Inter-faith Spiritual Care: Brazilian Perspectives

James Farris*

Abstract
This text deals with the question of spiritual care between members of different religious traditions. The central theme is the tendency within Brasil to fragment religious care, specifically in the context of the care of patients in hospitals. This reflects competition between churches, diverse types of fundamentalism, tolerance and intolerance.

Keywords: Spiritual care; fundamentalism; intolerance.

Perspectivas Brasileiras do cuidado intercultural e religioso

Resumo
Este ensaio trata da questão do cuidado espiritual entre membros de tradições religiosas diferentes. O tema central é a tendência no Brasil de fragmentar o cuidado religioso, especificamente no âmbito de cuidados de pacientes internados em hospitais. Isso reflete a concorrência entre igrejas, diversos tipos de fundamentalismos, tolerância e intolerância.

Palavras-chave: Cuidado espiritual; fundamentalismo; intolerância.

Perspectivas brasileñas del cuidado intercultural y religioso

Resumen
Este ensayo trata de la cuestión del cuidado espiritual entre miembros de tradiciones religiosas diferentes. El tema central es la tendencia en Brasil a fragmentar el cuidado religioso, específicamente en el ámbito de pacientes internados en hospitales. Eso refleja lo que ocurre entre las Iglesias, diversos tipos de fundamentalismos, tolerancia e intolerancia.

Palabras clave: Cuidado espiritual; fundamentalismo; intolerancia.

* Professor do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências da Religião da Universidade Metodista de São Paulo. E-mail: james.farris@metodista.br.
The term Inter-Faith Spiritual Care raises various complex and challenging questions. For example: What does “Inter-Faith” mean? What is “Spiritual Care”? How do cultural contexts affect “Inter-Faith Spiritual Care”? There are, obviously, no simple answers to these complex questions.

The concept Inter-Faith can be easily confused with Inter – Religious dialogue, which generally deals with questions of how to communicate between different religious traditions. Inter – Religious dialogue deals with how to approach practical, ethical and theological experiences between, for example, Christianity and Buddhism. Inter-Faith is a broader term. Assuming that faith involves the construction of universes of meaning, it includes both Inter – Religious and Inter – Denominational communication, or dialogue. Inter – Faith includes how to share experiences between both different Religious and Denominational traditions. This is important because it points to the central place of dialogue between Religions and Denominations within Religious Traditions.

Spirituality is another complex concept. However, in order to avoid the seemingly infinite discussions regarding what is Spirituality, I will use a fairly simple, and classic, understanding of the term. Spirituality is the creation and fostering of Communion between persons, groups, creation, and God. What this means and how to do it is incredibly complex, and varies widely between Religions and Denominations. However, the essence, or ground, of Spirituality seems to always return to one central question: “How do we create, foster, and live in Communion - Community with ourselves, our neighbor, or world, and our God?”

The idea of Communion may be the key to this discussion. Communion is an ideal, much like the Kingdom of God. Communion suggests basic, even if very general, shared values, beliefs, understandings of who we are as human beings, what we believe to be true, and our images of God. However, such an ideal is often far from what we experience in day - to - day life. Human values, beliefs, understandings of who we are, what is true, and our images of God are incredibly diverse. This diversity often creates conflicts and can shatter Communion. When Communion is fragmented by the diversity of experiences and beliefs, Inter-Faith Spiritual Care is very difficult.

The word “Communion” suggests “Community”. To live in Community means living with, and hopefully respecting the beliefs of the “Other”. Community generally refers to the kind and quality of relationships that we offer to each another, or, in other words, how we can best live together. It assumes that what we have, what we can offer, and who we are can be, at least to some degree, held in common. This does not mean that we live in an ideal world where everything is held in common. Community means that we recognize that we are not islands unto ourselves.
The opposite of community is immunity. To be immune means that we are protected from the dangerous “Other”, or from that which could threaten to infect us. Who we are and what is ours, is ours, and we do not need to share. Or, at best, we can share with those that serve our needs. Immunity implies a certain kind of community, but one which is finally self-serving. As long as the “Other” serves our needs, there is no threat. They can be part of our circle of relationships. However, when they disagree with us, or pose some sort of threat, they can be quickly dismissed, or defined as the enemy. The highest values in immunity are safety and security.

When Communion – Community directs our lives and faith, Inter-Faith Spiritual Care can be a living reality because it invites living together, sharing, and, at least, minimal mutual respect. To Care for the “Other” is not a threat. It becomes a part of who we are, and how we live together.

