

On 20th April our group held some round-talks, each one giving his/her opinion on the Dialogue so far, and the direction it should take in the future. As the days of this dialogue are drawing to a close, the discussions were not untimely.

Donald Nicholl: "I was brought up in an extremely political family. Man is a Zoon Politikon, a political animal - at least that was true of my family and myself. In the 1930's we were well aware of what was happening to the Jewish people. Even in my teens I began to read the works of Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher - particularly his tales on the Hasidim, the pious Jews. They had a lot to say to me, but above all; whatever they said, I must make part of my own life. E.g. 'I went to the Master, not in order to learn Torah from him, but how he laces and unlaces his felt shoes.' From the beginning it has to work in the nitty-gritty of daily life; otherwise I'm not interested in it. For a number of years I took part in Jewish-Christian Dialogue and then I became interested in other faiths, partly because I was asked to give lectures on religion in Kiel and California.

If in your own person you can embody some of the truths you find in other faiths, that in itself will be a work of bringing them together. They can't get together through committees! It is members of the human family who have to do it. Like what happened to Thomas Merton, the American monk - each one said: Oh, yes, he is one of us!

Relating to people of other faith, it sometimes happens, that the other realises things about his own faith, because others are helping him to see it. Like when I gave a series of lectures on Marxism, some of the students came up to me and said: This is really the first time that I've understood what Marxism is all about.

I had a lot of wonderful experiences, and feel privileged to have lived with people of other faiths; like my experience in Jerusalem. However, there comes a point when such things can easily become a hobby. And the little group of you can ~~xxx~~ become "Ecclesiola" - a little church. You all understand each other; your thoughts go around in a little circle and you write papers for one another; read each other's papers, books and go to each other's conferences etc. If that happens, you really dry up; and you don't notice it, because the people you meet are also drying up! One of the reasons why the Multi-Faith Resource Unit in Birmingham has been doing very well, is because Mary Hall and her group were not merely interested in getting to know other faiths. They were interested in this question: How can the people of different faiths living in Birmingham live as good citizens together in Birmingham. An essay in citizenship. One has to deal with people who are very fierce about things. In dialogue you constantly need 'reality markers', where one's fantasies are really tested against the touchstone of real people, real situations.

Mary Hall has been successful in this, with the help of her group.

Another group which has been successful is the "Shap group", who were particularly interested in how to integrate multifaith teachings in the curriculums of schools. They have really altered the situation in Briton over the last 15 years, and in other English speaking countries.

My special interest is: how can these different faiths, in whose name so much slaughter has taken place, how can they contribute to peace? Do they have any resources which are going to contribute to peace and the survival of the human family. So I've worked with the World Conference of Religions for Peace. Personally speaking, that has really given the direction to my interfaith life. This is always the question which is going on in my mind. This is the central thing for me.

Some of the groups to which I have belonged and still belong peripherally, they are just going on reading papers to each other.

So the question for this group probably is; what kind of work are we called to in the future? It seems to me that the group needs more continuity; not that you meet only once a year; there must be something you are doing in between; praying for each other and praying for common purposes. I wonder, because it started in Germany, whether there is not some kind of task in Germany you may be called for; I don't know.

One of the reality markers; in this world you have to be very shrewd. In the Gospel it says; you must be as gentle as a dove and as cunning as a serpent. In dealing with peace movements you have to have the gift of the discernment of spirits. You must always be aware that you are not being used by any political movements; and that you are having your own terms.

The relationship with young people in the interfaith work; the older generation is overrepresented in the official organisations. The youth group of the World Conference for Peace are trying to organise a pilgrimage to Moscow later this year. Donald suggested to give them all the cash available. If you don't have faith in the young people, you might as well give up.

Dealing with other politically motivated groups or conferences, it is like playing Yiu-Yutsu; you can throw them in all kinds of ways, by their own force; but you have to be calm and know what you are doing, and watch what's happening.

But I would really like to hear of what you have to say on how you see how your group is going to go on."

