

# BRIDGING THE GAP

## Cross-Cultural Spiritual Direction

*Theresa Utschig*

IN RECENT YEARS, HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS has become more globalised. Globalisation is not simply an economic reality. The increased ease of travel and the new resources of the internet have opened up seemingly unlimited new possibilities for exploring the limits of the self and the perennial questions of human existence. Nowhere is this more evident than in places like Taizé in France, where large numbers of young people gather in an environment that encourages them to express such questions.

I write as a member of one of the religious congregations of women that help to welcome the young people at Taizé, and accompany many of them on their spiritual journeys. I have been privileged to witness how the new and unique pastoral situation has generated new styles of spiritual direction. These draw both on classic scenarios and patterns of spiritual direction, and go beyond them. Moreover, the cultural and linguistic mix throws up interesting questions about the nature of spiritual accompaniment.

Conventionally, cross-cultural spiritual direction, and cross-cultural ministry in general, is thought of in terms either of missiology or of the care of immigrants. Here, one of the two people is engaged in a significant way in the culture of the other, and has taken perhaps considerable steps to meet the other person within their own cultural context. But what happens when the two people do not share, to any great extent, a common cultural milieu, when neither person participates significantly in the other's cultural inheritance? When, for example, a Korean is accompanying an English person in the Congo, or a Slovenian is accompanying a Thai in Taizé? Here the dynamics are different. What does it mean to accompany someone in such a situation? As the world becomes more interdependent, and as people from different cultures meet each other with increasing frequency, the Church will find itself confronted with more and more pastoral

situations involving issues of cross-cultural dynamics. Reflection on cross-cultural spiritual direction at Taizé allows a glimpse into how this type of relationship could develop in the Church as a whole.

The rapid development of the ministry of spiritual direction in the last four decades has opened up many possible ways for understanding how people might be accompanied on their spiritual journey. A word that well evokes the nature of this ministry is the French *l'accompagnement*, which connotes listening as well as simply accompanying. Spiritual direction as accompaniment focuses on the direction in which the one being accompanied is moving in their relationship with God. While spiritual direction can involve formally arranged sessions and a stipend, it can often also be—as at Taizé—less structured in terms of time and place (though arguably no less rigorous in its discipline). Listening to the person being accompanied can involve any of several roles, as required by the nuances of the relationship and the affective movements within the person.<sup>1</sup> The classic terms ‘director’ and ‘directee’,<sup>2</sup> though indicating a more hierarchical form of the relationship, are still in current use despite their limitations. I shall use them here, though spiritual direction will be understood primarily in terms of listening, and I shall also sometimes refer to ‘accompaniment’.

Spiritual direction in the Christian tradition takes place within the context of the Christian community, and in a form sanctioned by the wisdom of that community. An individual is given space in which to express their yearning for God. For a person to be able to talk to someone about their relationship with God, an environment must already be prepared wherein such a conversation is possible.

The felt need for spiritual direction arises, in response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, within a particular context, within a situation that recognises the value of such a need and fosters its growth.

<sup>1</sup> These terms are taken from standard contemporary works on spiritual accompaniment: Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), pp. 42-83 and 84-112; Carolyn Gratton ‘The Ministry of Spiritual Guidance’, *The Way Supplement*, 91 (1998), pp. 17-27; André Louf, *Tuning in to Grace* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), pp. 78-108; Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*, new revised edition (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), p. 45; and André Louf, ‘Spiritual Fatherhood in the Literature of the Desert’, in *Abba: Guides to Wholeness and Holiness in East and West*, edited by John R. Sommerfeldt (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982), pp. 37-63.

<sup>2</sup> See Janet Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* (London: St Paul’s, 2000), and William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982).



*Angela Utschig, A Safe Space in Burgundy*

At Taizé most of the young people who come are students, and most will be searching for something in their lives. For many of them, some form of 'God' will be present, whether or not they are able to articulate exactly who God is. Many are profoundly moved, or given a 'shock to the senses', by what they find in Taizé—the austere beauty of the surroundings; the lack of clutter; the welcome; the encounter with other young people who are searching; the respect for each person; the absence of the media; the absence of materialism; the unorganised space; the simple life. For many, the time of silence during each of the common prayers (about ten minutes) provides access to a deep place in themselves that questions them. Taizé is an environment conducive to 'openness' that allows space for each person's inner life. Many say they feel 'at home' there, or that they consider it their 'home'.<sup>3</sup> The people who come usually arrive with a question; and frequently something very profound happens in the person, either during their time in Taizé or afterwards. The work of effective listening is an interior discipline involving humility and respect for the one being accompanied, as well as a deep sense of dependence on God. What follows are some reflections on the nature of cross-cultural spiritual accompaniment

<sup>3</sup> Though Taizé is in France it cannot be associated with any particular culture.

based on my own experience of being accompanied, as well as of accompanying, in situations like that of Taizé. I am not going to arrive at a systematic or comprehensive description of companioning in such a context, but I shall raise questions, and point to areas for further exploration.

