

# Sharing the Gold: the dialogues of life and action

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*Unfortunately, it is a one-dimensional image of God that holds the minds of many people in any given time and religion. The relationship between God and humans becomes black and white. The spectrum of choice narrows and no place is left for diversity and plurality. If this becomes a pattern for religious life, members of each religion will withdraw into their own narrowness. Sharp differences will be created between people of different religions. Even within religions the adherents will stress their differences with other denominations rather than their commonalties. The result is that it becomes acceptable to say utterances such as: "My understanding is the only correct one, and you are an infidel because your view differs from mine. Thus you are guilty of sin. Hell will be your part, and heaven is mine."*

—Abdurrahman Wahid

## **the ultimate goal of studying other religions: dialogue**

During last October's conference at Valparaiso University about the importance of teaching the non-Christian religions in Christian colleges, Paul Griffith discussed "finding gold" in the other religions, and Anton Wessels described how one can read texts of other traditions to illuminate one's own understanding. (See *Cresset*, vol.LXIII, no. 7, Trinity) Rather than promoting a final solution, each of these presentations in fact discussed a stage in the process of interaction between religions. Each stage has its own importance. Many of us who are working simultaneously in the field of theoretical and practical dialogue use a model that starts at what we might call a dialogue of life: people of different religions living together peacefully without actually going into the specifics of each other's religion. The next level is the study of each other's faith. Solid knowledge of religions that are not one's own can then lead to a dialogue on the academic level via seminars, publications and joint research projects. Concurrent with the academic dialogue is the more informal level of sharing experiences, praying together, and identifying the problems that arise in multi-religious communities. The final level, where knowledge, shared experience and the joint effort of seeking the will of God come together, is the dialogue of action. Here people shape common movements that advocate justice, peace, human rights, gender equality and ecological justice. (See, among others: J.B. Banawiratma, "Javanese Culture and Moslem-Christian Dialogue in Indonesia," paper presented at the Workshop for Seminary Teachers about Muslim-Christian Relations, organized by the Center for Inter-religious Dialogue of Duta Wacana Christian University, July 1998.)

## **two countries in search of inter-religious relations.**

My ideas about dialogue are shaped from the experience of living in two countries where Christians are a minority. In the 80s I set up a refugee agency in Cairo, Egypt, where refugees were Muslims and Christians from all over Africa. Part of the challenge was to devise programs for counseling and spiritual help. Then, in the 90s I taught at an inter-denominational seminary for the Protestant churches in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. My main task was to help build a Center for Inter-religious Studies. That is why at the end of the meeting in Valparaiso I was invited to raise the "voice from the field." This voice probably differs from that of the average US academic since it was shaped in an environment where Christians cannot take their religion for granted. This contribution to *The Cresset* is based on my work in Egypt, and on teaching Islamic studies in Indonesia, participating in the life of the local church, and doing fieldwork for academic writing. In this essay I would

*Few problems are as  
intransigent as  
religious conflict.  
Professor Van Doorn-  
Harder leads us  
through some  
possibilities, with  
her experiences  
as guide.*

like to explore several elements concerning learning about the other, particularly the importance of this learning for young people all over the world. The topic is wide and intimately connected with inter-religious relations and dialogue. Hence I limit myself to personal observations and developments that mostly took place during the past two decades.

Followers of any religion are challenged to re-confirm their religious identity when living in the position of minority. On the one hand, they share many cultural customs and habits with their compatriots of other faiths. So there is the challenge to define what makes them different *as* Christians, *as* Muslims or whatever religion they adhere to. Also, there is the ever looming question why not convert and join the majority? When in a minority position, religions have good reasons to learn as much as they can about the religion of the majority. Even more crucial, they have to devise strategies to make those of the majority—in the case of Egypt and Indonesia, the Muslims—aware of what, for example, Christianity is about. This looks like a simple fact of life. Yet it seldom happens in practice. Christians in Egypt and Indonesia only started to study the Muslim religion seriously when they became aware that society around them had become dislocated due to social, economic or religious pressures. For example, during the twentieth century, in Egypt, Fundamentalist Muslims regularly began to claim special rights and privileges, disturbing a status quo in which both groups had seemed to be harmoniously living side by side. These rights were often claimed at the expense of Christians. Especially during the '90s, many lives were lost, businesses burnt, and a general fear of violence took hold of Egyptian Christians.