Peter Fromm: "My experience as far as the Dialogue is concerned. I utilise in an increasing way the benefits which I derived from the dialogue. It affects my daily life, not exclusively in a spiritual way, but more in a practical way - I can see what has touched me. I can come into agreement with what I have experienced, learnt; and then base it on some kind of certainty in my daily life. E.g. the limited dialogue we had in Israel.

Even though many things happened between Reinhard, Michi, Shanti and myself, the Jews did not need me, even I had requests from them. They would not dare to come to Bonn for a discussion with our congregation, even if I would invite them to Bonn.

Some of the things I learnt in the meditation course at Rockhill, I am employing in my job as a consultant. What I have got from the dialogue here, is that I have been urged to increase my activity, my involvement with those who now represent almost 8% of the German population, Muslims. Up to now I respected their faith, but they are there and I am here! Now this wall has been punctured. This would be my way of what to do with the dialogue. As far as the continuity of our group is concerned: it really needs considerable thinking and reconsiderations of the particular effort. Each one has his/her own obligations towards family, centre or whatever. It's not so easy as to say: my battery has been recharged with Mysticism, so I go there with my pencil and go there! At most, once a year, we meet - it costs a lot of money."

Shanti:" This dialogue gives a lot of inspiration, strength and help to work in one's own field. It is like a source. I let it much more happen without too much organising. It may suddenly grow into another dimension, without having a preconceived aim. Somehow my life is just starting. I am only now free from my job, and also from my marriage; now I have my duty towards my parents; I will have some kind of gathering place for meditation at my parents' home and I will see what comes out of it. I think it comes by itself."

Ananda:"Living in a multi-racial, multi-religious society such as Birmingham, one lives very very close together and situations arise in daily life, going to the shop, the post office. In Galle, where I live, they had some riots between Sinhalese and Muslims in the beginning of this century; the population of Muslims in Galle is ca. 25%, much higher than the average in the country, whereas where we are living is 99.9% Buddhist, only 12 Miles away from Galle - so I live in a sense quite isolated. When a situation would arise, a lot of misunderstanding will be prevented as a result of the dialogue, where we get a chance of living with people from different faiths. In this situation of course, we see only a fraction of Islam, in Pakistan; we are getting into the spiritual dimension of Islam, a beautiful way, but I have not been confronted with the political or with the other organised, maybe missionary aspects of Islam, the practical daily life - we have only seen a little bit, I think a very good part of it. The other thing is: the spiritual side and the practical side of life - as Donald has beautifully mentioned: wherever you turn your face, you see the face of God! - so not to separate too much what is going on spiritually and the human relationship: they are all part of one Whole.

We need steps in the Dialogue in the future also, not only in the group, but in our own life. To overcome barriers, we can take initiatives. "

Donald: "Last year when I was giving a course in Birmingham on 'Spirituality for all', there was much agreement between faith, that it is really a "Scientia cordis", a science of the heart. There is very much agreement on this, on how you have to behave, but there is a great struggle in the group between the "spiritualists" and the "activists". This seems to me a false dichotomy. The classical mystical christian teacher, St. John of the Cross, who lived in the 16th century, when the Spanish empire was very cruel towards the Indians; Spain was amassing wealth from Latin America, and yet, in St. John's writings you get no reference whatsoever to the injustice in the world. It wasn't that he had not made contact with it - he was working as a Brancardier in a hospital etc., but in those days you could live a mystical life in your convent or in your little community. But it seems to me now, that there has been a change in human consciousness and that you can no longer pretend that you are not aware of what is going on in the world - of course you can pretend, but it is pretension. Virtually all the mystics of the 20th century become prophets, in the sense: they make people aware of the injustice in the world, which is what the prophet was always doing. And confronting the powers in the world which are responsible for this injustice. I have a feeling that the mystical path in the late 20th century inevitably leads into prophetic action, i.e. that you confront the powers in the world that are producing this injustice. A consequence of this is, that if one is really going to live at peace with oneself, then one must in some sense or another - maybe it's only by prayer -, but you must be working for peace and justice. I don't see how one can live at peace in the late 20th cent. aware of all what is happening, without taking into your consciousness, and therefore into your actions the condition of the whole of the rest of the human family."

Ananda: "Not through social, economic or political revolution?"

