



The World Community for Christian Meditation

Seeing from the Other's Point of View

An Understanding of Inter-Religious Dialogue

Dialogue between religions and faith traditions - and the friendship that grows from it - is an indispensable component for peace, prosperity and happiness in the new era dawning on the human family.

Not only must we renounce the aggressive attitudes towards other faiths which has long grown in the fields of ignorance and suspicion of the unknown other; but we must positively embrace the work of dialogue and mutual understanding in the very field of our differences. This enthusiastic engagement in dialogue is needed in order to ensure that the friendship born of shared insights and from the spirit of wisdom will, in times to come prevent differences from forming into the divisions which are the perennial source of prejudice and conflict.

New ways of seeing depend on our approach to the other

A new way of seeing is needed to actualize a new stage of human evolution. This will be marked by a more pronounced element of the spiritual dimension of consciousness in human culture and interaction. With this will come a new understanding of holiness and enlightenment as the goal of human existence. These - as 'new' values together with the purposefulness needed to live by them - will gradually transform the motives of the institutions and systems in all societies. Social and political action of course remain crucial to change and development. But because of the scale on which this action operates today the spiritual dimension also needs to be made conscious.

It is therefore important to understand the nature of inter-religious dialogue. This understanding will be born of the faith and courage needed to risk our identity and past experience by seeing the truth from the other's point of view. Experiment and experience must be nurtured and centres and networks developed to host these new ventures into human progress.

Dialogue is necessary to control and eventually disempower the reflex of violence

We are acutely aware today of crisis on many levels of the environment, social and psychological life and international relations. The pace and scale of transition has accelerated and the fear this generates - because we are scared of change we cannot control - has created the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism, born of a literalist reading of scripture and the fears of threatened religious identities. New forms of

violence - this perennial human addiction - seem to be replacing conventional warfare. They continue to justify themselves, however, in the name of the very religions that - at their core - unanimously reject violence. At the heart of every spiritual tradition, in the deep structures and scriptures of all religion, deeper set than ritual or philosophy, violence is seen through and exposed as an unintelligent and counter-productive way of conflict resolution. As a failure both of wisdom and of creative imagination violence inevitably leads to forms of insanity and thus to the defeat of its own aims.

The increased influence of religion on a global scale demands contemplative vision as well as dialogue

Far from disappearing through the triumphs of modern science or the attempts of atheist ideologies to eradicate it, religion has never been stronger. Like art or science, religion is hard-wired into humanity. But just as science can be abused or used unwisely or art can become merely entertainment or propaganda, so there are forms of religion that become degenerate or ossified. Whenever religion becomes disconnected from its mystical source-experience its power to lead to transcendence and transformation diminishes. Beyond this point it can then become its own counter-image, as a rallying point for ethnic cleansing or the justifying of injustice.

Yet, religion has its own immune system. The means of its self-purification lie within its contemplative wisdom. But this needs to be revived in consciousness again by every generation, taught by religious leaders and practiced from the early stages of training and education in religious and spiritual life. An experience of the common ground awaits any individual or group that discovers and explores this contemplative core. It is this experience that directly though subtly generates the new way of seeing.



Applying the new vision to economics and ecology

One volatile area of crisis affects the economic structures which we have recently seen shaken to their foundations. More depends upon these structures than profit. They underpin essential human values of civility and self-control as well as supporting compassionate action on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. Sustainable and moderate development, in which the greatest happiness of the greatest number rather than the enrichment of the few is the driving motive, also depend upon the wisdom with which our financial systems are reformed and managed. A practical sense of the common good underlies the primal instinct for survival in human beings. Acting for the common good requires insight born of experience of the common ground of humanity.

Another area of crisis, climate change and biodiversity, similarly demands a new way of seeing together with the kind of common mind that over-rides self-centred perspectives. Solving the man-made problems of the environment is easily within human reach, scientifically and economically. What is not in place is the sense of a unified human

family that moderates the extremes of nationalistic self-interest. Without this new vision the good intentions of NGO's and electoral rhetoric can only fail to achieve the collaboration and collective political will necessary to save the planet from further depredation.

