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## **Love, Responsibility, Otherness**

### **Finnish Church Leaders on Interreligious Dialogue**

No peace in the world without peace among the religions; and no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. This well-known argument by Hans Küng (2000: 28) could function as the guiding-star for the statement of interest in this article: a Peace Appeal signed by leaders of several Christian Churches in Finland. In this article, I will focus on the subject matter addressed in this appeal, i.e. peace and dialogue. The aim is to analyse how these Christian leaders view the role of religions, and especially interreligious dialogue, in creating and promoting peace.

I will begin by presenting the Peace Appeal and the interviews which form the empirical material upon which my research is based. I will then concentrate on five issues which emerge from my analysis of this material as being especially important: the question of peace, love and reconciliation in a religious perspective; the question of otherness in interfaith dialogue; the relationship between dialogue and mission; the question of God's presence in other religions; and personal responsibility and action. Emphasis is placed on presenting and analysing the empirical material, but the topics are also tied to a theoretical framework based on current thoughts within moral philosophy and the dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber. The discussion is, in conclusion, summarised with the help of the three notions which form the topic of this article: love, responsibility and otherness.

#### **The Peace Appeal**

The event Ecumenical Christmas in Turku (Åbo) is a well-established tradition in Finland, familiar to the public through the ecumenical service broadcast on national TV on Christmas Eve. In connection with this event, a joint appeal for peace was signed on the 16th of December 2004 by Archbishop Leo for the Orthodox Church, Archbishop Jukka Paarma for the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bishop Józef Wróbel for the Roman

Catholic Church and the Methodist minister, Timo Virtanen for the free churches. By signing this Appeal at Christmas – a festival celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace – the message of peace as a central theme of the Christian faith was emphasised at a time of global conflicts and anxiety. I will quote the peace appeal in its entirety:

The role of religion in the world has recently become ever more topical. In many parts of the world religion is unfortunately associated with wars and conflicts. The situation between Christianity and Islam is becoming critical, especially in the shadow of the Iraq war and the battle against terrorism. As representatives of our churches and communities, we would therefore like to make an appeal for world peace and harmony.

We believe that religion can contribute to peace and harmony. The Bible tells us to love God with all our hearts, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. The Golden Rule known to many different religions tells us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

In order to create a more peaceful world, we need to fight injustice, free poor countries from the debts that they cannot pay, as well as actively work for forgiveness and reconciliation. We are now preparing to celebrate the nativity of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray, saying: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Lasting peace means that we have to come to terms with our past so that forgiveness and reconciliation will take the place of hatred and disbelief. One who has experienced forgiveness shall be free and become a sign of hope, a light in the dark. Where there is light, there will soon be more light. This thought encourages us to live. Jesus Christ came to the world to provide us with a future and hope. It is this hope that we want to express to you today.

This statement contains many ideas calling for a deeper analysis. I have conducted interviews with the four church leaders who signed the Appeal, to discuss their reflections on the Appeal and more generally on interreligious dialogue and peace from their points of view as Christian leaders in Finland. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2005 in Turku and Helsinki. They were loosely structured around a few central themes that the interviewees elaborated quite freely upon. The interviews were recorded on mini-disc and later transcribed. The discussions each lasted about one hour; three of them were conducted in Finnish (Paarma, Leo, Virtanen) and one in German (Wróbel). Except for the interview in

German, which is presented in its original language, the quotations have been translated into English by me (the original Finnish text is presented in the footnotes). This empirical material has been deposited in the Folkloristic archive at Åbo Akademi University.

The church leaders all regard the Peace Appeal as an important statement directed to the surrounding world and their own members. By drawing attention to the fundamental position peace has in all religions, and stating the wish of the churches to co-operate, the Appeal is thought to have an impact on the public opinion.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Peace Appeal is the fruit of ecumenical co-operation, but in addressing the issue of world peace, the role of Islam in world politics and the Golden Rule, the Appeal touches upon interreligious dialogue, i.e. the striving towards relationships based on understanding, respect and equality between religions. As this dialogue is a central topic in the interviews and one of the main focuses of this analysis, I will begin by discussing the theoretical view of dialogue upon which this analysis is based.

My understanding of dialogue is derived from Martin Buber's philosophy. Briefly outlined, his well-known argument states that a person's world-view always includes an 'other', an opponent in the form of an It or a Thou. The distanced attitude I-It is supplemented by the relationship I-Thou, which represents encounters – *Begegnung* – mutuality, and dialogue. These two attitudes are not competing but rather complementary (Buber 1958). In my reading of Buber, I-It is interpreted as a way of creating boundaries, and I-Thou is as a way of crossing boundaries. Creating boundaries can be understood tangibly, as distancing oneself from the other, but it can also describe situations where we, for example, delimit areas of experience for the sake of analytical description. Crossing boundaries implies letting the reality of the other into one's own consciousness, and experiencing the encounter without reservations (analysing, categorising). The complementary character of the attitudes I-It and I-Thou means that every person approaches the other both as an It and as a Thou, both creating and crossing the boundaries of her own interpretation (Illman 2004: 205). We are not faced with a binary opposition between Thou and It, but rather with a continuum. Sometimes we experience the spontaneous encounter, the dimension of the Thou; sometimes we need the distance and the matter-of-fact descriptions, constituting the I-It attitude. For the moments of true

dialogue to arise, however, we need to be able to recognise our counterpart as an autonomous other, a Thou (Illman 2005).

