

Talk amongst ourselves

The Dominicans last week invited a controversial theologian to their conference on interreligious dialogue in Rome. They hoped that Fr Peter Phan would “challenge their thinking” – and they weren’t disappointed. His and other talks explored different approaches to faith-to-faith discussions

Relations between Christianity and Islam have taken an increasingly central position on a large part of the world’s geopolitical stage these past several years. Even religious and political leaders who were once not very convinced of the importance of dialogue between these two great faiths seemed to change their minds after witnessing an unfolding of events that are now well known to everyone. They began with the terrorist attacks on New York City’s Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 and included the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, as well as Pope Benedict XVI’s controversial remarks on Islam at the University of Regensburg in 2006.

Although the general public may have only recently become aware of the urgency of interreligious dialogue, the Catholic Church has been actively interested in it for more than 40 years. It actually became a priority for the Universal Church in 1965 when bishops at the Second Vatican Council approved *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. But even before this landmark document was written, small groups of Catholics, such as the Missionaries of Africa (or White Fathers), were already bringing together missionaries working in Muslim countries to give them a forum for exchanging information and ideas. In 1956 the White Fathers and a Dominican friar named Fr Georges Anawati OP organised the first-ever “Journées Romaines” – a meeting on Islam lasting a few days that would be repeated every two years in Rome. These sessions would continue over the next 20 years.

The Dominican Order later took the lead with these meetings and by 1977 had renamed them the Journées Romaines Dominicaines (JRD). These were held once every four years near Rome and were specifically tailored for members of the Order of Preachers who were working in Muslim countries. Further developments took place under Fr Timothy Radcliffe, who was elected master of the order in 1992. He asked his newly appointed assistant for apostolic life, Fr Jean-Jacques Pérennès, to carry out an in-depth review of the Dominicans’ activities in Muslim countries. The French-born friar and economist then invited some 70 friars and sisters to Rome for a fresh set of JRD meetings in 1995. Before Fr Radcliffe called Fr Pérennès to the Dominican’s Rome headquarters, he had



spent 10 years (1975–85) working in Algeria alongside Bishop Pierre Claverie OP, a well-known proponent and pioneer of modern-day interfaith dialogue who would eventually be killed by Islamic militants in a 1996 car bombing. Bishop Claverie was the last of at least 19 Catholic Religious – including seven Trappist monks – who were killed over a two-year span of civil violence in the North African country. These “martyrs” would give new urgency to the work of the Journées Romaines Dominicaines from that point forward.

Fr Pérennès finished his term in Rome in 1998 and set about writing a best-selling biography of Bishop Claverie. Originally published in French in 2000, the English version came out in 2007 under the title *A Life Poured Out*. In 2000 he moved to Cairo where he oversaw efforts to build an impressive library that houses a large collection of valuable and even rare Islamic texts. Added to this, his work as the vicar provincial of the Dominicans in Arab-speaking countries since 2002 has provided him with experiences that have helped him remain an instrumental figure in the sessions of the Journées Romaines Dominicaines. In fact, it was from his suggestion that the friars and sisters on the order’s Commission for Dialogue with Islam decided to ask Fr Peter Phan, a Vietnamese-American theologian from Georgetown University, to be the guest speaker at this past summer’s JRD.

The meeting drew more than 40 people from nearly 20 countries on all five continents. The theme of the four-day gathering was “Universal Salvation: Challenged by Religious Identity”. Fr Phan, whose book *Being Religious*

Irreligiously was sharply criticised by the US Catholic bishops’ conference doctrinal commission for “confusing the faithful”, gave the opening address and served as a constant point of reference during the meetings. The organisers of the JRD wanted him to centre the reflections on a few theological questions that are basic to interreligious dialogue. What is salvation? Can people of other faiths be saved? And if so, how?

Fr Phan based his engaging presentation on a 27-page paper that was full of finely tuned theological ideas and concepts. He raised more questions than he answered, and with occasional bits of humour kept his audience riveted. More than anything, he got them to think. For example, he pointed out that *Nostra Aetate* exhorts Catholics not only to witness to their own faith, but to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual truths found among non-Christians”. However, he said the teaching from Vatican II “leaves the question of the positive role of non-Christian religions (as religions per se) in salvation undefined and open for further theological debate”. He went on to say: “We must not judge the truth of what others believe only by the standards of what we ourselves believe to be true. One helpful pragmatic test of the accuracy and truth of our description of other religions is to ask if their adherents can recognise themselves in what we say about them,” he said. Catholics must do better to take seriously the “otherness” of other religions, he said, and not view them exclusively from the Christian vantage point.

Fr Darren Dias OP, a Canadian of Goan ancestry, was asked to respond to Fr Phan’s talk. The bright young Dominican, who recently completed a doctorate at the University of St Michael’s College (Toronto), presented a Trinitarian approach to religious diversity. A specialist on the thought of the late Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, Fr Dias spoke of the different approaches to religious diversity after Vatican II. He pointed out that Lonergan disciples like Frederick E. Crowe SJ are convinced that the Church’s approach in this field can no longer be Christocentric, as in the past, but must give more reverence to the work of the Holy Spirit. “If the son lived only a few years in a small nation, the Spirit of the Lord fills the entire space-time universe,” Fr Dias said, quoting Crowe. The only logical conclusion in such an analysis

is that Spirit blows where the Spirit wills – on all peoples and within all religions. Such theological investigations from the Christian tradition were then balanced by the reflections of two Muslims who also addressed the JRD. They were Dr Adnane Mokrani, a Tunisian who studied at the Angelicum University and now teaches Islamic studies in Rome; and Cenap Aydin, a Turk who studied at the Gregorian University and is now working in the field of Islamic-Christian relations, also in the Eternal City.

