

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF FRITZ JAHR
TOWARDS RESPECTFUL
RELATIONSHIPS IN THE AREA OF
RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY**

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Introduction

The spiritual/religious dimension is recognized and contemplated today in the most diverse spheres of human life. Human beings are constantly seeking for meaning that transcends their limits and vulnerabilities and allows them to experience the meaning of life in the context in which they live.

Ill health is a factor that intensifies the search for experiences that make life more meaningful, independently of its conditions and limitations. Understanding the human situation this way, beyond the simple right to religious freedom, guaranteed to all citizens, it is necessary to guarantee a reciprocal relationship of respect for the faith of others, and spiritual assistance especially during illness and periods of hospitalization. The challenge resides in the question of reception and respect in the face of the immense diversity of expressions of faith and their relationship with the process of restoration of health.

⁵Fritz Jahr (1895-1953) was a German protestant pastor, theologian, philosopher and educator, born in *Halle an der Saale*. The concept of Bioethics, suggested by Jahr, gives a more amplified meaning to the moral relationship between human beings and other living beings, human and non-human. Developed as a "bio-ethic imperative", in place of the formal categorical imperative of Kant, Jahr points to ethics that deal with animal experimentation, the necessary deliberation as to the intentions of scientific research and the diverse aspects of the diffusion of science on the population as a whole, to make it more participatory. (BIOETHIKOS. São Paulo: Centro Universitário São Camilo. 201;5(3):242-275).

How to deal with religious diversity? It is understood that the experience and expression of faith transcends the scientific sphere, inherent in the healing process, however, importance is given today to the reasonableness of faith, the dimension in which dialog and interaction between faith and science is possible, between the various players in the healing process: health professionals, patients and family members.

In the health care the personal religious expressions emerge. The question of spiritual assistance does not depend on a person belonging to this or that religion, or if is a numerically expressive religious profession, or not.

The proposal of this study has its origin in the concrete action of spiritual assistants and seeks to identify elements in the thinking of Fritz Jahr that contribute so that this service may be in agreement with the current demands of religious diversity and to be in fact an ally to health care, especially in the case of clinical care or hospitalization.

1 RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: THE BEAUTY AND THE CHALLENGE OF DIFFERENCE

It is important to understand *where* and *how* society is today, that is, the environment in which that person - the patient - who is seeking health care, is situated. This is the starting point for the doctor-patient-family relationship. We are not starting here with a detailed analysis of the present situation, but presenting the main trends of post modernity, which in one way or other affect relationships in different human spheres and within which, the human being understands himself as a person.

We opted, in this study, to highlight the main lines of post modernity adopted by the author of Practical Theology, Norbert Mente (2005) that sums up the present situation following ample and universal trends, although distinct within different realities, with their challenges and prospects: individualization, pluralization, detraditionalization and globalization. (cf. METTE, 2005, p. 47ss).

The individualization of lifestyles, of understanding oneself as a person and searching for the meaning of life, and personal expression, is in fact, a constituent element of diversity. If on one hand, most radically, it can lead to individualism, incompatible with living together respectfully, on the other it is an important presupposition for the exercise of freedom and autonomy, for the leading role of the individual. Individualized styles constitute pluralism in the most varied environments, which require skill to live with difference, thus establishing a new form of relationship.

The exercise of freedom and autonomy does not only break free from uniformity and outward decisions. In developing an individual lifestyle, from personal convictions, this frequently leads to breaking free from tradition. On one hand, traditionally proven values may be lost, on the other this process allows keeping up with progress in a society that is in rapid and constant change.

Today, it is possible to widen the perspectives on a world scale, creating a community practically without frontiers and at the same time restrict them to oneself, as though it were possible to possess a world just for yourself. The result of this is new and challenging behaviors and relationships. Globalization, promoted and favored by numerous forms of communication, including those produced by technology, is increasingly transforming society even among those

who in a way appear *distant from the world*, given their geographical distance from large cities. If all the advantages of globalization do not reach everyone equally, some aspects of this process are absorbed more amply and change the forms of existence in the world and have a direct impact on interpersonal relationships.

