

Hospitality as a Condition for Dialogue: The Monastic Interreligious Experience

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包容作為對話的基礎： 隱修群體宗教交流經驗

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[ABSTRACT] Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) plays a crucial and unique role in bridging the gap between Catholics and other religions by focusing particularly on the interreligious dialogue of spiritual experience. The mission of MID has evolved from the original goal of developing Catholic monastic life in Asia to the concern for shaping a global culture of peace and more recently to articulating a new way of being Christian in an interreligious environment. At the core of the movement is hospitality as an interreligious virtue. While some have questioned the interest of Catholic monks in the spiritual practices of other traditions, extensive monastic experience bears witness to the positive fruits of interreligious exploration. The dialogues of monastics from different traditions have repeatedly shown that differences need not be obstacles but can be occasions for enrichment and reconciliation. The condition for dialogue is not flattening out the differences between religions but creating a space that allows them to be fully received. Hospitality is the space where this meeting takes place.

Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) plays a crucial and unique role in the bridging of gaps among religions as encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II. In his statement to the Secretariat for non-Christian Religions in 1984, John Paul II gave this reference: “All Christians are called to dialogue. While it is important that certain individuals have specialized training in this area, others also have an important contribution to make. I am thinking in particular of the intermonastic dialogue and that of other movements, groups, and institutions.”¹ MID is essentially a sharing of religious paths and experiences. It gathers persons who, in spite of their differences, recognize one another in the fact that they are on a journey towards one and the same mystery, towards one and the same transcendence. Hence, the encounters among Christian, Buddhist and Hindu monks and, to a lesser extent, spiritual Muslims and Jews, have inspired the Vatican to make of the “dialogue on religious experience” the fourth type of dialogue after the dialogues of life, action and theological exchange.

Many Christians, whether they are priests, religious or laity, currently adopt this dialogical approach. While this new type of dialogue is not reserved solely to them, monks have however shown the way in an unequalled manner; they are the principal promoters for a new ecclesial consciousness. They open up channels by inviting all the baptized to engage in it. It is from this perspective that MID ended their international news bulletin that had centered essentially on monastic initiatives, to give birth in 2011 to *Dilatato Corde*, a multilingual review open to all on the dialogue of religious experience.²

¹ “Dialogue is part of the mission of the church,” in *Documentation catholique* Vol. 10 (20 May 1984), p. 522.

² See <<http://dimmid.org/index.asp?>>

In order to do justice to this promising interreligious movement, I will limit myself to a few historical and spiritual considerations. The first three parts of the text each present an important moment in its development as well as in its form and direction. From its beginnings, the monks' dialogue has responded to the missional call to implant the contemplative tradition beyond the West, especially in Asia. In the late 1970s, this central objective was superseded by the concern to contribute to the development of a culture of peace on a global scale. Then, in the 1990s, with the creation of a structure independent of missionary intentions, the emphasis was placed on the will to articulate, at the heart of the Church, a new way of being Christian in the world. The fourth part of the text presents some elements to understand the nature of hospitality, which is at the core of this movement and which the monks propose as a primary condition for dialogue.³

³ For a more exhaustive study see Fabrice Blée, *The Third Desert. The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011); idem, "Shaping a New Ecological Consciousness. Insights from the Spirituality of Interreligious Dialogue," in Donald Mitchell and William Skudlarek, eds., *Green Monasticism. A Buddhist-Catholic Response to an Environmental Calamity* (New York: Lantern Books, 2010), pp. 167-179; "Die Wüste der Alterität. Spirituelle Erfahrung im intermonastischen Dialog," in Karl Baier, ed., *Spiritualität. Zugänge, Traditionen, Dialog* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), pp. 249-266; "Podwójna przynależność religijna i dialog międzymonastyczny," in *Annales Missiologici Posnaniensis* Vol. 14 (2004), pp. 7-28; "Double appartenance religieuse et dialogue interreligieux monastique," in *Mission* Vol. 10 (2003), pp. 9-32; "Aux frontières du silence. Exploration du dialogue interreligieux monastique," in *Théologiques* Vol. 7/2 (Fall 1999), pp. 79-94; "Dialogue et nouveau monastique," in *La Vie spirituelle* Vol. 731 (June 1999), pp. 257-270.

