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The Spaceship is Breaking Up – On Interreligious Prayer and Interreligious Cooperation*

More than ten years ago, Oomoto, a Shinto sect in Japan, planned a joint prayer service of Shinto, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.¹ The purpose was to pray for world peace in a situation threatened by nuclear danger and many other problems. I was invited to this service. At first I did not feel inclined to attend. Although I had put much emphasis upon interreligious fellowship, dialogue and cooperation, and have had experiences of many dialogue meetings, I was a little bit suspicious of joint prayers or joint services of different religions. Was this not a new syncretism? The Oomoto leaders urged me to attend, and finally I acceded. After watching the representatives of other religions praying very sincerely for world peace, I was impressed. At that moment, the scene described in the first chapter of Jonah suddenly came to my mind:

... the storm was so violent that the ship was in danger of breaking up. The sailors were terrified and cried out for help, each one to his own god.

We might say that this ship stands for the international voyage of humankind. Sailors came from different religious backgrounds. Today the spaceship called “earth” is in danger of breaking up. Many people are terrified and crying out for help, each one to her or his own god. In Jonah’s ship, while the sailors were praying to their gods, where was Jonah? Where did he go? We are told that “Jonah had gone below and was lying in the ship’s hold, sound asleep.”

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1. This could be the Oomoto – Episcopal joint worship service in Kameoka November 7, 1977 or May 4, 1979. For brief accounts of Oomoto’s joint worship services conducted in Japan and other countries, see Oomoto Foundation, *Bankyo Dokon – Seventy Years of Interreligious Activity at Oomoto*. Kameoka 1997: 11 f, 20 f, 28-33, 44 f and 51-53.

I am afraid that this verse describes what today's Christians are doing. The spaceship is breaking up, the people of other religions are trying to pray. But Christians do not want to pray with them. We could give many excuses. Their gods are just idols, their ways of praying are superstitious. How can we Christians, true believers of the only God, join with idolatrous people?

Well, if we want to stick to the traditional Christian teaching, we will, of course, conclude that we cannot and should not pray with believers of other gods. But we must know that such an understanding reflects only the history of Western Christendom, or Christian society. Christendom was self-sufficient and did not need to cooperate with the people of other faiths simply because there were no such people around. Of course, the people of Christendom had some knowledge of the existence of people of other religions. But non-Christians were living far away. They lived in their world. We live in our world.

Today we have entered into a totally different situation. We have come to the age of globalism. Global communication is part of our daily life. In every city, every town, even every village, people of different religions are living together. We cannot separate our world from their world. This is today's reality. We live in a pluralistic society. We live together with people of other religions. In order to live together, we must be able to work together. And this is not just a possibility. In many fields we are already working together.

If this is a fact, I think we must proceed one step farther. Is it not true that for many centuries "working is praying; praying is working" has been an important Christian motto?² I must admit that "praying together" sounds a little bit sensational. What Oomoto tried to do more than ten years ago, Pope John Paul II did in 1986 in Assisi in a much more moderate way. He did not say "praying together." He just said "meeting together for prayer." This is a better expression.

Due to the long history of Christendom, at first it was not easy to work together with the people of other religions. Although gradually we have become accustomed to working together, we are still timid and hesitant about praying together or meeting together for prayer. But we must be aware that the spaceship called "earth" is breaking up. Many people of other religions are very sincere in hoping for peace and justice in the world and the salvation of "the earth."

The captain found Jonah, lying in the ship's hold, and said to him, "get up and pray to your god for help!" Are we like Jonah who was lying in the ship's hold? Are we sleeping while other people are praying? Do we hear the voice "get up and pray to your god for help!"?

2. See, e.g., the expression *ora et labora* ("pray and work") which St. Benedict applied as a basic principle for monastic life.