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### **Thai perspective on Religious Plurality and Religious Identity**

This short presentation focuses on the relationship between religious plurality and religious identity in the Thai context. Since there are other interventions from different contexts and perspectives I will limit myself to briefly present the concrete situation of it in Thailand and then shortly reflect on these data. What I will say is based on my experience as a missionary in this country for about 24 years.

It is a fact that the world in which we live is becoming more and more pluralistic because of many reasons and among others especially mass migrations and faster communications at all level. Also from the religious point of view plurality is becoming more evident sometimes even inside the same household.

Though Thailand is a country with a great majority of Buddhists, also Muslims, Hindus and Christians of various denominations are quite visible in its society. The State officially recognizes five religions, namely Buddhism, Islam, Christian Catholicism, Christian Protestantism and Hinduism. The king is considered the protector of all religions and a guarantor of religious freedom.

The common attitude of the majority of the Thai people is that all religions teach to be good people and therefore all religions are all worthy of respect and appreciation. At present here people of different religions usually live and work together harmoniously. There have been some discriminations and persecutions years ago, when the Christian religion was perceived as an instrument in the hands of the colonial powers. However it is something of the past.

Also on the part of the Church, though in the past it was strictly separated from other religions to the point that interfaith marriages were prohibited and even only entering a Buddhist temple was considered a sin, today the attitude has totally changed. The wide opening of the Vatican II Council brought a new positive outlook towards other faiths. For this reason it is now much easier for Christians to live together with the other people without becoming strangers in their own country.

Today in Thailand in some villages where there are both a Buddhist temple and a Catholic church, the Buddhist community helps preparing and participates in the parish feast. At the same time the Christian community does the same on the occasion of the temple feast. In most Catholics schools it is common for Buddhist students to join the Catholics in prayer and even in the liturgy. Often Buddhist monks are invited for performing religious activities for the Buddhist students at the school itself. Neighbors can be in very good terms or even good friends in spite of different religious beliefs. Sometimes they accompany each other when doing some charitable activities, no matter who the organizer or the receiver might be. Working together for the common building of the society is expected from all. Often the government calls for the representatives of the various religions present in the country to lead prayers on some national special occasions. Since the Catholics are a tiny minority in this country (about 0.3 percent of the population) most of them marry in interfaith marriages bringing religious plurality even inside the family.

The acceptance of religious plurality is certainly positive. It leads to harmonious living together and it brings peace to the society. It is born from the certitude that God who is Truth and Love is present and works in different degrees in all religions as it is stated in many recent Church documents (Nostra Aetate, Redemptoris Missio...). It is rooted in the certainty that "it is the Spirit who sows the "seeds of the Word" present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ" (RM28). "Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions serves as a preparation for the Gospel and can only be understood in reference to Christ, the Word who took flesh by the power of the Spirit so that as perfectly human he would save all human beings and sum up all things" (RM29).

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (NA 2). “The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: “Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man.”” (RM29).

Certainly in religious plurality there are also challenges to be faced. The risk is to become so indifferent to the religious dimension up to the point that all religions can be considered as the same. Sometimes Relativism leads to think that one religion is good for me while another can be good for you. In this way reference to the absolute truth would be lost.

These challenges lead us to reflect on the second part of our topic, that is, religious identity. Religious plurality should not be perceived as a threat to religious identity. On the opposite, experience shows that it is a stimulus and an opportunity for growth in one's identity.

Very often the first reaction towards someone of a different faith is fear. Whatever is different from me is perceived as a threat, because it challenges me pushing me out of my comfort zone of religious certitudes towards a new synthesis capable of welcome the other. Challenges are important for growth and depth in the understanding of one's faith. This is certainly true also in Thailand, where the tiny Christian community daily faces the huge majority of Buddhists. If both can overcome fear, meeting the other becomes a liberating and enriching experience as the experience of many here shows.

Religious identity is certainly not only a set of doctrines learned in a classroom once and for all. On the contrary it requires a constant adaptation and transformation. Perhaps it can help now to reflect on how we form our religious identity<sup>i</sup>.

First of all we should be aware that *religious identity is formed in a context of reciprocal trust*. And trust is also shown in *openness to dialogue*, which is precisely to say that trust happens when religious adherents *encounter* and engage one another.

Actually *Religious identity is always formed in relationship*; meeting the other, the different one, helps identifying one self. In reference to the other I identify myself more clearly, understanding in a deeper way similarities and differences with the other. However no relationship could be possible without an attitude of reciprocal trust.

*Religious identity is formed through mutual discovery*. Discovery requires us to risk ourselves insofar as our pre-conceived perspectives are *re-formed* in relationship. Listening to the other, understanding who he/she is, and letting him/her challenge my certitudes; explaining who I am in a way that the other can understand; all this leads to a new synthesis about myself and my identity.

Many examples could be brought to clarify what might sound as a theory. I will just refer here to the experience of some parishioners in the parish where I was ministering, when we decided to ask for the collaboration of the local Buddhist temple in order to serve better people affected by AIDS and belonging to both religions in the territory of our parish. At the beginning people were afraid of working for a social service with others of different faith, but once they overcame their fears, they discovered that those people had their same desire to work for the good of the patients. Little by little trust developed. Dialoguing with them while working, they were able to understand the motivations behind the action of the Buddhist counterpart while at the same time they had to clarify their motivations in order to explain them to the others. It became an opportunity to go deeper in their faith understanding in order to be able to clarify it to the other. It was the beginning of a collaboration that lasted many years till a new Abbot out of fear for the close collaboration and friendship that had developed, stopped it. However, for those who lived it, that experience is cherished even after some years have passed. They feel that their faith has been strengthened through the openness and collaboration with people of other faiths and that they are more mature and open people because of what they lived.

It is obvious that, if there is not an initial clear understanding of one's identity, the risk of confusion and syncretism is always present. Only respect for the truth and constant research of it can ensure a deepening in one's identity while entering in relationship with the other.

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<sup>i</sup> The article **Forming Religious Identity in the Context of Religious Pluralism**, written by Michael Reid Trice on 05/01/2011 (<https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/210>) is very helpful in our reflection of the formation of religious identity. I make constant reference to it in these few lines.