



THE ENCOUNTER OF RELIGIONS AND THE HARMONY OF CULTURES

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### Introduction

"In questions of religious encounter this century has been marked by a transition from a phase of aggression, criticism, and conflict to one of conversation or dialogue."

This positive statement was given by Juha Pentikäinen as the opening words for an international symposium on the Encounter of Religions at the University of Helsinki in September 1975 - the proceedings were published in TEMENOS, Studies in Comparative Religion presented by Scholars in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, in volume 12 in 1976.

In spite of the cold war between East and West the world then seemed to be on its way towards the harmony of cultures. The ecumenical movement was flourishing and religions were meeting each other in a more friendly way than before.

Later developments on our planet have shown that this diagnosis was far too optimistic. President Anwar Sadat was soon murdered accompanied by Indira Gandhi and many other political and religious leaders; the still unsettled severe wars on the Gulf Area were to come.

Europe at that time seemed to be the most secure continent on Tellus after the political steps against the cold war achieved at the European Security and Cooperation Conference held in Helsinki 1975. The boundaries, at least in Europe, then seemed to be eternal on the basis of the agreement signed in Helsinki by the leaders of the 35 countries. The collapse of Communism and the Soviet Union, as well as Yugoslavia at the turn of the 1980's invalidated the post-war balance, starting developments which in the Mid-1990's have not yet come to their end. Recent history anyhow shows that such efforts as Communism, Marxism and Maoism to make up 'non-religious societies' have been unsuccessful. Human mind has been shown to be more interested in religious affairs than it had been thought in these and other materialistic and antropocentric ideologies born during the previous as well as this century.

When the world is approaching the beginning of the 3rd Millennium our evident diagnosis is that there are more unsolved crises than ever before in the world. Many of them have been labelled to be religious in spite of the fact that the roots of the conflicts often are historical and ethnic. In front of the still unsolved Bosnian crisis with all its political, religious and social variables, including the Christian-Moslem confrontation, we may today ask what is left out of "the Spirit of Helsinki" of the Mid-1970's in the contemporary world.

#### About the concept of religion

The very concept of religion needs reconsideration in the contemporary world. It has been difficult for the scholars of religions to present such a brief statement which at the same time would include the most essential about religiosity and might be valid as far as every literate and illiterate religion in the world is concerned. One of the many efforts to define religion was made using the criterion of the concept of 'god' or 'deity' before scholars found that Buddhism as one of the so-called world religions at least in theory is an 'atheistic' religion.

The concept of religion found in most European languages comes from a Latin word "religio". The concept in particular includes the idea about being dependent from something 'divine'. The whole point of view is very western, however, and such an idea is completely unknown in many cultures. In other words, there are many cultures in the world which are very religious but have got along without concepts like this in respective languages.

The fact that there are more religions today than ever before also demands the reconsideration of the concept. It is possible to approach the field usually called "religion" from five angles which seem to be found in all the literate and non-literate societies it has been possible to study so far (more thoroughly in Juha Pentikäinen's monograph "Oral Repertoire and World View, FFC No. 219, Helsinki 1978):

1. The cognitive dimension comprises the conscious, intellectual factors such as an individual's or society's awareness of their religion, their "Weltanschauung", their view of the universe, and the world, of the system of values, of the supernatural figures that dominate their beliefs, etc. Religion is usually characterized by the fact that people are convinced of the existence of one or more supernatural powers who watch over their fates, their needs and their values.

2. The affection level refers to the problems surrounding religious feelings, attitudes, and experiences. Man feels that he is dependent on something supernatural and, at the same time, feels some kind of link with it. A religious experience is a state of interaction between the natural and the supernatural, a state in which a religious person or rather, tradition acting through him, actualizes a meeting with one of the figures that dominate his beliefs.

3. The conative aspect in religion is seen on the actional level as a form of behaviour. Included here are rites,

social conventions, such as sacrifices, prayers and claims with the aid of which the individual or society can achieve by traditional methods some kind of union with religious figures. Besides ritual, religions usually presuppose certain ethical behaviour, the observation of certain norms in order that the rewards promised by the religion may be obtained and the punishments avoided.