When immunity guides our lives, it is much more difficult to live together, share, and respect one another. The “Other” can become a source of infection, or a threat. One of the fundamental questions for Inter-Faith Spiritual Care may be exactly at this point. When and where do we feel at peace with caring for the “Other”, who may have values, beliefs, and faith that are very different from ours? Who is the “Other”? How secure are we in our own beliefs? What are the limits of our understanding of “Communion” and “Community”?

The word “God” immediately raises problems, because Spirituality, in its broadest sense, does not necessarily include Western concepts of “God”, and religious traditions often understand “God”, or Imago Dei, in ways that are quite different. However, since Inter – Faith is a broad and inclusive concept, it is well worth considering that, in the words of Paul Tillich, the concept of “God” reveals and expresses our “ultimate concern”.1 God does not necessarily reflect the beliefs of any one Religious Tradition, but is that which organizes, orients and expresses our deepest beliefs and values. “God” is the “ground of our being”, and orients our life, and the meaning of Communion and Community.

This is very similar to the idea of Rudolf Otto that “God” reflects a universal human experience that is A Priori.2 It is a part of our consciousness. The possibility of experiencing the “Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans”, The Mystery, The Power and The Attraction of the Infinite, is built into our existence. How we experience and express this deep reality varies enormously, but it is there. It is always a presence and potential. Inter – Faith Spiritual Care respects this presence and potential in all of its complexity and variety.

Once again we return to the question of Communion, Community and Identity. How my community understands God, or the Infinite, and how another community understands God, or the Infinite, are often very different. What are the limits of our tolerance for differences of belief, liturgy, and action? How do we deal with these differences? What does “Communion” mean? What does “Community” mean? How can we offer Spiritual Care to those who believe in ways that we do not understand, and can even frighten us?

Finally, Care is how our community seeks to create, foster and live in Communion and Community, in practical terms. Or, in other words, how is it that we seek to live in such ways that are faithful to our beliefs about the nature, presence, and will of God, and at the same time live with those that believe in ways that may be very different? Within various Monotheistic traditions, Care is intimately related to the Care of Souls. Traditionally, it includes healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, and educating. It is an expression of deep mutual correction, encouragement, and solidarity which embraces the totality of life. In this case, the term “Care of Souls” refers to the totality and integrity of human beings in light of the nature of the Divine. Who is included and who is excluded in the “Care of Souls”, Communion, and Community is a key question in Inter-Faith Spiritual Care.

Finally, the ideal of Inter – Faith Spiritual Care seeks to create and foster Communion and Community between persons of diverse religious traditions and denominations. It is how we express the Love of God, the Ground of our Being, both within our Communities of Faith, and beyond them. If there is one question that dominates Inter – Faith Spiritual Care it is: “How do we build bridges, and at the same time maintain and respect our own identity and community of faith?” There are, of course, no simple answers.

**Brazilian Contexts**

In order to understand Inter – Faith Spiritual Care in Brazil, it is important to have some notion of Brazilian Culture. To begin with, that there is no one “Brazilian Perspective” or “Culture”. Brazil is physically the size of the United States, and is composed of a seemingly infinite variety of cultures. Historically, the south of Brazil was influenced by German and Italian immigrations. The north of Brazil maintains African influences. The Amazon continues to reflect strong indigenous influences. The central regions of Brazil are a mixture of a wide variety of cultural influences that include European, South American and Portuguese traditions. The major urban centers are a seemingly infinite mixture of cultures and traditions, currently highly influenced by North American and European values. It is impossible
to understand Brazilian cultures without taking into account the political, economic and religious influence of Portugal, Europe, and the United States in the last 500 years. Specifically, the religious “map” of Brazil has been, and continues to be, profoundly influenced by each of these.

This is the link to the current religious context of Brazil. Beginning in the 1500’s, Brazil was almost exclusively Roman Catholic. Indigenous religious expressions were repressed, and almost systematically eradicated. This situation did not change significantly until the mid 1800’s, with the arrival of various Protestant missionaries, generally from the United States and Europe. These new “religious expressions” were generally tolerated by the Roman Catholic Church. This was due, in great degree, to the perception that these “religious groups”, or “sects”, generally concentrated their attention and ministry on members of their own group. For example, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Adventist, and Mennonite missionaries and pastors typically ministered to members of their own communities. The tendency was to Care for one’s own group.

However, as these “religious groups” began to grow and expand, this attitude changed. Beginning in the 1930’s and 1940’s Protestant traditions began to have an increasingly important presence in Brazilian culture. This presence was religious, economic, social, and educational. This represented a shift in power, or social presence. While the Roman Catholic Church was still the dominant religious presence in Brazil, it was no longer the only Church in Brazil. This shift in religious power, presence and expression was further complicated by the resurgence, in roughly the same period, of Indigenous and African religious traditions that had been effectively underground, but still very powerful, for centuries. By the 1960’s, the religious map of Brazil had changed radically.