### ***Qualities of the Director—Welcome and Presence***

Most current spiritual direction takes place between people who are engaged in the same cultural context. In cross-cultural accompaniment, the director clearly needs to be familiar with the cultural presuppositions out of which the directee is operating, in order better to respond to the nuances of the directee's narrative. Many directors working in cross-cultural direction situations are working with several directees from the same type of cultural background, and are able to develop a familiarity with these cultural manifestations and how they influence the directees' ways of relating. However, in cross-cultural accompaniment it is also possible that a person's spirit can find direction even when the director is almost completely unfamiliar with the directee's background.<sup>4</sup>

How the director welcomes the directee will certainly help set the tone for their time together.<sup>5</sup> When the director is unfamiliar with the culture of the directee, the directee may need a certain gracefulness in order to put up with the clumsiness of the director. The director in these cases will be advised to follow the lead of the directee. (For example, to greet each other, should the two shake hands? Bow? Nod? Kiss on one cheek? Two? Should the director avoid touching the directee? How much space should be left between them as they walk together? Talk together? How much eye contact should be made?)

Cultural expectations are only one aspect of a very complicated exchange between the two people. Much will depend on the mood of the directee (which may be affected by the weather, the time of year,

<sup>4</sup> From within the context of group discernment Peter Bisson asks whether it is possible for spiritual consolation to happen in a group without prior communication on the level of culture. This question parallels my own as to whether spiritual direction can take place where the director is unfamiliar with the directee's culture. See Peter Bisson, 'Cultural Conversion and Cross-Cultural Communication: A Basis for Communal Discernment', *The Way Supplement*, 85 (Spring 1996), pp. 55-61.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Rakoczy, 'Unity, Diversity, and Uniqueness: Foundations of Cross-Cultural Spiritual Direction', in *Common Journey, Different Paths: Spiritual Direction in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Susan Rakoczy (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), pp. 9-23, here p. 18. Other articles in this collection have also nourished the present article, notably those by Marina Herrera and Padraic Leonard.

their body, their health, a situation they encountered on the way to the session . . . ); the issues they are currently dealing with (or not); and their personal expectations, real or perceived (of the director, self, the conversation, the Church, community, and so on). It is important to be aware of these influential factors. A good rule of thumb is that one should give more weight than normal to body-language, gesture, and actions on the part of the directee, and leave more space for them to think. An openness of mind and spirit to the state of the directee will go a long way toward enabling the directee to have an open attitude toward herself and toward God.

***The directee is unique, unlike any previous person***

The director must be careful not to project their own motivations onto the directee, and be wary of trying to define the directee according to the director's own structure of directee is unique, unlike any previous person. They have their own life story, experiences, personality, emotional responses, level of intellectual development, sense of humour, appreciation of beauty, ways of relating to people, openness to the world, sensitivity to new things, depth of woundedness. One is on 'holy ground' in an encounter with a directee.<sup>6</sup> While the directee is in some sense a product of their cultural heritage, they are always more than cultural stereotypes would allow. Though they may be deeply engaged with their culture, each person is a unique child of God, and can only be encountered as such. It can sometimes take a great deal of courage not to speak, and to let the directee articulate in their own manner and in their own time what they need to express. Particularly in a cross-cultural situation, directors might find themselves needing to withhold judgement, or to refrain from expressing the judgement they have formed until a later time. Reverie, a treasuring and pondering in the heart (Luke 2:19), involves a cognitive suspension in order that the experience to can be taken in on another level of being. It can take courage and endurance to let emotions stay at the surface without attempting to analyze them or even to formulate any thoughts around them. This kind of 'holding back' on a certain subject, gesture or attitude might even last over several sessions, and can provide the directee with a 'container' to hold what is happening.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Rakoczy, 'Unity, Diversity, and Uniqueness', p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> In the field of counselling, containment as capacity for transformation involves bearing the unbearable for the other. This gives the other a space in which to allow a deeply painful issue or experience to be

Much of what the director 'does' can best be described with the word 'presence'. Susan Rakoczy indicates that in order to be present to the directee, the director must be equally present to herself on their own cultural journey.<sup>8</sup> The director is present to the directee, and present to the action of the Holy Spirit in the directee. Presence implies receptivity: a receptivity to the spoken and unspoken expressions of the directee. At the same time it implies activity: an attentiveness to the being of the directee, and an active listening that is awake to nuances. Presence usually entails suffering, being with the directee in their struggle for liberation in God. People from cultures that stress 'being' over 'doing' will have not only more understanding of what presence entails, but perhaps also have higher expectations in this regard. If director and directee are both from cultures where the *modus operandi* is 'doing', it might take a more concerted effort to recognise the necessity and the benefits of being with the other through a process.