Spiritual depth underlies religious dialogue

What I have said so far suggests why learning about the nature and developing the practice of inter-religious dialogue is urgent.

Dialogue will be effective in relation to the level of spiritual development of those who conduct it. When religious traditions and spiritual wisdom-transmissions meet at the depth level of contemplative experience a new consciousness is born. In the past this has been explicit only in remarkable individuals – the spiritual masters and teachers and the small group of enlightened founders. Today, as the Book of Wisdom says,

the hope for the salvation of the world lies in the greatest number of wise people.

Religious institutions and their leadership themselves need to be conscious of this. But the awakening and radiation of wisdom does not depend on institutional religious authority alone. It is generated by personal practice at the grass roots.



Christian Meditators' visit to Haiti 2008

Deep dialogue depends upon small, local, contemplatively oriented networks more than on centralized religious institutions

Evidence suggests that a small leaven of 'ordinary people' is the first to understand and practice meditation. Even these small groups, in our experience as a community, begin with individual awakenings and leadership. Personal discipline is needed for transformation. Prayer is then gradually rediscovered as being, in the first instance, concerned with changing the one who prays rather than as a magical attempt to change external reality or the laws of physics.

Local centres, small weekly groups and global webs and networks are needed to seek and connect those who are seeking this experience and discipline. They then support this leaven as it grows gradually into spiritual maturity. While we are talking of a radical change in global consciousness we must nevertheless proceed, with painstaking faith and perseverance, on the small scale and local levels.

Such global webs of meditation and dialogue - and the necessary local centres within these networks - need to be risked and supported. They may function in varying degrees of relationship with conventional religious structures. But they should not be seen or understood as competing with or rejecting these institutions. Collaboration between the institutional and mystical levels will produce benefits for the greatest number. Often these centres and networks will help restructure and update the institutions they are connected with. They will also take a prophetic lead in developing new forms of inter-religious dialogue at the local level as well as organizing occasional inspirational larger events.

How dialogue works in silence and word

In true dialogue no attempt is made to compete, convert or win the argument. By listening to and sharing with each other everyone learns to see from the other's point of view without rejecting or losing their own particular and precious perspective

Two elements are necessary for dialogue that effects this new way of seeing. Meditation together is one, with each participant meditating within his or her own tradition. This is why it is important that each tradition owns its own contemplative wisdom. Christianity, which is an important player in the development of global dialogue, especially needs to recover its own meditation wisdom if it is to sit in the equality of friendship with the other great contemplative traditions of Asia. Silence is a powerful medium of communication and transformation. It betokens trust, openness to transcendence and mutual acceptance at a level deeper than the greatest differences of belief or opinion.

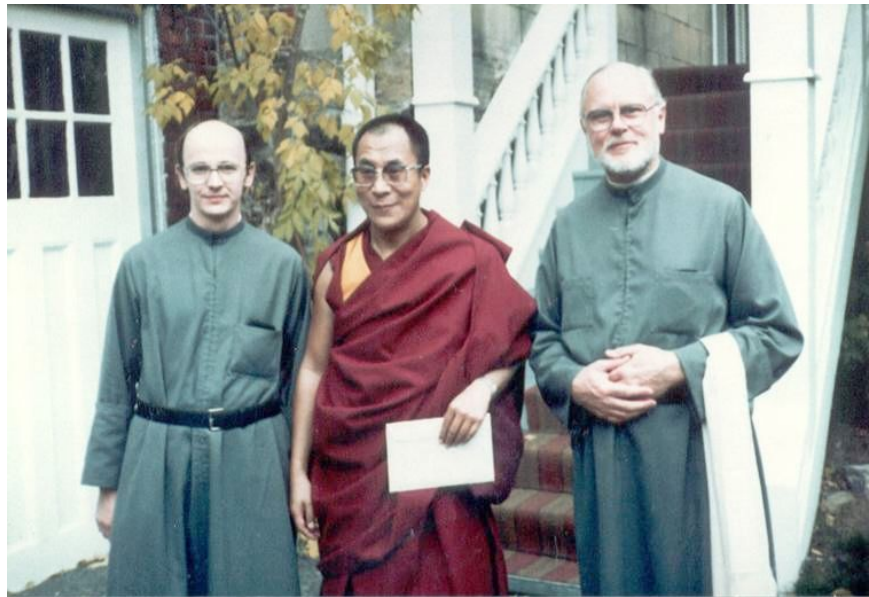
Meditation engenders communion and communion takes form in community.
Community facilitates communication.



