

The Tent at the Crossroads: Insights from the Contemplative Encounter in Interreligious Dialogue

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In interreligious dialogue, the contemplative encounter remains underexplored, yet it may prove essential for cross-religious engagement. The contemplative encounter goes beyond the cultivation of religious literacy and the flourishing of mutual understanding. Those of other traditions are enjoined as partners in the search for existential fulfillment and are approached as fonts of insight for theological reasoning and sources of valid spiritual wisdom. After briefly reviewing key Vatican documents on dialogue, I propose that there is both a created space and a need for a deeper dialogue of spirituality. Three themes reveal and reflect the possibilities of this encounter—a renewed intra-religious (that is, introspective) dialogue, a rediscovery of key symbolic portrayals of this space of dialogue, and an exploration of the dialogical and spiritual virtue of silence. In this paper, I portray some of the contours and hopes of a renewed praxis of contemplative encounter among traditions, and, particularly, in the life of the Catholic Church. Such a movement may prove invaluable to the development and growth of many areas of Catholic theology and vital for the life of the global church.

Keywords: interreligious, contemplative, encounter, silence, praxis

Neither monologue nor conquest is tenable...The meeting point is neither my house
nor the mansion of my neighbor, but the crossroads outside the walls,
where we may eventually decide to put up a tent—for the time being.
—Raimon Panikkar¹

Introduction

While the process of interreligious engagement in the Catholic Church has a history predating the promulgation of the papal encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* over fifty years ago, and while an understanding of the importance of dialogue has developed greatly since that moment, the journey on the path of dialogue is far from complete. The past five decades have brought a renewed and rooted dialogue with the world, and thus with other religious communities. The Catholic Church has responded to the situation of religious diversity in a variety of ways—theological, philosophical, and spiritual. We have seen in this time magisterial and masterful attempts to define and express theologies of religions, theologies of religious pluralism, theories of inclusive and non-imperial ecclesiology, and an epistemological openness to the movement of the Spirit outside of conceived and comfortable boundaries.

Despite these movements and shifts, however, many avenues of possible encounter remain unexplored, underdeveloped, or removed from practice. In my analysis, there have been two major attitudes, a dialectic, in interreligious explorations: on the one hand, treatment of the dialogue partner as someone to be explained within a religious worldview, and on the other, treatment of

¹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 91.

the other as someone to learn about, to establish a friendship with, and to distinguish ourselves from in good faith, drawing distinct, though friendly, boundaries between *us* and *our neighbors*. While interreligious dialogue will necessarily and rightfully include these elements as a holistic process, it cannot stop at the borders of seeking mutual understanding. I believe that a third way of dialogue, that which emphasizes the religious “other” as a partner on the quest for meaning and truth, is possible and necessary in seeking new depths of relationship, wisdom, and learning in a world where dialogue has become both norm and imperative.

The dialogue of spirituality, and more specifically, a dialogue centered on the sharing of contemplative and mystical wisdom of religious traditions, embodies this approach and remains to be explored more fully. A contemplative dialogue, embodied in the exchange of spiritual and mystical wisdom and dispositions with those of other traditions can open new and life-giving avenues of learning, reflection, self-understanding, and wisdom. I argue that it is in this mode of dialogue that we can explore new levels of existential and spiritual encounter. It is in this mode that our horizon of dialogue, too, is expanded and altered—allowing for our partners in dialogue to move beyond being either object of explanation or subject of definition to being a source of valid spiritual wisdom and experience, a teacher and partner on the path of faith seeking understanding. Before exploring and explaining this way forward, however, it is important to consider and appreciate the contemporary situation of interreligious attitudes, particularly with regards to several critical documents and statements of the Catholic Church. While there is now a large corpus of work and commentary available, I will only briefly comment on three works: *Ecclesiam Suam*, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Dialogue and Proclamation*.

1964–2020: Developing a Catholic Approach to Interreligious Dialogue

Over fifty years ago, the Catholic Church embarked on a journey in the world. Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* marked a turn from isolationism to communion, dialogue, and fellowship within a developing and rapidly changing modern world. The encyclical rightly emphasizes that “[t]he Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make.”² The world is not to be rejected or shunned, but it is to be the ground and field of the Church’s witness to the Gospel. Four proper characteristics of dialogue are named: clarity, meekness, confidence, and prudence.