A Missionary Requirement

The world was no longer the same after the Second World War. With the decline in European power and the successive waves of decolonisation the Roman Catholic Church found itself in a “post-colonial” world whose boundaries had been redrawn and had thus opened up to other lines of thought. Christian missions would begin to face the growing realities of atheism and religious pluralism. It is in this context that Pius XII launched his general call to mission with the 1957 publication of the encyclical *Fidei Donum*. For the first time, a pope called the whole assembly of believers to engage in the spread of the faith; an action which testified to a Church whose presence was challenged by a new global condition. The monastic orders of St. Benedict (Benedictines, Cistercians, Trappists) heard the Sovereign Pontiff’s call. The response came from the Dutch Benedictine, Cornelius Tholens, for whom, “before anything else, abbots must recognize that monks of the Benedictine order have the duty to go out in the name of the order to encounter other peoples, other races, other religions.”⁴ This newly adopted perspective broke with the traditional one; the motivation would no longer be to convert by rejecting *a priori* other beliefs, but primarily to value listening and dialoguing. It is on this principle that the Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM) has created in 1960 an organization grouping all the sons and daughters of St. Benedict around a common cause, that of implanting Christian monasticism in the so-called mission countries.

This new movement brought with it the need for a renewal of mission in the Church, thus anticipating the revolutionary measures that would be put forward at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In this, the inspiring pioneers were Henri Le Saux,

⁴ Blée, *The Third Desert*, p. 17.

Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton. Le Saux, more than the others, demonstrated by his life and message the need for the Church to welcome religious difference if it intended to be heard. In leaving his monastery in Brittany, the French Benedictine went to India in 1948 in order to found the first Catholic ashram with Jules Monchanin, with the view of making known the great Christian contemplative tradition. In order to achieve this he knew the importance of getting to know his new culture. He was therefore put into contact with Hinduism by the intermediary Ramana Maharshi and the sacred mountain of Arunâchala where the Hindu holy man resided. This meeting undid his plans as he came to be attracted by the experience of non-duality (advaita), moving him to enter ever more deeply into the abyss of the Self. This made him an apostle of interreligious dialogue, a new avenue which he laid out for the entire Church, and primarily for the members of AIM. Knowing in order to be known was the motto at play here, to which Vatican II gave its support. The decree on mission in fact invites the institutes of perfection "to found houses in mission areas, as not a few of them have already done, so that there, living out their lives in a way accommodated to the truly religious traditions of the people, they can bear excellent witness among non-Christians to the majesty and love of God, as well as to our union in Christ."⁵

Note that the contemplative vocation of the monks was an advantage in this initiative, especially in the Asian context. In countries of Hindu or Buddhist majority, monastic life is often an important, sometimes a central dimension in the society. At the heart of this monastic life are found practices of meditation offering many similarities with the diverse forms of contemplative prayer known

⁵ Vatican II, *Ad Gentes: On the Mission Activity of the Church* 40. See <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html>

among Christian monks. This became evident for many during the pan-Asian congresses in Bangkok (1968) and in Bangalore (1973). Organised by AIM, these encounters permitted Christian monks from the West and Asia to face together the challenges that accompany monastic implantation in Asian countries. Many realized, at these occasions, how much culture and religion were closely bound and how necessary it would be to enter into dialogue with the movements of Hinduism and Buddhism. This is an effort made more urgent since Christianity is often in the minority in these countries and largely considered as a foreign religion of colonisation, to which is given very little spiritual value. On this last point, Patrick D'Souza, Bishop of Varanasi, spoke at the congress in Bangalore: "We have been for the inhabitants of this country a sign of love for our neighbor, but we have not succeeded in being signs of the presence of God in us and around us."⁶ Hence, the Christian monks awoke to the need to recapture the essential in the monastic life away from Western cultural elements, the essential which, according to Merton, "is not embedded in buildings, . . . in clothing . . . even in a rule."⁷ He actually refers to something deeper than a rule, a full interior transformation, the ultimate objective which all else serves. This explains why the missionary effort will not be sustained unless Christian monks and laypersons better manifest the contemplative depths of their own tradition while being involved into a dialogue of religious experience.