Inspired by the hermeneutics of, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975: 269–72), understanding and interpretation are emphasised in the analysis. The dialogue is seen as a complex process involving intellectual knowledge, attitudinal and emotional dimensions, formed by cultural, religious, social and personal traits. Focus is placed on how and why we create boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, i.e. how similarity and difference are defined. Dialogue is a complex, human process of meaning creation, rather than a necessary process abiding by genetic rules (Illman 2004: 53). Indeed, interreligious dialogue can be viewed as a ‘hermeneutics of the other’ (Tracy 1990: 51). Contemporary researchers of moral philosophy, such as Peter Winch (1987), D. Z. Phillips (2001) and Raimond Gaita (1991, 1999), who deal with the ethical dimension of encountering others, constitute another source of inspiration. On the basis of their reflections, the emphasis on individual responsibility and actions advanced in the Appeal are discussed.

### Religion, Peace, and War

The Peace Appeal states that the role of religion in the world is of growing importance today, a claim supported by the church leaders. Also in Finland, interfaith dialogue is experienced as urgent as a consequence of September 11, 2001. As religion is often connected with contemporary conflicts and wars, the Appeal emphasises that religion can instead contribute to peace and harmony. How, then, can this be done and what can religion bring to global peace work that other, secular efforts lack?

In the interviews, all church leaders stress the importance of peace and reconciliation as core values in all religions. Thus, religions not only *can*, but *should* play an active part in global peace efforts. Asked about the most important message of the Appeal, Archbishop Paarma expresses himself in the following way:

This idea of peace is common to all great religions. Even though history, the history of the churches and religions, also shows that religion has been used for the opposite purpose too, as an instigator of war, hatred and violence, and is still unfortunately used in this way here and there. But the true nature of these religions is to proclaim peace. It is expressed in slightly different ways in different religions: the Jews say *Shalom* and

the Arabs have the same term, and we talk about peace or a happy, good life – that is the original meaning of all religions. And this core should be emphasised, and then we notice that we have something that unites all religions; and that we can work together.<sup>1</sup>

Peace is thus interpreted as a basis of Christian faith, as the fundamental message of the Bible and of Jesus Christ. By signing the Appeal, the church leaders stress the urgency of this message to all Christians. Bishop Wróbel talks about a *theology of brotherhood*: as God's creations we are all brothers and should not fight. This is the primary motivaton for Christians engaging in peace efforts. He stresses that Christianity is concerned with more than our relationship to God: it is concerned with horizontal relationships in the world, i.e. the interpersonal dimension. Such pacifist ideals are, however, not always strong enough to compete with other ideologies, such as power and money, Archbishop Paarma concludes. It is a challenge to live one's life in a way that is faithful to the demands of Christ, Mr Virtanen says.

Religion can motivate people to engage in peace work, the church leaders stress, and encourage people to actively further reconciliation. Such motivation can, of course, come also from other, secular ideals of pacifism and humanism, but religion is the most powerful motivator, Bishop Wróbel claims. Nevertheless, peace cannot be achieved only through interreligious dialogue; there must also be a dialogue between believers and non-believers. Otherwise, we can never achieve peace on earth, he states.

In elaborating the special traits of peace in religions in general, and in Christianity in particular, the notion of *love* emerges as the central theme in the interviews. Especially Mr Virtanen brings out love as a key concept. Peace among the people of the world presupposes peace of mind, and such peace is built on love, he argues: 'the Christian notion of peace is always based on loving your neighbour as yourself. On that foundation

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1 '... tämä rauhanajatus on eri uskonnoille, kaikille suurille uskonnoille, yhteinen. Vaikka historia, ja kirkkojen ja uskontojen historia osoittaa myöskin sitä, että uskontoja on käytetty aivan päinvastaiseen tarkoitukseen myöskin kiihottimena sootaan, vihaan ja väkivaltaan. Ja yhä edelleen käytetään siellä täällä, valitettavasti. Mutta niitten uskontojen varsinainen olemus on julistaa rauhaa. Että se on eri uskonnoissa vähän eri tavalla ilmaistu, juutalaiset sanovat Shalom ja samaa on sitten arabeilla, sama termi, ja me puhumme rauhasta taikka onnellisesta elämästä – sehän on kaikkien uskontojen perimmäinen tarkoitus. Ja se ydin pitäisi nostaa esille, ja silloin me huomaamme, että on jotain joka yhdistää kaikkia uskontoja, ja me voimme yhdessä toimia.' (IF mgt 2005/10.)

it is, of course, easy, easier, to build peace.<sup>2</sup> We are commissioned to love God and our neighbours, he continues; thus there should be no limits to our love. In his view, this trait separates Christianity from other religions and ideologies: 'As a Christian, I think it is easiest to encounter other religions because we have a message with which we can encounter everyone, and that is precisely the message of God's peace and God's love.'<sup>3</sup>

The perception that religions cause war and conflict, on the other hand, is strongly repudiated by the church leaders. Using faith to promote hatred is seen as the gravest of distortions of any religion (a claim which, of course, begs the question of who has the power to define 'genuine' religion). So-called religious wars in the world have more complex backgrounds, the leaders underline, with many aspects contributing to conflicts. The most important aspect is all kinds of inequality between people, Archbishop Leo underlines: 'it is not religions that stand against each other, but human circumstances.'<sup>4</sup> War is not caused by religious people, but by godless people, or people who have thrown out God from their hearts, Bishop Wróbel believes: 'Man findet genug viele Beweise dafür um zu sehen, dass nicht die Religionen die Ursache des Krieges sind, sondern diejenige die an keinen Gott denken, sondern ... egoistisch sind.'<sup>5</sup>

In such heated situations, religion is, however, an excellent weapon for those wanting to deepen the conflict, since religion has a strong effect on people's emotions. Even if religions are not seen as the *genuine* cause of conflicts, the fact that religion and violence are confused in the minds and rhetoric of some believers cannot be ignored. This is acknowledged by some of the church leaders, who stress that the issue of religion and violence cannot simply be dismissed as illegitimate. There will be no world peace before the religions learn to live in peace with each other, Archbishop Paarma notes, paraphrasing Küng.