The Church is the instrument of Christ’s kingdom of justice and peace, its role to “bring men together in mutual love through the power of that kingdom....”³ The Church is a reality to be lived, not theorized, and it is on pilgrimage through the world. The Church is rooted in the world, but the world is a canvas of diversity, with many tangled roads of fulfillment and self-understanding. The Church must necessarily engage with all peoples in the work of building the kingdom of God. The Church is on pilgrimage, but what path is being taken? Who is encountered on the road, and what is learned? How does the religious other help us on our way? These are questions that remained unanswered by the document, and while decades of thought have produced answers, a dialogue of spirituality can offer further insight.

² Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* §65, August 6, 1964, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.

³ *Ecclesiam Suam* §16.

The Second Vatican Council’s document *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated in 1965, stands as a pivotal moment in the Catholic Church’s commitment to interreligious dialogue and the positive evaluation of the religious “other.” The document states that other religions “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men,” and that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.”⁴ The stage here is set for the pursuit of fruitful encounters marked by respect, faith, and a desire for knowledge and sharing. The document also defines the Church as being in relationship with non-Christians, implying a certain level of commitment to a mutual journey. The breadth and depth of these relationships has been considered in these past decades, but how will they be defined in the coming century? The contemplative encounter may offer a way forward in recognizing the possibilities for relationship with the religious “other.”

In 1991, twenty-five years after *Nostra Aetate*, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue published the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* as a reflection on the relationship between dialogue and evangelization. The document emphasizes four forms of dialogue, earlier stated in a 1981 document, that comprise the interreligious encounter. They are:

- i. **The dialogue of life**, the sharing of daily life.
- ii. **The dialogue of action**, the sharing of the quest for development and liberation.
- iii. **The dialogue of theological exchange**, where specialists exchange religious ideas and teachings.
- iv. **The dialogue of religious experience**, where spiritual riches are shared, particularly prayer, contemplation, faith, and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.⁵

These four ways of dialogue are not mutually exclusive and portray a holistic and intertwined reality of the dialogical experience. Dialogue is not a static, rote exchange, but a fluid, vibrant, and dynamic process of faith and growth.

Dialogue, in this document, is defined in several ways. It is, on a basic level, reciprocal communication between beings. Secondly, it is an attitude of respect and friendship. Lastly, and in the context of religious plurality, it is defined as a positive and constructive relation in which individuals and communities seek mutual understanding and enrichment.⁶ It is obvious that this proposal makes room for the contemplative dialogue as an expression of the dialogue of religious experience, but how much has this form been emphasized and practiced? Is it possible to take dialogue beyond the ceiling of mutual understanding? *Dialogue and Proclamation* further adds, “Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations.... It reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness....”⁷ The contemplative encounter in the dialogue of spirituality has its role in the life of the Church as an integral and interrelated way of engagement.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* §2, October 28, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁵ The Catholic Church’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* §42, May 19, 1991, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html.

⁶ *Dialogue and Proclamation* §9.

⁷ *Dialogue and Proclamation* §40.

From this necessarily brief survey, we can see that, while the developing understanding of interreligious dialogue in the Catholic Church has been rich, and while a space has been properly carved for the process of contemplative encounter and exchange in the dialogue of spirituality, the process must be explored further. The Church is on pilgrimage in the world, though the proper role of the religious “other” is not made clear. The Church is in relation with other religions, which reflect rays of Truth, though the extent of this statement remains uncertain. The process of dialogue is dynamic, though how exactly is this process interpenetrating the listener and receiver? The contemplative dialogue offers particular insight into these questions.

Moving Forward: Proposing the Contemplative Encounter in a Dialogue of Spirituality

It is important to properly define the dialogical mode at hand. Using the terms *spirituality*, *mysticism*, and *contemplation* can be quite dangerous, given their broad range of ambiguity, experience, and history. It is also important to recognize that these terms perhaps do not carry the same weight or recognition across religious and linguistic boundaries, though I am speaking and naming from a Catholic-Christian perspective. This mode of encounter may have a different name under different circumstances and with different partners. Dialogue occurs between people, not systems, and thus any theory, and the structures upon which it is built, are subject to particular, innumerable contexts.