All good spiritual accompaniment requires the person accompanying to have a great deal of self-knowledge, as well as to be open to the transformation they might undergo in the process of listening to the directee. The director also needs to be honest about their own personal issues, so as to be able to avoid imposing them on the directee.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the more interior freedom the director has, the more they will be able to be present to the directee. The more authentic the director is, in the sense of being responsible for their reactions, the more this will encourage the directee to have a similar attitude. Because of the potential for miscommunication in cross-cultural spiritual direction, these qualities in a director take on a heightened importance. Good spiritual direction will be enhanced by attention to cultural issues and questions, even in cases where the two people share a common cultural inheritance.

The director will need to have a sense of how they are perceived by the directee, since transference can take on different forms in a cross-cultural direction situation. The directee might expect something from the director, consciously or unconsciously, or might need something

transformed. See Marilyn Miller-Pietroni, 'Containment in Theory and Practice', *Psychodynamic Counselling*, 5 (1999), pp. 407-427.

<sup>8</sup> Rakoczy, 'Unity, Diversity, and Uniqueness', p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of how the woundedness of healers can be devastating in relationships dealing with the spiritual aspect of a person, see Demaris Wehr, 'Spiritual Abuse: When Good People Do Bad Things', in *The Psychology of Mature Spirituality: Integrity, Wisdom, Transcendence*, edited by Polly Young-Eisendrath and Melvin Miller (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 47-61.



from the director (affirmation, challenge, non-responsiveness); they might be unconsciously pushing the director to respond in a certain way. The directee might be afraid of something in the director, or read a situation or a particular response in the wrong way, or assume the wrong context for a remark. A directee tends subtly to adjust their narrative according to what they understand the director feels to be of value, or according to the topics of conversation pursued or not pursued by the director.<sup>10</sup> A directee's way of relating to their director may (or may not) be linked to their image of God.

Above all, the director does well to pray before and during a session,<sup>11</sup> as well as afterwards. An attitude of prayer will enable the director to listen in the way that the cross-cultural situation requires, with sensitivity to differences of all kinds: language, culture, belief systems, values, social context, and so on.

### ***Qualities of the Directee—Openness and Trust***

Being accompanied by a person from another cultural context can require a certain amount of courage, particularly as there is a greater risk that such accompaniment will bear little or no fruit, or even have a negative impact. A directee inexperienced in cross-cultural situations might not be aware, at the outset, of the extra effort that such a conversation involves, or of the amount of patience and forgiveness required. They will need consciously and explicitly to approach each spiritual direction session in a spirit of openness. They might also need to make an extra effort at clarity, especially in terms of images and cultural references, realising that there will be some things that simply cannot be communicated outside one's own cultural context. Because of the potential for miscommunication (including misreading of verbal cues or body language), cross-cultural spiritual direction has its own special frustrations, but it can also (in many respects) be especially rewarding, both for the directee and the director. In my experience, it is also possible for good to result from misunderstanding or non-understanding.

In addition to the normal process of becoming accustomed to a director, a directee in a situation of cross-cultural direction will have to

<sup>10</sup> On the director's resistance to the directee or their religious experience, see Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*, p. 48.

pass through what Peter Bisson describes as the phases of 'cultural shock'.<sup>12</sup> These are phases encountered by any person in a new situation, but are most easily recognised as those by which a person comes to terms with the strangeness of another culture. An initial euphoria is followed by a phase of confusion and criticism. This provokes either defence against a perceived threat (rejection) or else appreciation and enjoyment of the new culture (welcome). Bisson's insights on cross-cultural communal discernment are useful in understanding some of the processes involved in cross-cultural spiritual direction. Among the ways to bridge the cultural gap, Bisson lists friendship, good will, good group process, common faith (common religious vocation and charism), and common work.<sup>13</sup>

A directee in front of a foreign director will need to assess how the director is hearing what they say, and to monitor whether the director's reactions are in line with what they are trying to express. It may be that the director will sometimes act purely out of their own cultural presuppositions, and proceed on something in a manner that the directee fails to understand. Any internal contradiction or confusion experienced by the directee because of this will be resolved either positively (acceptance) or negatively (rejection), or else left unresolved for a period of time. The directee needs to be comfortable with the ambiguity of a cross-cultural situation.