The changes generated in recent years in the religious scope are also caused by these trends since it is impossible to separate religious questions from the development of society itself. In their origin, different religions may have considered themselves to be exclusive, the only way to salvation. But the processes mentioned above produced a new experience in perceiving that they are no longer unique, but manifold. “The perception that arises as obvious is that their religion is just another one, among others, even if this perception is in conflict with the original exclusive legacy of each religion” (VIGIL, 2006, p. 114)

Religious questions, on one hand remit immediately to realities enshrined in faith in the Transcendent, that is, dimensions of life not totally included in the space in which they are perceived, lived out and evaluated, and on the other, the experiences of faith are concrete and their expression is contextualized and real, interacting continually with other aspects of life. This is why it is the reason of continual study and open-minded analysis. The unknown, the mysterious, cannot be ignored, because from this the typical behavior of each religion can be deduced, especially in its multiple inter-relationships. Accepting and understanding diversity in different areas of human experience is essential to comprehend the human being as qualified to see himself in different ways of existence in the world, distinct, but always interconnected.

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However, there are no controversies so fierce in the realm of religion as those that deal with diversity, since they deal with concepts and the content of beliefs traditionally held by the follower and his group as *the truth*, and that at the same time transcend human possibilities and categories. Their moral behavior and lifestyle are inspired by their doctrines and truths. The primary questions are: Without this truth, would what I believe make sense? How to relate to someone who has *another faith*? How does the change from the self-perception of an exclusive religion into religious diversity impact the concept of *truth*? As the theme here is not to deal with the concept of *Truth*, the questions raised are used to point out the complexity of paradigm change in this field.

The development of a posture of respect, acceptance, and overall, admiration towards those who relate in a different way with the Transcendent, is an extremely delicate and meaningful challenge for society today where diversity and uniformity compete in different areas of life. On one hand each person creates his own way of being, thinking and believing, but on the other, behavior, thoughts and beliefs are globalized. In this context, also in the religious scope, experiencing identity as a person and a community can be considered something good and challenging at the same time.

The author used as reference for this study, Fritz Jahr, understood in his time - the beginning of the 20th century - that diversity amongst Christians is something positive, as long as Christian values that encourage this relationship between different people are preserved.

The more adherent and intensive the religious devotion, the more likely the deciding gradations of differences amongst the various people and groups will turn out, so that no two people's inner

believes are alike. Perhaps the many forms of belief attest to the strength of the religion and, from that point of view, could be a good sign. It is mandatory that the richness of the forms of belief must not cause religious unrest between the Christians. Such danger is very real and, from the past up to the present, the same thing always happens: The Christian churches, which are uniquely pioneering in their works of charity, a model for all of modern culture, show a terribly short apply of this love in the behaviors toward each other in matters of differing religious opinions. (JAHR, 2012, p. 43).

To see yourself as different from someone else and see the other as different are enriching human experiences when they allow and, above all, promote mutual acceptance and respect, considering the other person as a reference for your own identity. To affirm and consolidate your own religious identity is substantially different from trying to impose your own convictions on people of other religious groups. Ecumenical and inter-religious co-existence implies valuing someone for what they are and for what they believe, without trying to transform or convert them to your own beliefs. The exclusive appreciation of what constitutes a common doctrine at the expense of differences, promoted for many years and praiseworthy for providing a space for co-existence and reciprocal acceptance, should also effectively include respect and acceptance of the other person, precisely in that which makes them different. It is a difficult question to address and experience harmonious and conjointly between different religious communities. The incalculable diversity of religious groups that related to individualized personal care, as is the case in the area of Health, become evident and significant.

The primary questions at that time, from the author Fritz Jahr, in the first half of the 20th century, are very close to those currently seen in different societies, under the impact of new realities resulting from the development in the most diverse human and scientific spheres.

Starting from the exposition of Jahr on the internal situation of the Christian Churches at that time, their controversies and relationship difficulties, you could consider expanding the question to the religious diversity today: What complicates the experience of religious diversity as something positive in society today? How should we co-exist among so many different groups? Within the Christian context, Jahr recognizes: “Instead of the peace, that Christ expects, we find intolerance, disharmony, quarrel and dispute – and one could call this the norm. This is not be and should not be so” (JAHR, 2012, p. 43).