I am aware that a dialogue of spirituality encompasses more than contemplative and mystical wisdom; contemplatives and mystics are not the only spiritual practitioners of a given religious tradition⁸. As Abbot Timothy Wright states, “In the narrow sense, the word ‘spirituality’ refers to the content and style of prayer practiced and lived by believers.”⁹ Spirituality is a broad and malleable term, and no religious community has a singular method of spirituality. Naming this project as a contemplative dialogue would be too narrow, given that the Catholic Church has a rich and established contemplative and monastic tradition, and while this dialogue of spirituality finds a home in this space and way of life, it cannot be limited solely to this. Mystical dialogue, too, becomes too narrow, assuming that it is an esoteric and restricted path. Qualifying this experience as a contemplative and mystical encounter, however, allows us to focus on the paths of contemplation, meditation, and mysticism as a particular focus within this broad dialogue. Thus, I move forward with naming this as the contemplative and mystical encounter within a dialogue of spirituality. This is a specialized and narrow field, though fruitful.

This is not the space for an extensive etymological or historical treatment, though the following terms merit an entire corpus of literature. By *spiritual* I mean a religious believer’s appreciation and involvement in religious life and practice, in which every moment is seen as a chance to experience God, a mode of life that seeks the presence of the Absolute in all things. Spirituality is a path of re-formation and re-remembering moments of revelatory wisdom, and for

⁸ In focusing on the contemplative experience of spirituality, I do not discredit other forms of spiritual expression of worship that may also properly be termed as “spirituality.” Such examples in the Christian world include ongoing participation in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church and the experience of being “born again” in certain evangelical churches.

⁹ Timothy Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer: Encouraging Muslims and Christians to Pray Together* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 17.

Christians, it is the path of living the Word of God in Christ. By *contemplation* I mean the practice of directing the unified mind and heart to the awareness of God as a living reality. This includes meditative practices, such as repetitive prayer, ascetic practices, and *lectio divina*. This is embodied in the Christian monastic tradition. By *mysticism* I mean a high level of contemplation which seeks and builds the union between the soul and God, to behold God in an experience beyond rational discourse. These are particular, not universal, definitions. Thus, the contemplative encounter in the dialogue of spirituality refers to a space and process where religious practitioners share and discuss their experiences of transcendence, stillness, Divine Presence, and/or unity. It is a dialogue that is itself a mode of contemplation, a process of prayer, and an opening to the Presence of God in the hearts, traditions, and practices of all involved. It is a dialogue that is open to learning beyond religious borders.

This dialogue is unique in that it seeks to feel and nourish the presence of God within the dialogue encounter. Contemplation seeks prayer with the fullness of being, shaping eyes that see God in all things, a sense of humility, and an understanding of Presence beyond words and limiting boundaries. In this method, acts such as praying together, sharing space, and common reflection opens doors for the dialogue partner to become a part of the journey of spiritual discovery. The presence of the Spirit beyond the borders of Christianity has roots in the Christian biblical and intellectual tradition. In the biblical narrative, God’s spirit broods over the primordial waters.¹⁰ Israel knew of God’s work among other peoples, and Melchizedek is honored in both Hebrew and Christian testaments as a true priest of God.¹¹ The patristic sources, while always remaining rightly rooted in their Christian affirmation, also offer testament to this movement, particularly in Justin’s affirmation of the manifestation of God’s Word before the Christian dispensation and Irenaeus’ affirmation of creation as a divine manifestation.¹² As the decree *Ad Gentes* claims, “the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified.”¹³ In *Nostra Aetate’s* affirmation of the ray of Truth in other traditions, we must acknowledge the Spirit’s movement in unimaginable and surprising ways. We can be open to learning from this presence in the world and in other traditions.

Religious diversity is a jewel to be contemplated, not a challenge to be conquered intellectually or theologically. Contemplation fosters a willingness to engage the other as teacher, as harbinger of Spirit, and as source of wisdom. This acknowledgment, and a proper response of respect, listening, and learning, is essential for creating new spiritual memories across religious boundaries, a project of interreligious dialogue that is the proper goal of the dialogue of spirituality. The task of learning from the religious “other” is not easy, nor should it be pursued carelessly. It is the fruit of relationships, of appreciation, of spiritual practice and conversation, and listening and reflection. *Ecclesiam Suam* calls for a slow dialogue, which will make us wise,¹⁴ and *Dialogue and Proclamation* states, “[w]hile keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others....”¹⁵ The dialogue of spirituality fulfills these goals. This is not a new movement nor a way of dismantling the other ways of dialogue. It is a way to remember the value of silence, presence, and openness accompanied by faith seeking understanding. Its wisdom

¹⁰ Genesis 1:1-2.