⁶ Blée, *The Third Desert*, p. 26.

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New Directions: New York, 1975), p. 340.

For World Peace

Faced with the urgency of developing a dialogue with Buddhist monks and Hindu renunciates, AIM founded two commissions in 1978, one in the United States, the other in Europe. These created an opportunity to gather persons who, at the heart of the family of St Benedict, felt called to this cause. They were few but their commitment was such that it allowed a dialogical awareness to develop among the monks in a relatively short time and with great creativity, in spite of some opposition and limited logistical and financial resources.

Moreover, in establishing itself in this way, the dialogue developed as an activity in service of the human community, progressively releasing itself from its missionary objective. A distance has thus grown between the emerging vocation of the dialogue and that of AIM to help monasteries establish themselves in Asia. This is all the more so as Western monks confronted early on the Asians' desire to emancipate themselves from Western missionary directives, realizing finally that planting Christian monasticism in Asia is a bet that only the Asians can win. The Abbot Primate officially acknowledged this reality at the occasion of the pan-Asiatic congress of Kandy (1980): "It is up to you, monks and sisters of Asia, to engage in dialogue and to determine what Benedictine life in the monasteries of Asia today should be like. The monasteries of other continents cannot assume this responsibility because, even with the best of intentions, they are not fully aware of the problems you face. In order to continue the necessary acculturation of Benedictine monasticism in Asia, you have to live in an Asian milieu day in and day out. Even more, you have to be Asian."⁸ In the West, priorities changed; monks awakened slowly to

⁸ Blée, *The Third Desert*, p. 66.

the importance of the unique role they are called to play in the effort to create spiritual bonds in a world evermore global and in rapid evolution. Tholens contributed by adopting the perspective on the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965): “as we move away from apologetics and missionary activity as it is commonly understood, new possibilities are open to us—not those of a new way of doing mission, but those of living together with the members of other religions and sharing what we have in common!”⁹ Western monks knew they could contribute greatly to this task.

Already, at the congresses in Bangkok and Bangalore, Catholic monks had discovered the ease with which they were able to get along with their Buddhist and Hindu peers. They succeeded in dialoguing with them in the area of religious experience whereas discussions based on doctrine often led to dead-ends. This was the realisation of Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, then president of the Secretariat for non-Christians. He gave his official support to the monks in a letter addressed to the Abbot Primate on June 12, 1974, in which he encouraged them to pursue their efforts in the matter of dialogue, a dialogue which he situated not so much in the missionary context but rather within that of understanding and mutual enrichment. The priority became less to convince the other believer to align him- or herself with the Christian message but rather to develop a way of moving forward together towards the divine mystery around which all find themselves to be co-pilgrims.

Thus, the interreligious monastic dialogue came to assume as a main objective the contribution to peace in the world. The first founding meetings of Petersham (USA) and Loppem (Belgium), held in 1977 at the origin of the creation of interreligious commissions, witness to this will. The monks in dialogue also found a way to

⁹ Blée, *The Third Desert*, p. 50.