2 RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: IS CO-EXISTENCE AND FRATERNITY POSSIBLE?

“And should not be so” (JAHR, 2012, p. 43), so how should it be? In many aspects we have progressed (since 1935), but we still have a long way to go. Another reason is that this question has become much more complex since then, and is in another socio-cultural context. To understand the need and the road to a good inter-religious dialog, it is necessary to identify the points in common and the differences between one religious community and another, especially because it is possible to talk about differences. Only with a vision of the differences and similarities can we define a good agenda for pacific and constructive co-existence between all the parties. Referring to this question in the Christian arena, Fritz Jahr says: “Central to any Christian church form is this important question: How do we differ from other Christians?” (JAHR, 2012, p. 43) This can also be applied to other religious groups. It is only identifying and accepting the differences that will make it possible to construct a joint path

of *respect, admiration, and reciprocal understanding*. At this level, it is important to establish, apart from individual otherness, a form of *collective otherness* – of the faith community - where the parts allow themselves to be mutually challenged and engage in profound self-analysis without, however, renouncing important elements of their own beliefs, namely those that identify their faith and are thus, fundamental to their identity. Inter-religious dialog “promotes the liberty and dignity of peoples, stimulates collaboration for the common good, overcomes violence motivated by fundamentalist religious attitudes, and educates to promote peaceful co-existence”. (DAp, 2007, p. 112)

An important contribution in this area is made by specialists, such as theologians, although we are not here making a theological analysis on the theme. “In this comparison, the counterparts know and appreciate reciprocally the spiritual values and cultural categories, promoting communion and fraternity among men” (ARINZE, 1984). Where the basis of the dialog contains respect, admiration and openness for learning, “the dialog becomes a source of hope and the factor of fellowship in the transformation” (ARINZE, 1984). Recognizing differences is important to promote tolerant attitudes, and accepting the differences is necessary for reciprocal appreciation and learning.

Diversity means *personal and group identities*. Where the difference is suppressed, the vitality and dynamics of diversity are also suppressed. The many *distinct and peculiar* elements conform to diversity. In the religious scope, renouncing personal beliefs, taking an identical stand as others in a society made up of groups so diverse and fixed in their beliefs and ideologies, the search for / imposition of *unanimity* may become a path as dangerous as proselytism based on radical beliefs.

The starting point for dialog on diversity is the recognition of common belief without, however, being limited to this: “It is preferable to keep in eye what unites us prior to that which divides us” (JAHR, 2012, p. 43). To recognize and rejoice in what unites us is fundamental, and a *meeting point*, to create space for co-existence and dialog, especially when this includes different perspectives of the concept of that which for a religious group is the truth, or at least, points towards it.

As Jahr makes his analysis based on internal controversies in Christianity, it is also worth remembering the vast field of inter-religious experience that exists today. What common aspects can be identified in positions, behavior and philosophy of life based on such distinct doctrines? The dialog becomes unfruitful when there is a clash on doctrine, which is not the main consideration, when thinking about personal health care. Whilst it remains a concrete expression of love and solidarity, the practice of each religion is extremely appropriate for promoting a meeting of different viewpoints. Begin by looking at the human being himself. If the form of understanding God is different, common human values like charity - solidarity are cross-party. And there the different religious confessions effectively meet.