To further complicate the situation, the relatively small groups of Pentecostals, which had been present in Brazil since the 1920’s, began to grow rapidly in the 1950’s and 1960’s. In the 1970’s and 1980’s a new expression of Pentecostalism, Neo – Pentecostalism, also began to grow rapidly. It is difficult to describe Neo – Pentecostalism. As a movement, it is neither Pentecostal nor Protestant. It is influenced by the Theology of Prosperity, marketing theory, and a mixture of Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Protestant, and Afro-Brazilian theologies. Its growth, over the past twenty years, has been phenomenal.

Inter-faith Spiritual Care: Brazilian Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>93.1%</td>
<td>91.8%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Protestant *</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neo-Pentecostal **</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afro-Brazilian / Other Religions ***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Total membership exceeds 100% because of multiple – church membership, which is not uncommon in Brazil.)

* Baptist, Adventist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational and Mennonites.

** Statistics regarding membership in Neo – Pentecostal Churches is very difficult to determine due to the lack of formal membership records.

*** Kardecista, Umbanda, Candomblé, Neo – Christian Religions such as Jehovah’s Witness, Mormons and Good Will League, and all other recognized religious groups.

This “informal” map is made even more complex by the reality that many “church members” also frequent other religious worship services. The result is that there is tremendous competition between religious traditions for membership, or, more specifically, for financial support. What was, more or less fifty years ago, a Roman Catholic country has become an incredibly diverse and competitive religious universe.

To give some life to these numbers and this history, I would like to give an informal example of the religious diversity in Brazil. I live in a middle class neighborhood in São Bernardo do Campo, one of the many cities that surround São Paulo, which is the second or third largest city in the world, with a population of approximately 12 million.

In front of my home there is an Umbanda House Church (an Afro-Brazilian religion). Up the street is an independent Pentecostal Store – Front Church. Within a one mile radius of my home are: a Roman Catholic Church – which occupies a central place in the neighborhood square; one Candomblé
center (an Afro-Brazilian religion); two Neo-Pentecostal Churches; six independent Pentecostal Churches; two Japanese religious centers; one Mormon Temple; one Methodist Church; one House Church which I cannot identify, and; the Methodist School of Theology in Brazil.

I have cable television, which is still a rarity in Brazil, but an influence that is both powerful and growing. Amidst the 34 channels that I receive, one is owned by the Roman Catholic Church, one by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (a Neo-Pentecostal Church), and one by the Rebirth in Christ Church (a Neo-Pentecostal Church). I do not have statistics regarding the number of independent religious programs broadcast on various channels, but it is an impressive presence. The number of formal and independent—illegal religious radio stations is very difficult to calculate, but probably numbers in the hundreds.

In summary, Religion in Brazil is very present, incredibly diverse, and highly competitive. This is not to say that religious diversity is something new, or exclusive to Brazil. Religious diversity and competition is a widespread phenomenon in the modern world. What marks the situation in Brazil are the complex interactions between social-economic context, the historical concentration of power in one religious tradition, and the current growth of some traditions in the midst of the near stagnation of others. These realities profoundly influence relations between Religious Traditions and Denominations. These are at least some of the religious—social contexts that influence the question of Inter-Faith Spiritual Care.

**Inter-Faith Spiritual Care in Brazil**

There is very little Inter-Faith Spiritual Care offered in church communities, universities, hospitals, and in the day to day lives of priests, pastors, and believers. This does mean that it does not exist, but it is fairly rare. This is due, in large part, to the current religious climate in Brazil that seems to reflect competition between religious groups, and the need to establish and maintain religious identity.

For example, recently a friend of mine, a pastor in a city in the interior of Brazil, told me a story. The pastor is a woman, about 40, with considerable pastoral experience. An elderly member of her church asked her if she could visit a neighbor, who was not a member of the church. The neighbor was also elderly, and not a member of any church, but had, during her life, gone to the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, several Pentecostal Churches, and, from time to time, Afro-Brazilian Churches. The pastor visited her fairly regularly, and offered her Communion. This became common knowledge in her local church. When it came time for
her pastoral evaluation, several members of her Church Council questioned her about the time she had spent with this person, and whether it was “advisable” to offer Communion to a person who was not a “member” of the “Church”. The pastor responded that in the Methodist Church the Lord’s Table was open to all who seek the Grace of God. The members of the Church Council “agreed”, but questioned her for spending “so much time” with a non-member of the church. The pressure was subtle, but powerful.

