

Commitment and Openness: A Contemplative Approach to Pluralism

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Late in the nineteenth century, the city of Chicago hosted the World's Columbia Exposition in honor of the 400th anniversary of Columbus' "discovery" of America. In conjunction with that occasion, the World Parliament of Religions was planned as a conversation "higher and nobler," which could explore the foundations of religious unity in the world. The Protestant hosts invited a rainbow array of presenters from all the major world religions, and those present were exposed, most for the first time, to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and other Asian religions.

The purpose of the Parliament was, according to reports, "to indicate the impregnable foundations of Theism,"¹ especially to prove the superiority of the Christian religion. What occurred there was much more significant: white American Protestants met Buddhists, African-Americans, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews, and found them powerful, worthy of respect, and remarkable. What occurred there is what has come to be called the "dawn of religious pluralism" in America. This was the first time that mainstream America really looked at the question of difference in religion, acknowledged there were actually a variety of different religious paths, and realized that the superiority of Christianity was not obvious to everyone. The delegates of the Parliament proclaimed the coming of a new era in the twentieth century.

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have only begun to digest the power of plurality in American life. We might humbly predict that a major task before us in this new millennium is to learn to fully engage diversity, plurality, and pluralism in our religious lives. Indeed, for contemplatives like ourselves, pondering pluralism is essential to the integrity of our spiritual journey--I would suggest that we cannot consider ourselves contemplatives without pluralism at the heart of our practice.

When we talk about religious pluralism, we are talking about encounter with difference or otherness in whatever religious form it may take. Raimundo Pannikar, who has done a great deal of work on inter-religious dialogue, says that "What to do with the barbarian?" is the central question for religion in the time of pluralism.² We all have some notion of "barbarian" in our minds: for all of us, there is some presence, some person, or some tradition that is barbarian to us. In practicing religious pluralism, let us ask how it is that we make a

¹Richard Hughes Seager, ed., *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1993).

²Raimon Panikkar, "The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel," *Invisible Harmony: Essays on Contemplation and Responsibility*, (Minneapolis, MN> Augsburg Fortress Press), 1995. p. 59.

relationship with that which is other or different from ourselves. Pluralism respects the differences that reside in the variety of religious traditions, without reconciling or integrating those differences into a single path. Pluralism is willing to rest in the ambiguity of religious difference. From this point of view, pluralism is a very courageous practice, an engagement with the *fact* of diversity in our world. And this practice is appropriate and important for contemplative communities. In fact, I'm not sure if it is possible to be truly contemplative without engaging in pluralism.

How might the contemplative respond to the challenges of pluralism? By contemplative, I mean one for whom ultimate reality is discovered in the heart of one's own experience. For the contemplative, spirituality is more important than religion; meditation and prayer are more central than doctrine; journey is more important than goal.

I would like to suggest that pluralism provides an ideal ground for the development of the contemplative path, for it challenges us to "commitment without dogmatism and community without communalism,"³ in the words of Diana Eck, Harvard professor and founder of the Pluralism Project.

From a contemplative perspective, why would we engage with a pluralistic *perspective*? Sometimes it seems that we religious people are interested in pluralism because of guilt, because of past prejudices and insensitivities which we would like to overcome or erase. We are moved by the desire for justice. But that is not a good enough reason from a contemplative perspective. If we bring guilt to the pluralistic question, our encounter will be subject to merely moralistic concerns, and will keep us from the depths of transformation.

Frankly, engaging with pluralism is necessary for our very path, for spiritual development for ourselves and for the world. The contemplative path cannot be insular. We must be open to all the varieties of the world, to be touched by what we encounter, and to be transformed. When we draw a rigid boundary around ourselves, our contemplative development is over. When we encounter the "other," that which we have ignored, excluded, or just not known, we have the capacity to question our conventional minds, to expand our horizons, and to go deep. The "other" is our greatest teacher, our guru. The contemplative, I would submit, needs pluralism in order to remain authentic.

Our paths must be open to all of the varieties of the world, and they must be touched by what we encounter. If we draw some kind of boundary around our spirituality saying, "Oh, this is irrelevant to it or that is irrelevant to it," then our contemplative practice is over. It becomes formula, dogma, institution, religion.