The directee will also need to be continually reflecting on how well the relationship is functioning. They must be willing to end the relationship if it ceases to be life-giving, even if they are unable to articulate how this has occurred. Directees come into the relationship of spiritual direction with certain expectations, of themselves, of the director, of the session, and of God—expectations which they may or may not be able to put into words. Movements of consolation or desolation may be less clear in a cross-cultural context, because it is more difficult to articulate the factors involved. Negative dynamics in the relationship might include the directee doing something unconsciously to please the director as someone perceived to be in authority (for example following certain religious practices that they know would satisfy the director). This might be complicated in a cross-

<sup>12</sup> Peter Bisson, 'Cultural Conversion and Cross-Cultural Communication: A Basis for Communal Discernment', *The Way Supplement*, 85 (Spring 1996), pp. 55-61.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that all of these ways of bridging cultural gaps are employed as a matter of course in Taizé.



cultural situation by the directee's trying to meld elements of their own tradition with those of another culture (a Western young person practising elements from the Eastern spiritual traditions, or an immigrant trying to fit in with the dominant culture). Any one of these situations might cause the directee to feel that they are not being understood, or bring about a situation where they are unable to be open with the director.

***Every culture understands and practises care in a different way***

Though a spiritual direction relationship cannot be confused with therapy, what the directee expects by way of care will also be part of the spiritual direction dynamic. Every culture understands and practises care in a slightly different way.<sup>14</sup> For the directee, the director can tangibly represent God's care, and their expectations of God's care can influence their expectations of the director. A director who senses anxiety on the part of the directee might explore these questions. It might be possible to arrive together at a more reasonable set of expectations, or to separate the directee's expectations of God from the directee's expectations of the director.

### ***Reflections on the Relationship between Director and Directee***

The mysterious other to be welcomed in spiritual accompaniment—in Christian understanding, a unique child of God—can appear even more mysterious because of the cultural presuppositions out of which they are operating. The spiritual direction relationship will be viable only if the director has a positive attitude towards different cultures. If by 'other' they understand 'alien', then they will view the other as a discrete entity. Such a relationship will not be a forum for dialogue, but rather an occasion for imparting truth, advice, counsel, or knowledge from one person to the other. This is not to say that faith cannot be strengthened in this situation, and that the directee cannot make real progress in their relationship with God. For it to be viable, however, both people need to accept the situation as normative, and be willing to work within the limitations (and richness) of such a worldview. If, on the other hand, the other is viewed not as a discrete entity but as a dynamic reality, their 'otherness' will become the occasion—and

<sup>14</sup> Zack Eleftheriadou, *Transcultural Counselling* (London: Central Book Publishing, 1994), p. 40.

source—of dialogue.<sup>15</sup> In this case, a determined effort will usually provide ample points of entry into their unique interpretation of the world, revealing how the other's God-narrative relates to their conception of themselves and their relationship with others.<sup>16</sup> A conversation between two people who are really 'other' to each other can have the effect of enabling both parties to go beyond themselves, and to begin to understand what it is to relate to God who is completely Other. It is in the encounter with the foreign that we can begin to deal with the strangeness of God.

Cross-cultural spiritual direction conversations may take place in one of several languages, depending on the competences of both the director and directee. If there is an equal choice, it is preferable that the directee chooses in which language to converse. The choice might indicate that the directee's theological and spiritual vocabulary is richer in a certain language, or that the language itself is endowed with a vocabulary that the directee needs in order to express their thoughts. A choice of one language over another could also indicate a conscious decision to distance herself from the director, or from the subject matter, in the attempt to look at something more objectively. Or it could be an attempt to avoid an encounter with a certain subject that was experienced within a particular linguistic context. Speaking in a language other than their original language might also enhance the directee's sense of encountering the other, or express their need to go beyond current internally established boundaries and parameters. In some cases, it might be necessary for each person to speak in their original language at a certain point in the conversation, in order to clarify a particular topic. Though this can be difficult for both parties, it can enable the two to understand each other more clearly.

