Above all, education can raise the level of enlightenment about the new cosmopolitical economy and strengthen the political will towards progressively implementing innovative insights.

Vicente Marasigan, S.J.


"Believer, missioner, servant, diarist, and neighbor": these few words capture some of the unique characteristics of the author of this slim, engaging volume. McCahill, who prefers to simply be known as “Brother Bob,” is a Maryknoll priest. After his original eleven-year assignment in the Philippines, he left in 1975 for a “needier mission” in Bangladesh. This book is culled from Brother Bob’s two decades of experience with his Bengali Muslim neighbors.

In his preface McCahill recalls the “moment of ecstasy” that he experienced on October 31, 1966; he notes: “There was no question that God was calling me to missionary priesthood” (p. ix). After several happy and fulfilling years in Mindanao, Philippines, Bob sought to totally immerse himself in the Islamic milieu of Bangladesh. He faithfully kept a diary of these “spellbinding experiences” which he believes are “not commonplace.” “In fact, when I sum up these past twenty years in Bangladesh, the words fascinating, illuminating, and stimulating instantly come to my mind” (p. xiii). Readers are treated to an engaging slice of Bengali life as it is lived by Allah’s faithful poor in rural villages — all through the eyes of a deeply sympathetic Christian missionary.

McCahill’s mission methodology is a town-to-town approach in imitation of Jesus’ model of mission. He chooses only Muslim towns. He finds a neighborhood peopled by hawkers, rickshaw pullers, coolies, and other day laborers. His house is a simple 13-by-7-foot bamboo hut with one window and a door. He has few earthly possessions, but requires a place that is “private enough for me to celebrate Mass and to pray every morning” (p. xvi). “Wasting time on God’ is the most reassuring exercise of the day” (p. 13).

McCahill recalls that in every one of the towns where he has lived among Muslims (he currently lives in his fifth location) each passing year has been marked by a characteristic change in people’s attitude toward him. “Broadly speaking, the first year is distinguished by suspicion... The second year is marked by a growth in trust....
During the third year I can feel an increase in their affection for me. By then I am nearly everybody’s ‘uncle’, or, to some few, abba (‘father’)” (pp. 10-11).

What are you doing here? “I am your Brother Bob, a Catholic Christian missionary. I am here to serve seriously sick persons who are poor. Service to the needy and love for all persons is my purpose in life. Christians believe that Allah makes happy those who serve the needy (p. 56).

Bob’s activities elicit a variety of responses, similar to this one from a school headmaster: “We welcome a brother who will live among us in poverty and celibacy” (p. 97). An “uncharacteristic personal remark” came from a tuberculosis doctor: “The people hold you in affection” (p. 52). Bob practices what could be called “good neighborology.”

Mc Cahill’s strong convictions follow two clear models: Jesus and Gandhi. In fact, two of the four chapters of the book are given to elucidating how these figures have shaped Bob’s missionary approaches. Jesus taught: “Spend yourself (Matthew 20:28), serve others (John 13:15), go and heal (Acts 10:38), practice your religion openly (James 1:27), and expect rewards from God alone (Luke 14:14).” Gandhi counseled: “A life of service and uttermost simplicity is the best preaching” (p. 57).

A letter of assignment from Bob’s Bengali bishop gave five priorities for his apostolate: “Live among the poor as a brother to them. Serve the sick so that they may live. Show the respect which our Christian religion has for Islam and Hinduism. Explain to those who inquire about the reason for your lifestyle and good works. Contact the Christians in the area (a scattered few) and encourage them to live good lives” (p. 57). For Bob, this approach constitutes effective mission: “Missioners in Bangladesh serve the purpose of Christianity better by disinterested service to the poor than by proselytizing them. It was Gandhi’s view, and it is mine” (p. 58).

The genius of this enthralling book is that the vision of mission and dialogue described in the foregoing paragraphs comes alive through short diary entries which capture how countless Abduls and Ayeshas of Bangladesh challenge, inspire, and entertain Brother Bob. Village life and sincere people vibranty emerge as one reads. When Bob gave a small bar of soap to a woman who had none to wash her only shartee, she returned a blessing. Bob reflected later: “To be blessed by a woman who is so poor that she has no change of clothing is evangelical joy” (p. 31). When Bob gave a fifty takas note ($1.25) to a recently widowed woman, she immediately bought food for her four children who had
not eaten that entire day. Bob wrote in his diary: "If all my training and efforts to come abroad had given me only today’s opportunity to help this widow, I thought, it would have been worth it" (p. 47).

Mc Cahil was once asked for his thoughts on the evangelization of Christian religious personnel by the poor. From experience he spoke of their patience under adversity, their prayer, their resiliency amidst suffering and hardship, their total surrender to Allah. He concluded: "Still, the safest answer to give to the question ‘How do the poor evangelize us?’ is to recall that God is with them. God is a mystery to us, and God’s way of working through the poor is beyond our analysis" (p. 71).

*Dialogue of Life* is a very good read about the life and dedication of a missionary priest. The reader connects one’s own life, faith, and values to the experiences of Brother Bob. Profound insights emerge. Mc Cahil is not merely a theoretician of authentic dialogue; he is a sincere practitioner, a doer who links theory and practice in the daily dialogue of life.

When Bob was recently moving on to a new town, he heard: “People in the town are talking. . . . They say you’ve done a lot for the poor.” Bob responded: “All praise be to Allah” (p. 109). Yes, not to us, O Lord, not to us; but, to your name be the glory. Mission continues.

*James H. Kroeger, M.M.*


The title and sub-title of this attractive book succinctly summarize its contents: the spiritual bases and practice of Muslim-Christian relations. Edited by two Islamic experts of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the book traces the numerous, diverse initiatives in Muslim-Christian dialogue from 1978 (the year of Pope John Paul II’s election) until 1994. The reader is struck by the Church’s commitment to engage in fruitful dialogue as an essential dimension of its missionary activity.

In each of the 24 chapters a creative and inviting format of presentation is followed. The chapters are comprised of a thematic narrative (e.g., “Pioneers of Dialogue,” “Praying for Peace,” etc.) which