

DIALOGUE AND PARTNERSHIP AMID RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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Indian Society is distinguished for its diversity of cultures, languages and religions. This pluralistic feature has been woven in the very fabric of our nation from time immemorial. We regard the diversity of religions and mutual interaction of religious traditions as a special blessing of our times that can contribute to the building up of an egalitarian society capable of overcoming the caste, creed, class, sex and gender based divisive forces.

Despite many positive signs and events, the present Indian scenario is rather bleak. Clashes between religions, conflict, hatred and mass killings have become the order of the day. The horrifying communal violence in Gujarat that threatened the very foundation of our secular and democratic system, the brutal activities by religious fanatics in Orissa and other parts of the country are still vivid in our memory. Particularly disturbing is the trend towards politicisation of religion and fostering of an aggressive fundamentalism for political and economic ends.

With these introductory remarks, we shall engage a critical analysis of the word 'dialogue', with special reference to Vatican II and other official Church documents. As Christians, called to imbibe the spirit of Jesus, the dialogical partner par excellence and Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, in Part II we shall highlight the salient features of the ministry of Jesus and Paul. We will also underline their theological

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significance and implications. Part III will pose some challenges for today.

Part I: Dialogue and Partnership

One of the biggest challenges for the Church (applicable to all church groups/denominations) in the 21st century is a paradigm shift from top-down instructions to a genuine dialogue among its members. Equally important is the ministry of fostering dialogue that embraces all areas: intra-church, inter-church and inter-religious. In a multi-religious context of India, intra-ecclesial dialogue is not enough to make the Church truly dialogical, indicating both participation and a sense of equality. The dialogical principle must extend to other religions.

The word *dialogue* with its root in the Greek "*dialogos*" means "converse with". It implies reciprocity, the ability to listen with an open mind and heart, the sharing of different ideas or sentiments. Dialogue is not consensus of opinions or viewpoints. Consensus seeks agreement; dialogue not only allows disagreement but also respects the different convictions of the other. Genuine dialogue thus presupposes equality, humility, freedom, mutual respect and appreciation. In the words of Cedric Prakash, "it is basically a space where one can be oneself and make others be themselves – a sense of feeling at home – with the space and with one another."¹

Dialogue became the in-word during Vatican II, which saw the Church essentially as communion. In the midst of the Council proceedings, Pope Paul VI issued his first Encyclical (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964), which developed a theology of dialogue that was highly influential for the Council itself and many subsequent Vatican documents. For example, the Pastoral Instruction on Social Communication (*Communio et Progressio*, 1971) affirms that "dialogue among Catholics is indispensable" (#354) and that "free dialogue within the Church does no injury to her unity and solidarity" (#357).²

Interreligious dialogue has in a way been institutionalised in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue (formally known as the Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians) established by Pope Paul VI in 1964 "marks an important turning point in the understanding of this essential

¹C. Prakash, "Dialogue of Life," *Awakening Faith*, Vol.XXII, No.2(Mar-Apr2009), p. 46. See also Bishop Bosco Penha's article "Interreligious Dialogue in SCCs..." in the same issue, pp. 51-58.

²Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *Church and Social Communication: Basic Documents* (Manila: Logos Publications, 1997), pp. 98-99.

dimension of evangelisation.”³ The Vatican II document on Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions (‘followers of religions’ is a more friendly term than ‘non-Christians’), *Nostra Aetate*, clarifies the Church’s position:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon these ways of conduct and of life, these rules and teaching, which though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflected a ray of the Truth, which enlightens all people (NA.2).

Thinking along these lines, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) as well as the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) committed themselves to “acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among the people of Asia as well as the values in their society and culture.”⁴ In 1966 the Church in India set up a CBCI Commission for Dialogue with other Religions and with Non-Believers, and appointed a full-time secretary to this Commission in 1973.⁵

Located at the CBCI Centre, New Delhi, today this Commission is known as the “Commission for Religious Harmony” and functions as “the official organisation of the Catholic Christian community in India for multi-faith relations.”⁶ True to its vision and mission, the Commission makes sustained efforts for promoting harmony among individuals, communities and religions. It monitors diverse schemes for motivating and facilitating people of all religious and social persuasions at the national, regional and local levels.⁷

³Lucio V. Coutinho, “Proclamation and Inter-religious Dialogue,” *Report of the First National Conference of Pontifical Mission Organisations in India* (Bangalore: Pontifical Mission Organisation, 1990), p. 156. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the subject is contained in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), the Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (1965), the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes* (1965) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium Spes* (1965).