Without a doubt, moments of Communion and Grace do occur between different religions and denominations, but, sadly, they are the exception, and not the rule. The recent and current religious climate in Brazil tends to promote an attitude where each cares for their own. Questions of religious competition and marketing appear to dominate the landscape. On the other hand, there are deeper questions that influence this problem.

For example, it would appear that the Roman Catholic Church is attempting to maintain its historical dominance in Brazilian Culture by reinforcing its traditional roles and theologies. Such practices and principles can, at times, exclude Communion with other traditions. There are exceptions, but offering Care to members of other religious traditions is an exception.

Historical Protestant Churches continue to be in the minority. There is a tendency to create a form of “Ghetto Mentality” that protects them from other social and theological influences, but at the same time isolates them from social and cultural realities. For example, my denomination, the Methodist Church in Brazil, recently voted to not allow formal membership and leadership in Ecumenical Organizations; a move that was directed at affiliations with the Roman Catholic Church. The Methodist Church continues to be Ecumenical, but its members, pastors and bishops cannot have formal membership or leadership in such organizations. This complicates any type of Inter-Faith Spiritual Care on an institutional level, and reflects an attitude of isolation within the daily life of church members.

Afro-Brazilian Religions continue to be in a process of recovering and celebrating their social-historical-religious roots. For this reason, they tend to create their own “Religious Universe”, which hesitates to enter into Communion with Dominant Western Religious Traditions.

Pentecostal Churches have a delicate relation with Charismatic Roman Catholic and Protestant Traditions that does create a certain Communion between these diverse experiences, but it continues to be profoundly influenced by history and internal conflicts in each Religious Tradition. Pentecostal and Charismatic Religious Traditions tend to value the Spirit of God and the Word of God, the Bible, but often have considerable difficulties ministering to those who do not believe as they do.
Neo – Pentecostal religious communities, or Churches that emphasize the Theology of Prosperity, tend to accept any and all believers, whatever their formal or informal religious affiliations, but the emphasis is on emotion – spirit filled worship, and not on the ongoing Care of Souls. In terms of Inter-Faith Spiritual Care, it is hard to evaluate Neo-Pentecostal Churches. On the one hand, they are very open to accepting persons from all Religious Traditions, and incorporate theologies, rituals and traditions from a wide variety of sources. On the other hand, they emphasize mass religion, have difficulty articulating a coherent theology, and often reduce Spiritual Care to emotion filled worship services and the promise of miracles.

Another context where Inter-Faith Spiritual Care often occurs is in hospitals, and related institutions. Once again, it is important to understand the Brazilian context. There are basically three types of hospitals in Brazil. There are government hospitals which are part of the SUS program (the Brazilian system of Universal System of Health Care). Government hospitals do not include space for religious chaplaincy, because of the separation between Church and State. The same is generally true for hospitals related to Federal Universities. There are exceptions, but these are rare. A few hospitals related to Federal Universities are open to the concept of chaplaincy, if it is related to the department of medicine, usually psychiatry, of the university.

The second type of hospital is related to religious institutions. The vast majority of these hospitals are Roman Catholic. These hospitals almost always have some type of formal chaplaincy, but it is very rare for other religious traditions to be included. There are a few hospitals related to Historical Protestant traditions, but, once again, they rarely have chaplaincy programs. When they do, the chaplains are almost always related to the religious traditions that support the hospital, and are volunteers.

The third type of hospital is independent. In many cases, these hospitals have roots in religious traditions, but over the course of time, and for financial and administrative reasons, became independent. Other independent hospitals are formal corporations that include doctors and insurance companies. Independent hospitals rarely, if ever, have formal chaplaincy programs, generally for financial or philosophical reasons.

In the Methodist Church, which is my religious tradition, in spite of our formal openness to other religious traditions, hospital visitations are almost always limited to members of the Church, or to members of other Protestant Traditions. A friend of mine, a Methodist Pastor, recently visited a member of another Protestant Church, a close friend of a Church member, who was in the hospital. The patient spent much of the time asking about the beliefs of the pastor, his Church, and why he was there. In the end,
the patient accepted the prayers and presence of the pastor, but only with a certain reluctance. His pastor was his spiritual guide, and this pastor was only an acceptable substitute. His prayers were very welcome, but only after considerable evaluation. They were not the same as those of “his pastor”.

At an emotional level, this makes sense. When we are vulnerable, as all hospital patients are, we protect ourselves. When we are most vulnerable, we seek the familiar. We want our family, friends, and pastor. However, the deeper issue is that the question is more than emotional. The “patient”, the person, was not totally comfortable with the presence of a pastor from another religious tradition, even if it was also Protestant. At a deep level, the “other pastor” was, at least to a certain point, perceived as an unknown. This reveals a great deal about the spiritual – religious environment of Brazil.