The difference is always subject to be analyzed and evaluated by the one that is different. Considering this aspect, Jahr calls for moderation here and counsels, “When dealing with differences, on should not exaggerated the others conceptual weaknesses and remain silet about the positives.” (JAHR, 2012, p. 44) Although inter-religious sharing about the exercise of solidarity is not the appropriate time to debate doctrine, this sometimes happens. Therefore, it is worth considering here the advice of Jahr (2011), “One has to be very cautious with negative critique; especially in the area of religion – also the Christian religion – the danger is great that one may judge from a presumed truth and

justice, i. e. one misjudges.” (JAHR, 2012, p. 44). It is easy to raise a type of *ecclesiastical court* to judge what is different. According to Jahr, each religious group is made up of people with limitations and is liable to make mistakes. If on one hand you should not get involved in unfounded criticism, on the other, you need to know how to evaluate the other person, who is different, but with the necessary skill to maintain a good interpersonal and inter-group relationship. This will happen more consistently when more is known about the *impossibility of neutrality*, which constitutes an important element of limitation and condition prone to error. Once again, Jahr presents guidance in a simple and precise manner on ethics of respect:

One must become aware that one’s own religion has shortcomings and weaknesses, for which a lenient judgment is taken for granted. Such a consciousness should suffice to take on a kinder judgment towards the shortcomings of others. (JAHR, 2012, p. 44)

Awareness and perception of religious diversity accompany the conquest of the freedom of expression in society as a whole. It is no longer necessary to identify oneself as a member of a traditional and majority Church. Following a faith by tradition has lost strength and it is possible for members of the same family to belong to different churches. It is possible to migrate and also reconcile multiple allegiances, so that while tradition is preserved, new religious expressions are embraced simultaneously.

3 RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND THE HEALING PROCESS

Everyone who consults a health professional and/or goes to a health institution goes there with the sole intention of seeking treatment for their body. However, as the human being is indivisible, the health professional receives and

treats the person and not just an organ. Thus he relates with the person in several dimensions of life. Therefore, to discover the state of the person implies, apart from the clinical evaluation, perceiving his psychological, social and spiritual condition...

The benefits of faith in the healing process are well-known. And even if there were no scientific studies on this faith/health relationship, this dimension cannot be ignored because of the personal freedom guaranteed to all citizens. Religious diversity, therefore, is not a question of a separate area. It is fundamental to recognize the religious background of the population and understand how each person sees himself within his belief in the process of health-sickness as well as his after death belief. Eschatology, although a theological issue, impinges on other areas since it throws light on the meaning of life in the present. Knowledge of theological studies is not expected, but the way the patient sees himself as a person, his origin and destiny, more or less defined in the various religions, should be understood, and this requires a respectful attitude in an environment where invasion into personal life is, by nature and necessity, intense in a therapeutic process.

Spiritual assistance for patients in any form of hospitalization is a service strictly linked to humanization since it deals with an important human dimension. Therefore, it is important to organize the spiritual assistance between a religious group and a multidisciplinary team. In the healing process, besides the techno-scientific processes there is the care aspect that helps to humanize the therapeutic process by providing one-to-one human relationships. Spiritual assistance is included among these, when carried out with reasonable criteria.

There are some urgent challenges here since there are some behaviors and procedures that cannot be established by decrees and should arise from the

human perception of those involved. If, looking at society in general there are *majority and minority* religious groups, when dealing with personal care, as is the case with health care - even greater attention is needed because of individual understanding. So religious diversity, comprehensive and complex, as already mentioned, is even more rich and challenging.

Observations on Spiritual Health Care:

1. If on one hand spiritual assistance is indisputable and any doubts can be resolved by consulting the regulations, on the other hand feasible paths need to be considered always taking into account the well being of the patient, and respecting his wishes, whatever his religion.
2. Not every hospital has a staffing structure including professionals trained to give spiritual assistance, in particular capable of seeing everyone appropriately, taking into account the wide religious diversity. A coordination⁶ / team should be trained to discuss, with the different religious denominations and areas of expertise, and establish, with the management, medical body and multidisciplinary team, spiritual assistance in accordance with the rules of each institution.
3. The spiritual⁷ assistants at times, understand the service as a right of their church and not a right of the patient. For this reason, they ignore the need to respect the internal procedures of the institutions directed towards the well-being of the patient, which causes conflict, since permission to make a

⁶This organization is understood to provide coordination in the organization, training and accompaniment of the work understanding that the visitation is carried out by visitors accredited by the various churches.

⁷The terminology "Spiritual Assistants" comes from the law of Spiritual Assistance, including here everyone who does religious hospital visitation.

visit should take place in agreement with the medical team. Ultimately, for the churches it is a duty arising from the right of the patient.