Another element in dialogue that is also enriched by meditation is the opening of our scriptures to each other. This is a more popular and easily run form of dialogue than the academic or philosophical discussions conducted between scholars. The most simple believers meeting at a local level can share their favourite or key texts with each other and invite response and discussion. To those who believe in inspiration or some form of revelation the opening of the sacred books releases the living and active power of the Word in ways that change perceptions and opens hearts more deeply than a narrowly conceived intellectual exchange.

An illustration of these reflections in the life of the World Community for Christian Meditation and The Good Heart

I would like to illustrate what I have said above with a description both of the diverse experience of contemplative recovery ecumenically within Christianity and of inter-religious dialogue gained by The World Community for Christian Meditation since its seeding in London by John Main (1926-1982) in 1975 and its structural set up in 1991.



(right to left) Dom John Main, HH The Dalai Lama and Dom Laurence Freeman, Montreal September 1980

In 1980 John Main and the Dalai Lama met in Montreal and shared a common vision of the need for a spiritual renewal of consciousness through the teaching of meditation within their respective traditions. In 1995 the Dalai Lama led the annual John Main Seminar called *The Good Heart*. The participants were drawn from Buddhist, Christian and many other faiths. All meditated together three times a day, each in their own way and discipline.

The Dalai Lama had courageously accepted to comment upon a selection of Gospel texts reflecting different aspects of Christian faith, ranging from non-violence to the Resurrection. He read these sacred texts with curiosity and deep insight to the benefit of all present. After each of his commentaries a dialogue took place. There were profound moments of sensing an almost transcendent unity – as if all differences had been resolved. These moments inevitably resolved into ways of seeing in which the differences re-emerged but were now transformed and no longer barriers to friendship. The very differences became means of transcendence. Friendship and mutual recognition grew stronger as the differences were accepted along with the similarities. The regular meditation periods in silence refreshed speech and sharpened thought.

The influence of this breakthrough event has subsequently been spread widely through the book of *The Good Heart* in many languages. This model of dialogue – that combines both meditation and the reading of each other's scriptures – has since proven successful on many other occasions. It is regularly used, for example, at the John Main centre for Meditation and Inter-Religious Dialogue at Georgetown University.

From The Good Heart to The Way of Peace

It was agreed between the Dalai Lama and Fr Laurence Freeman OSB, the Director of the *World Community*, to build upon this event. *The Way of Peace* was thus initiated as a three-year program.

Each year a different aspect of dialogue was emphasized but the essential model of meditation and commentary on each others' sacred texts was preserved. The first of

these dialogues took the form of a pilgrimage in which the Dalai Lama greeted a large group of Christian meditators to Bodhgaya, sacred to all branches of Buddhism as the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. At dawn each day we began with meditation under the Bodhi tree and continued with periods of dialogue and meditation.



HH The Dalai Lama and Dom Laurence Freeman, Bodhgaya 1998

The following year the form emphasized was that of an intensive retreat led by the Dalai Lama and Fr Laurence at a monastery in Italy. In 2000 the culmination was the millennium John Main Seminar in Belfast, with the support of the British and Irish governments and of most religious leaders, at which the Dalai Lama and many previous Seminar presenters spoke on peace.