¹¹ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 24.

¹² Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 57–61.

¹³ Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes [Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church]* §4, December 7, 1965; *Ecclesiam Suam* §65.

¹⁴ *Ecclesiam Suam* §83.

¹⁵ *Dialogue and Proclamation* §49.

and fruits are vital for the life of the Church in confronting new questions in the era of pluralism and globalization.

What are some of the ways in which this dialogue is embodied, and how is it carried forward? What is the way of mutual discovery on the path ahead? Some examples and reflections on particular instances, opportunities, or practices reveal that a rich and deep contemplative encounter in the dialogue of spirituality is both possible and fruitful. These are: the intra-religious dialogue, a personal and communal reflexive conversation; symbols and themes of a contemplative space of cross-religious encounter; and the virtue of silence in encounter and sharing.

The Intra-Religious Dialogue: Knowing, Challenging, Nourishing, and Expanding Our Roots

A proper interreligious encounter cannot occur if we do not have the time, space, and courage to root ourselves in our own traditions. Our tents must be firmly rooted if we wish to open the canvas wide enough to keep the company of visitors, sages, and angels. *Ecclesiam Suam*, from the beginning of the document, calls the Church to self-knowledge, to look with penetrating eyes upon itself.¹⁶ The document also calls Catholics to a dialogue with other Christians and with other Catholics. Dialogue is recognized as a continual and constantly renewing process that occurs within our communities, and even within ourselves. This process—this confrontation with oneself, one’s tradition, one’s personal and communal history, and one’s relationship with God—is the internal exclusive dialogue, the intra-religious dialogue. In the case of the Church, it is a communal and ecumenical project, but we must also say that it is intra-Catholic and ultimately a personal conversation. It is an essential prerequisite to any dialogue, but it is particularly important if we seek to build the epistemological openness, the spiritual presence, and the courage to plunge into the unknown inherent in the contemplative encounter. It is a self-preparation on the journey of exploration as much as it is the process of exploration with the religious “other.” It is a spiritual action, which looks upwards to the Divine, downwards towards our traditions, and horizontally to the world; it is a prayer of openness in all directions.¹⁷

This notion of the intra-religious dialogue has been developed and contemplated by Catholic priest and theologian Raimon Panikkar. Panikkar’s own life and work stands as an interesting embodiment of this endeavor of listening, encounter, and embrace of religious wisdom from the religious “other.” It is a process that is inherent to the religious experience and encounter. For Panikkar,

The real religious or theological task...begins when the two views meet head-on inside oneself; when dialogue prompts genuine religious pondering, and even a religious crisis, at the bottom of one’s heart; when interpersonal dialogue turns into an intrapersonal soliloquy...a religious act that itself engages faith, hope, and love.¹⁸

In the intra-religious dialogue, one’s own spiritual, intellectual, and historical roots are seriously and maturely confronted. It is a process encountered either by the knowledge or experience of

¹⁶ *Ecclesiam Suam* §9.

¹⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), xvii.

¹⁸ Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, 48.

religious and philosophical plurality. It is a process of rooting and growing that has foundation in our heartfelt encounter with another as friend, as companion, as a reflection of both myself and God, and includes taking their insights and opinions to heart. The inner dialogue, involving the entirety of a person, is a necessary condition for fruitful interreligious encounter.¹⁹ It is a process of exploration and confirmation rooted in humility, in faith, and in sincerity. It does not mean a rebellion against hierarchy or tradition, but it is the process of encountering these facets before seeking to encounter or respond to the religious “other.” As Panikkar suggests, “when you engage in the intra-religious dialogue, try first to remove the beam in your own eye before removing the speck in the eye of your neighbor.”²⁰ It is allowing oneself to become comfortable enough to confront mystery beyond a personal and communal horizon. This confrontation with mystery, and the mutual process of pondering with a dialogue partner, is an inherently contemplative response, and thus foundational to both preparation for and pursuit of the contemplative encounter.