Given the context of the local church and hospitals, it becomes fairly obvious why Brazil does not have any form of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). There are training programs for chaplains, generally within the Roman Catholic Church, and for medical professionals, to understand the relationship between spirituality and health. However, there are no organized chaplain training programs that discuss the complexities and realities of Inter-Faith Spiritual Care.

Beyond questions of religious and denominational histories and identities and the financial and administrative realities of hospital systems, there is another layer to the question of why Inter-Faith Spiritual Care appears to be so difficult within Brazilian contexts. This deeper layer is related to questions of fundamentalism, tolerance, intolerance and moral exclusion.

**Fundamentalism, Intolerance and Moral Exclusion**

There are two classic ways to understand religious fundamentalism. The first is that it is a hermeneutic principle based on a sacred text. In this sense, fundamentalism is the belief, by a relatively specific religious group, that their interpretation of a sacred text is literally true and authoritative. These interpretations generally reject any type of metaphorical or allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Such an interpretation reinforces the identity of the community, but does not necessarily generate intolerance, or exclusion of other interpretations and beliefs.

This is a relatively simplistic definition, because, in fact, fundamentalism often identifies various beliefs, dogmas and practices with the revealed nature of God. These become the guiding principles of the community, and are rarely questioned. The key is that these elements of belief are considered to be the

---

divinely revealed foundation of the being and identity of the community. Still, fundamentalism cannot be exclusively identified with conservative religious groups. There are also theologically liberal fundamentalisms. There are philosophical, economic, and social fundamentalisms. In the case of non-religious groups, the “god”, or authority, that reveals these truths may be very human. The fundamental dynamic is to identify the being and identity of the group with very specific beliefs and behaviors, which are often unquestioned.

Various fundamentalisms can live together relatively peacefully. The question of intolerance and moral exclusion enters when the hermeneutical, or interpretive, tradition becomes political. When a religious community, for a variety of reasons, seeks to impose its interpretation of God's truth on other traditions, usually in subtle fashions, then intolerance becomes a fundamental problem, and Inter-Faith Spiritual Care becomes almost impossible. It would appear that this is often, though not always, the case in Brazil.

When a community translates its beliefs into the political, or social, realm, the result is often intolerance, due to the need to “convert” others to certain ways of believing and being in the world, or a certain image of God. In this sense, the survival, identity, and being of a religious community depend on converting others to their belief. To some extent, this explains why a patient visited by a pastor from another Church can at times feel uneasy. “Why is he / she here?” “What does he / she want?” “Where is my pastor?”

Though a generalization, in Evangelical Churches in Brazil there are four very common characteristics that mark religious identity:

- Jesus as the only way to salvation;
- The need to combat idolatry;
- A strong sense of “having the truth” and “being different”, and;
- The need to evangelize, not only in the sense of spreading the seeds of the Gospel, but of “gaining souls for Christ”.

These marks of what it means to be Evangelical often lead to a subtle fundamentalism, and a certain intolerance of other religious experiences. It may very well be that the third element, the need to be different, is what lead my tradition, the Methodist Church in Brazil, to distance itself from Ecumenical Organizations, and specifically from the Roman Catholic Church.

When dialogue regarding the nature of God and truth are hampered, then theoretical fundamentalism often becomes applied, practical, or political fundamentalism, and Inter-Faith Spiritual Care is rarely possible. Such funda-

---

mentalism may be quite subtle, or very public. In Brazil, fundamentalism is generally subtle. While there are fundamentalist religious communities, they do not have a great impact on religious life. When fundamentalism enters the religious scene it often expresses itself as intolerance, or exclusion, of other religious communities, or experiences.

Due to a wide variety of factors, religious fundamentalism in Brazil expresses itself via the need to defend the identity, beliefs, and numerical growth of religious communities. This tends to generate intolerance, and makes Inter-Faith Spiritual Care very difficult, because Care is frequently transformed into Proselytism.

Religious communities that understand their source as based in revealed truth can, in extreme cases, categorize those who do not have the same beliefs as radically different, or other. This means that persons and groups who do not have the same religious, or moral, beliefs are not necessarily included in their system of love, justice and compassion. Moral exclusion can see the other as being outside the community in which the norms apply, and therefore in need of “conversion”. At the extreme, those outside of the community can be viewed as heretics, or sinners. To a large degree, the interpretation of the other, by the “faithful”, determines how those outside the moral system should be treated. Some communities may see the need to express Compassionate Care for the “lost soul”. Others may see the need to “convert” the “lost soul”. Once again, at the extreme, there are others that may see the need to “condemn”. Amidst the complex landscape of religious life and being, Inter-Faith Spiritual Care requires, at the very least, Compassionate Care. Conversion and condemnation are attitudes that contradict the very nature of Inter-Faith, Spiritual, and Care.