⁴*Nostra Aetate*, 2.

⁵CBCI Commission for Dialogue & Ecumenism, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (New Delhi, 1989), p. 1. Information on CBCI & FABC has been gathered from L. Fernando, “CBCI and FABC on Religious Pluralism,” *VJTR*, Vol. 64, No. 11 (November 2000), pp. 857-869. For a comprehensive view on Religious Pluralism today, see the entire issue cited above.

⁶For details, see *Fellowship*, 16, 2 (July 2008) 49.

⁷For details, see *Fellowship*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (July 2008). The quotes in the paragraph are from p. 49 of the same issue.

While acknowledging the positive elements in other religions, the Vatican Council and subsequent official documents underscore the centrality of Jesus Christ. Christ is the constitutive mediator of salvation, and the distinguishing feature between Christianity and other religions is the Christ-event. As Dupuis observes, whatever theological interpretation we give to the Council and its context, it is difficult to say that in practice it goes beyond the fulfilment theory, although it may not be the fulfilment theory in its classical form. There is no point in over-optimistically reading into the mind of the Council our pious wishes. All the values found in other religions are in relation to the Church, as if nothing authentic could be present in them except in relation to the Catholic Church. There is no explicit acceptance of other religions as ways of salvation even necessarily in relation to the mystery of Christ.⁸

At this juncture we may dwell on Jesus' vision and praxis of dialogue and Paul's notion and commitment to Jesus' vision in view of furthering the reign of God.

Part II : Jesus and Paul: Models of Dialogical Partnership

In my search for an apt beginning of this section, I found the questions formulated by Joseph Pathrapankal relevant and loaded with theological insights.

- How are we to understand the role and significance of Jesus Christ in the context of the recognition of other religions also as ways of salvation?
- Is Jesus Christ one among those who are called saviours?
- Is he one who is superior to all others? Or is Jesus Christ unique in such a way that all are saved only through him?⁹

In their attempt to develop a relevant Christology in a religiously pluralistic world, theologians of both the Roman Catholic Church and other Churches have introduced new terms such as *exclusivism*, *inclusivism* and *pluralism*.¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this section to

⁸See J. Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), pp. 169-170.

⁹Joseph Pathrapankal, "The Significance of Jesus Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism: A Biblical Critique," in Errol D'Lima and Max Gonsalves, eds., *What Does Jesus Christ Mean? The Meaningfulness of Jesus Christ amid Religious Pluralism in India*, (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2001), p. 121.

¹⁰Ibid. Such efforts have resulted in the publication of several documents from Catholic Church (mainly from 1965) and from the World Council of Churches (from 1971) articulating their conviction that religious pluralism belongs to the very plan of

engage in a discussion about the merits and demerits of these terms. The paper will limit itself to highlighting some key issues for today.

The Universal Thrust of Jesus' Teaching

Because of our faith in Jesus and commitment to his mission, Jesus of Nazareth remains the model and inspiration for theological discourse. Despite his Jewish upbringing, Jesus tried to transcend the narrow boundaries of Judaism. That he refused to be a conformist is beyond doubt (see Mk 2:23-26; 3:1-6; Lk 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Jn 5 & 6). By way of illustration, we cite two instances which manifest Jesus' prophetic stand and all-embracing mission: his interaction with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30; Mt 15:21-28) and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42). Both are nameless and 'faceless' women, but critical and creative dialogue partners of Jesus. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and the praise of the Roman officer's faith (Mt 8:10-13) are other striking examples of Jesus' openness to non-Jewish people. He proclaimed the good news of liberation/salvation to all (Lk 4:18-21) irrespective of social and religious status. Poor and rich, women and men, sinners and saints, Jews and Gentiles – all received a warm welcome in his kingdom.