The intra-religious dialogue concept is extensively rooted in Panikkar’s anthropology and cosmology²¹. The dialogue partner and religious “other” is perceived as someone also equally in communion with the Mystery of Reality. In seeking a vision of reality, we cannot only rely solely on our consciousness; we have to, somehow, incorporate the consciousness of others about themselves and the world as well.²² The dialogue partner is treated “as a revelatory experience, as you would—and should—look at the lilies in the field.”²³ In this process, we accept being taught by others; “We discover the depths of the other inside of ourselves, because we are all sharers in the world.”²⁴ A dialogue is not only a *duo-logos*, but a *dia-logos*, an encounter of two *logoi*, or religious realities, which pierce through to a new horizon of understanding. This encounter is inherently contemplative, for it encourages us to sit and struggle with new horizons, to listen to possible movements of the Spirit, and to seek new insights on the journey to God.

The field of Comparative Theology, as pioneered by the Jesuit scholar Francis X. Clooney, can also offer important insight into this contemplative preparation and response. Clooney defines Comparative Theology as:

Acts of faith seeking understanding, which are rooted in a particular faith tradition, but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.²⁵

Comparative Theology as a field of theological research is sensitive to the need to be religiously literate, to have an awareness of religious diversity in the world, and to understand that this

¹⁹ Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, 75.

²⁰ Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, 1.

²¹ Raimon Panikkar’s anthropology, cosmology, and theology have merited volumes of writing. Unfortunately, this short paper is not the space to explore these facets of his work, which traditional Catholic theological circles often find concerning.

²² Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, 25.

²³ Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, 1.

²⁴ Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, xix.

²⁵ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.

diversity affects even our own religious faith and experience.²⁶ It is a field that takes seriously both diversity and tradition. Clooney warns that:

We must deny ourselves the easy confidences that keep the other at a distance.... We need to learn from other religious possibilities, without slipping into relativist generalizations. The tension between open-mindedness and faith, diversity and traditional commitment, is a defining feature of our era....²⁷

Theological reflection in this sphere is not defined solely by religious narratives and histories, but by a holistic approach to religious plurality. It is a process of theologizing from multiple perspectives, reflecting on old and new truths in an interior dialogue.²⁸ The focus of comparative theology is not systematic thought, but on particular instances and encounters, particularly between texts and practitioners. The source of comparison and learning is approached with a sense of respect. Its wisdom is taken to heart, contemplated, absorbed into our own quest. This is done with respect for theological boundaries, so much so that crossing them and crossing back is a spiritual event and intellectual accomplishment.²⁹ Another example of this is Thomas Merton, who sought to introduce his monastic novices to Sufism as a way to strengthen their commitment to monastic life.³⁰ Such a pursuit is inherently contemplative, for it seeks to journey with multiple sources of wisdom, which requires time, patience, listening, and learning. It is as much an internal journey as a journey with others, a personal spiritual event as well as a journey across religious boundaries. Comparative theology as a field gives great theological support to the venture of the contemplative encounter, the fruit of which is a profound encounter that makes existential learning and sharing possible.

There has also been scholarship proposing a new matrix for Christian-Muslim dialogue, notably by the Muslim scholar Syafaatun Almirzanah, which focuses on putting the mystical wisdom of religious traditions into conversation. While Dr. Almirzanah's work focuses on a particular and situational comparison of the thought of Meister Eckhart and Ibn al-Arabi, the range of possible dialogue with both past and contemporary mystics is endless. Dialogue, in this framework, is the "learning of truths attained by others and coming back with those truths to enrich our own spirituality."³¹ Muslim and Christian spiritualities converge in the mystical experience of union with God.³² It is from this convergence and this touching of spiritual worlds and paths that the dialogue of spirituality is justified. Almirzanah's work poignantly emphasizes the powerful personal and spiritual transformations that result from an attitude of spiritual openness and in approaching the other tradition as a source of wisdom, an opportunity for learning, and a chance to encounter God in the recesses of the heart. While this proposal is limited to Christian-Muslim dialogue, I argue that it must be taken beyond these confines, pertaining to different contexts and needs, slowly and contemplatively.

²⁶ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 6.

²⁷ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 7.

²⁸ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 13.

²⁹ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 59.

³⁰ Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer*, 143.

³¹ Syafaatun Almirzanah, *When Mystic Masters Meet: Towards a New Matrix for Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2011), 204.

³² Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer*, 123.

Three notions all reflect common ideas that are inherent and essential to a contemplative encounter in the dialogue of spirituality. First, to sustain serious questioning there is a need for critical, engaged, and prayerful rootedness in our traditions. Second, there must be a willingness to treat the dialogue partner as a source of valid self-understanding and wisdom. And third, we have to recognize mutual convergences in contemplative awareness, searching, and presence. Such an approach opens new horizons for interreligious interactions and their personal, theological, and spiritual implications. Beyond an appreciation for the intra-religious encounter, a powerful symbol also provides essential insight into the methods, approaches, and attitudes of the contemplative encounter.

Symbolic Meditations: The Cave, the City, and the Tent

Symbols, myth, and story are powerful tools in the spiritual journey, and several symbols are rather effective in portraying the process of contemplative encounter as personal experience, spatial reality, and reflection of attitude. Symbolic language is a vehicle of the Spirit, and an aid on the road of contemplation. Symbols are by nature open-ended and sacramental, offering a path to humility. It is an essential language of the mystical encounter. Three symbols—the Cave of the Heart, the City of Jerusalem, and the Tent of Abraham—offer a window into the space, conceits, and opportunities of the contemplative moment of encounter.

The Cave of the Heart, or in its original Sanskrit, the *guha*, is an important symbol particularly for Christians who have lived dialogue in India, with the Hindu mystical tradition, or with practicing Hindus. It was an important symbol for two important figures in the process of Christian-Hindu dialogue and the process of Christian enculturation in India in the last century—Henri Le Saux, or Abhishiktananda, and Bede Griffiths. This center, “the *guha*, the ‘cave’ or secret place of the heart, is a metaphor that [both] frequently used to express their deepest dimension of interiority or introversion where we meet God, the Ultimate Reality. It is an image taken from the Upanishads.”³³ It is a symbol derived from Griffiths’s exploration in enculturation, in introducing the intuitive wisdom of the India to the missionary and Western Catholic Church. He was guided by an intuition that the Church’s contemplative consciousness was vital, and that Hinduism and Christianity met in these mystical depths.³⁴ It was a way of describing the experience of presence felt at the center of convergence between Christianity and Hinduism, a center of personal experience of joy, wonder, and Divine presence beyond words or rational formulation—a place of relation without obliteration.³⁵ Griffiths believed in an existential convergence in the *guha*, where Christian and Hindu wisdom both shine light on the presence of God. Abhishiktananda, too, engaged this symbol in his journeys between Christian and Hindu asceticism, which was made particularly real during his time in silence and meditation on the holy mountain of *Arunachala* in India.³⁶ Always cautious of betraying his Catholic identity and heritage, to which he clung during his explorations in India, Abhishiktananda embodies the attitude of open rootedness that embodies the existential encounter.

³³ Wayne Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought* (Woodstock, NY: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2003), 206.

³⁴ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 3.

³⁵ Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths*, 6.

³⁶ Shirley Du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart: The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 71–80.

The image of the cave produces many psychological and spiritual reflections. As a place of both darkness and refuge, it is a place where we must necessarily walk blindly, though we are protected from the storm and cold by its silence and stillness. The image of the heart and its contemplative function, of course, is not foreign to the Christian tradition. The heart is what must be converted in developing our sense of Ultimate Reality, according to John Paul II,³⁷ and Benedict used the image of the “ear of the heart” for discerning unfamiliar insights in contemplation.³⁸ It is at the encounter and horizon of hearts where we hear God.³⁹ The *guha* stands as a symbol for the process of exploring another tradition through contemplation and learning, a way of absorbing foreign wisdom into one’s very being. The *guha* is the symbol of epistemological humility in the dialogue encounter, where silence and presence foster relation and learning without obliteration. It is self-discovery through encounter, it is a meeting with God inspired by an interior depth beyond distinctions.

Our second image, the City of Jerusalem, invokes a sacred legacy for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For many Jews, it holds special status in *halakha*, Jewish religious law. Jewish collective identity and consciousness triangulates against its history. In medieval Christian cosmology, Jerusalem was the *axis mundi*, and throughout the centuries to the present day, the proposed site of the tomb of Christ at the Holy Sepulchre draws thousands of devoted Christian pilgrims. For Muslims, Jerusalem is the location of the Prophet Muhammad’s *mi’raj*, his night journey to God; the first direction of prayer before the orientation to the Ka’aba; and the location of one of the holiest mosques in the Muslim world.