A student of mine in the Master of Religious Studies Program is a part-time, unpaid Chaplain at a hospital in the city where he lives. The hospital has a well known program of treating persons with HIV/AIDS. My student regularly visits these patients. He is an exception. On various occasions he invited other pastors to visit these patients. Only one pastor agreed to make one visit. Two pastors made it very clear that they believed that HIV/AIDS was God’s punishment for sinful behavior. The HIV/AIDS patients were effectively excluded from the moral community of these pastors.

The key element appears to be the decision-making processes of how to treat those that are outside of “our” religious community. As previously noted, those outside of our community may be seen as somewhere on a continuum between neutral and evil. Where on this continuum my religious community places the other is a fundamental element in deciding how they
should be treated. Should they be cared for? Should they be converted? Should they be ignored? Should they be condemned? These are fundamental questions in understanding the role and identity of religious communities in Inter-Faith Spiritual Care.

**Solidarity, Tolerance, and Beyond**

A few years ago, the term “Solidarity” was very popular among more “liberal” Churches and Pastors in Brazil. Solidarity is difficult to define, but its essence is Communion and Community. It points to building bridges and relations between people, groups and institutions. The term reflects attitudes from various Latin American Liberation Theologies, and originally referred to solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. Over time, solidarity came to be understood as a basic pastoral attitude toward the whole human community, but with particular attention to the excluded. Solidarity is Communion, Compassion, and Care; all in the pursuit of Justice in the light of God’s love. As a principle, it is based on Mark 12: 28-31. “One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

This is the meaning of Solidarity in Brazil. While the term is currently out of style, it has been more or less replaced with the idea of “Communion”. How do we create Communion in the midst of such fragmentation and competition?

Communion and Care require Tolerance. Without Tolerance, Communion and Care can quickly become either superficial or transformed into self-serving intentions or actions. In social environments, such as Brazil, where religion is concerned with survival, numerical growth, or the declaration of a special, set apart, identity the Care of All Souls, or Communion become extremely difficult. As such, it is important to look at the concept of tolerance.

There are many types of tolerance. For example, there is tolerance that only exists to seduce. This type of tolerance serves the need of the “tolerant”. “I tolerate you in order to convince you that I am right.” By tolerating your beliefs, my hidden agenda is to convince you that I am right. This is a veiled form of fundamentalism and intolerance.

There is tolerance that expresses power. “I am tolerant of you because you are not a threat. In the long run I believe that you will come to believe as I do, but there is no hurry. My position is secure, and I can wait.”
Another form of tolerance might be called Laise Faire. This form of tolerance reflects passivity. Directly or indirectly it says: “We will see who is right in the long run.” Such tolerance avoids the risk of living and expressing the truth and identity of the community.

There is tolerance that ultimately seeks to create alliances. “I tolerate you in order to create an alliance against a greater foe, or to gain power.”

Tolerance can also be based in curiosity. “What do you believe, and why?” Such tolerance can be the beginning of Communion, or simply a way of reinforcing the beliefs of my community. This depends on the intention.

With the exception of tolerance based on sincere curiosity, each of these forms of tolerance is ultimately self-serving. Spiritual Care based in such tolerance ultimately creates fragmentation, and not community. In this sense, it cannot be genuinely Inter-Faith.

Tolerance that promotes deep Inter-Faith Spiritual Care requires a secure sense of identity, respect for the other, and the desire to create Communion. Fundamentally, it requires a tolerance that says: “God’s Truth can only be discovered by sharing our partial truths.” In this sense, the person and community respect and maintains their beliefs, while, at the same time, are open to learning from others. We recognize that each of us holds a partial truth, and all of us are seeking the Truth.

Such tolerance is Spiritual because it seeks to create and foster Communion between persons, groups, creation, and God. It expresses Care because the Other is a Thou, and not an Object, or an It. It is Inter-Faith because it respects the Other, without denying Self and Identity. Needless to say, such tolerance is rare, but it is possible.

The Methodist Tradition and Inter-Faith Spiritual Care

My tradition, the Methodist Church, has historically relied on the theology of John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of the Methodist movement, to understand the meaning of Care and Communion. Wesley was deeply concerned with bringing the Gospel to all. This led to a deep respect for diversity and the need for a theology that both respected the fundamental authority of the Bible and how God speaks in the midst of human experience. As such, the Methodist Church has a long history of accepting diversity, and providing Care to all. While the current religious climate in Brazil does not encourage Inter-Faith Spiritual Care, this does not mean that the Methodist Church is without a deep sense of its importance.

