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EAST IS EAST

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"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," so goes the well known opening line of "The Ballad of East and West," by Rudyard Kipling. The purpose of this essay is to try to understand the difference of perspective and approach towards other religions, between the Asian and Roman mentalities, in their broad contours. The meetings organized by the Vatican in Assisi may be studied as symbolic of the problem.

1. The Assisi Meetings

The first "World Day of Prayer for Peace" was held in Assisi on 26 October 1986, on the initiative of Pope John Paul II. Dissatisfaction was expressed at the time by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger. He wished to avoid any semblance of syncretism. And at his General Audience five days before the gathering, Pope John Paul said: "Certainly we cannot 'pray together', namely, to make a common prayer, but we can be present while others pray."¹ He believed that, besides other means to peace, prayer was necessary. He added, that peace is "the result of prayer which, in the diversity of religions, expresses a relationship with a supreme power that surpasses our human capacities alone." Though the assembly did not offer joint prayers, each religious group remained respectfully present at each other's prayers. In his

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¹*The Tablet*, (22/10/2011) 4, 28.

encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* he explained that this action “was meant to confirm my conviction that ‘every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart’.”² He went on to hold similar meetings in 1993 and 2002. At the same time he was aware of the fears of “syncretism” and a “deceptive irenicism”, which some harboured.³

On the 25th anniversary (27/10/2011) of the first World Day of Prayer for Peace, Pope Benedict XVI convened a meeting in Assisi in the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels, entitled “Pilgrims of the Truth, Pilgrims of Peace”. From here, in the evening, the participants made a pilgrimage to the Basilica of St Francis about two miles away. The significance of the title was explained, in a press conference on 18 October, by one of the organizers of the event, Cardinal Turkson: “The emphasis is on pilgrimage instead of praying together,” he said; the change in emphasis was meant to avoid any semblance of “syncretism”.⁴ For the first time, four “non-believers” were invited to join this year’s event. One wonders whether this was done, in order to have an excuse for not praying together. Even if “pilgrimage” may be understood metaphorically, the incongruity of inviting non-believers to make this pilgrimage in the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels and thence to the Basilica of St Francis, remains. Hence it would not be surprising if the next assembly, supposing one does take place, is held in a neutral location. Unlike the 1986 meeting, prayer in the assembly was suppressed in the 2011 meeting; the delegates would have to pray privately.

What is the “syncretism” which some small, vocal groups cry? The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “the amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.” What happened in the 1986 Assisi meeting, far from being an “amalgam”, was a juxta-position or co-existence of different religions. Whereas Vatican II exhorts Catholics to go way beyond this, to a pro-existence: “through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these people, as

²John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 29.

³John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 53.

⁴See Vatican website accessed on 28/10/2011: http://press.catholica.va/news_services/bulletin/news/28234.php?index=28234&po_date=18.10.2011&lang=i t#PROGRAMMA DELLA GIORNATA DI ASSISI. *The Tablet* (22/10/2011) 28.

well as the values in their society and culture" (NA 2). Actually the uneasiness about praying with people of other religions cannot be reduced to opposition from some quarters. The Vatican shows itself quite undeterred by much stronger and more widespread opposition on several other issues, e.g. the new English translation of the Roman Missal. The problem arises from the mind-set of the Curial officials. The remarks of K. McDonald are helpful in understanding this. He was working at the Secretariat for Christian Unity when Pope John Paul II announced the Day of Prayer for Peace. He notes: "there was a definite feeling that we were entering new territory, and breaking new ground."⁵ This observation comes as a surprise to us here in India, because we have been praying with followers of other religions since our earliest school assemblies. This practice, which antedates Vatican II by decades, has not led to any "syncretism". Rigid, narrow exclusivism is not less a danger in the Church than indifferentism.

All this reminds us, that the Church's attitude to other religions has been very much influenced by its European history and context, and that the Roman church is still very euro-centric although it presides over a universal Church. This may be illustrated from many areas of church life. Here I limit myself to the field of the religions, as I said at the outset.

2. Historical Background

2.1. Earlier History

Once Christianity became the state religion in country after country of Europe, with the understanding of '*cuius regio eius religio*' (the kingdom must follow the religion of its ruler), much force was used by Christian monarchs to achieve their politico-religious ends. Thus there came into being a 'Christian' Europe, which had no place or feel for any other religion. The power and domination of the Church greatly expanded. At the same time there hardened a certain exclusivity which was expressed in the axiom "Outside the church no salvation." This was interpreted quite literally, as I have shown elsewhere.⁶ This narrow and intolerant attitude accompanied the missionaries during the colonial period. The Bull "Unam Sanctam" of Boniface VIII (1302) reads: "We declare, state and define that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of all men that they submit to

⁵"Power of Prayer," *The Tablet* (22/10/2011) 4 ff.

⁶J. Saldanha, "The story of an Axiom," *Jeevadhara* (2007) 508-520.

the Roman Pontiff.”⁷ In legitimately seeking to condemn certain extremist European ideological movements which were truly in conflict with Christian revelation, Pius IX enunciated positions which were at the other extreme. The following propositions are condemned as errors in his “Syllabus”:

Every one is free to embrace and profess the religion which by the light of reason one judges to be true... We should at least have good hopes for the eternal salvation of all those who are in no way in the true Church of Christ... In our age it is no longer advisable that the Catholic religion be the only State religion, excluding all the other cults.⁸

I highlight only a few other, lesser known markers, along this dark path of religious exclusivity and intolerance.