incarnate the monastic pledge, taken from Psalm 33:15 and carried in the Rule of St. Benedict: "Seek peace and pursue it." (Prologue, 17) Since reconciliation is the vocation of his disciples, St. Benedict, the father of western Christian monasticism, shows that the monk has still a place today. In 1994, Jerome Theisen, then Abbot Primate of the Benedictines, confirmed this when he underlined his commitment towards peace: "It is our task to stress the spiritual values of the various world religions in the hope that through knowledge and dialogue we who belong to monastic institutes may contribute to the creation of peace in the world. Pax is Saint Benedict's gift to us and our gift to the interreligious dialogue."¹⁰ Conversation with Asia and its religions remained the axis of monastic dialogue. It would no longer, however, aim at implanting Christian monasticism, but rather at integrating two worlds whose future, the monks believe, depends on their capacity to listen and dialogue. The interaction between these two spiritual regions, the spiritual East and West, represents a challenge for the current generation that must be highlighted with great attention. Thomas Keating, Trappist monk and the second president of the North American Commission notes that "it is at just this present moment that the world is on the threshold of a great spiritual confrontation between the East and Christianity. This confrontation could be one of the greatest moments in history. Never before have the Vedic and Buddhist traditions confronted the Christian tradition on so broad a scale."¹¹ Here, Jean Leclercq, a Benedictine of Clervaux Abbey in Luxembourg, recognized the unique contribution of monks to this purpose. "Throughout its history the church has encountered strong currents that at first were foreign to it; little by little these confluences brought about great advances in faith and sanctity. Is it not fitting that monks should be,

¹⁰ Blée, *The Third Desert*, p. 55.

¹¹ Thomas Keating, *The Heart of the World* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 60.

in the way that is proper to them, the artisans of this historic encounter?”¹²

Towards a New Consciousness

The gap between mission and dialogue finally ended with the creation in 1994 of a new interreligious structure which is still known today and which rests on two major elements. First, it consists of a General Secretariat (DIM/MID) which is both independent of and complementary to AIM and represents all of the initiatives and the interreligious players – in monastic milieus – vis-à-vis both Benedictine and Cistercian authorities. Second, the new structure allows adherence from other continental commissions with the General Secretariat alongside North-American (MID) and European (DIM) Commissions which already exist, ensuring that the international character of the monastic movement for dialogue and the freedom for each body to choose its activities according to local situations.

Over time, Indo-Sri-Lankan and Australian commissions have been added. If the Indian Commission, the “Benedictine Interfaith Dialogue”(BID), officially came to light early in 1995, it had nonetheless begun to structure itself in 1993 following an intermonastic exchange where Tai Situ Rinpoche, Tibetan authority, invited a group of European Christian monks to his monastery (Sherab Ling). The Camaldolese monk Bede Griffiths gave his last public conference on this occasion.

The Australian Commission was created in 1991 and took the name “Australian Monastic Encounter” (AME) in May 1994. Its

¹² Blée, *The Third Desert*, p. 77.

uniqueness is that its members are not only Benedictine and Cistercian monks but also Buddhists and Hindus. After having undergone some difficulties, it gained new life in 1995 under the name "East-West Meditation Foundation." Beyond these four commissions, two others were called to develop themselves, one covering South-East Asia and the other, South America.

The new interreligious structure is the fruit of a sustained effort to have dialogue accepted at the heart of the great family of St. Benedict. Many in fact looked with suspicion on this unspoken attitude of welcoming the other with their beliefs and with their forms of prayer. Suspicion was also nursed by certain theologians of renown like Louis Bouyer and Hans Urs von Balthasar who participated in a collective work published in 1983 regarding, in particular, the dangers of Eastern meditation (Zen, Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, etc.) when applied to the context of Christian prayer life. In light of the great success of these foreign influences, the authors lamented the fact that they do not seem to raise any question or issue. Here the monks were directly targeted. In introducing the book in question they state that in "certain monasteries, Buddhist monks have come to introduce the entire community to Zen. There is one such abbey in Holland which has a Zen garden-room, more spacious than the Church, and the monks are free to come and substitute the office hour by a time of meditation. Countless are the convents where such techniques pose no problem whatsoever, even including at Segovia where the body of St. John of the Cross lies!"¹³ Bouyer saw this as an evil situation and Balthasar viewed it as a betrayal. The criticism was so strong that Cardinal Ratzinger was inspired to publish, a few years later on October 15,

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar et al., *Des bords du Gange aux rives du Jourdain* (Paris: Saint Paul, 1983), p. 8.

1989, a letter to the bishops regarding Christian meditation. It was a way of recalling to them the elements of an authentic Christian prayer while discouraging dialogue with religions from Asia, mainly Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as adoption of their meditative practices.