A contemplative approach to pluralism, however, begins with **commitment** to a particular spiritual path. By commitment, I do not mean professions of faith. Faith professions have the problem that they are based on

³Eck, *Encountering God*, p. 195.

concept and ideology, and they place doctrine above experience, a stance that is contrary to the contemplative life. Rather, for the contemplative, commitment has to do with practice; commitment trusts in what we are experiencing directly, what we know personally, through our practice. In the Dzogchen tradition of Tibet, "deciding on this alone" is one of the key foundations of the meditation journey.⁴

This means that when we sit down to meditate, contemplate, or pray, we are willing to commit to that situation and whatever it brings up. We are willing to be present with our doubts, distractions, and emotional attacks, opening to the process and what unfolds. It also means commitment to practice becoming the center of our lives, the venue for discovery and transformation.

We find this out over and over again in the sitting practice of meditation. When we sit down and sit still, whatever we have been holding at bay, whatever it is that we would rather not acknowledge or deal with comes right at us. When the Buddha, sitting under the tree of enlightenment, was attacked by Maras, these were not foreign beings, but were aspects of his own mind and the world in which he lived. He was able to remain there because he had made a commitment to stay until his confusion had evaporated and he completely understood the flows and patterns of his mind and life.

Some years ago, at an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I asked: "How can we at The Naropa University counteract sectarianism in the world?" He answered in two parts "The first thing we must do is practice deeply." It is true, we need to find a way to get deep. We have to get beyond concept-- that's what I mean by going deep--beyond belief, beyond religious tenet or dogma, or ideas that we hold that we have just sort of borrowed from someone else. We need to get deep into the heart of our own experience, the things that we really know.

There is an example that has been used a great deal: that if we want to go deep spiritually, we can't go around and dig a lot of little holes. We need to find one place and dig a deep hole. And so as contemplative people, we need to find in our own experience what it is, what practice it is, what approach it is, that takes us deep in that way. So when I talk about commitment, I'm talking about commitment to practice, to engaging our direct experience.

Commitment is necessary in order to ground us in our meditation practice, to anchor us to our own inherent intelligence, and to give us the confidence to open to the very rich and complex world around us. Commitment has to do with empowerment, for when we acknowledge our practice at the heart of our experience, we can move out into the world with an open heart. For the contemplative, yes, commitment is at the heart of engaging pluralism.

⁴Petrul Rinpoche, *The Special Teaching of the Wise and Glorious King and its Commentary*, (Vajravairocana Translation Committee) 1989, p. 2.

The second point of pluralism is **openness**. For the contemplative, openness is implicit in the practice of meditation or contemplative prayer, and it is that openness which draws us more deeply into our experience and our hearts. But it is important that this openness draws us out into engagement with diversity, difficulty, and all the rough edges in the suffering world.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama answered the question about how we at Naropa Institute could counteract sectarianism in the world, he said first we must practice deeply. Then he suggested that we have contact with others, and he suggested five ways we could initiate such contacts. The first way was to invite the scholars from other traditions to Naropa. The second way was to talk intimately with the real practitioners of another tradition. The third way was to go on pilgrimage to sacred sites with people from other traditions. The fourth was to get religious leaders from different traditions together for simple, superficial conversation--he said it's good for people just to see them getting together, it doesn't even matter what they say. And lastly, to encourage people from different traditions to do socially engaged work together.

These are fabulous, creative suggestions. But the main point is this: opening up, having contact with others, engaging each other, really connecting, and cultivating intimacy which does not annihilate difference. One of the most important practices for opening up is interreligious dialogue. We as Buddhists encounter religious others every day in our lives in North America and Europe. Rather than isolating ourselves and thinking only of our own communities, we could engage in genuine inquiry to find out about their religious lives, their spiritual practices, their experiences in sustaining a sense of sacredness in an increasingly difficult and violent world. Engaging this way helps us cultivate inquiry and curiosity about our own spiritualities and religious lives.

The World Parliament of Religions began over a century ago with a narrow quest, trying to promote the superiority of Christianity. Now it continues with a completely different mission and vision, as the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions. Still based in Chicago, it seeks "to cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world."⁵ The Council seeks not unity but harmony, honoring the distinctive and unique qualities of the great spiritual and religious traditions of the world. The method by which it cultivates this goal is interreligious dialogue. It is important that we as contemplatives are contributors to this important goal.

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⁵ www.parliamentofreligions.org

