expressed in the Vedas, particularly in the famous hymn of the Rig Veda:

He with the long loose locks supports Agni, and moisture,
heaven, and earth:

He is all sky to look upon: he with long hair is called this
light.

The Munis, girdled with the wind, wear garments soiled of
yellow hue. . . .

You therefore, mortal men, behold our natural bodies and
no more.

The Muni, made associate in the holy work of every God,
Looking upon all varied forms flies through the region of
the air.³⁰

But it is not enough to move easily from the West to the East. What these monks and other Christian pioneers who came from the West to “drink from the ancient sources of wisdom” discovered above all was the action of the Spirit in the sages they met and in the challenge they hurled at the Christian tradition. Their example, which is now well known, inspired many vocations, especially among Christian monks and nuns. It may seem surprising that these people so devoted to silence had a particular skill for dialogue, and yet, thanks to their special attention to the most essential spiritual realities, they made a significant contribution to interreligious dialogue.³¹ They were encouraged to do so, in 1974, by the

³⁰ Rig Veda, 10.136.

³¹ Bernard de Givé, *Un trappiste à la rencontre des moines du Tibet* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2010); Pierre Massein, *Un moine chrétien rencontre*

then-president of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, who noted that “the presence of monasticism in the Catholic Church is already a bridge to all religions. If we tried to approach Hinduism and Buddhism without monasticism, we would hardly be considered religious.”³² In response, Catholic monks created commissions for monastic interreligious dialogue.³³

In Europe, these commissions gave particular attention to organizing “spiritual exchanges” between Japanese Buddhist monks and European Christian monks in their respective monasteries.³⁴ During these exchanges, it soon became clear that they could not limit themselves to comparing their monastic customs or the spiritual methods of each tradition. For the Christian participants, fundamental questions arose about the foundations of their faith. In their own place, and with their own charism, monks and nuns entered the ranks of those who are trying to develop a theological approach to these key issues.

It is, therefore, necessary to study the theological implications of these interreligious encounters.

des moines bouddhistes (Dijon: L'échelle de Jacob, 2012); Basil Pennington, *Monastic Journey to India* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982).

³² *Bulletin de l'AIM* 17 (1974): 62.

³³ Fabrice Blée, *The Third Desert*, trans. William Skudlarek (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011). See the website of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue: www.dimmid.org.

³⁴ Benoît Billot describes such an exchange in his book *Voyage dans les monastères zen* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1987).