A number of iconic events were held such as a meeting of Protestants and Catholics at one of the most violent areas of the Falls Road, encounters between victims of violence from both sides of the divide and meetings with young Catholics and Protestants. Together, the message was delivered that the friendship born of inter-religious dialogue, sustained at the level of meditation, can be applied as spiritual medicine to the wounds of division inflicted by religious groups upon each other.

The Way of Peace continues as a regular event in the life of the World Community and in recent years has expanded to embrace Muslim-Christian dialogue as well as underpinning material work for social justice in deprived areas of society and the developing world.

Meditation creates community, locally and globally

The sharing of silence and the sharing of the Word. This two-level approach to inter-religious dialogue produces deeper encounters and therefore more sustained living memories of unity. These memories serve to inspire action at many levels of local and global society.



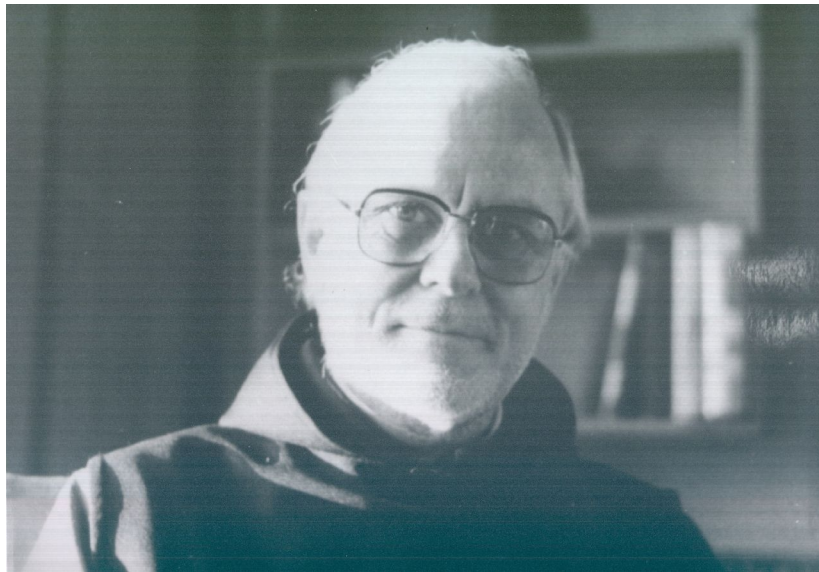
Young meditator, Fiji

The World Community is pledged to this work of dialogue as an adjunct to its own specific role in helping to reinstate the practice of meditation at the heart of Christian life. Through its work in teaching children to meditate, in supporting the spiritual development of students in higher education, in linking directly with the poor, oppressed and marginalized in the world, dialogue is continuously moving between heart and hand, from contemplation to action. Underpinning this work is the essential grass-roots experience of the truth that John Main expressed in these words: *Meditation creates community.*

Laurence Freeman OSB

September 2009

The Community meditation has created



John Main OSB (1926-1982)

After careers in the diplomatic service and law John Main became a Benedictine monk. His legacy has been in the recovery of the Christian tradition of meditation and his inspiring the foundation of the World Community for Christian Meditation. His books include *Word into Silence*, *Monastery Without Walls* and *Moment of Christ*.



Meeting of the National Coordinators of The World Community for Christian Meditation, Germany 2008

The World Community for Christian Meditation was formed in 1991. Its members, weekly meditation groups and centres now span 100 countries. Its family of websites is linked on the web at www.wccm.org.

The John Main Seminar is the key annual event of the World Community, in addition to the retreats and workshops held at national and international levels.

2010 – James Alison

- "The Shape of God's Affection" led by James Alison

2009 - Robert Kennedy, SJ

- "When God Disappears"

2008 - Cardinal Walter Kasper

- "Unity: Local and Global"

2007 - "Still Present: The Life and Legacy of John Main"

- "Le Rayonnement de l'Enseignement de John Main"

- Speakers included Charles Taylor, Laurence Freeman, Balfour Mount, Sarah Bachelard, Peter Ng and Yvon Thérout.