The contemporary situation of Jerusalem, entangled within a web of conflict, shared claims, and shared angst, heightens the importance of this city. Jerusalem’s residents share space daily, despite the temptation to claim the city solely for their own tradition or experience, and it is a city that cannot exist without being shared. Were the Western Wall to be obliterated, Al-Aqsa mosque would not stand, and were Al-Aqsa mosque to be removed, the sanctity of the Temple Mount would be violated. Either move would affect a place where Christ walked and preached. The history of contemporary Jerusalem cannot be undone by reversion to the past, and the entanglement cannot be erased.

Despite a mutual claim to the space of the Temple Mount, particularly among Muslims and Jews, the confrontation over shared space does not stop here. The reality of shared space bleeds from its precincts to the streets of the city and pervades everyday life. The *shofar*, the *adhan*, and church bells are heard from bedrooms and bakeries alike. It is a city where the religious “other” is entwined within ourselves—our histories, our spaces, or narratives. Any attempt to remove this “other,” to try to exile them from our city, our space, our holy precinct, will only result in the destruction of our own inheritance. Jerusalem teaches us that the perceived exclusiveness of our religious history and space may not, ultimately, be so exclusive. We can try to build fences to keep the other out, but the land would not flourish. We can attempt to keep the other from our quarter, but then the city would crumble.

³⁷ Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer*, 65.

³⁸ Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer*, 82.

³⁹ Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer*, 318.

In our dialogical encounters, in the market of interaction and exchange, are we at peace with sharing our histories and space, or does a hidden angst prevent a fullness of encounter? In reflecting on a shared narrative, history, or space, do we learn not only to accept the perspective of other, but to allow ourselves to learn and be shaped by that perspective? In allowing the city to stand, and allowing it to stand on the pillars of perceived contradiction that, paradoxically, keep it alive, we learn to fully inhabit the space of the city. The city is no longer restricted by the fences of boundaries and angst, but the boundaries are allowed to flow organically. And there we meet the “other” as friend and as neighbor.

The third symbol, the Tent of Abraham, derives from Genesis 18. It is a symbol of radical hospitality, where strangers are entertained in a most personal space. Abraham pitched his tent near the great trees of Mamre after his journey from Ur. It is the simple tent of the wandering patriarch, a pilgrim on his journey. One day, Abraham looked up to find three men before him. The visitors sat under the shade of a tree near the tent, and were sustained by Abraham: water was brought to wash their feet, and food was brought to nourish them before they continued on their way. But they did not do this before prophesizing the birth of Isaac to an elderly Sarah.

This passage has a long tradition of interpretation in rabbinic and biblical exegesis, particularly regarding the identification of the relationship between the three strangers and the Lord. The strangers have often been interpreted as angels of the Lord in disguise in Christian exegetical traditions, and the event thus serves as a lesson in finding God in the stranger, in the religious vocation of hospitality and service, and the reality of unexpected and unique theophanies in the world.

In our own lives, we find ourselves often in tents at crossroads. As pilgrims in the world, in the journey of faith and life, crossroads are places to pause and to listen, to reflect and absorb. We listen prayerfully and patiently for the voice of God. And, unexpectedly, strange situations and realities come to reveal and to teach, to direct and encourage. The Lord appears in unexpected ways. Dialogue encounters, too, are crossroads where tents are pitched, where we pause to listen and reflect. In our dialogue encounters, are we hosting our dialogue partners as angels in disguise? Have we allowed our eyes to adjust see the presence of the Spirit in our dialogue partners and the religious “other?” Are we allowing the Divine Presence within the “other,” and the religious wisdom within the “other,” to manifest itself without restricting our directing it? These are encouraging challenges posed by the symbol of the Tent of Abraham.

Remembering to Listen: Silence as a Dialogical Virtue

Silence is a powerful spiritual reality and praxis. It is the heart of contemplation, the womb of the Word, and the father of the preachers, according to the Catholic tradition. Christian contemplatives have always valued the power of silence. The ultimate aim of the contemplative path is interior silence, an opening of our innermost selves to the mystery of God. Silence is also a powerful and underappreciated dialogical virtue, and it is at the heart of the insight of the contemplative encounter. While not the exclusive mode of engagement, a contemplative encounter informed by moments of silence is a powerful shared spiritual moment, and creates the attitude of humility and listening necessary for learning from the religious “other” and the Spirit present in the encounter.