Don: "One cannot really prescribe anything. People have different paths. Some people have such powerful prayer, that their prayer in itself is a contribution to that. When I study these people, it seems that they are just drawn into this situation: e.g. Vinoba Bhave in India, Khan in Pakistan."

Reinhard: "About our Dialogue. Only this word, dialogue, will vanish more and more. It cannot describe the importance, which it symbolises. It is life itself which in Dialogue. It is simply the accent, which is this life, at each place in the world, sharing - or.. it refuses. So this, in truth, not hypocritically, without knowing for him where you are guided, where you are led, but with all your strengths do what you have to do at this place, NOW, without looking at other people.

Sharing your life with the one next to you. So, I feel from my own personal things, that I come to a certain order, but I don't know exactly what happens and what shall I do ? Till now I think the pattern of what I need to share my life with the next person, is for me to be married with my wife Benita, with ALL implications and not to leave out any moment, any joy, any burden, any ache. And from this point of view it seems to me that I should start like a stone, thrown in the water and the waves will spread over the surface. So perhaps a next ring should come. And I don't know how it can be. Perhaps in my church, to visit my brothers and my sisters in their convents - but that's only a little. They have very little time - perhaps I can come once a year or so; there's no basis to work any further. I don't know how to share this, my life with the next who are coming my way. Therefore I said to Peter, you must help me. I have the feeling that most things around us are dying. If we can get to the source to get water, so they can become green again. I know that this is what has happened, and what is always being created. But we are blind. We don't see, that this water makes the desert green. The water is there, but how to live in this water. For example, for you (Don) the peace movement is your vocation in a living dialogue. Each one of us can find what is his vocation. Michael has his community and I know how much it is growing; new things and new seeds. And Peter, I know how he is a heavy worker - he must be a rock to go through the mountains he has to go. Halima, I think there are so many challenges to give your faith and to change your faith into a new world. I could perhaps say you are getting a shower from Razvi father (Mehdi) and you will give it to others. Deepal, I am convinced, I can feel so deep how you are involved in such sharing. And Ananda is for me always an example to be here, present in this place, without prejudice. In all places he would be one of the persons with most and I think each place where he works (inaudible).... I am not looking for an organisation. It seems we only have to dive into the life stream, nothing else."

Peter: " A question which arises in me is two-fold; first: Can idealism be shared, and in what way ? Second question: Especially in the light of Govind's comments of his not coming: Is the dialogue a highly personal experience, which ripens to all taste, enjoyment, but remains in one little place, yourself ? In my view, if we could find words, thoughts, aspects, which are commonly comprehensible, that our really unique experience can be transported, even mentioned to others, that they might get a feel, secondly that they might be "caught" by that what is said. I think there is a great thirst in the world for what we are doing. There are shutters, which keep out the rain; keeping up the umbrella of daily conformity:

Peter: My thesis is: we can only invite those who are thirsty, that they might be ready to fold the umbrella and see what is beyond... And that :click... and see the beyond is what I like to do here.

Reinhard: I like that image very much, because it show that it is not the idealism which matters; it is the rain which matters. I would like to say: Look, desert, it rains !

Ananda: But it takes some courage to make yourself vulnerable to other influences. One is so much caught up in one's own pattern, which makes you relatively secure. You hang on to that relative security, which is NO security. In Western countries people have probably no time to get out of their pattern. They have lots of time to watch television, but not for these kind of things. If there is no actual situation in your surroundings, where you are confronted with it, there is no real need for getting out - there is no problem; why should we create one ?

But for people living in a concrete situation and who don't know how to get out of it; dialogue becomes a necessity.

Donald: Community in Corinthians is the ideal - well Jerry, have you ever encountered such a community amongst Christians ? Not in the West, but in Latin America, where it is a matter of life and death - otherwise it becomes a hobby. When you realise that life is a choice between Paradise and the other place (hell); and the world as it now is, we are faced with a choice of life or death, the chances of the human family surviving (in terms of probability) are very small. Once you see that, you don't have any difficulty in knowing what to do! If not, there is always a lesser degree of seriousness of commitment.