As mentioned above, the language of love is seen as a vital part of the Christian peace message. The church leaders unanimously claim that Christianity can contribute to the global peace movement by stressing the

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2 '... kristinuskon rauhan perusta on koko ajan se, että rakasta lähimmäistä niin kuin itseäsi. Ja sillä perustalla tietysti on helppo, helpompi rakentaa rauhaa.' (IF mgt 2005/8.)

3 'Kristittynä minusta on kaikkein helpoin kohdata toisia uskontoja, koska meillä on kuitenkin sanoma, joka voi kohdata kaikkia ihmisiä, ja se on nimenomaan Jumalan rauhan ja Jumalan rakkauden sanoma' (IF mgt 2005/8).

4 '... eihän siinä uskonnot ole lähtökohtaisesti vastassa, vaan ihmisten olosuhteet' (IF mgt 2005/9).

5 IF mgt 2005/11.

values of forgiveness and reconciliation in solving conflicts and creating the impetus for a better future. In order to create lasting peace, we must come to terms with the past and fight injustices, the Appeal states. The experience of forgiveness makes us free to love our neighbour: that is the message of the Christian Church, Mr Virtanen believes. Yet, the past should not be ignored, it is argued: we must know our past, but also know how to forgive and forget Archbishop Leo says. Nevertheless, the issue of compensation for the injustices of the past should not be suppressed, Bishop Wróbel underlines: we need to speak freely of reconciliation.

This discussion of the characteristics of religious peace work can be illuminated by reference to Buber. In his view, dialogue has a specifically *religious dimension*: 'in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*' (Buber 1958: 22). Buber's philosophy builds on the thought that the relationship to the eternal Thou always forms the background against which we meet other persons as Thou. It is not a relationship apart from our human relationships, but it encompasses all relationships within itself (Buber 1958: 77, 81). This idea places dialogue efforts based on religious conviction in an interesting light, giving them a unique function in the global peace movement. This aspect is important in the interreligious dialogue portrayed in the Peace Appeal and in the interviews. Today, it is often assumed that active believers of one faith or another are more narrow-minded than others; that belonging to a religion makes people intolerant by definition. But in Buber's view, it is rather the other way around: Our relationship to God is what makes interpersonal relationships and dialogue possible. We are different, but all part of God's creation. We are bound by the same life conditions as human beings in an imperfect world. Religiously-based dialogue efforts thus serve the I-Thou relationship in a special way.

### **Valuing the Unique Individual**

The importance of interreligious dialogue is acknowledged by all four church leaders. As mentioned above, peace, love and reconciliation are seen as cornerstones of the Christian faith and as fundamentals also in other religions. Dialogue between religions should have as its starting point the many values and beliefs we have in common, they stress: its first goal should be to let the participants get to know each other, which involves finding the values they share and possibilities for co-operation. The question of peace, Archbishop Paarma notes, has become the issue around which it has been easiest to unite.

The similarities between monotheistic religions – above all the companionship in faith between Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are especially mentioned by Paarma, Leo and Wróbel. Many Christians are afraid of Islam, Archbishops Leo and Paarma note, but this is due to a lack of – or the wrong kind of – information. When I learn to know a Muslim as a person, I can see that he is just the same kind of person as I am – he only believes in another way, Archbishop Paarma explains. Respecting and valuing all human life is a central principle also in Islam, Bishop Wróbel reminds us. Furthermore, Archbishop Paarma, as well as Bishop Wróbel draw attention to the fact that all the children of Abraham believe in the same God. Furthermore, Bishop Wróbel notes that dialogue is needed also *inside* the churches because the differences among, for example, the members of the worldwide Catholic Church are immense. This is significant, since acknowledging the diversity within one's own tradition is an important step in developing an understanding for the plurality of religions at large (Tracy 1990: 55).

The absolute value and equality of all individuals is mentioned as another reason why believers should engage in peaceful, respectful dialogue. In Christianity, the value and uniqueness of each individual is fundamental, Archbishop Leo stresses:

Every person is absolutely equal in their human dignity, no matter what religion they belong to, or if they belong to no religion at all ..., the value of the individual is immeasurable, that is boundless. And that is precisely because he is God's image.<sup>6</sup>

Respecting individual dignity and freedom, regardless of religious conviction, is thus seen as a religious task. In Mr Virtanen's words: 'without personal freedom, you cannot say to another person: I love you.'<sup>7</sup> In fact, Bishop Wróbel states that religions should be the most uncompromising guardians of human rights and dignity: 'es ist wichtig zu sagen zugleich, dass die Religion, oder der Glaube an Gott, also *richtige* Glaube an Gott,

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6 '... jokainen ihminen on ihmisarvossa täsmälleen sama, kuuluu sitten mihin uskontoon tahansa tai ei kuulu yhtään mihinkään. [... yksilön arvo] on mittaamaton, se on siis määrätön. Ja se on juuri se, että hän on Jumalan kuva.' (IF mgt 2005/9.)

