

RETHINKING INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE FOR OUR TIMES

For the December public lecture by Zoom of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life, Rev Dr Peniel Rajkumar, the Programme Executive for Inter-Religious Dialogue and Co-operation of the World Council of Churches began by quoting the late Lamin Sanneh: “For all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling. For God it is the cornerstone of universal dialogue.” Dr Rajkumar asked his over 50 listeners to cherish God who created difference.

He characterized the present religious culture as shaped by one of the idols of our time, a global financial system that enriches a few and impoverishes many. He presented inter-religious dialogue as a resistance to this current expression of ‘empire’ and defined dialogue as ‘a means of living our faith in Christ in the service of community with one’s neighbours’ (from the Chiang Mai statement of 1977). A ‘dialogue of the hands’ is a means of justice and peace, for ‘we continue to support the empire by default unless we look for oppressed places to find alternatives’. Thus, Dr Rajkumar argued that we should look at inter-religious dialogue from the perspective of the marginalised. In its understanding of the neighbour, Christian faith sees ‘the other’ not as an object, but as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, an agent of God’s action. Thus we are evangelized by those of other faiths with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He criticized some interreligious dialogue as an activity of elites that focused on theology and theory and not on practical action in communities, comparing it to discussions on the top floor of a high-rise building while on the ground floor a fire is raging out of control. The process of dialogue is determined by its participants and so he argued that people from the grass-roots, particularly women should also be included, as actors on the ground who make a real difference.

He identified the most pervasive current legal threat against Christians is to present them as either the victims or prosecutors of forced conversions. Such a view does not think that marginalised people are able to make their own decisions. To call such people ‘rice-bag Christians’ is to objectify such converts from an elitist view of freewill or autonomy. Such criticism is not made of converts from the upper castes.

Dr Rajkumar’s lecture stimulated his audience to think and triggered more questions than could be addressed in the time available.

Reflection and debate after the lecture asked how those at the margins are defined. It is often the elites who define them politically and argue that their religion is shaped by their political views. This is true both of those who seek to explain their conversion as an exercise of their freedom and of those who seek to explain it as an example of ‘rice-bag Christians’.

How do the poor define themselves in religious terms? Vinay Samuel argues that they act because of their experience of God, not because they are exercising a right to act or convert. He writes,

“For the poor, particularly in India, conversion is the pathway to dignity and significance in an Indian culture that had crushed their will and trampled on their identity. Their identity was not self-made with a strong will to resist oppressive forces. It was a crushed identity. Acceptance as members of God’s family produces true inner release and a sense of being blessed. The poor long for inner release – the healing of a crushed soul and an embrace that made them know they belonged to God and His family that healed and empowered them within. At the heart of their new identity are healing and belonging and that is their empowerment. Experience of poverty is not just economic deprivation and political marginalization. It is a daily experience of obnoxious behaviour that assaults one’s sense of self, the bigotry that cuts deep, the generalised prejudice, negative attitudes, the discrimination and stereotyping. Healed within and belonging to God’s family is the Identity they seek.”

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