### Egypt

Each time Egyptian Christians faced attacks from the Muslim community, they reacted with different strategies. During the '60s their strength was a patriarch considered so holy that both Copts and Muslims held him in the highest respect. Kyrillos VI regularly called together warring parties, at times threatening with nothing less than the wrath of God. Also, there are Christian leaders active all over the country who spent a lifetime maintaining good relationships between the different religious groups under their care. Bishop Athanasius, who is in charge of the largest church province in Egypt, is an example of such a personality. During his career of over forty years as a bishop, he has made a point of visiting Muslim families in his diocese, talking with them and providing them help when in need. I vividly remember the dumbfounded expression of a representative of the German church after he found out that several of the typewriters bought for the bishop's office one year before had all been handed out to Muslims owning small businesses. "They need them more than I do, they have families to feed," was the only discussion the Bishop allowed about this. Charity for all, not just for those of the same body is his motto. He pairs this with constant learning and teaching about the Muslim faith. He urges his parishioners to understand what Muslims believe and why, *including why some can turn to violence*. This regularly happens in his province, which lies on the borders of Upper Egypt where clashes between Fundamentalist Muslims and Christians and moderate Muslims have been most violent. Yet, in March 2000 the local governor acknowledged in a public speech that "Without Bishop Athanasius our province would be on fire." Only during the final years of the twentieth century have Coptic Christians started to undertake deliberate attempts to develop lasting models of dialogue with the Muslims. This came from Bishop Athanasius and from youth groups. Young people realized they had a life to live in their country and if for nothing else, out of sheer survival, they had to find ways of reconciliation.

### Indonesia

When I came to Indonesia it was a country full of fearful people. The government held a firm grip on every element of society that could potentially divert from its official ideology. Criticisms, clashes between communities, and disputes were kept at bay by intimidation and suppression. Yet this same country professed as its state ideology the principles of Pancasila. This ideology, that gained the status of a civil religion, was based on the acceptance of four major religions present in Indonesia: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The motto was and is "Unity in Diversity."

The regime strove to create harmony between religions and between the many ethnic groups. The regime's tolerance, however, was quite superficial. Differences could be expressed by dancing local dances and wearing local costumes. At the same time the power elite, the Javanese culture, was predominant. Also all the profits coming from the riches in the provinces outside Java were channeled mainly to the capital Jakarta.

Many understood that this was a frail harmony indeed. That is why Abdurrahman Wahid started to suggest reconciliation long before the system collapsed. He realized that polite presentations of papers in academic seminars would not suffice to keep the nation at peace when its different sections gained true freedom of expression. The real problems were that in the pluralistic country with a great diversity of languages, cultures, religions and races the government tried to unify all those different elements in one happy ideology. The moment the regime fell, the experiment collapsed and fighting erupted all over the country. People started to reclaim their identity, their religious rights, their lands or their stake in business that had been taken away by immigrants from other parts of the nation.

"Our country used to be a model of peaceful co-existence between different religions, a model of inter-religious harmony. Now it has become a model of interreligious war." This remark was made by a Protestant pastor during a seminar on Abrahamic religions that took place in Yogyakarta during August of this year. *Interfidei*, an Indonesian Institute for inter-religious dialogue had organized the seminar. Three rabbis had come over from Israel. Their visit was unique since in Indonesia, both Christians and Muslims harbor great suspicion toward Judaism. This in spite of the fact that few Indonesians have ever met a person of Jewish faith, since there are next to none in the country. The meeting was held in a Javanese hotel surrounded by a lovely garden, where, coincidentally, a society that holds contests in bird singing met at one of the pavilions. The singing from their cages on high poles presented an appropriate symbol for the meeting: many voices creating one tune. But these two were not the only gatherings in the vicinity.