The basic content of Jesus' mission was the inauguration of the Kingdom (Reign) of God, characterised by God's motherly and fatherly love and care for all people and the whole creation. One can find a summary of the Kingdom (God's rule/reign) values in the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" (Mt 5:1-12; Lk 6:20-26). Commenting on the content of Jesus' preaching and the frequent occurrences of the expression 'Kingdom of God' in the Gospels, Pathrapankal says, "The Kingdom of God meant not a territory but rather a situation, a state and quality of being..."¹¹

Although the original message of Jesus was theocentric, in the latter part of the Gospels, we see Jesus demanding commitment to and confession of his unique identity (Mt 10:32-33).¹² Thus the focus is shifted to the person of Jesus. Paul Knitter observes: "If the original message of Jesus was theocentric, the pervasive message of the New Testament is undeniably Christocentric..., the original message of Jesus was transformed, not lost."¹³ This Christocentrism of the early

God. See also Michael Amaladoss, *Making Harmony-Living in a Pluralistic World* (Delhi: IDCR & ISPCK, 2003), pp. 134-137.

¹¹J. Pathrapankal, "The Significance of Jesus Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism," p. 124. For an elaborate view, see pp.123-129.

¹²Ibid., p. 129.

¹³Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 173-174.

Church is revealed in 1 Jn 1:1-4; Jn 1:1-18; 14:6; Acts 4:12 and other passages in the New Testament.

Pauline Understanding of Salvation in Christ

The passion with which Paul of Tarsus explains the unique role of Jesus as Saviour of the Jews and the Gentiles, men and women, is explicit in his Letters, particularly in Romans and Galatians. He is uncompromising in his faith proclamation that God's salvation is offered to all people through redemption in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:21-26). Jesus on the cross is the demonstration of God's salvation, justification or righteousness. He is the meeting point for humans and God, the place where humans experience the 'atoning love' of God (Rom 3:25; cf. Gal 2:20). A person is saved through her/his faith *in* Christ and faith *of* Christ.

At the heart of Paul's gospel stands his deep rooted conviction, "A person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith *of* Jesus Christ (*diapisteōslesouChristou*)...we have believed *in* Christ Jesus (*eisChristonlesounepisteusamen*) that we might be justified by faith of Christ and not by the works of the law" (Gal 2:16; cf. Gal 2:20; 3:22; Phil 3:9).¹⁴ Jesus on the Cross is the greatest demonstration of his faith in God, who justified and reconciled humanity apart from the law (Rom 3:28).

In the context of the Galatian controversy over the law of circumcision (Gal chs. 1-3), Paul's contention that in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but faith working through love (Gal 5:6; 6:5; 1 Cor 7:9) is of utmost importance, especially for women whose covenant partnership was realised only through the circumcised male. By his emphatic statement that baptism provides all that circumcision offers in order to enter into a covenant relationship with God (cf. Gen 17:1-27; Ex 4:24-26), Paul introduces a revolutionary idea.

Having been baptised into Christ, both man and woman become a new creation (Gal 6:15). A person's state before her/his call makes no difference since the circumcised and the uncircumcised are justified by faith. God is the God of all (Rom 3:29); Christ is all in all (Col3:11). Therefore, the woman enters into the covenant relation of God's people through her own faith and baptism; she is a full-pledged member of God's family. The significance attached to ethnic, legal

¹⁴Francis Pereira, *Gripped by God in Christ - The Mind and Heart of St. Paul* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1991), p. 96. For further discussion on faith of Christ and faith *in* Christ see also pp.96-98.

and sexual status has been dissolved (Gal 3:28) in the “all-embracing corporate existence in Christ.”¹⁵

Salvation in the Indian traditions and religions is perceived in varied forms and shades. Indians understand salvation as “*loka-samgraha* (welfare of the society and the cosmos) also as *moksa* (individual liberation) from the *samsara* (the cycle of birth and death).”¹⁶ A lucid understanding of the various shades of salvation in Indian traditions and religions has been provided by the scholars of Indian Theological Association (ITA).¹⁷

Leaving aside all theological debates on the universal significance of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5), we shall try to respond briefly to issues related to the salvific role of Jesus in our multi-religious context.

How do we interpret Paul’s concept of justification or salvation through faith in Jesus in our specific situation of religious pluralism? If Paul were alive today, would he not change the style of communication of his faith experience? Should our faith-claims about the crucified and risen Christ make us exclusive and aggressive?

