

CHRONICLE

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“SPIRITUAL RESOURCES AND CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS”

(A Report on the Annual International Interreligious Seminar held
in New Jersey, March 18-20, 1983)

In the recessive corridors of differing cultural histories, there remain countless expressions of human attempts to communicate with God. An individual usually seeks advice and help from others in order to ease the burden of any physical, mental and even spiritual endeavour. A grandiose desire, such as the wish to communicate with God, is surely no exception. This was one reason for an International Interreligious Seminar which took place in New Jersey, March 18-20, 1983. The Seminar was jointly organized by the Centre for Indian and Interreligious Studies, Rome, and the Dharmanivas Centre for Interreligious Research, South Orange, New Jersey, U.S.A. At the opening ceremony of the Seminar Dr. Albert Nambiaparambil, Director of CIIS, Rome, lit a cotton wick from the centrally placed Oil Lamp. Symbolically, the representatives of various religions who were present there, including the Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Chinese, Japanese, Jewish and Christian traditions followed suit.

On the first two days, the seminar was conducted at the Immaculate Conception Seminary, Darlington, New Jersey. In a scenic north Jersey setting, the seminary retained an impressive English-styled estate. The woody nature setting, with its crisp clean air and calming tranquillity, was an auspicious asset for this meeting of religions. It was in this peaceful atmosphere that over 25 scholars brought together various religious traditions, while their minds remained concerned about mankind's troubles. Hence, the seminar was on the theme “Spiritual Resources and Contemporary Problems.”

Making presentations were many internationally well-known people, such as Archbishop Jean L. Jadot, former Apostolic Delegate in the United States from 1973 to 1980, and presently President of the Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians. In his paper, "A Pastoral Response to the Human Spiritual Heritage", Archbishop Jadot asked:

...cannot we Catholics be enriched by coming to know the deep spiritual experience of people of other faiths? Cannot their devotion, their commitment to self-discipline, their sense of hospitality, their firm moral code challenge us to be better Christians?

He continued to observe that, while faced with a religion not our own, we feel threatened by its presence. Are we to give up our religious tradition? Should we demand recognition of our spiritual superiority? Must we close our doors to seemingly contradictory religious beliefs? Archbishop Jadot acknowledges that "differences of opinion and creative tensions are signs of life and seriousness. ...A faith which is dynamic and living and vital is always capable of growth and fuller understanding".

Other speakers went on to stress the vital importance of interreligious dialogue. Both Fordham University Professor, Evert Cousins, and the United Nations representative Robert Muller in his Video-taped message, called for interreligious encounters to gain a new modern perspective of the human condition. They hoped that other meetings and efforts would be made, raising the consciousness of both the academic and pastoral communities through open, critical evaluation and mutual understanding. They emphasized the need for interreligious dialogue. They said that we not only gain understanding of other peoples and faiths, but, in the process, also come to an even deeper understanding of ourselves and our own faith. Dialogue is, of course, a required method for this mutual enrichment. But how do we start? Without the psychological colouring, caused by our ego supported pride in social status (be it religious, economic, or political), we become able to approach eye-to-eye those of other faiths and beliefs. Professor David Eckel of Harvard University said we must first learn to face each other in order to face our common problems.

The main theme of the seminar was categorized into the following sections:

1. Indian Spiritual Resources and world Problems
2. Catholic Spirituality: Universal Quest
3. Judaeo-Christian-Islamic Sources
4. East Asian Sources

Representatives for these sources were S. K. Sivaraman, a leading Hindu scholar from McMaster University (Canada), and L. M. Joshi a noted Buddhist exponent from the Punjabi University (India). Monsignor Thomas P. Ivory of the Newark Archdiocese, along with Father Frank R. Podgorski, Professor at Seton Hall University, presented insights into the Roman Catholic affiliation and affinity with other sacred traditions. Other representatives included: Rabbi Ely E. Pilchik, Central Conference of American Rabbis; Dr. Charles Courtney, Professor at Drew University; William Chittick, Columbia University; Professor Julia Ching, University of Toronto; Chung-fang Yu of Rutgers State University, and Professor Charles Fu from Temple University.

In brief, these scholars reflected the various religious sources as spiritual storehouses offering solutions for our contemporary problems. They sought to reach into the depths of the real causes of such pressing afflictions as economic exploitation, poverty, social inequality, and the perilous threat of global warfare. What the above-mentioned scholars found was that each had presented invaluable insights for assisting all persons in becoming better, more moral, more religious, more civilized human beings.

Numerous ideas and concepts were presented in broad range, from the inward-looking Yogic search for the True Self, or innermost soul, to the humanistic Confucian notion of *jen*, or "human-heartedness": an all-embracing love in which the individual finds the proper social relationship with others.

The Empathic Encounter

The seminar continued with presentations scanning the manifold religious traditions in an eclectic way. Included were:

Raimundo Panikkar on "*SPIRITUALITIES IN DIALOGUE*"
University of California at Santa Barbara.

Robert Neville on "*SPIRITUALITY IN A PLURALISTIC AGE.*"

John B. Chethimattam on "*FUTURE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE.*"

Professors Neville and Chethimattam made their presentations at the Dharmanivas Center, East Orange, New Jersey, on the third day of the seminar.

An overall view of the seminar expressed the need to obtain a "new sense of multiple bonds," as Father Nambiaparamil stated. He further stressed the need to let "our focus be on the whole man". The "whole man" include his physical, mental and spiritual being, as well as his subtle interrelationship with the surrounding universe. In the true sense of the words, is not this to become truly "holy" and "catholic": "holy" from the middle English derivative "whole"; "catholic" from the secondary Greek meaning "to become perfect." To become "whole", we start by bringing together parts.

"Dialogue" implies conversation and an exchange of ideas. It is a communication. It is also a communion: a bringing together of what we hold in common. Although an International Interreligious Seminar attempts to bring spiritualities into dialogue, we cannot forget that dialogue begins on the personal level. Without the handicaps of foreign languages and differing cultural traits, isn't there already an enormous barrier between those of like background? Even among family members? Isn't these the fundamental "dialogue of life"?

The problems hindering successful dialogue are the same on an intimate personal level; whether between foreign groups or only between two individuals. Qualities such as openness, respect for the other, patience, and sincerity are required in bringing the gaps between religious brotherhoods, as well as generation gaps and cultural gaps; some will be directly enriched through interreligious dialogues. Other will benefit through an "interreligious" dialogue, by taking their own religion more seriously in searching for solutions of personal problems. On the individual or global scale, religious dialogue has great potential for improving the spiritual state of modern man. The spiritual resources are there, if only we make an earnest attempt toward putting their inspiration into actions.