In reaction to this text, under the initiative of the Benedictine Pierre-François de Béthune and with the encouragement of Cardinal Arinze to pursue a debate with the Vatican, the monks in dialogue shared their interreligious experiences of contact with Asia and demonstrated how their Christian faith had been enriched. This led to the publication in 1993 of the document *Contemplation and Interreligious Dialogue. References and Perspectives Drawn from the Experiences of Monastics*¹⁴ which is a synthesis of fifty testimonies. It was the opportunity to articulate and theorize the rich experience of DIM and to give it a theological and pastoral orientation. It speaks of a dialogue where welcoming the other is an act of charity and faith. It is in one's relationship with God, in the Spirit of Christ, that one draws the strength to open oneself, in the loving divine presence, to the other who prays and believes differently, the one who, for centuries, was considered as the ultimate enemy of the Church, a heretic internally, a pagan externally. Hence, the monks in dialogue made of themselves artisans of a new way of being Christian in the world, not for themselves alone but also on behalf of the whole Church. The monk aims at a transformation of the ecclesial mindset, founded on the idea that a connection to the religious other is not a threat to faith but is today the privileged place of its very expression. A new awareness is inaugurated where hospitality becomes the centre of gravity.

¹⁴ See <<http://monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=363>>

Sacred Hospitality

The dialogue often consists of finding similarities among religions in order to overcome differences which have often been seen as a source of division. Thus, any hope of understanding must rest on a common ethic, cause or theology. In the case of DIM, the approach is otherwise. This monastic experience shows, on the contrary, that the differences are not an obstacle to dialogue but are precisely the place where reconciliation is possible. Otherness is clearly assumed. The monks succeed more easily where theological or doctrinal dialogues often lead to a deadlock. This is made clear by the fact that they meet together not in the name of the dogma of one Church but because of a shared experience of God. If they exchange ideas and insights as in all dialogues, it is especially on the basis of an inner drive that they gather together, a pull that invites each one, in their particular way, to turn towards the divine mystery that is both at the heart as well as beyond all religious traditions. This is what characterises the dialogue of religious experience, listed by the Vatican as the fourth type of dialogue, together with the dialogues of life, action and theological exchange. It defines this dialogue as one "where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute."¹⁵ For DIM, the condition for dialogue is not in flattening out the differences between religions but in creating a space that allows them to be fully received. This joining is understood here as an acknowledgement of a partnership, a fraternity in God within, and not in spite of,

¹⁵ See Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, ch. 3, par. 42: <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html>

differences. Hospitality is thus the space where this meeting takes place.

Saint Benedict makes of hospitality a typically monastic vocation; hence Kevin Hunt, an American Trappist, urges monks to make of it the foundation of all dialogue: “That’s something we are good at; it is second nature for those who live according to the Benedictine rule.”¹⁶ If the monks made the effort at all times to practice this, they were nonetheless generally disinclined to receive the other with his faith and his beliefs, beginning with Saint Anthony of Egypt who had harsh words for Arians and Gnostics. This then is where today’s newness resides: the stranger is not received without his most intimate religious desires, even if they are contrary to ours. To love your neighbour is also to love what defines him or her within his/her relationship with the transcendent. Hence, the monks of DIM allow themselves to be received by others before receiving them.

Le Saux as much as Merton encouraged his peers to become familiar with Eastern religions by immersing themselves in those traditional contexts in order to get beyond mere superficial meetings.¹⁷ At the end of the monastic congress of Bangkok (1968), two Christian monks spent an entire day in a Buddhist temple, an initiative that was again encouraged at the congress in Bangalore (1973) by the Camaldolese monk David Steindl-Rast. Two years later, on the eve of the creation of the interreligious commissions within AIM, the monks, questioned during an investigation run by Tholens, agreed on the necessity of an exchange that would be not only intellectual: “It may be that monks from one civilization will spend some time in a monastery of another, or perhaps small groups

¹⁶ M. Freeman, “Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. Contact Persons Workshop. Christian-Hindu,” 13–16 June 1994; report of the Abbey of Saint Procopius, Lisle, Illinois.