7 '... ilman tämmöistä omaa vapautta, niin ei voi sanoa toiselle, että rakastan sinua' (IF mgt 2005/8).

die tiefsten, die größten Begründungen der Menschenwürde ist, und der Menschenrechten.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the effort at dialogue based on religious conviction is once again seen as fulfilling a function of its own, this time in its advocacy of human dignity and equality. Along the same lines, Raimond Gaita argues that religion can contribute to interpersonal understanding by offering a language that facilitates a way of talking about the uniqueness of every individual. He brings together the acknowledgement of the unconditional preciousness of every individual, which is indispensable in dialogue, with the religiously coloured notion of *holiness*. This term, he believes, captures an important quality in our dialogue with others: by encountering the other as a unique and precious person in her own right, we obtain a feeling for the inviolable dignity of every human being, or, to use another word, holiness (Gaita 1991: 1, 35). Therefore, religious language can shed light upon the way in which other persons limit our selfishness and form our lives as nothing else does. We can talk about the freedom of the individual, our right to respect and dignity, but no secular terms can capture this human quality as easily and forcefully as the notion of holiness (Gaita 1999: 19, 23). This quality of holiness, I believe, is what the church leaders allude to in their descriptions of religion as a guardian of the human values needed in dialogue. We can, therefore, as Gaita stresses, find a distinctively religious contribution to peace ideology in the linguistic arena – none of the church leaders, however, uses the notion of holiness in the interviews.

Respecting every person as a unique individual, as equal in value and dignity, is thus an important aspect of the Peace Appeal, the church leaders stress. This makes the openness needed in dialogue possible. According to Buber, genuine dialogue belongs to the I–Thou-relationship; it is about reciprocity and response, it requires that I reach out towards the other, that I am truly present and ready to see. A dialogue requires two *separate* parties, otherwise there is only a monologue (Buber 1947: 23). Hence, it is vital to underline the importance of acknowledging *otherness in dialogue*. Otherness can be understood in relation to Ilham Dilman's notion of *human separateness*: that we all are unique individuals in our own right. This is, in his view, a prerequisite for understanding, rather than an obstacle to it. Separateness should be acknowledged and valued in dialogue; separateness is not isolation, but rather autonomy and relation in union (Dilman 1987: 78, 105).

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8 IF mgt 2005/11.

Otherness may – but must not necessarily – imply difference. The point of dialogue is to facilitate unity in spite of differing opinions and convictions. Understanding does not require sameness: neither party must give up their own identity in order for a ‘fusion of horizons’ to occur. Differences are seen as possibilities rather than obstacles during dialogue (Buber 1958: 57; Gaita 1999: 271). In my interpretation of Buber, this means that there are possibilities for understanding and fellowship that are not based on consensus. We need not share one opinion or one religion in order to enter into dialogue. Our fellowship is based on our common situation, as human beings in the world, a situation characterised by anguish and expectation, according to Buber (1947: 9).

Otherness may also however imply similarity. The important issue, therefore, is not that we are different, but rather that we, as Dilman argues, value each individual’s separateness and autonomy. This otherness is not estrangement, but lets us come close and affirm the value of diversity. By encountering the other in this way – as connected to ourselves, but at the same time independent and unique – the other becomes what I have called an *autonomous other*: an other, who is not under my power, who can surprise me and be different but still equal, interesting and important (Illman 2004: 183–4). Every interpersonal relationship is formed in the constantly changing juxtaposition between similarities and differences. Both polarities are constantly present, intricately united in every encounter: we are neither completely similar nor completely different. The notion of otherness, in my interpretation, acknowledges this multiple identity, building on separateness and autonomy.

How do the church leaders respond to this call for difference? Otherness in dialogue, as defined above, is mostly regarded by the church leaders as a valuable trait which is worth safeguarding. Even though different religions have many values in common, we are still different and do not have to become alike in order to understand each other, they stress. The aim of dialogue is not to change the other but to try to understand the difference, and to understand that difference does not necessarily imply antagonism, Archbishop Leo and Bishop Wróbel argue: even if the other is not my friend, he does not have to be my enemy. Neither is the aim of dialogue to try to find a compromise between the religions, Archbishop Paarma stresses: ‘Dialogue is easy to pursue when we have sorted out what our aim is, that we are not striving towards some kind of common religion, and we are not trying to convert each other.’<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the interviewees underline the importance of knowing oneself – a demand which is not so easy to meet as it may seem: it requires

reflexivity, honesty, and, at times, courage. Dialogue is possible only if you know your own starting point, and respect the values that you yourself want to be true to. Without recognition of your own starting point you have no platform to build your dialogue on, Archbishop Paarma claims, a point advocated also by Archbishop Leo, who states: 'the better the Christians know their own faith, the better they know Islam, the better they know Jews.'<sup>10</sup> Dialogue does not always lead to agreement and understanding, and we cannot always accept each other's views. But the greatest problem facing interreligious dialogue today is not the strongly held opinions, but the weakly held ones, Archbishop Leo believes, paraphrasing the words of the Bible: Christian salt is losing its saltiness.

When you are secure in your own identity, it is easier to be tolerant and understanding towards others, as their differing beliefs are not experienced as a threat, Archbishop Paarma and Bishop Wróbel claim. As Christians, we must be able to face everything, we have nothing to lose, Mr Virtanen argues. Referring to the words of the Bible, which, in his opinion, are quite clear, he says, 'If we read the Bible as it is written, it says that if God is for us, who can be against us? And this makes me free to respect my neighbour, whether he is a Muslim or an Eskimo or anything, whatever he believes in.'<sup>11</sup>

Otherness is, to conclude, an important value to be cherished in interreligious dialogue: every person is unique and worthy of respect. Even though the aim of dialogue is not to make the participants change their views and become more similar or more different, it is still valuable to recognise the many similarities between religions. This attitude towards otherness, David Tracy describes by the analogy similarity-in-difference (Tracy 1990: 42), offering a common base on which to build peace. The same spirit is found in the following statement made by Archbishop Paarma:

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9 'Ja tätä dialogia on helppo käydä silloin kun tämä on selvitetty, mihin pyritään, että ei pyritä johonkin yhteiseen uskontoon, eikä pyritään käännyttämään toinen toistaan' (IF mgt 2005/10).