---

This respect for diversity reflects the cultural realities of England in the 18th century and Wesley’s personal religious experience. England was in the midst of an Industrial Revolution that changed the character of the country. In a relatively short period of time, England went from agriculture to industry; from rural to urban. This industrial explosion brought persons from rural areas of England, as well as from Europe, Spain and Portugal, to live and work in the cities. The result was tremendous growth in industrial centers, along with the accompanying problems of unemployment, poverty, violence, alcohol abuse, the fragmentation of families, and social disorganization.

The situation of England in the 18th century is very similar to modern day Brazil. Over the past 40 years there has been a mass migration to the cities, in search of jobs. This has resulted in a wide variety of social problems, much the same as in Wesley’s day. Many persons who arrive in the cities come with very few financial or professional resources, and often find themselves living in Favelas (Slums) on the periphery of urban areas. Just as in Wesley’s England, unemployment, poverty, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, the fragmentation of families and social disorganization are profound challenges for the Church.

Wesley’s religious tradition, the Anglican Church, was predominantly middle class, intellectual, and formal. As such, it was often out of touch with the needs and experiences of the majority of people. Wesley saw this problem as more than religious and social. It was a question of spirituality, Communion and Care.

At a crucial moment in his adult life, at a Bible study in Aldersgate Street, London, Wesley experienced a personal religious conversion. In his words, he felt his heart “strangely warmed”. His conversion changed his life forever. While the Anglican Church of his day valued the Bible, reason and tradition, there was little emphasis on personal religious experience. Because of his personal conversion, Wesley began to place great emphasis on personal religious experience. This turned his attention increasingly to daily life, the experience of God, and practical spirituality. He became less concerned with formal Church practices, and more with the needs of people. For Wesley, true salvation meant experiencing God, recognizing practical needs in the midst of daily life, working to change society, and uniting the mind, spirit and heart. While religious practice and presence continued to be of great importance, healing mind, body and spirit became central in his theology and practice.

In almost all of his texts there is a profound concern for Care and Communion. For example, his Sermon of the 23rd of May, 1786 is entitled
“About Visiting the Infirm”. The text of the sermon is based on Matthew 25.35, is very practical, and reflects the needs and fears of his time, and ours.

Summarizing the sermon, Wesley says that both pastors and members of the Church resist visiting the infirm. They are afraid of receiving, through the air or by contact, the illness of the person they are visiting. They resist visiting someone whom they “little know”. The hospital “casts a shadow that is not well received”. Wesley goes further to say that visitation is more than visiting the infirm, those abed. It includes visiting those that are in a state of affliction, whether it be of the mind or the body, good or bad, that fear God or not. Visiting the infirm is a fundamental Christian duty. The key is that Wesley does not exclude those that we do not know, or who do not fear God. Women are not excluded. Children are not excluded. The poor are not excluded. Persons of other religious traditions, or no religion, are not excluded. The “other” is included in Communion. In the Wesleyan tradition, this is a fundamental basis for Inter-Faith Spiritual Care.

Another basis for Inter-Faith Spiritual Care is the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which is the foundation of our theological reflection and social presence. We seek the meaning of Care and Communion in the Bible, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. While the Bible is given priority, Tradition, Reason and Experience are a part of seeking and recognizing God’s presence in our lives, and the meaning of Care and Communion. This balance of influences affirms that God is both Transcendent and Imminent.

To give Care reflects who we are – Body, Mind, Spirit and Soul. This includes our Personal and Social Past, our Knowledge of Self, World, and God, and our Personal Experience. All of these influence our Experience of God.

Wesley lived in a context where religion was often reduced to either Moral Precepts or to the Authority of Systematic Theology and the Tradition of the Church. His response was to recognize the richness and complexity of life, always in light of Faith. In the Methodist tradition we begin with the authority of the Bible, but understand that to understand what God is saying we must include other elements. Our Tradition, Reason and Experience are present in every moment of our lives, including how we understand the Bible and our faith. As is obvious in his sermon on “About Visiting the Infirm”, Wesley was very practical. While he always began with the authority of the

---

8 Id., Ibid., Sermão 98.
Bible, he did not separate faith from life. God was experienced in the midst of life. This has direct implications for Care.

While the Bible is the foundation for Inter-Faith Spiritual Care, we can draw on our Tradition, resources from Psychology, Sociology and other Human Sciences, and on our Personal Experience of God. This is one of the true gifts that Wesley and the Methodist tradition offer today.

It points to a deep concern in the Methodist Church for people, for Communion. “What does it mean to live in Communion with God, neighbor and creation?” At present, this is a fundamental question with regard to Inter-Faith Spiritual Care. I am sure that the Bishop did not intend to discard a fundamental theological principle. What the story says to me is that creating Communion comes before defending ideas. Creating Communion requires that we go beyond our comfortable boundaries, and embrace the other, the stranger.