¹⁷ See Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 313.

of monks from different cultures will work together without any particular end in mind other than to live together as equals and in mutual respect."¹⁸ This became a reality with the establishment of a hospitality program in Europe in 1979 and in the United States in 1982. The Europeans developed their ties with Japanese Zen monks while the Americans made exchanges with Tibetan monks who were refugees in India even before opening themselves to all of the sangha (Buddhist community) with the organisation of interreligious meetings at the Abbey of Gethsemani (1996, 2002, 2008).

During these exchanges, Christian monks came to understand another religion from the inside which, when added to bookish knowledge, allowed them to familiarise themselves with otherness, to grasp its consistency and to lay foundations for mutual understanding. Hospitality certainly offered an opening to others but, as well, a chance to sink deeper into one's own faith. In fact, the effort that is required consists in putting one's self in pursuit of Jesus by going towards the one who is different, outside the accustomed norms, in a free act, expecting nothing in return, if only that one might be touched by the divine mystery that marks the encounter. The Spirit that Jesus left us as an inheritance invites us, today more than ever, to follow the steps of the Master on a road that is rarely travelled. The love which surrounds us grants such an internal freedom that it becomes possible to meet genuinely with the one who is usually perceived as a threat to our physical, psychological or spiritual integrity. It is therefore precisely this Spirit who, letting the Spirit be sought and discovered within religious otherness, gives hospitality its sacred character. Faith within this mystery of unity, in imitation of Jesus, carries the encounter and allows us to welcome both the questioning and the suffering which are inherent to it.

¹⁸ Blée, *The Third Desert*, pp. 81-82.

If receiving the other believer is born within such an act of faith, it also leads to its deepening by engaging the host as well as the guest in a process of stripping away where priorities are redefined. This relational space is similar to a desert towards which the Spirit leads us, the same as the desert to which he led Jesus (Luke 4:1-13) in order to be tempted and to rededicate himself to God. If Christian monasticism was born in Egypt's desert, the monks of DIM show us the way again. However, this time the desert is no longer made of sand but is the relationship with the traditional enemy, the one who prays and believes differently. In this "desert of otherness" the Christian may reconnect with the divine in a most significant and relevant-to-our-times way, in solitude and interior silence without having to opt for a total and permanent retreat from the world. It is here that the Christian must choose between the will to power hidden in the pretension of being the sole owner of truth, and humility before the mystery which can never be won by works but is given with the greatest of generosity. This is why, even before speaking of mutual enrichment, Béthune, above all, sees in the dialogue an occasion for a "mutual impoverishment."¹⁹

In this, at a time of crisis where the survival of humankind is at stake, the monks of DIM invite the Church and humanity to a heart-to-heart meeting, emptied of false identities, capable of releasing a creative energy for a renewed coexistence which respects differences.

¹⁹ Pierre-François de Béthune, *Par la foi et l'hospitalité* (Clerlande: Publications de Saint-André/ Cahier de Clerlande 4, 1997), p. 68.

For Further Reading

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[摘要] 隱修群體宗教對話協會 (Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID)) 作為天主教和其他宗教之間的橋樑, 扮演了重要及獨特的角色。MID 協會特別著重跨宗教在靈修體驗上的對話。協會的主要任務, 從早期如何發展在亞州區內的天主教修道/僧侶生活, 演變至關注如何塑造全球的和平文化, 以至近期探討作為一

名基督徒如何在跨宗教環境下的新處世方式。在這思潮的核心中，包容被視為一種跨宗教的美德。雖然有人對天主教僧侶對其他宗教的靈修實踐持有興趣作出質疑，但豐富的僧侶體驗證實能對跨宗教的探究有正面的影響。在來自不同宗教傳統的僧侶間的多次對話中，我們可以看到宗教間的不同並非障礙；而是豐富彼此間的認識及消除分歧的機會。對話並不存在要移除宗教間各異之處這個條件，而是要創做出一個令各宗教都得以被接納的空間。包容就是這個對話的空間。