10 'Jos kristityt tuntevat omansa ..., mitä paremmin he tuntevat omansa, niin sitä paremmin he tuntevat islamin, sitä paremmin he tuntevat juutalaiset' (IF mgt 2005/9).

11 'Jos me luemme Raamattua niin kuin se on kirjoitettu, se sanoo että jos Jumala on meidän puolellamme, niin kuka voi olla meitä vastaan, niin silloinhan se vapauttaa minut kunnioittamaan lähimmäistäni, oli hän sitten muslimi tai eskimo tai mikä tahansa, uskoo hän sitten mihin tahansa.' (IF mgt 2005/8.)

I believe that if difference is not acknowledged, then the contact is – I will not say false but it is at least not fair. It is fair if we confess that we are different and we differ in that and that and that way. But nevertheless we have much in common ... and we can understand each other on that basis: accept the difference but at the same time search for that which unites us. And peace is what most obviously unites representatives of different religions.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Tension between Dialogue and Mission**

Valuing otherness is, as discussed above, the idea and aim of interreligious dialogue. In discussing such a topic with Christian church leaders, the issue of mission arises in its wake because the missionary character of Christianity seems to have a bearing on any relationship between Christians and representatives of other faiths. Jesus gave his followers the commission to ‘go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28:19–20, NIV). In contemporary discussions of interreligious dialogue, this is often associated with an illegitimately aggressive tendency, excessively embodied in colonialism and imperialism (Ariarajah 1999: 101). Mission is seen as a problematic issue, a reminder of a time when the world was divided into civilised and barbaric people, and different religions were placed in a hierarchical system with Christianity at the top as the crown of evolution.

Have missionaries then outlived their usefulness in the contemporary world, since dialogue is the new way of responding to people of other faiths? Is dialogue replacing missionary work, are they complementary or even contradictory? In considering this relationship, the four interviewees present a rather complex image of the issue, encompassing several different perspectives. The church leaders keenly underline the fact that mission today is a multifarious activity: it includes, e.g., social, health and

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12 ‘Luulen, että jos sitä erilaisuutta ei tunnusteta, niin se yhteys on – en sano että valheellinen, mutta se ei ole niin semmoinen reilu. Se on reilu jos tunnustetaan, että me olemme erilaisia, me eroamme siinä ja siinä ja siinä kohdassa. Mutta siitä huolimatta meillä on paljon yhteistä [... ja voimme] ymmärtää siltä pohjalta, hyväksyä se erilaisuus, mutta etsiä samalla niitä, mikä meitä yhdistää. Ja rauha on se, joka niin kuin kaikkein selvimmin on se mikä yhdistää eri uskontojen edustajia.’ (IF mgt 2005/10.)

educational work, and it takes place in distant developing countries as well as at home. Above all, this work is always performed with an attitude of respect, co-operation and community. Mr Virtanen avoids making a clear-cut difference between dialogue and mission, but underlines the importance of personal relationships in both fields: getting to know each other on a personal level, thereby creating possibilities for discussion and respect towards the other and her religion. Dialogue, in his view, is not unproblematic, and concord on a theoretical level is not always achieved without modifying one's own views. Therefore, the most fruitful dialogue is carried out on the practical level, in connection to some concrete task uniting the different parties. In that way, one gets to know the other on a personal level and can initiate a discussion which opens up opportunities to influence the other – a comment which could be interpreted as revealing missionary intentions again.

According to Archbishop Paarma, openness is a key concept in mission as well as dialogue. There should be no hidden agendas, one should clearly state from the outset the purpose of the contact, otherwise, doubts about one's motives are easily created. According to Paarma, both dialogue and mission deserve to be carried out in their own right: dialogue involves discussions aiming at increasing mutual understanding and finding ways of co-operating in order to create a more peaceful, just and prosperous world. Mission, on the other hand, is preaching the gospel and teaching the Christian faith.

As expansion is an inherent aspect of most great religions, there will always, on a practical level, be tensions between dialogue and mission, Paarma believes. He is not convinced, however, that this is inevitable. Although Christians are commissioned to try to convert others, there are also other, equally important Christian principles to be cherished, e.g., respecting the other, valuing her freedom and trying to build a common understanding. Thus, there should be room for both mission and dialogue in the Christian contacts with other religions, Paarma argues. The important thing is to keep them apart, and to engage honestly either in dialogue or in mission.

According to the church leaders, dialogue and mission are not irreconcilable opposites and the similarities between the two are emphasised: both are seen, for example, as motivated by love and peace. In Archbishop Leo's view, interreligious dialogue can perhaps be seen as the common missionary striving of the different religions directed towards the secular world; it is not a competition between different religions, but rather their joint venture. If the aim of mission is defined as making everyone believe in Jesus Christ as their personal saviour, then dialogue cannot achieve this,

Archbishop Paarma notes. But if we realise that both dialogue and mission aim at creating a better and more peaceful world, then we open up a new perspective: 'And maybe, if we together, co-operating with different religions, could make this world better, then we have already come closer to one another, and some of the goals of missionary work will have been achieved.'<sup>13</sup>

Also Bishop Wróbel argues that the perception of a polarity between mission and dialogue builds on uninformed views of mission. Mission is not solely about winning persons for Christ on the intellectual level, it concerns all that we are as humans. It is about love and respect for other persons, a wish to share the good things that God has given. Therefore, mission is in no way contrary to dialogue. Bishop Wróbel even argues that mission brings with it such values that are fundamental for peace and understanding among people of different faiths: 'Ich denke eben, dass die Mission, oder Evangelisierung heutzutage ..., das bringt mit sich was für Frieden fundamental ist, ja, weil es bringt mit sich den Gebot der Liebe, der Gerechtigkeit und den Respekt, den Respekt des Menschen.'<sup>14</sup>