4. The social factor forms a fundamental part of every religion. Religion presupposes the existence of a group whose duty it is to watch over views and to carry out certain tasks. The members of this group work together in order to achieve the goals imposed on them by the religion.

5. The cultural level of religion concerns the dependence of religion, both in time and space, on the ecological, social and cultural environment in which the religion is practised.

How do religions meet today?

Memory is said to be generational. History and even our own short experience shows that religious encounter is a very multifaceted problem, and dialogue is only one of the ways in seeking forms for the resolution of problems linked to the relationships between religions.

In a typology of religious encounters, the following seven models may be recognized among others and are more thoroughly discussed in the report.

The first may be characterized as an effort to create some kind of common language in the area of religions, a kind of 'religious Esperanto', or one of the many more or less successful efforts for the 'one common world religion'. The second is the 'continuation of mutual aggression', the third one is expressed by the many different variants for the 'mixture of religions' or the forms of 'syncretism', the fourth 'gradual efforts to bring about a reapproachment between religions' or 'convergence'. The fifth is the peaceful coexistence of religions or a 'pluralistic state', the sixth their open confrontation in a 'dialogue' proper, and the seventh the direct 'cooperation of religions'.

Particularly in the recent history of western thought, the exaggerated emphasis on the dialogue aspect may have led to the perceptual imbalance which is noted in the huge literature dealing with the field evidenced most extremely in the often either consciously or nonconsciously expressed view that in the encounter of religions it were always a question of dialogue. Approaching religious encounter solely on the ideological or cognitive level may, however, lead to errors of perspective.

Within the 'comparative' study of religions, also called as the 'history of religions', there has prevailed a great desire to emphasize the multi-dimensionality of religious encounters. Religions form one interesting component in that multi-faceted reciprocity within the scope of which ideologies, cultures, societies and individuals meet in the contemporary world. The science of religion studies religion and its

alternatives, also "non-religion", holistically as a part of the culture and social environment in which that religion occurs sometimes 'hidden' or 'forbidden'. Encounter of religions is basically a matter of reciprocity and interaction between world views and cultures and individuals.

In the former history of the discipline of study of religions, the distribution of religions was usually shown by geographical maps. Such recent global developments as air and water pollution, urbanization and industrialization, wars, new migrations and invasions of refugees, emigrants and immigrants have, however, invalidated the old 'religion and area' hypothesis. Religions today rather meet in the streets and ghettos of the urban world than in the peaceful landscapes only; religions and world views meet where people meet in the transit halls of their lives and also deaths, very often even inside families.

In the study of religions, we are not only interested in that encounter which takes place, so to speak, on the upper level of religious hierarchies, e.g. in the headquarters of the ecumenical talks between religious leaders, conciles or other organized dialogues. It is equally important to analyze those informal situations in which religions encounter one another. In this paper, examples on religious encounters, on the following levels among others are discussed: 1. universal, 2. country and state, 3. regional, 4. local, 5. social, 6. individual.

#### Islam in the focus

As far as the established major religions are concerned particular emphasis today should be directed to the encounter between the two biggest bodies inside the family of religions: Christianity and Islam. Academic study of religions started in the western world on the early 19th Century due to the history of thought inspired by philosophers of the Enlightenment Period. Typically enough, the equivalent Arabic concept for 'religion' (dín) has been recognized in singular only; i.e. the only "dín" for a devout Moslem is Islam. At the same time such an important fact should be taken into consideration that Islam for a Moslem is not a religion in the western meaning of the word but rather 'a way of life' to live as an individual, a Moslem society (umma) within an Islamic state. The responsible caretaking for Moslem brothers is one of the essential items in Islam to such an extent that conversion from it is considered to be an almost criminal matter breaking all the ties with his/her Moslem family, relatives and the whole society.

Various approaches of Islamic Studies have been practiced in Europe at least a century and a half, starting with the first scholarly printed edition of the Qur'an by Gustav Fluegel in 1834. I principally agree with Jacques Waardenburg, according to whom three avenues in Islamic Studies may be distinguished (I.C.M.R. Vol. 1, No. 1, 1990): Humanities, social sciences and Islamic studies. Although our emphases are somewhat different we quote Waardenburg's statement which - within the context of Islam - is accordingly discussed more thoroughly in the revised version of the paper.