Other speakers gave brief presentations of the work they are currently doing in places like Iraq, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, Ivory Coast and even more “Western” places like Australia, Europe and North America. Participants broke into five small French or English-speaking working groups to talk about things like the role of religions in conflict resolution, healing practices in Africa, studying the faith of another, creating a spirit of friendship and hospitality, promoting education in a multicultural milieu and other issues.

On the final day there was a general discussion among all those who attended the meetings and this generated moving testimonies and keen observations from a number of people in the so-called hot spots where Christians are a minority amidst large Muslim populations. Two sisters from Iraq were especially memorable. Sr Nazik Matti, a young woman who is completing a licentiate at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, said she was frustrated that Catholics usually approach interreligious dialogue from a heavily Western context in which Christians are in the majority. She said it was different in Iraq and other places in the East where Christians were a tiny minority. She said that while she was enriched by the JRD discussions, she felt like the conversation was too slanted towards a Western point of view.

Another Iraqi, Sr Sherine Mariam Panour, told of the respect that the Iraqi Muslims have for the some 140 Dominican sisters who are in the country, especially because of their work in schools and hospitals. Most of the people they serve are Muslims. “When the Muslim women give birth they want the Mother [sister] to accompany them to the delivery room and to bless them with the Rosary we pray. And they want their children to be taught by us,” she said. But both sisters said the general violence of fundamentalist Muslims against Christians was at times an unbearable burden and obstacle to even beginning interfaith dialogue and relations. At one point there were more than 1,000 lay Dominicans in Iraq, but now the number has dwindled to a mere 50 youngsters and 50 older adults. Sr Sherine said that when she was working in Mosul her superiors advised her to move to a safer part of the country. “But I thought, where should I practise my Dominican charism if I don’t practise it with people?” She said such meetings as the Journées Romaines Dominicaines were useful opportunities to help the West understand the East. “We need interreligious dialogue, but first we must have inter-Christian dialogue,” she said.

MICHAEL MCCARTHY

‘What am I sensing beyond the butterfly, where once was the Creator?’



Whence comes the elation? I mean the elation sparked by the beauty of the natural world. I have felt this a great deal during the summer, pursuing what may seem an unusual quest: to see all of Britain’s butterfly species in a single year.

It’s possible: there are 58 of them. It would be much harder in France, where there are more than 250. But it still requires a lot of travelling: the chequered skipper is only to be found in the Highlands of Scotland, the mountain ringlet is only up mountains, the swallowtail is only in the Norfolk Broads and the Glanville fritillary only occurs on the Isle of Wight.

It also requires a lot of planning, for each species has a distinct and limited period when it is on the wing; and a lot of luck, for when you get there, the sun has to be shining. In general, no sunshine, no butterflies. It’s 500 miles to Argyllshire to see that wee, small chequered skipper, not much bigger than your thumbnail, and up there, there’s an awful lot of rain.

But it’s worth it. The determined pursuit of the full total means that you somehow find your way into the heart of understanding what butterflies have to offer, which is a quite remarkable amount of natural beauty.

This summer I have stood in a woodland glade as 1,000 heath fritillaries, orange and black, fluttered a foot from the ground in a silent dance; I have stood on a downy headland and watched Adonis blues outshine the sunlit sea below them, so brilliant was the electric blue of their wings; I have seen marbled whites that look like flying pocket chessboards, and orange tips which look like silky flower petals, and on the last day of the summer, the brown hairstreak, seldom encountered, but when seen, quite breathtaking, chocolate brown with glowing golden bands across its forewings.

All of these have triggered deep feelings in me, beginning with the very first butterfly sighting of the year.

It was Sunday 5 April and I was

on Merseyside with my wife and two children, my daughter aged 17 and my son aged 12; we had gone to the grave of my parents whom my children had never known, and I wanted to effect an introduction, as it were. It was a chilly, windy morning but a watery sun was shining and as we stood at the graveside a dead leaf, dark and ragged, came bowling through the air towards us and dropped at our feet. Then the “leaf” opened its wings, displaying four brilliant “eyes” of red and blue and yellow: it was a peacock.

Why on earth should I feel it? Why on earth, when my whole being was concentrating on the loved ones of the past and trying to convey what they had meant, to the loved ones of the present, why should this entirely extraneous emotion elbow its way into my soul?

As the peacock opened its wings at the graveside, a tiny thump of elation. There was no suppressing it. And since then, as I have pursued species after species and felt it time and again, I have wondered at its origin.

Once, in pre-Darwinian days, it was explicable, to Christian minds at least: the beauty of the natural world was a reflection of the Creator who made it, and to rejoice in it was to be at one with him. But now we know there are mundane reasons for loveliness: colours are in flowers to attract the insects that pollinate them (grasses need no colours, being pollinated by the wind).

Similarly with butterflies, the brilliant colours of the wings have evolved for a reason, be it camouflage, or to break up their outline, or to serve as a warning, or to mimic another creature. We can explain it.

But what about the elation? How do we explain that? What is it that I am sensing beyond the butterfly, where once was the Creator? The colours that make beauty in the insect may be merely functional, but what is this response of mine?

In the course of five months seeking out every butterfly species in Britain I have learned the answers to many questions. Now I can tell you their food plants, and their flight periods, and how they pass the winter – as an egg, a caterpillar, a chrysalis or an adult insect. But about the elation on seeing them, I can tell you nothing, other than that I feel it.

What is this happiness? Where does it come from?

■ Michael McCarthy is environment editor of *The Independent*.