The Marist Way of Promoting Interreligious Dialogue – Part One

I want to consider how the Church should relate to the world's great religions by doing so within the context of the Magi coming to offer gifts to the infant Jesus. The Church has wrestled with this question for centuries. I want to thank Bishop Robert Barron, Bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, for his insights in his homilies on the Feast of the Epiphany,[1] from which I will draw heavily in the following thoughts. Of course, I will add pertinent Church teachings. I also want to apply the charism of the Society of Mary that will help shape how Marist School teaches its students to relate with Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism/ Hinduism.

Let's begin by identifying the problem. Christianity asserts that it is the definitive revelation of God and God's intentions for the world. Other great religions make similar claims. Do we fight, convert, learn, or flee from them? All of these strategies have been applied at one time or another.

Bishop Barron identifies two extremes to avoid, which he describes as a maximalist and minimalist interpretation of Christianity. Let's look at the maximalist position. It says that Christianity is exclusively and uniquely the right religion and all other religious traditions are false or are from the devil, as someone recently told me. There have been advocates of this position throughout the Church's history. As history shows, it tends to use verbal or physical violence to resolve the matter. The extremists or fundamentalists in Islam have taken this position as theirs regarding Islam's relationship with Christianity. Some Catholics and other Christians have done likewise but with respect to Islam. After 9/11, Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, called Islam an evil religion. That, in a nutshell, is the maximalist or exclusivist position.

Let's look at the minimalist or radically inclusive interpretation of Christianity. Bishop Barron describes this as an equally extreme position currently more acceptable in Catholic circles. This interpretation says all religions are the same. We are spiritual seekers climbing the same sacred mountain by different paths, but all lead to God. This is too extreme and cannot be held by Christians who believe that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him (Jn. 14:6).

The Catholic Church and the Society of Mary walk a tightrope between these two extremes.

Again, with Bishop Barron as our guide, let's look at the maximalist or exclusive position and why it is problematic. He notes that far too many points of contact exist between our Christian faith and the world's other great religions. If the other great religions are evil, then we must say that much of Christianity is wicked. Why? Because there are so many family resemblances and points of contact between them.

Regarding Judaism, Pope John Paul II said that the Jews are the elder brothers and sisters in the faith.[2] They came to the faith first. They are the people with whom God made a special covenant that we believe was fulfilled in Christianity. There is a massive congruence between Christianity and Judaism. Both believe that God has made special covenants with their people. Both believe in a personal creator God who sustains and governs the universe and who has communicated through revelation with his people. All of this Christianity and Judaism hold in common.

There also are huge points of contact between Christianity and Islam. Much of the Koran overlaps with both the New Testament and the Old Testament. Many of the patriarchs and prophets are mentioned and

[1] https://www.wordonfire.org/videos/sermons/epiphany/
[2] https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-08-20-mn-3718-story.html

revered in the Koran. Even in the New Testament, there are many points of contact. Jesus is profoundly revered, and Mary is mentioned more often in the Koran than in the New Testament. Islam holds to a personal creator, God, who sustains and governs the universe, reveals himself to the world, and calls his people to a life beyond this one. In all these ways and many others, Islam comes together with Christianity.[3]

Buddhism has a rich tradition of monasticism, mysticism, prayer, and contemplation. In recent years, Buddhist and Christian monks have come together, and when they do, they talk about theology, but they also practice their faith together and find much in common in their spiritual styles. The great Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, established a very vibrant contact with Buddhism during the last part of his life.

In Hinduism, the ultimate deity is portrayed by three faces, and many have seen a link to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. More importantly, Hindus believe the divine principle is available in and through everything. It is a bit like the sacramental tradition that Catholics have.

Bishop Barron points out that all these family resemblances rule out the extreme and maximalist position that says we're right and they are wrong. The Second Vatican Council affirmed in many of its texts that there are rays of truth in all of the great religious traditions in the world. The attitude of the Catholic Christian ought to be to look first to those and not first to the points of differentiation. Look first to these many powerful points of contact.

Cardinal George made that point regarding ecumenical dialogue among Christians. It also applies to interreligious dialogue. He said the Catholic Church has all the gifts Christ wants his people to have. It doesn't mean the other Christian Churches don't practice some of these gifts better than we do.

Applying this principle to interreligious dialogue, Bishop Barron says the Catholic Christian Church has the fullness of the truth. That is what it means when we say we have the definitive revelation. Yes, but other Christian churches, ecclesial communities, and religions can practice some of these truths better than we do. We can learn from the Muslims about the unity of God and about the submission we all owe to God. We can learn from the Buddhists' prayer and contemplation techniques which have been doing so for centuries. From the Hindus, we can learn about this rich sense of the divine presence in and through all things,

So, the maximalist position can be ruled out as the definitive Catholic position. Like the three kings, members of another religious tradition who brought their treasures to Christ, the many religions of the world can be seen as bringing the treasure of their religious belief, practice, art, and architecture to Christ. That gesture and the infant Jesus's acceptance of the gifts from the Magi suggest that we begin with what we share in common with the other great world religions.

[3] Here is a curious detail told to me by Fr. David Burrell, a professor at Notre Dame, who is an expert in the Islamic and Christian dialogue. He said that an Islamic scholar once told him that the whole first part of St. Thomas Aquinas' great theological treatise, the Summa Theologicae, would be seen as a powerful commentary on the Koran. When Thomas talks about God's existence, his power, nature, simplicity, eternity, etc. a good Muslim would be in profound agreement.