Spiritual realities may be difficult to articulate, and gestures, body language, tone of voice, pitch, volume, inflection, pace, pauses, emphases, silence, glances, and facial expressions are all involved in

<sup>15</sup> Sandra Schneiders points out the alienation that results from the postmodern awareness that metanarratives are limited and relative. In contrast to the imperialistic attempt to bridge the cultural gap by subsuming the other into one's own metanarrative, accessing the other by way of dialogue allows each person to retain their integrity. See Sandra M. Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), pp. 112-115.

<sup>16</sup> From a postmodern standpoint, Paul Lakeland suggests that encountering the other is made possible only by the recognition of a certain degree of similarity of experience. Dialogue then enables us to make connections with our own symbolic systems and understanding of reality. See Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 84 ff.

their communication. Grammar is also important, especially in a language that director or directee does not know well—unusual constructions may merely indicate lack of knowledge, but they can also express a subtle point that should not be missed. It can happen that in spite of communication difficulties, prejudice, problems of adaptation, and general incomprehension, the directee has a need to speak to a certain director at this particular time, even though (or possibly because) that director is from another culture. Perhaps the directee needs to grapple with the mystery of foreign-ness, or finds psychological breathing space in the fact that the director requires explanations for things that someone in their own culture might take for granted. Perhaps there is a certain cultural complementarity, where gaps or deficiencies in the directee's culture are compensated by things found in the director's culture. Or it is possible that there is something in the personalities of the two of them that just 'clicks' so that the directee feels free to unburden something only to this particular person at this particular time.

It is generally easier to understand and to be understood by someone from one's own cultural background. The possibilities for racism and prejudice in cross-cultural relationships are real and subtle.<sup>17</sup> Everyone has had negative experiences with people who were different from them, and reactions can surface in the spiritual direction relationship that can be very surprising to both people.<sup>18</sup> Even emulation of the person or an idealization of aspects of their culture can be detrimental.<sup>19</sup> The other person can be perceived as immature, simply because their ways of processing and articulating information are different. If transference or counter-transference occurs as a result, it will be best to acknowledge and name the situation openly. This will at least signal the existence of the problem, or indicate that there was a problem of this type in the past which has resonance with what is

<sup>17</sup> See Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*, pp. 44-49 for a description of the resistance of the directee to the director, and, perhaps more debilitating, on the part of the director toward the directee.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of three mechanisms typically used to cope with differentness (compliance, aggression, and avoidance), see Carolyn Gratton, *Guidelines for Spiritual Direction* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1980), pp. 139-142. See also Eleftheriadou, *Transcultural Counselling*, pp. 32-33 for how the behaviour of the other person is often read (and diagnosed) from within one's own cultural filters, or in terms of stereotypes.

<sup>19</sup> See Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*, pp. 165 ff, for a look at mild to severe positive and negative transference.

happening in the current situation. It also enables both director and directee to make the decision as to whether this is an insurmountable barrier in their relationship.

In situations of cross-cultural spiritual direction, people generally require a longer time to settle in, and more energy will generally be spent on getting to know each other. Comment on the director's situation is kept to a minimum, to allow the directee as much freedom as possible in the expression of their experience and life. It may be difficult to maintain the balance between taking the time needed to establish a relationship of trust on the one hand, and the desire of the directee to talk about what is important on the other. Both processes can either go too fast or too slowly, causing discomfort in the relationship. There are stages that must be passed through in any relationship that is built upon trust. Both parties need to have the desire to be there and make the relationship work. Both people must bear goodwill toward each other and have fundamental respect for the other person and where they are at in their life at the present (without this necessarily being the subject of the conversation). Particularly in a cross-cultural situation, this ability to give the other person space to be themselves is of paramount importance, even though it might be difficult to determine what really gives the person this freedom. What a person from one culture finds freeing, a person from another might find oppressive. Then again, cross-cultural relationships are particularly susceptible to erosion of trust, because words, gestures and body language can so easily be misinterpreted in such situations. When the relationship no longer works, both people need to be honest about what is going on, and be willing to terminate it if necessary. Such a decision can be an avenue for growth (for both people), especially in retrospect, as some measure of emotional distance becomes possible.<sup>20</sup>

***The ability to give the other person space is of paramount importance***

From what we have seen, it is clear that the process of cross-cultural spiritual direction is multi-faceted as well as delicate. It holds tremendous potential, and invites our engagement despite its risks. We need to continue exploring the dynamics involved in such processes, particularly since we are at a point in history where the demand for this

<sup>20</sup> Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*, pp. 173-174 discusses inappropriate termination on the part of the director. Fear in this case can be linked with cultural misunderstanding.

kind of cross-cultural spiritual accompaniment can only become greater and more frequent.

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