Paul’s statements on the uniqueness of Jesus in God’s plan of salvation have to be understood in the context of his Damascus encounter and apostolic experiences in different churches. Having realised the futility of the Torah to make him justified before God, Paul focused on the righteousness of God effective through faith in Jesus Christ. Biblical scholar Legrand expresses it succinctly: “Justification by faith and not by the works of the Law was thus implicitly contained in the Damascus vision and in the manner in which it subverted Saul’s religious outlook. Now was the time when the new Covenant was fulfilled, covenant written in the hearts (Jer 32:31-34; 32:40; Ez 37:26), and universally opened to all peoples” (Zech 2:15; Is 19:19-25).¹⁸

As an apostle to the Gentiles and champion of Gentile Christians’ freedom (Acts 15: 1-35; cf. Gal 2:11-17), Paul’s approach to people of other faiths in today’s society would be distinguished by reverence and cordiality. He would emphasise that “God shows no partiality”

¹⁵Brendan Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Woman* (Homebush: St. Paul Publications 1988), p. 6.

¹⁶See “Workshop Report,” in Errol D’Lima & Max Gonsalves, eds., *What Does Jesus Christ Mean? – The Meaningfulness of Jesus Christ Amid Religious Pluralism in India* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2001), p. 162.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

¹⁸L. Legrand, “St. Paul the Missionary,” *Vaiharai*, Vol.12, No. 2 (July-December 2007), p. 10.

(Rom 2:11) and that “God will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and uncircumcised through that same faith” (Rom 3:29-30). Paul’s Christ-centredness would enable him realise the irrelevance of an aggressive mission amid religious pluralism. Presumably he would accept the paradigm shift proposed by the ITA scholars: “Christians must proclaim a Jesus: a) who is not a threat to the religions of India; b) who is related to the other ways of salvation present in India not as their fulfilment but as offering them service (kenotic Christ)...; f) who is present through his Spirit in the whole of creation.”¹⁹

Part III: Challenges and Tasks Ahead

Religious pluralism being a fact of history, religious belongingness should not be an obstacle to harmonious living and interfaith partnership. One can discover expressions of pluralism in Biblical texts.²⁰ Describing religion as “a divine-human relationship,” Amaladoss accentuates the need for learning from other religions: “...what I am suggesting is that each religion, while believing in its specificity and uniqueness, can – and does – accept the legitimacy of other religions as facilitating divine-human encounter. Each religion will explain this in accordance with its own faith-vision.”²¹ Critiquing the people who brand pluralistic approach as “relativization strategy,” Pathrapankal stresses: “It is to be forcefully maintained that when we speak of pluralistic approach, it is not a relativization of one’s own faith in Christ that is proposed, but rather an objective approach to the reality of religions in God’s plan of salvation.”²²

In the present socio-economic, religio-cultural and political context of India, Christians should be encouraged to work with all people of good will in furthering the Reign of God. Theologians have a great responsibility to educate the laity about the teachings of Vatican II that express openness to the riches of other religions and cultures (*Gaudium et Spes* 86, 59; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 37; *Ad Gentes* 11) and recognise that they contain the seeds of the Word (*Ad Gentes* 11; *Lumen Gentium* 17). George Soares-Prabhu has pointed out that the aggressive mission of the colonial period and mission exclusively understood as “Church growth” based on the great commission (Mt

¹⁹See “Workshop Report” in *What Does Jesus Christ Mean?*, p.177.

²⁰See PremaVakayil, “Biblical Pluralism: Its Expressions,” *Bible Bhashyam*, Vol. XXXII, No. 4 (December 2006), pp. 257-271. See also other articles in this issue dealing with Pluralism.

²¹M. Amaladoss, *Making Harmony*, p. 138.

²²J. Pathrapankal, “The Significance of Jesus Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism,” p. 140.

28:16-20) has to be balanced and corrected by mission as witness based on the text of Matthew 5:13-16.²³

Dialogue with people of other religions provides a platform to learn from one another's religious traditions and values, combining deep commitment to one's faith and openness to others' experience. Genuine dialogue fosters communication and makes each other's faith intelligible. In the process we learn to respect diversity, recognise unity and celebrate the presence of the Spirit in all religions. As Samartha says, "faith cannot be imposed from outside; it emerges out of a long experience."²⁴

The negative role of religions as witnessed in contemporary India does not negate the positive role religions can play in building a better nation and a better world. Examples abound in this regard,²⁵ including my own contribution to foster interreligious ministry. My experience of promoting unity in diversity and harmony among various religious communities has deepened my conviction that followers of other religions are not mere objects of our theological discourse, but partners in our common search for Truth. What is important is the quality of our involvement, the humility to work *with* and not merely *for* people. "Involvement in the struggles of people has to become the source of theology and liturgy; a faith commitment born of this will lead to a spirituality ..., of solidarity with and liberation of the poor and the oppressed."²⁶

Inculturation: A word about cultural expressions of the Christian faith is in place here. A Church in dialogue with followers of other religions is called to express its faith in and through local cultures which are liberating and empowering: "Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truth found among non-Christians, as well as the values in their society and culture" (NA, 2). Although the Council documents recognise the legitimacy of plurality of cultural expression in the Church (LG 13; GS 58; AG 9),

²³George SoaresPrabhu, "The Church as Mission: A Reflection on Mt 5:13-16," *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXIV, No. 142 (July 1994), pp. 271-281.