To summarise the views of the church leaders, the issue of mission is not such a stumbling block to relations between religions as is often assumed in a post-colonial perspective. Dialogue and mission are both different and similar in character. Their motives are similar, but in practice they should be kept apart. One exception exists, however; aid and development efforts included in missionary work should not be restricted to persons sympathetic to the Christian faith. Rather, it should be motivated solely by the need of the other. Archbishop Paarma stresses that one must not take advantage of a person's needs for religious purposes. To shed light upon this idea, Mr Virtanen refers to the example of the recent tsunami catastrophe in Southeast Asia. In the aid work that followed, he argues, what mattered was not a person's religion, but rather their need. In Mr Virtanen's opinion, this should be the order of priorities: first, caring for the needs of the other, then perhaps discussing differences in faith.<sup>15</sup>

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13 'Ja voihan se olla, että jos me yhdessä, eri uskontojen yhteistyönä, voisimme tehdä tämän maailman paremmaksi, niin me olemme silloin jo tulleet lähemmäksi toinen toisiamme, ja jotain siitä lähetystyöstä on tapahtunut' (IF mgt 2005/10).

14 IF mgt 2005/11.

15 'Ja siellä tuli ne käytännön teot mukaan, siellä ei kysytty, että mitä uskontoa edustat, vaan siellä kysyttiin mitä sinä tarvitset, ja se on minusta se tärkein kysymys ensin. ... Että kuka sinä olet ja mitä sinä tarvitset? Sen jälkeen sitten voidaan keskustella, että jaa, että mimmoinen jumala sinulla on?' (IF mgt 2005/8.)

## God in Other Religions

Interreligious dialogue, it has been argued, places high demands on the participants: it is not to be conducted half-heartedly, with hidden motives or without a willingness to question one's own preconceived ideas. In order for dialogue to achieve peace and reconciliation, as presumed in the Peace Appeal, both parties need to conceive of the relationship as an encounter between I and Thou, and be able to preserve their own convictions, while at the same time being open and humble towards the otherness of the other. One threat to dialogue, though it is refuted by the church leaders, might occur when the aims of dialogue become confused with those of missionary work. Another, perhaps more subtle, threat to dialogue is not granting the dialogue partner – or oneself – the autonomy and integrity of a Thou.

What position are the church leaders ready to grant their dialogue partners? S. Wesley Ariarajah (1999) discusses how this issue has been debated within the World Council of Churches over the years. The Council has taken a stand on the question of God in other religions on several occasions. Ariarajah believes the WCC is presently ready to affirm the notion of a sincere *search* for God within other religions. Lately, the support for the thought of God's *presence* in other religions has grown, too. *Finding* God in other religions is still a controversial issue and no common understanding has emerged. Most members maintain that salvation is found only through Jesus Christ, while others argue that the 'conviction that God as creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable ... that God's saving activity could be confined to any one continent, cultural type, or group of peoples' (Ariarajah 1999: 116). Inspired by this discussion, I posed the following three questions to the church leaders: Can we see a sincere *search* for God in other religions? Can we see the *presence* of God in other religions? Can God be *found* in other religions? The answers I received reveal interesting and, in my view, intentionally ambiguous positions.

The first question receives a unanimous answer in the affirmative from the church leaders. All of them stress that seeking God and religious truth are fundamental to all human life. God is the creator of the whole world, therefore, we find a longing for God in the souls and minds of all people. The question of God's presence in other religions receives more varied responses. Archbishop Leo finds nothing controversial in the statement since God, in his view, is present in every person he has created. This is also the view of Mr Virtanen. Bishop Wróbel and Archbishop Paarma both

point out that God has the power to reach out to his creation in any way he chooses, and therefore we cannot exclude the possibility of him being present in other religions, in other peoples' search for a better life. Yet, they stress, the complete solution to the quest for God's presence is Jesus Christ.

Can God or a way to God, then, be found in other religions? This is, as Archbishop Paarma formulates it, a problematic issue. On the one hand, Christianity builds on the thought of one path leading to eternal life and a true connection to God – that of Jesus Christ. But is everyone else then excluded from salvation? Paarma says that we have no answer to these questions. In his view we must leave many questions open: 'We only know that Jesus Christ is the way. But is there another way? We do not know of any other way.'<sup>16</sup>

Mr Virtanen and Bishop Wróbel articulate more clearly their scepticism about the possibility of finding a full and true connection to God in other religions. God is not far away from any one of us, he calls us all and everyone has her own way to God, Virtanen maintains. But what kind of a God can be found along these different paths? Mr Virtanen, however, believes that the Christian perception of God is the 'sweetest and nicest', an opinion he bases on the Gospel and what it tells us about the love of God.<sup>17</sup> Bishop Wróbel is certain that you can find God in other religions, but makes one important reservation: he doubts whether you can find the *complete* divine truth elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Bishop Leo, for his part, affirms the ambiguity of the question as to whether it is possible to find God in other religions by answering: 'Well, I will at least not deny it.'<sup>19</sup> During the interview he clarifies this statement by saying that he finds we definitely have all we need in the teachings of the Gospel, but that good teaching can be found elsewhere, too.<sup>20</sup>

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16 'Me tiedämme vain sen, että Jeesus Kristus on tie. Mutta onko joku muu? Ei meillä ole tietoa mistään muusta tiestä.' (IF mgt 2005/10.)

17 '... voisi ajatella, että kristillinen jumalakäsitys on ehkä kaikkein suloisin ja mukavin ajatellen sitä, mitä evankeliumit meille kertovat Jumalan rakkaudesta' (IF mgt 2005/8).