Just down the road the Mujahidin, the holy warriors, were demanding that the Muslim sacred law of Shari'ah be introduced in Indonesia. They met in a strictly guarded compound. Young men with neon-green armbands stating "Security" made sure nobody could just slip in and observe. It was an all-male affair, rare for Indonesia. The guards had donned a garb apparently designed for the event. In order to re-enforce their Islamic identity they wished to stay away from the normal Javanese dress for men, a variety of looks that ranges from Western-style pants and shirt to a wrap-around skirt with a jacket. So they had come up with a brown-colored gear reminiscent of a Franciscan cassock, including the rope around the waist. Looking at it charitably, they could be considered as dreamers because to them the Shari'ah is the only way to overcome the country's economic, social and religious crisis. Yet many Christians thought otherwise. They were scared. Christian schools were given two days off and the students were instructed to keep inside as much as possible.

These two meetings that took place at the same time underscored an important element of inter-religious discussions. That is, not knowing the other can have many negative consequences, starting with fear or hatred. Coming back now to the possible stages of dialogue, the first thing to do is to study about each other. Many countries can be mentioned where people of different religions live closely together, yet know nothing about each other's faith. One of the Israeli participants mentioned, for example, that when growing up in Tel Aviv he never once met a Muslim. In Indonesia, students at Islamic schools study Christianity through a book written by a Muslim. A book used for Judaism started with: "The Old Testament consists of the Torah and the Talmud." (It has now been replaced). Equally, Christians used works by Christian authors to study Islam. It seldom entered people's minds to actually learn about each other by closely observing the other's religious reality.

The example of the textbooks seems innocent, amusing at the most. Yet not knowing each other can lead to disastrous conditions. Groups alienating themselves from each other through ignorance can easily move to attacking each other. These conditions start in the home at a very early

age. Ibu Shafa'atun, a professor of comparative religion at the Islamic State Institute told those present at the conference that she tries to teach her son Hasanan to respect those of other faiths. When she visits a colleague who is a Catholic priest, Hasanan comes along so that he will get used to socializing with those who are not of his own religion. One day he asked her: "Father Bono is not a Muslim; does this mean that he will go to hell?" She explained that since the Qur'an has many good things to say about Christians she did not think he would. A few weeks later Hasanan came home from the Muslim elementary school he attends. He was upset. The teacher had explained that all those who are not Muslim will surely burn in hell. None of the children in his class doubted that the teacher was right. Now Hasanan worried about Father Bono. Here at the level of elementary education an early stage of closed community building was going on. Children were made aware that the imagined community they shared created and defined their identity. (See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 1991.)

The Mujahidin meeting was a vivid reminder of the fact that Indonesian Muslims have been searching for ways to reassert their religious identity. Since the 80s there has been a worldwide strengthening of Islam as religion and as identity. The Iranian revolution had a profound impact on Muslim communities in South East Asia. Muslims became aware of the fact that they could gain importance by fighting against Western domination. The intensified Islamic identity at times also led to increased fundamentalism. This phenomenon for example, led in Egyptian elementary schools to increased instances of animosity between Muslim and Christian students. After researching this situation further, a director of a school in Cairo concluded that the children at home learned a host of myths and slander about each other's community. This also led to the creation of imagined communities where borders were redrawn all the way to the playground. Where in the past free social interaction had been possible, children were now forbidden to play with each other.

Christian churches should have a long history of preparing for these kinds of incidents. After all, the early church was a church in an alien environment. Nowadays, however, few of its members are taught even a simple awareness in considering the other. For example, most churches in Indonesia have not yet been able to start a serious ecumenical movement, let alone starting relations with those of other religions. Seminaries ignored the need for teachers of Islam. This past August, for example, the sixth Christian specialist of Islam acquired his doctoral degree. That means that he was one of only six Christians who did an in-depth study of a Muslim topic.