²⁴S.J. Samartha, "Dialogue in a Religiously Plural Society," in Israel Selvanayagam, ed., *The Multi-faith Context of India* (Bangalore: BTTBPSA, 1993), p.8. See also Samartha's *One Christ - Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology* (Bangalore: SATHRI, 1994).

²⁵See *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 221 (September 2007). The whole issue deals with dialogue initiatives in India.

²⁶Joseph Mattam, "Incultured Evangelization and Conversion," *Voices from the Third World*, Vol. XXVI, No.1 (June 2003), p. 80.

the Church leaders in India (all denominations), including liturgy experts, by and large, still cling to a Western form of Christianity as seen in the architecture of our Churches, the atmosphere of worship, postures, gestures, signs, symbols, vestments of priests, music, prayer forms, etc. Consequently, a majority of the laity too follow an imported spirituality, liturgy, and style of mission, which do not appeal or cater to the needs of the oppressed and exploited section of the Church/society. Many have uncritically accepted the Western form of Christianity as normative and universal.

Dialogue and inculturation are integral aspects of mission in a multi-religious and pluri-cultural society like India/Asia. Inculturation is basically the continuation of "God-with us" event or Incarnation in history. It may be described as the very process of Christian living. It is the transformation of the life of a Christian community from within "by which the Good News becomes the principle that animates their attitudes, world-view, value system and action - in short, their whole life."²⁷

Church leadership, especially at the local level should give due priority to interreligious endeavours not merely at the theoretical level, but in concrete action plans, which include also study of the Scriptures of different religions. Leaders must ensure that dialogue with believers of other religions is the *dialogue of life* where people of all religions join together to promote unity, love, truth, justice and peace.²⁸ In actual practice, dialogue and partnership entail that together we take up the cause of the least, the oppressed, the exploited and discriminated minority groups. A more creative form of dialogue is expressed as united action for a common cause in society, such as the eradication of social evils. All religions should unite in the fight against poverty, illiteracy, child labour, harassment of women, exploitation of Dalits, communalism, terrorism, environmental destruction and whatever. In short, concern for the poor is the meeting point of religions, and universal compassion (*karuna*) is the characteristic mark of a religious person.

Conclusion

In the course of our study on *dialogue and partnership amid religious pluralism*, undertaken in the socio-cultural and religious context of

²⁷M. Amalados, *Making All Things New: Mission in Dialogue* (Gujarat: Gujarat SahityaPrakash, 1990), p.65.

²⁸See Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA), I (1979), p. 16. For further insights on the liberative nature of dialogue, see K. C. Abraham, *Liberative Solidarity: Contemporary Perspectives on Mission* (Tiruvalla: ChristavaSahityaSamithi, 1996).

India, we have made a modest attempt to explore the meaning of dialogue and its nuances. A special feature of the paper is its concern for inculturation as an integral aspect of mission.

Portraying Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus as models of dialogical partnership, we have underscored the significance of their teachings and praxis. In the process, our study has highlighted their theological impact and implications. The Church's proclamation of the uniqueness of Jesus should not be to the exclusion of other manifestation of the Divine. On the contrary, it must challenge us to follow the path of Jesus who acknowledged and appreciated the faith found in others. The entire Church, in particular Church leadership, is called to foster a culture of dialogue among the people of God.

Thus, rising above the narrow confines of religious structures, rituals and traditions, genuine dialogue and partnership enable us to live as children of one God and as responsible citizens of our country. By imbibing the spirit of Jesus and Paul, the Church can liberate itself from its ideological fetters. Empowered by the Spirit of God, we have to move towards the realisation of a *dialogue of life* that fosters human dignity, equality, liberty, harmony, protection of mother earth and integrity of creation, and peace with justice.