2006 - Margaret Rizza

- The Fire of Silence Through Music and Mystics

2005 - Richard Rohr OFM

- "A Lever and a Place to Stand"

2004 - Joan Chittister OSB

- "Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men"

2003 - Speakers Panel on Bede Griffiths OSB

- Andrew Harvey, Shirley Du Boulay and Bruno Barnhardt OSB Cam. on Bede Griffiths OSB

2002 - Bishop Kallistos Ware

- "The Kingdom of the Heart: The Jesus Prayer in our Daily Life"

2001 - Archbishop Rowan Williams

- "Spirit in the Desert"

2000 - The Dalai Lama & Previous Presenters

- "The Way of Peace"

1999 - Huston Smith

- "Return to the Light"

1998 - Thomas Keating

- "Heart of the World"

1997 - Mary McAleese

- "Reconciled Being"

1996 - Raimon Panikkar

- "The Silence of Life"

1995 - Laurence Freeman

- "On Jesus"

1994 - The Dalai Lama

- "The Good Heart"

1993 - William Johnston

- "The New Christian Mysticism"

1992 - Jean Vanier

- "From Brokenness to Wholeness"

1991 - Bede Griffiths

- "Christian Meditation: An Evolving Tradition"

1990 - Eileen O'Hea

- "Spirit and Psyche"

1989 - Balfour Mount

- "On Wholeness"

1988 - Charles Taylor

- "Christian Identity and Modernity"

1987 - Derek Smith

- "On Reading"

1986 - John Todd

- "The New Church"

1985 - Robert Kiely

- "The Search for God in Modern Literature"

1984 - Isabelle Glover

- "Indian Scriptures as Christian Reading"

Patrons of The World Community for Christian Meditation

supporting and encouraging its work:

Eileen Byrne - belonged to the first meditation community established by Fr John Main in Montreal. In 1989 she became the director of the Christian Meditation Centre in London.

Milo Coerper - a Washington DC corporate lawyer and Episcopal priest. He served on the Guiding Board from 1991 to 1999 first as Vice-chair and then as Chair.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama - spiritual and 'de jure' political leader of the Tibetan people. He lives in exile in Northern India because of the continuing occupation of Tibet by the Government of China. He was the John Main Seminar speaker in 1994 on the topic of 'The Good Heart' and has been co-leading with Fr. Laurence the on-going Buddhist/Christian dialogue, The Way of Peace.

Paul Harris - a former director of the Christian Meditation Centre in London who has served me building of WCCM through his writing and teaching.

Cardinal Walter Kasper - Former President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in the Roman Curia. He was the principal speaker at the John Main Seminar in 2008, held in Mainz, Germany.

Thomas Keating - Cistercian monk and retired abbot, founder of Contemplative Outreach. He was the John Main Seminar speaker in 1998 on the topic of 'Heart of the World: The Contemplative Dimensions of the Gospel'.

Robert Kiely - Professor Emeritus of American Literature at Harvard University. He led the John Main Seminar in 1985 on the topic of 'The Search for God in Modern Literature'.

Mary McAleese - President of Ireland and the 1997 John Main Seminar speaker on the topic of 'Reconciled Being'.

Balfour Mount - Montreal physician, internationally recognised as an expert on Palliative Care. He was the first Chair of the Guiding Board.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, London

Bishop Michael Putney - former Professor of Theology and now Bishop of Townsville; Queensland, Australia, and is a member of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity

Dom Diego Rosa OSB - Abbot General of the Olivetan Benedictine Congregation

Dom Michelangelo Tiribili OSB - Abbot General Emeritus of the Olivetan Benedictine Congregation.

Bishop John Tong - In 1992, Bishop Tong was ordained Bishop of the Hong Kong

Catholic Diocese in 1996.

Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury who presented the John Main Seminar
“Silence and Honey Cakes” , 2001.