The churches' attitude of looking inward has been a serious obstacle in understanding the other and in building structures of peace from times of war and conflict. The Catholic Father Mangwijaya used to challenge his Church because according to him "non-Christians *per se* have relatively little place in our pastoral concern and in our spiritual life as such." Another Catholic priest teaches from Egypt that "the vocation of the Church of Jesus Christ in this world is to be the Sacrament of the love of God for everyone, and to be a sign and anticipation of a new communion among men and women." (*Father Christiaan van Nispen tot Sevenaer SJ*. "Our Christian Faith as Lived and Expressed in Our Society, Today and Tomorrow," *paper delivered at Duta Wacana Christian University workshop, July 1998*.)

What Paul Griffiths called "finding gold" in other religions during the meeting in Valparaiso, was named "passing over" by those who were present at the meeting between Abrahamic religions. The experience of passing over, deliberately experiencing aspects of another religion than one's own was considered an important element in creating bonds between communities. Intrinsic to the term "passing over" is that one comes back to one's own religion. A useful example of this experience came from a Calvinist Javanese Christian who felt abandoned by his church during a time of spiritual crisis. A Buddhist friend taught him techniques of Buddhist meditation. As a result of this he had found a peace of mind which had greatly helped him solve his problem. The example shows the importance of the "coming back." The Javanese Christian had not used Buddhist texts to meditate on but had chosen passages of the Psalms instead. Also in passing over one's original religious identity is not changed radically. In this example the person is still a Christian, but a Christian who uses meditation as a way to draw nearer to God. (See Gerrit Singgih, "Converted Theology and Religious Pluralism in Indonesia" in *Indonesian Politics in a Time of Reformation*, 2000.)

### fragile existences

Many examples can be mentioned of how peoples of different religions can live together in peaceful coexistence. The problem is that those communities do not live in vacuums but are part of political, social and economic fields. Forces from these fields can distort the balance between communities. One example is in the Moluccan islands, where Muslims and Christians peacefully lived together until January 19, 1999. Suddenly, "Moslems and Christians, seemingly without warning, started to attack one another, burning down each other's houses and killing one another. Thus far, this senseless confrontation left thousands of people dead and precipitated the devastation of property worth millions of dollars, wiping out much of the economic progress made in the province since Indonesian independence. (Dieter Bartels, "Your God Is No Longer Mine: Moslem-Christian Fratricide in the Central Moluccas [Indonesia] After a Half-Millennium of Tolerant Co-Existence and Ethnic Unity," to be published.) Analysts ascribe what happened to a combination of religious polarization created by the influx of a large number of Muslim immigrants from other parts of Indonesia, with overpopulation and land scarcity, urbanization, globalization, westernization and provincial power struggles. The violence also reflects the lingering influence of Suharto's legacies, especially the old regime's exploitation of religious divisions. "Suharto did not so much control religious divisions as shamelessly exploit them, often with disastrous consequences." (Robert W. Hefner, *The Asian Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition*. August 16, 2000.)

In the transition period after Suharto stepped down, fundamentalist Muslim elements became more vocal in society. One of them calls itself the Lashkar Jihad, "the holy army for the Holy War." During the year around 2000 of its members were sent to the Moluccans to "avenge spilled Muslim blood." This former unknown presence aggravated the already volatile relationships between Christians and Muslims. Another major factor of the clashes is, according to the anthropologist Bartels, the breakdown of the local traditional law that was used for many centuries to restore peace among warring factions.

Neither the Muslim or Christian religions had provided a basis for the former peaceful coexistence. In spite of living closely together, Moluccans lacked any real knowledge of each other's religion. The question of course is whether such knowledge would have been of any help in the face of the overwhelming violence that has taken place during the past two years. It is hard to say. Yet, if religious leaders had been more knowledgeable about the religion of the other, attempts of reconciliation might have started before the situation erupted. Also, giving careful consideration to the indigenous system that worked for centuries, and adapting aspects of it into the Christian and Muslim religious life, could have prevented bloodshed. The younger generation of church leaders was more influenced by Western thoughts and teachings. Consequently they wanted their Church to be modern, not burdened down by ideas of the past on which the original system of negotiating peace was built. (Dieters, 19,20) The Muslim community witnessed similar developments.