Ananda: To feel the urgency; once it becomes a burning sensation (right!) there is no choice left to do certain things. Sometimes we forget the urgency and we fall back in our own complacency.

Michael: I think to share what we are experiencing with our brothers in the church, it is not possible in any other way than we do, Reinhard. I can't give a lecture about our experiences in dialogue. I only can go together with a Muslim (a german speaking Turk e.g.) into a convent and give an opportunity to see Islam as a real spiritual, lively, religion with personal encouragement, day by day through prayer. In Germany there is a living Turkish Muslim community; they have their mosque

Halima: We could contact the Naqshband community in Hamburg and see.

Ananda: From our personal experience; whether we are able to give enough room to the other person is one thing; but this cannot be taught to another person, without that person going through the same experience. You cannot force meditation onto anybody; you cannot force openness. But for people living in a minority situation, just to know that there are people taking an interest might be a real stimulus for them to open

and also for the environment, to get a better understanding of them. Donald: So many in the faith organisations thought to get the leaders of these communities together, to see if we ought to establish an inter-faith network, i.e. a centre which would disseminate news about interfaith work - because very often we seem to duplicate work. And it was a very edifying experience: 70 people came together: Sikhs, different kind of Hindus, Muslims, Bah'ais, Christians. We met at 10 a.m. in London and didn't finish till 4 p.m. and we did not hear any hostility or alienation. Why do you think this was? Maybe because almost all these leaders had a long experience in Dialogue. They know that when someone puts something rather badly, not to take offence, but to let it ride a bit and then let it come out. Or some brother of his own community will get up and correct him. However, on the whole they were not interested in theological issues; they were mainly concerned about getting their separate schools in the same way that the Christians do. How are you Christians going to help us about Halal slaughtering? What are you going to do about the business of the call from the Minaret? If these people are going to have any trust in you, you have to respond to their questions, their concerns.

My sister is doing just as much as myself; although she has no formal education, she goes and teaches English to the Pakistani women in Halifax! It should really start at that kind of level. They are great friends now. Of course one could meet one's university friends and have a different kind of discussion. But if one wants to go deeper, one has to respond to them as a community, not only to some interested individuals.

Halima: "The situation in England seems to be very different from the situation in Germany. E.g. in Hamburg, most religious communities don't even know each other. We in the Islamic centre have tried to find out how many Muslim communities there are and that was impossible. We think there are ca. 14-15 mosques, but we are not sure about that. Most of the German newly converted Muslims are not organised. Also, there are political and national barriers, which prevent people from attending each other's meetings. In Germany it is still not possible to have Islamic religious instruction in school. Also, things pertaining to family law, Halal slaughtering etc. are also not properly regulated. The Church Council of Immigrant Workers are experimenting with the Shariah. I have to explain to them what it is."

Donald: Yes, obstacles are reality markers!

Michael: So far I have been only once to the Friday prayers in the mosque in Flenburg, after two meetings to get through to them. I was not allowed inside the prayer hall, but sat in a separate room with a window.

Peter: When Donald told about his sister teaching English to the Pakistani ladies, it struck me. In that small cell, at that level, these Pakistani ladies really see a light in their life through your sister! And I think that is marvellous. On the other hand, I do not see the Dialogue as a platform for solving social, community problems. This may be a task too; we may be tempted to stick to that. I, Peter Fromm, as some kind of activist, I will stick to our kind of Dialogue, for a higher purpose, until the problem is solved. And I will do it together with others. I really don't know - to use marketing jargon - how to sell the Dialogue! Those who are willing to listen, with energy and enthusiasm, they will certainly get caught. The conditions of my friends apparently have improved, according to my standards, because Peter got involved. If they say their condition has improved, I believe it. It is existential, decided at the bottom.

Donald: Now I'm not on anybody's pay-roll, I have a lot of time to see. I think those people who don't have to work in fields and factories, and who have had education, they have an obligation to see what other people find difficult to see. Dramatic situations can be easily seen, but subtle things are going on all the time, which are difficult to discern. E.g. in England if you are unemployed, you are going to live 10 years less than those in the other rich part; children are going to die in greater numbers; the incidence of mental illness is so much higher - death is going on all the time, in everyday situations! So, I think it is my job to share with other people what I see. And what I see throughout the whole earth and the human family is that we are confronted with the choice of life or death.