"The humanities study the languages, texts and history

of Islam as a civilisation and religion. The main difficulty confronting them is to understand properly the texts studied. Anthropology, sociology and political science constitute the main contribution of the social sciences. Here the main difficulty lies in explaining religious data correctly within their context. In religious studies, the third avenue, the main problem is to interpret correctly the way in which Muslim communities and persons have understood their cultural tradition and the religious elements which belong to it. Focusing on the people's intentions which make Islam a religion rather than a social system or ideology, enables Islam to be understood from the perspective of religious studies."

### Scientology as a New Religion

It is typical of the so-called new religions that many of them have been labelled as "religions" on behalf of the scholars only. Instead of firmly established formalities, several new religious movements prefer to be quite unorganized bodies, yoga or meditation groups without any organizations. In their later phases, if necessary, some of them have become organized as registered or even scientific societies in respective countries.

The Church of Scientology is one of the few which have made strong efforts to become acknowledged as religious bodies. Its strong wish to become recognized as a 'church' very well fits into the criteria of religion described above.

As far as the cognitive dimension is concerned the Church of Scientology has a full library of texts written by its founder Ron Hubbard. In its dogmatics the Church is related to the teachings in Hubbard's well-known texts on Dianetics. It has its own mythology related to the life and the teachings of its founder. Typically enough, there is a room dedicated to the founder in the headquarters of the Church all over the world with his pictures and maritime symbols related to his career, even his favourite cigarettes.

When the religious organization was established, the Scientology world view (having its background in the word "scios") has tried to find more universal expressions emphasizing its spiritual connections with such eastern religions as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. The concept of 'god' exists in Scientology teachings but it is less personal than in Christianity, Islam and other theistic religions, a kind of 'Supreme Being' as the highest stage of the 8 Dynamics, 'God Dynamic'. The doctrine on "thetan" is related to early and new Gnosticism, that on reincarnation to Hinduism and Buddhism.

The Church of Scientology may thus be considered syncretic in its teachings. Its own choice to be called a 'church', according to a Christian model, may be interpreted to be in connection with its American roots related to the history of American society.

On the basis of our contacts with some members of the Church in the headquarters of the Church in Scandinavian countries, we have recognized that for these people the Church offers both such models for their life style and such

experiences as well which can be called religious (the affection and conative level). Scientologists, for example, tell about their former lives and reincarnations. In the process of auditing and spiritual consulting new ways for experiences are offered and sought for when moving from step to another. Instead of conversion in a Christian way we may speak about a solution when a person makes his/her decision to follow the founder and to become a believer. This kind of process is just one of the typical features of religion to be recognized in Scientology too.

The conative aspects of religion are emphasized in the ritual handbooks covering the human life cycle (name giving, wedding, burial ceremonies) as well as the annual course with its own memorial calendar commemorating the founder. It is characteristic of scientologists that they usually establish families among themselves. The Church itself seems to be a big family for all of them to take part in auditing and all the other offerings of the society. The Church of Scientology with all its functions is a 'way of life' for people attached to it. Its maritime Flag mythology forms the basis for its social structure. It is an inner circle for those who have made a lifetime promise for the Church.

The Church of Scientology today very actively takes part in interreligious dialogue with representatives of the big world religions as well as such new religions as the Unification Church, Neo-Hinduistic and -Buddhistic movements. In these discussions not only religious issues are dealt with but questions on peace and war, ecology and pollution, the future of family, the role of women, etc. and new programs and functions are established on a world wide basis. Experiences from various countries also tell about aggression and oppression experienced by the members of these bodies. From time to time controversies have brought up difficult problems and confused in the public opinion the picture of the basically religious nature of these movements.

The Church of Scientology has been recognized as a 'new religion' in all recent handbooks published by historians of religions in various countries (Barker, Holm, Melton, Wilson, etc.) Its comprehensive social organization with all its networks and cultural infrastructures is another important testimony of its religious nature. According to our opinion, there are many reasons why Scientology may be considered to be a modern Western-born religion in the very western meaning of the word 'religion'.