

General Resume



James Heisig

I have been asked to make a brief resume of what has gone on these past two days. You will appreciate the impossibility of the task I have been given. There were too many ideas to summarize, let alone to catalog or harmonize. I take refuge in brevity.

There was no search for a consensus and I will not impose one here. At the same time, the flow of the conference as the organizers originally conceived it did manage to survive the great variety of perspectives and experiences represented here. This is a tribute to the foresight that went into the preparations, but also to the willingness of the participants to be carried along by the same stream. The hope was to show that when set against the backdrop of the internal diversity that forms and sustains our different religious traditions, the conflicts among traditions can be framed in broader terms. Time and again examples of the interplay between inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts, and between the attempts to resolve them, confirmed the point. From there it was a natural step to look at the ways in which religions suffer from cultural differences, but also at the ways in which they can help the world better adjust to the perceived threats of multi-culturalism and reinforce the efforts being made to intercultural and interreligious education. Throughout it all, mention was made again and again of the desire for peace. What was distinct about Bilbao 2005 was the special context in which the calls for peace, already so familiar to our ears, were reiterated here—namely, the celebration of diversity.

How is it that we feel drawn to think so positively about diversity when common sense tells us that, in the real world, diversity more often than not is the very thing that repels us from one another? The transition from diversity to conflict is one we see with such alarming frequency in our daily newspapers that we have to ask ourselves: How is it that none of this flared up here? How did this group of people allow themselves to celebrate diversity without letting the talks slide into the familiar ruts? There were voices that tottered and even nudged us there, but in the end, the positive mood prevailed. Many of you, especially the speakers, are veterans of these meetings, and of dialogue among religions, and know only too well how strong the feelings under the surface are, and how easy it is for a casual word or comment to detonate them. So why not here? Was it only a courtesy to the fragile—and congenial—bubble our Basque hosts surrounded us with? Was it simply the desire for a moment's relief from the daily horrors and festering wounds of what we euphemistically called "civilization"? Or was it the sign of a real desire to celebrate the creative side of something that has been too destructive for too long?

It seems only natural that a conference that seeks to focus on the diversity within cultures and religions, and among cultures and religions, should itself show such diversity of presentation, logic, and rhetoric. It is not enough to get our ideas straight about the promise and perils of the differences that religions and cultures produce and protect. We have also to attend to the variety of ways in which people phrase the question of diversity and their reasons for doing so. We have not been subjected, in these two days, to propaganda—which in itself is surprising enough. But we have had everything from

academic arguments, historical analysis, and descriptive accounts to sermons, teachings, oracular pronouncements, poetic flourishes, emotional stutterings, and heart to heart simplicity. Which of these is the best way to treat the subject? —None of them. What is the best way? The very variety we have had. Of course, there is no way to satisfy everyone without subjecting everyone to a little annoyance here and there. Think of all the comments you have made in between sessions, or leaning over to talk to the person next to you, about the speakers and the panelists—the ones you liked, the ones you did not. *That* is what diversity is. If you want diversity, then prepare to be rubbed the wrong way, to discover the limits of your own tolerance. There is no way to achieve true clarity of thought about diversity without allowing for a diversity of expression.

But there is a lot more to diversity than modes of expression. Words and ideas moved in and out of a range of meanings and feelings. The very core notion of “dialogue” between cultures and religions was understood in different forms. On the one hand, the term referred to a forum for solving problems, a kind of place where people could bring the best of their humanity to bear on the worst of our humanity. “Peace” among religions, it was said, requires disarmament of the military, cultural, economic and theological weapons that have aimed at conquest; and the religions are invited to share in conflict resolution—is that they, in fact, have been part of the problem, even if in theory they have all preached peaceful coexistence.

There is another kind of dialogue, a dialogue that has no purpose. Its locus is not defined by a problem to be solved, but by the simple desire to see what there is to see. This is the pursuit of wisdom which no religion has the right to claim as its own. I was struck time and again by anecdotes recounted throughout these days, ending with a comment that this exhibited a particular Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, or Islamic virtue. But for those not in that tradition, it sounded remarkably human and nothing more. In tying an act of goodness to a particular tradition, one is in fact saying that that tradition finds a way to tap into what we all know as our human strength. And if a particular religious way brings out the best in us, we are saying it is natural to the human soul, not only to the souls of the believers. The locus that dialogue often does a better job of making this transparent than individual religions have done.

This brings us to perhaps the most important sense of diversity, reflected not only in many of the participants but also among many of you in the audience. Many presenters, although identified as a believer of one tradition, straddle cultural identities. Others, although from one culture, straddle religious identities. It is important to see that many of you feel comfortable with the scriptures, wisdom, practices, and teachings of different traditions at the same time. This diversity may be seen as something dangerous to what traditionally has been understood as a religious identity, but the fact is the people who have thought of themselves this way are the ones who catalyzed the dialogue among religions. Dialogue was not the child of organized religions; nor did it spring from the center of the cultures and traditions. It sprung up naturally among those at the peripheries, the border-straddlers. In committing itself to dialogue, organized religion is not inaugurating a reformation. It is catching up with the spirit of the age.

This conference is also an attempt to catch up. We are not just catching up with a new wave of ideas. We are catching up to what we already feel in our hearts is right but which the traditions in which we were raised taught us to view as a menace to our identity. The true challenge to the great religious traditions represented in this hall is not whether they can talk to one another by educating experts who are capable of doing dialogue at a professional level. It is whether they can find a way to speak to the interreligious dialogue going on in the hearts of the ever growing numbers of people who are seeking to inherit, as their birthright, the wealth of cultural and religion wherever they find it. For all the psychological, theological, and political warnings about the danger of assimilating the multicultural, multireligious reality of the surrounding society into one's individual person, the fact is, more and more people *do* identify themselves this way. We have a lot more catching up to do. Either that, or we leave the hall and lend out support to the systems of education and the institutionalized biases that strive to harden the identities of the younger generation to one religion, one nation, one language, or one culture—and then hope that, somehow, we can keep them in dialogue with one another, and stop them from violating one another in the name of conflicting values or beliefs. Unless we find a way to teach a love of diversity—something at which we have so little experience—we give our children no choice but to fall back on the lowest common denominator of ever more complex laws, and to rely on professional organizations to police the protection of the basic human right to be different.

Whatever happens as a result of what has been said here, whatever is remembered and whatever forgotten, one thing needs to be said: Bilbao 2005 has been a celebration of diversity. It was a risk that could have backfired and exploded at any number of moments. But something kept it a celebration, something within us that the peace-loving spirit of the Basque people made feel at home.

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