Ananda: Thinking of Rupert Sheldrake's morphogenetic field theory: when something is happening somewhere in the universe, it has an impact on all other places. Experiments in small groups in dialogue will also have their effect on the universe and this earth.

Shanti: We are tuning in, we are becoming aware of what is going on. It is having a view in time, which is due to happen.

Ananda: Yes, like the astrologer who told Deepal, without knowing him, that he would be going to a foreign country, with a friend, for some religious purpose. This was somewhere in the air, and he just "picked it up". Now are we just helpless people, rods in a big machine, or do we have the ability to help the machine run a bit smoother? Do we have any kind of initiative, or are we just enacting the role imposed by other forces?

Shanti: For myself, it just takes place and we become aware, more and more.

Reinhard: Yes, it takes place, but also this little rod in the machine can help it run more smoothly, but at the same time, there are other places in the same machine like sand - squeek, gnaw, crack! Perhaps, at least in the Judeo-Christian Muslim tradition, that it does not come in a smooth evolution, but at a certain point there is a great break.

Then you could say, that there comes a whole new arrangement in the whole machine, in the world. We cannot take this simile any further. This takes place now also, not only then. This is an open door for me. Don: The Sheikh has just come back and he will be back with us soon. In Berkely there is a very nice Jesuit called Father Dan Mohagan. Dan and I were invited to a dialogue with three Tibetan Lamas, in the home of three Benedictine brothers. So we got there and there were three Lamas, 2 interpreters, Dan and myself, the three brothers and Dan's recording machine. We began at 10 a.m. Dan began to question the Lamas through the interpreter. There seemed to be not much substance in the answers. "In the dialogue one must be patient" I could see Dan think. He would put a metaphysical question and he would get some nonsensical answer. By about 11.30 a.m. it was clear that it was not going to work and we all left. Three days later, the Benedictine brothers had been playing the recordings and discovered what was going on - after every metaphysical question Dan put, he got the exact same answer, put in different ways, viz.: If you are interested in Tibetan ^{religious tradition,} Buddhism, help the Tibetan refugees. In other words, until you have done that, you are not in a position to receive our teaching ! That's a very powerful thing, in the Tibetan tradition, you cannot move to the next stage, until and unless you have completed the previous stages. They were saying to us: "How serious are you?"

Peter: Don, I do not ask you for a ready plan, but for a far-fetching provocative idea, if possible. You have almost a dream - really going to the roots, where you want to put the nourishment.

Don: Well, I gave a talk in Tantoor (Jerusalem) which provoked greatly. I asked myself: Is there a locus classicus for doing theology ? Which usually means: Is there a text from which you begin? in theology.

Let's forget about a text; let's ask if there is a physical place from where you do theology. Tantoor, our place, was up on a hill and it had succeeded a Crusader order. When I first saw it, I said: That's a Crusader institute; It looks down on Bethlehem and Jerusalem and it has nothing to do with the people. So the place already determines the ideology to some extent. Very often your physical position determines your ideology, which is your social position position determines your ideology.

Christians asked: Is the Christian revelation of such a kind, that from it you can know in what place you ^{should} do theology? So, I said: Well the central revelation of Christianity is that God is three personed: a community of persons, or a personed community. So you cannot do theology in isolation - you have to do it in community. Secondly, God is not masculin, God is beyond gender. Traditional theology has neglected the "feminine side of God", which is a wrong term. Men and women must be together.

Thirdly, Jesus is constantly saying: You've got to be like children, so there must be children also there. It must be located near those (Math.22) who are hungry and poor etc. The physical place has to be like that. If you look at the history, it has been contrary to that: it began in Bishop's homes, Monasteries and eventually in Universities, male celibate, isolated and in the Anglican Church from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge - from a privileged position.