In silence, “we let God do the work, and words come later.”⁴⁰ Silence is a profound embodiment of the spirit of poverty, and in the moments of stillness we allow ourselves to be inspired by the nearness of God and the fragments of Divine wisdom that impregnate every moment. It is an emptying of one’s framework,⁴¹ but in the emptying a fullness is sought. Silence “does not deny the word, but is aware that the silence is prior to the word and that the word simply words the silence that makes the word possible.”⁴² It is the pinnacle of faith, for it reaches out into the darkness of unknown horizons. Silence should not be seen as a failure or as submission, a way to escape the confrontation of disagreement. It should be about listening, absorbing what the other has said or done, and allowing the presence of the Spirit to shape that reception. It is a recognition of the limitedness of language and discourse in describing the presence of God. It is not fatalistic, but a realization that keys are not yet available for certain doors. This does not mean that we cease dreaming about what lies beyond them. Humility is an intellectual virtue,⁴³ which reflects humanity’s situation as finite creatures yearning for the infinite.

Silence is the proper milieu in the *guha*. Both Abhishiktananda and Griffiths found that the wisdom of Hindu *advaita*, or nonduality, and the Trinitarian mystery merged not in an intellectual exercise, but in the silence of presence.⁴⁴ Silence is the way of inviting our dialogue partner into our caves, cities, and tents, and our own way of seeing these spaces in a new way. Silence is essential for healing personal and collective memories, a fasting and a preparation for experiencing the presence of God in unexpected ways. Listening is central to healing, and in silence the Spirit broods and the Word is born. Silence is essential for creating new shared spiritual memories, and it is essential to the contemplative encounter. Silence is not the end of the contemplative encounter, but it is the heart and womb where shared words—reflections, memories, and moments of love—are continually born. It is a movement rarely seen in dialogue encounters, and its encouragement could effect a new way of being and relating with dialogue partners.

Conclusions

The contemplative encounter in the dialogue of spirituality offers an opportunity for moving beyond a common and restricting dualism in Catholic interreligious dialogue. Beyond engaging an object, in need of explanation, or a subject, permanently distinct from *me*, it is possible to engage a *thou*, a source of self-understanding, wisdom, and spiritual insight that deserves to not only be respected, but to be considered in our hearts, with the courage of faith seeking understanding, and guided by the virtues of contemplation, meditation, and prayer. It is possible to engage the religious *thou* in shared moments of prayer, reflection, contemplation, and silence. This is the core of the contemplative encounter. It is a journey both in solitude and in community towards a new horizon:

The model that needs to be developed then is not that of mutual assimilation through a reduction of faith-content but that on interpenetration and cross-fertilization of the various traditions in their diversities; not a leveling of religious identities but a dialogical openness and mutual enrichment through conversation.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer*, 291.

⁴¹ Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer*, 39.

⁴² Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 22.

⁴³ Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 106.

⁴⁴ Du Boulay, *The Cave of the Heart*, 80.

⁴⁵ Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 50–51.

The contemplative encounter does not call us to a space beyond our faiths, to a space where we relativize or ignore all that our traditions have taught us, but to a space beyond knowing, beyond relationships, beyond solidarity. It calls us to the spiritual reality of inter-being and inter-relationship. We must not forget that the journey of faith is a journey of growth, of learning, and of surprises. Are we creating spaces, in our hearts, discourses, and relationships, for joy, wonder, and surprise? This is where the contemplative encounter invites us.

While such a dialogue praxis may be vital to the life of the Catholic Church, it must not be forced or constricting. Inherent in it, and in its building, is the process of interior dialogue, of preparation, of fasting and renewal, of rooting ourselves in spiritual and religious practice, and of private, communal, and mutual listening, prayer, and reflection. Praying “entails conversion of the heart...it means deepening our sense of Ultimate Reality.”⁴⁶ This is a journey that can no longer be taken in isolation, but together, with all willing, in faith and in hope. It is a journey into the tent at the crossroads, the horizons beyond our borders.

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⁴⁶ Wright, *No Peace Without Prayer*, 65.