18 'Aber, ob man *volle* Wahrheit über Gott findet, das bezweifle ich' (IF mgt 2005/11).

19 'No, en minä ainakaan sitä mene kieltämään' (IF mgt 2005/9).

20 '... kyllä siinä evankeliumin opetuksessa on ihan kaikki tarpeellinen, siinähan on kaikkea sitä tarpeellista mitä on sitten monessa muussakin' (IF mgt 2005/9).

The complex answers to these questions are, in my view, highly relevant for interreligious dialogue and the balance between the similarities and differences, involved in such relationships. In analysing these answers, it is clear that the church leaders respect and value the endeavours of persons committed to other religions: a longing for God is seen as genuine in all religions. The questions of God's presence and the possibility of finding God in other religions, nevertheless, reveal a wish to protect the exclusivity of one's own faith, seeing it as different from the others. This, of course, is not surprising. If you embrace your religion whole-heartedly, it is inconceivable that it could be exchanged for any other tradition in the twinkling of an eye.

Regarding one's own faith as the only right path for oneself must not include, however, self-righteous and hostile claims to superiority. With Buber, one could say that there are several doorways leading to the eternal Thou, because the path leading thereto is different for every person (Buber 1958: 98–9, 102). What we call this eternal Thou is thus of lesser interest: 'For he who speaks the word God and really has *Thou* in mind (whatever the illusion by which he is held), addresses the true *Thou* of his life' (Buber 1958: 77–8). Who the eternal Thou is, is thus left open: the main thing is not that you hold an opinion, but that you have a path with a goal, a real commitment.

This might be understood as a relativistic conclusion, but this is, I believe, neither the intention of the church leaders, nor is it my interpretation. Rather, it is a call for reflection and self-reflectivity. As mentioned, the aim of interreligious dialogue is not to abolish differences, but to acknowledge the value of all participants as unique in their own right. The dialogue requires that we see each other as legitimate perspectives on the world; as precious individuals to be taken seriously and to be treated in a responsible, respectful way (Winch 1987: 177–8; Gaita 1999: 281–2). Taking the other seriously means granting him the status of a fully capable moral agent. To accomplish this, we must acknowledge that the conceived other has feelings, hopes and thoughts that are as deep as, though not necessarily *the same* as, ours (Gaita 1991: 158). Even if I do not share another person's views and values, I can still recognise her as a unique and legitimate perspective on the world (Phillips 2001: 6, 307).

Such an encounter with another person always places us in the situation of a moral decision; it requires our attention, reflection and responsibility – every time anew. This situation has to be addressed time and time again in a sincere, open and thorough process of reflection in relation to the specific situation and the specific person we stand before. Therefore, dia-

logue should be based neither on an ethic of rules and regulations nor on a relativistic attitude of 'anything goes'. The importance of knowing yourself and being confident about your own identity appear to be key issues in this discussion. We may also recall the comment by Archbishop Paarma: we know that our path leads to unity with God, and if there are other paths, they are not known to us. Such a stance is criticised by Ariarajah, though: Our generation must move forward from neutrality to a more genuine appreciation of the religious lives of our neighbours, he believes; we cannot afford to continue saying: we do not know (Ariarajah 1999: 123). My conclusion however is that openness and humility are needed in inter-religious dialogue. So, the answers given by the church leaders are perhaps the only possible ones for dialogue truly be a dialogue which defends mutual otherness. Dialogue should open my eyes to the uniqueness and uncompromised dignity of the other, creating ways for us to turn towards each other, calling each other Thou. But dialogue should also allow me to acknowledge my own identity in a positive way, offering a safe and inspiring 'home' to start the journey from.

### **Creating Peace Means Responsibility and Action**

The analysis above has shown that the issues of interreligious dialogue and peace are apprehended and discussed with a good deal of unanimity among the church leaders interviewed. They all stress the value of difference, the importance of knowing yourself when entering into dialogue and they all allow for the presence of the divine in – at least some – other religions. As leaders of their churches, the interviewees discuss these topics mostly on a general level. When asked they, however, underline the importance of personal responsibility and involvement in order that the values expressed in the Peace Appeal may be put into action. Creating peace is up to every one of us, not just politicians and world leaders, Bishop Wróbel stresses: 'Der Frieden muss in den Herzen des Menschen beginnen.'<sup>21</sup>

At an initial level, it is important to learn about the ideals of peace and companionship in religions, Wróbel continues, but we must also take these principles to heart, make them our own and use them in all aspects of our lives. God gave us free will, Wróbel as well as Virtanen argue. It is therefore up to each of us to make the decision in our hearts about whether

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21 IF mgt 2005/11.

to carry the responsibility for peace or not: 'Der Mensch ist fähig diese, Gottes Stimme zu hören und zu akzeptieren. Man muss selbst wählen.'<sup>22</sup>

Creating the impetus for peace is thus an individual responsibility, the church leaders claim. Love, peace and tolerance are key words in all religions, Mr Virtanen underlines, but nevertheless, violence and hatred seem to be the key actions. The fine ideals expressed in the Peace Appeal are not being put into practice. The church leaders therefore stress the importance of acting to bring about peace and reconciliation. Acting together unites people more than anything else, Archbishop Paarma stresses: 'the common task, responding to the needs of others, unites us and tears down the images of enmity.'<sup>23</sup> One day, the Lord will ask: did you do enough, Mr Virtanen points out. It is therefore the responsibility of every Christian to act for peace and to care for others.