Nowadays, the Jesuites in England are doing an enormous amount of spiritual exercises, they produce a course on spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius - 1 month or 3 months, which costs £1.500.- which equals about 30 weeks of unemployment benefit for a couple. Who can afford a retreat like that? Only privileged people. So I said, why don't you go to the unemployed people; they need it more !.

When Clovis Buf was asked: How can Europeans develop a kind of liberation theology for Europe, the first thing he said was: they must realise first, that they haven't to change their brains; they've got to change their location! They need to move out of these privileged positions; get on their feet!

A book by Michael Harrington, "The other America"- which Pres. Kennedy liked, has the thesis: Americans, in order to live in their city, they ~~have to~~ believe that there are no blacks, no Porto Ricans, no poor in their city - because they never see them - they go up and down the same lanes always. So he went through the list of the other America, which middle class Americans never see: Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Mexicans etc. However, Harrington did not see..... the Indians. So, the very failure of his book illustrates the power of his thesis! Who do we see? E.g. I lived in Jerusalem for 4 years. I went into a huge Benedictine monastery being built. The Arab workman, chipping the stones, elderly, breathing the dust into his lungs - and I see all the chisel marks, to make a nice place for these monks to contemplate? You know, this can't go on! It don't make any kind of sense! This is the way I tend to see the world. So, when I went into Dadyal the other day, I thought: It's good to be amongst the people who bear the burden of history. I'm not exempting myself from a failure to respond to these conditions, but one mustn't change one's opinion, so that one can remain comfortable oneself.

My wife and children would be having a laugh when they would see what has been going on here for the last ten minutes; because sometimes I get a bit "between the teeth", you know! So, there you are !

Peter: Thank you very much, Don.

Don: Johnson Benis' words: "After the miling street, with its swelter and its sin, who has given me this sweet, and given my brother dust to eat. When does his wage come in?" - as they say in California: This is "Right on!"

However, we should not accuse anyone. There is no text in the Scriptures which is menacing. All texts are ~~supposed~~ ^{meant} to be liberating! -46-

Ananda: Not to be closed off from society. To be in touch with the reality markers. The possibility of meeting a whole month per year is really a luxury. The implementation into our daily life is what we can learn from these kind of insights, and we will be stimulated to implement these findings into our own environment.

Deepal: I was looking at the dialogue; I made a few observations; I saw it in three facets: 1: it provides each of us a personal chance of having a dialogue with oneself; it actually helps one to progress spiritually; 2: when you are confronted with foreign beliefs and environment, your horizon expands, with regard to the general relationships; 3: I wanted to find out what is the impact of this dialogue on the whole? So, while trying to make something out of that, it reminded me of a story: "Mashallah!" - Sheikh Rahid came into the room: Sorry for being late! So, this story is in the Buddhist literature. A time comes, when the life span of man reduces; tension of war increases: war and fighting. Some people see this as bad; they resort to quiet places and try to live well. This gives an effect to increase the life span of these people and their followers. I have no belief that this is that period. And the other thing I observed in myself was the psychological situation of human beings; different needs arise in you as you evolve: starting with your physical needs, then your love and belonging needs etc. etc. and then you try to find out beyond what you can see. Then one makes more effort and takes a serious interest in these things beyond the ordinary experiences. The other element is this not seeing poor or suffering. I personally experience this very much. I leave the village early morning and move with the richest in Colombo- all people who want to buy and buy. I don't see the real suffering of people. Then I have some friends who are doctors who see the real suffering of people. Whenever I call them and they relate, it really touches me; it's even difficult to imagine. But suffering is going on. It is like sleeping in one room with Peter: the real challenge comes actually when I want to sleep after waking up - when you are really open there is no conflict; the conflict arises when you have some choice. So, I think, the Dialogue has completed a certain cycle ' Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam. Now, it should be shared with the broader masses. Is there a crowd who want to know about it? If we unrealistically assume that there is, it may be a waste. In the third world countries, there is suffering; for them this kind of dialogue is not palatable; they have to fulfill their basic needs first. We are like guinea pigs: in a laboratory; we are undergoing tremendous pressures, pains, difficulties - for what? If it is only for our benefit, it's not sufficient. In such moments, people like you, Donald, can contribute a lot.