### pluralism and religious identity

What happened in the Moluccan islands seems an extreme example that has no relation with the lives of the average college student in the US. I do not wish to preach Armageddon here, just to point out that maintaining good relationships among different religions and studying their basic tenets is no longer a luxury. Today, pluralism is a fact of life in most countries, be it based on language, religion, culture or ethnicity. Differences and variety can be celebrated as a great gift from God, adding an interesting spice to life. As history teaches us, in many places it also becomes a source of great strife. As the story about Hasanan shows, one of the main questions in a pluralistic situation is how to prepare the children to live in such a society. The question is not just about knowledge and tolerance but also about asserting one's own identity, in this case religious identity, in a positive way.

During the conference on Abrahamic religions it was mentioned several times that we need to scrutinize our educational systems. Mostly students are fed facts and knowledge that ultimately prepare them to become useful workers in society. There are few examples of schools that teach reli-

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The Cresset is  
enriched by her  
willingness to provide  
this essay from the  
field, during her  
summer's work  
in Indonesia,  
despite  
numerous technical  
obstacles.*

gion in a creative way. If religion is taught at all, lessons are mostly geared to improving knowledge about one's own religion. Seldom do schools actually try to instill in students what could be called a sense of "global ethics." But only with such a sense can a new generation be raised that does not think in term of "our kind of people" and "those kind of people." It is one of the few feasible venues available to break through the imaginary walls of imagined communities.

Building a system of global ethics has been a topic of discourse among religious leaders for years. Hans Kung proposed this in his keynote speech during the Parliament of World Religions in 1993 in Chicago. Yet little since that time has gone beyond the academic level. Developing such a system requires creative leaders who help build the curriculums appropriate to the local conditions. These are lacking. Also religious leaders are important because they are able to reach out to those reluctant to join in. In each religion many can be found who are not willing to cross bridges or "pass over." They prefer to stress the truth and finality of their own religion and will continue to teach their children in this vein.

Some examples can be given of leaders in different religions who managed to go beyond the resistance within their own religions. Romo Manguwijaya, for example, was instrumental in creating several groups for inter-religious dialogue. Members were students, pastors, priests and all types of professionals. The activities of these groups range from providing food to the poor, talking together about problems, to sharing religious experiences, for example by inviting the members to recite prayers from their respective religion. Bishop Athanasius has set up schools that focus on teaching English and ethics not connected to any specific religion. Parents go into debt to send their children to these schools because many are tired of the spiral of violence Egypt has witnessed during the 90s.

Experiences from Indonesia to the USA show that once people are open to getting to know the religion of the other, they feel enriched not only because of the new knowledge, but also because it forces them to reflect on their own religion. One of the Somali Muslims I worked with in Egypt wrote in his thank you note after he left for Australia: "I thank your church program for making me a better Muslim." In a different way the importance of experiencing the religiously unknown came up during a meeting at Duke University. The topic of discussion was how students could become aware of their potentials for church ministries. Making a three-week trip to Israel together was mentioned as a model that works. That will help students to gain new experiences, taste new food, smell new smells and talk with Jews, Christians and Muslims. This stimulates discussion, reflection and bonding. Nobody seemed fearful that experiencing the religions of Israel will lead to sudden conversion of the students. Even if a zealous member of the other religion attempts to impress the superiority of her faith on you, this does not automatically imply bad intentions. I was very impressed when a member of a conservative, closed Muslim group announced during a Quran study that "We now all take a moment to pray for Nelly's conversion to Islam because we hope she can be with us in heaven."

Finally, to students all over the US learning about other religions is not merely an academic exercise. Looking from Valparaiso, we witness, for example, a growing Muslim community in Chicago and meet many Muslim professionals who are living nearby in town. These people are becoming our neighbors. Students not only have to be informed about the other religions, they can also learn to identify with the stranger in their midst. As was mentioned before, learning about others and meeting them helps students to reflect on their own religion. Both colleges and churches can be proactive and not repeat the mistake made by churches like the ones in Indonesia. Wim Bijlefeld, who spent a life time teaching about Islam and models of dialogue once called learning about other religions, "Nothing less than our Christian duty." If nothing else, it is a Christian virtue to be hospitable to neighbors and strangers rather than condemning them to hell before becoming acquainted. ✠