4. The spiritual assistant may wish to act with adverse purposes: Namely to carry out religious proselytism, usually in an exclusive way. In this case, instead of bringing comfort to the patient within the faith he professes, this may lead to internal conflict and despair. This may interfere negatively in the therapeutic process and, in consequence, it may create an unfavorable climate between the medical team and the spiritual assistants. There are visitors who receive financial help from their church for winning new members, and not all of them are prepared to comply with the objectives of spiritual assistance. This situation may cause disruption for the hospital and discomfort to the patient and his family. This could be described as *taking advantage of vulnerability and human fragility*. Within the suffering caused by infirmity, experiencing the limitations of life and technology, the patient in desperation looks for anything that will help him, and being denied a free choice, may lead him, at times, to neglect or even abandon the treatment.

5. Spiritual assistants who see themselves as outside the therapeutic process have difficulties in following the technical procedures necessary for their permanence in a hospital environment. Without due preparation, they may interfere in the clinical process when the internal rules and procedures are not followed, established to prevent hospital infections, among others. Religious rites should be reviewed and adapted to this situation, following the guidelines set out by the competent internal authorities. The institution should then, reduce this deficiency by offering training.

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6. Religious institutions, facing the challenges of religious diversity, usually organize the work of spiritual assistance with professionals / spiritual assistants, made available for this work, leaving the challenge of evaluation, so as not to discourage them too much, in their favor. This is not to reduce the institutional identity, but to guarantee the service according to the humanitarian nature of their faith and the legal backing. We consider here that humanitarian care arising from such values as fraternal love, common to the diverse religious groups, are the platform for building good relationships and adequate space in view of religious diversity.
 7. Interdenominational events to discuss the matter are worthy and necessary and contribute towards the training of spiritual assistants.

Considerations

Once entrusted to a health professional, the responsibility for the healing process needs to be shared to avoid uncertainty about the different paths towards restored health. Therefore spiritual assistance must be an ally in the therapeutic process. Illness itself has a debilitating effect on the human being. This is added to the vulnerability caused by the confusion arising from too much information being offered due to the lack of appropriate health care training. Consistent communication with the patient is needed from all those involved and harmonious communication between all those involved in the healing process. Spiritual assistance is also included in this process in a form that includes possibilities and limitations, and its part in the general therapeutic process.

When the limitations of biomedical resources and internal resources are reached and comprehended, that is, when hope has dwindled for an immediate

medical solution, the search for help from *superior forces* intensifies. No matter the religion of the patient, this process is of great importance so that he/she is fortified by his/her own faith. Overcoming proselytism in a multicultural and multi-religious society is a fundamental premise for spiritual assistance to meet the need of the patient as a significant part of the healing process.

Religious acts without criteria are justified in the name of "religious freedom". The *promise of miracles*, the *expulsion of demons*, among others, clash with the therapeutic processes as they induce patients to neglect or even abandon their treatment. This is not questioning the dogmas that give rise to these manifestations, but the idea of putting faith in God as a form of *alternative medicine*, removing the dimension of *ally in the healing process*.

Here, one of the teachings of Jahr should be pointed out, perhaps for this reflection, the most important contribution: as well as celebrating what we have in common, the deficiencies need to be analyzed because all groups are capable of making mistakes. "True mistakes or actual weaknesses in the other's belief should be rejected, however, in a most objective manner and without impassioned agitation." (JAHR, 2012, p. 44)

The care taken by Jahr in addressing the theme shows how delicate it is, and therefore, always accompanied with concern and sometimes omitted so as not to create conflict. But is this the best way?

Maybe true inter-religious co-existence, the dialog with wider knowledge, occurs when each religion is able, when affirming its own identity, to identify and accept its own errors, seeking to overcome them, and, when commenting on the deficiencies of others do so in a respectful and constructive way that can be used as reference in their own analysis of others.

This proposal for religious co-existence can be beneficial in the health area since it requires essentially an attitude of humility and also a collective personal otherness, so necessary to overcome the challenges of spiritual assistance.

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