At my University, The Methodist University of São Paulo, there is the Methodist School of Theology and the Graduate School of Religion. Both the School of Theology and the Graduate School are ecumenical, and various students at the Graduate School come from non-Christian traditions. Many students who study at the School of Theology do their Masters Course at the Graduate School.

Recently, I was giving a class on Faith Development Theory, at the Graduate School. In the class were five Methodists, one Presbyterian, two Baptists, one Roman Catholic, and one Umbandista, an Afro-Brazilian, non-Christian, religion. At the School of Theology, it is very common to begin class with prayer, and it almost always ends with the phrase “In Jesus’ name we pray”, or something similar.

At the Graduate School we do not begin class with prayer. One student, a Methodist, asked, in a very respectful way, why we did not pray before class. The Methodist student, who is studying Missions, did not know that one of his colleagues was not a Christian. I answered, also in broad terms, that the Graduate School was both ecumenical and inter-religious. The student responded that we were studying at the Methodist University of São Paulo, and that the vast majority of students are Christian. As such, we should respect “our” religious tradition.

At this point, the Umbandista student, who is studying the sociology of religion, entered the discussion, saying: “So it is a question of power? We pray according to who has the most votes?” The Methodist responded: “The University is Christian. It is not a question of power, but respect for our tradition.” The Umbandista: “Your tradition. Not our tradition.” Soon afterwards the Roman Catholic student said: “I do not ask you to pray to Mary, which is my tradition, and we are the majority in Brazil.”
From there other students entered the discussion; at times supporting the Methodist, at times the Umbandista. Questions were raised about the relationship between the Church and the Academy, the meaning of being a Methodist University, academic freedom, the place of prayer in the University, the relationship between faith and religious practice, social and political power, the meaning of ecumenical, and so forth.

I felt lost much of time, and only barely managed to organize the discussion. Still, it was an exciting and rich discussion which revealed a great deal about religious dynamics, power, compassion, communion, fear, and hope. In the end there was a certain Communion. All present agreed to have a moment of silence at the beginning of each class; each using the time as they wished. We did not resolve the conflicts or answer the questions, but we did find a way to live and learn together.

**The Way Forward**

My wife and I have a friend who left a middle class Protestant Church, went to a Spiritist community for a few months, and is now attending a Neo-Pentecostal Church. She left the Protestant Church in the search of a miracle for her cancer, and because she did not feel welcome because of her poverty. She is still not well, but her cancer is in remission. We see each other every week or so, and always pray together. At one point she told us a story that, for me, points the way forward, toward Inter-Faith Spiritual Care in Brazil.

The pastor of her current church has never visited her, either at home or in the hospital, but preaches “Spirit-Filled” sermons. When she is well she goes to worship services and feels welcome and renewed. She has friends there, and feels a sense of Communion with the members of the Church, most of whom are, as she is, poor.

The pastor from the Protestant church that she attended continues to visit her at home, and when she is in the hospital. She feels a personal and spiritual bond with him that guides and sustains her, but says that the Church community was very formal, and not “Filled with the Spirit”. She says that they prayed for her, but then made it clear that she was not truly welcome. She did not dress like they did. Grace entered when, at a certain moment, the pastor said that “God does not mind how you dress.”

One pastor offers worship that is “Spirit-Filled”, and promises miracles. The Church accepts her, even though she is poor and comes from another religious tradition. The other pastor offers her personal Care and Presence. He did not abandon her because she did not fit the traditional profile of his Church. Her friends offer her the family that she does not have, as well as love and prayers.
Our friend is not Protestant, Spiritist, or Neo-Pentecostal. She is not a member, in the traditional sense, of any Church. She is poor, sick, and vulnerable. She is seeking Care, Healing, Communion, and Community.

At least in the context of Brazil, she is a metaphor for how Inter-Faith Spiritual Care exists, and may grow. It is informal. It is personal. Though it rarely exists on formal, institutional, or ecclesiological levels, it is present between pastors, persons, friends, and families. In the midst of the various problems between religious traditions and communities, our friend has found a delicate balance that offers her Care, Communion, and Community that often go beyond the bounds of traditional church membership, fidelity and identity. This would seem to be the future of Inter-Faith Spiritual Care in Brazil, at least in the near future.

Bibliografia


Inter-faith Spiritual Care: Brazilian Perspectives


R.F; Paloutzan. Invitation to the Psychology of Religion. Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 1996


Recebido: 19/5/2011
Aprovado: 20/12/2011