Activity and responsibility are central also in Buber's philosophy. You cannot reach another person if you exclude God, but neither can you reach God if you exclude the people around you (Buber 1958: 108–9). Believing is thus affirming others as Thou and also affirming yourself. The path to the eternal Thou passes through the world and I–Thou-relationships, the 'living reality' (Buber 1958: 88). In encountering the eternal Thou we are commissioned to act in the world. This statement seems to be descriptive of the commitment called for in the Peace Appeal. As the church leaders point out, working for peace is closely connected to individual responsibility. Religions or cultures as such are not agents fighting poverty and suppression, rather it is individual persons who make decisions and interpretations in their daily lives. Interreligious dialogue is always an interpersonal dialogue, a fact which makes it a moral issue (Illman 2005).

Interreligious encounter places great responsibility on our shoulders. The world is *entrusted* to us, and we are to respond to this confidence by taking our responsibility (Buber 1947: 52). It is therefore up to me to try to encounter the other as a Thou, even though he might choose not to respond to me in the same way. Love means engagement in the world, it is the responsibility of an I for a Thou. Therefore, the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference (Gaita 1991: 179; Dilman 1987: 66). Love includes a willingness to be bound to other persons, but it still allows enough space for them to be themselves (Dilman 1987: 86, 88–9). The clearest response to

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22 IF mgt 2005/11.

23 '... se yhteinen tehtävä, ihmisten hätä ja siihen vastaaminen yhdistää myöskin, ja purkaa näitä viholliskuvia' (IF mgt 2005/10).

such theoretical claims is stated by Bishop Wróbel. As believers, we should accept responsibility for the world and not turn our backs on it, he argues. In the Bible, love has a practical aspect to it. Therefore, he is troubled when he hears Christians talk about God's love and loving your neighbours but without giving their words any practical content. Love is more than a feeling, he claims: love is a demand for human rights, respect and peace. Archbishop Leo makes a similar point:

Indeed, a person can have good thoughts, but the thoughts are in his own head, they do not show. But words are already a little more, words can at least be heard and words can make someone else think. But still, words without deeds are somewhat light-weight.<sup>24</sup>

### Concluding Remark

This article has touched upon interreligious dialogue and its significance for creating an impetus for peace in the world today. Through an analysis of the empirical material – the Peace Appeal signed by four Christian church leaders in Finland and interviews with them – the current topic has been illuminated from different angles. In my interpretation, three terms arise as especially significant in this discussion: *love* as respect and engagement, *responsibility* as an individual ethical demand, and *otherness* as an important acknowledgement of the autonomy of another person and of oneself.

Dialogue is a demanding task, the church leaders conclude. Interreligious co-operation is connected with fundamental questions that are not always easy to reach a consensus on, Mr Virtanen notes. Unfortunately, the easiest way to solve these matters is often not to get involved with the other at all, a situation in which everyone happily keeps themselves to themselves.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the church leaders agree that both ecumenical co-operation

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24 'Kyllähän ihmisellä voi olla hyviä ajatuksia itsesssänsä, mutta se on vain, että ne ajatukset ovat sen toisen omassa päässä, niin ne eivät näy. Mutta sanatkin ovat jo vähän enemmän, sanat sentään kuuluvat ja sanat voi saada jonkun toisen ajattelemaan. Mutta sanatkin ilman tekoja niin kuitenkin ne ovat sitten vähän kevyttä.' (IF mgt 2005/9.)

25 '... ja niitä [kysymyksiä] ei ole aina helppo ratkaista yhteyden suuntaan. Se on paljon helpompi ratkaista niin, että me pysymme omillamme ja te omillanne, niin me olemme kaikki onnellisia!' (IF mgt 2005/8.)

and interreligious dialogue are fruitful and constructive in Finland, attracting benevolent interest from the wider public. This is an interesting development calling for further analysis, especially against the background of the negative evaluation of traditional missionary work.

The church leaders are also united in their view that interreligious dialogue will become a crucial question in the future. We have no other choice than to engage in dialogue, Bishop Wróbel states. Mr Virtanen and Archbishop Leo share this view; the greatest challenges in interreligious relationships are still ahead, Archbishop Leo adds. Archbishop Paarma calls himself an optimist: the task of creating peace on earth might seem unrealistic, but we need visionaries who dare to work for and dream of the impossible. They can pave the way for a new world: 'If the religions can be won for peace everywhere, then we have the hope of creating peace and a more just system in the world.'<sup>26</sup> Here, too, further investigation is vital, bringing in the perspectives of the dialogue partners, in Finland and on the global scene.

What hopes do the church leaders attach to the signing of the Peace Appeal? Bishop Wróbel and Archbishop Paarma hope that it can inspire people to engage in peace work, and make them conscious of the fact that peace is a moral demand bestowed on all of us. Even though the Appeal has not reached a large audience yet, a network oriented towards peace has been created which, step by step, can work to realise the conditions for peace. By signing the Appeal, Mr Virtanen says, the churches give an important signal that they are ready to engage in dialogue and to interpret Christianity as a message of peace and love, forgiveness and reconciliation. Implementing these ideals will largely be an aspect of everyday life. Archbishop Leo agrees that this is a first small step on a long journey, but that it can make people conscious of the opinions of the churches and their leaders: 'We talk about *this* hope, and we should be prepared to listen to what others say about their own hopes. Because it is all, however, the shared hope of humanity.'<sup>27</sup>

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26 'Jos uskonnot saadaan kaikkialla rauhan puolelle, niin silloin meillä on jotakin toivoa saada maailmaan rauhaa ja oikeudenmukainen systeemi' (IF mgt 2005/10).

27 'Me kerromme tästä toivosta, ja pitää kuunnella, mitä muut kertovat omasta toivostansa. Koska se on kaikki kuitenkin ihmiskunnan yhteistä toivoa.' (IF mgt 2005/11.)

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