In 1246 the Franciscan John of Plano Carpini, an emissary of Pope Innocent IV, was probably the first European to enter the court of the Great Khan, in this case Guyuk Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan. Weatherford describes that disastrous encounter:

The first diplomatic contact between Europe and the Far East had degenerated into an exchange of comparative theology mixed with religious insults. Despite the extensive spiritual beliefs that the Mongols and Europeans shared in common, the opening relationship had been so negative and misguided that ... in the end, they would... abandon Christianity entirely in favour of Buddhism and Islam.⁹

Guyuk Khan replied to the letter of the Pope:

The contents of your letters stated that we ought to be baptized and become Christians... But you men of the West believe that you alone are Christians and despise others. But how can you know to whom God deigns to confer His grace?... Thou thyself, at the head of all the Princes, come at once to serve and wait upon us!¹⁰

No better was the encounter, in 1253, of the Franciscan William of Rubruck with Mongke Khan, another grandson of Genghis Khan. In 1287-1288 Khubilai Khan sent Rabban Bar Sawma of the Assyrian Rite to Europe as his emissary. Here he met Pope Nicholas IV and the college of Cardinals, and the kings of France and England. Given the great freedom of religion in the Mongol empire, Rabban Sawma was

⁷Neuner-Dupuis (ND), *The Christian Faith*, Bangalore: TPI, 2004, 804.

⁸ND, 1013, nn 15, 17, 77.

⁹J. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004, 163.

¹⁰C. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1955, 83-86.

surprised to find that only a single religion was tolerated in Europe. He was also struck by the political and civil power of the religious leaders.¹¹ The Mongols maintained great freedom of religion in their vast empire, at a time when heretics were being executed in Europe, at the urging of Popes. Nearly eight centuries later Pope John Paul II acknowledged, among the reasons why Christianity almost vanished from Central Asia, “perhaps above all a lack of preparedness to encounter the great religions of Asia.”¹²

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) referred to Jews as “blasphemers of Christ” and decreed that at all times they “are to be distinguished in public from other people by the character of their dress.”¹³ The General Council of Vienne (1311-1312) took exception to the daily *azan*:

It is an insult to the holy name and a disgrace to the Christian faith that in certain parts of the world subject to Christian princes where Saracens (Muslims) live... the Saracen priests... in their temples or mosques, in which the Saracens meet to adore the infidel Mahomet, loudly invoke and extol his name each day at certain hours from a high place, in the hearing of both Christians and Saracens, and there make public declarations in his honour (Decree 25).¹⁴

The council also notes that a great number of Muslims flock from far and near to venerate the tomb of a saintly Muslim: “This brings disrepute on our faith and gives great scandal to the faithful.” The council concludes: “These practices cannot be tolerated any further without displeasing the divine majesty. We therefore... strictly forbid such practices henceforth in Christian lands.” Accordingly the council enjoins on Christian rulers the obligation “to remove this offence altogether from their territories and take care that their subjects remove it, so that they may thereby attain the reward of eternal happiness.”¹⁵ After the capture of Granada the Moors (Muslims) were given the choice, in 1498, of emigration or conversion to Christianity.

¹¹J. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 219.

¹²John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 9.

¹³Constitutions 68 & 69: N.P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. 1, Sheed & Ward, 1990, 266.

¹⁴A little further the council refers to “the sacrilegious name of Mahomet.” (I happen to be writing this while the *azan* is sounding from the mosque in my vicinity).

¹⁵N.P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 380.

In 1434 the General Council of Basel, in its 19th session, issued a Decree on Jews and neophytes:

... renewing the sacred canons, we command both diocesan bishops and secular powers to prohibit in every way Jews and other infidels from having Christians, male or female, in their households and service, or as nurses of their children; and Christians from joining with them in festivities, marriages, banquets or baths, or in much conversation, and from taking them as doctors or agents of marriages or officially appointed mediators of other contracts... They are to be compelled, under severe penalties, to wear some garment whereby they can be clearly distinguished from Christians.

Furthermore they are to be segregated into ghettos, "as far distant as possible from churches."¹⁶ Duns Scotus († 1308) taught that a Christian ruler had the right to take Jewish children from their parents and baptize them. The great Doctor of the Church, St Thomas Aquinas († 1274) held that though a Christian king must tolerate Jewish rites in his domain, he must in no wise tolerate the rites of other non-Christians: except it be to avoid scandal, or strife, or because through toleration the people would gradually be converted to the Christian faith. He also justified the idea of a military religious Order.¹⁷

It is unfortunate that the negative attitude towards other religions was exported from Europe to the colonial missions. Idols and temples were destroyed on a large scale, all over the colonies. There is no need to burden the reader with the scores of examples available to illustrate the point; suffice it to quote a few. St Francis Xavier's indulgenced prayer for the conversion of infidels exclaims: "Behold, Lord, to your dishonour hell is being filled with them!"¹⁸ The same thought recurs in the brief catechism he composed. His grand-nephew, Jerome Xavier, plainly told Emperor Jehangir and his court that Mohammed was in hell. The princes he baptized added, that the Muslims too would meet the same fate.¹⁹ Four Franciscans were martyred in Thane about 1319, near Mumbai, for making similar statements before a Muslim judge.

¹⁶N.P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 483-484.

¹⁷*Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, Q. 10, art. 8 & 10; Q. 188, art. 3

¹⁸*Manuale Christianum, Praecepta Selectae, Mechliniae*, H. Dessain, 1914, 92.

¹⁹J. Saldanha, *Patterns of Evangelization in Mission History*, Mumbai: St Paul's, 2009, 92.

The few examples of openness to other religions are very exceptional. Like the letter which Pope Gregory VII wrote in 1076 to Anzir, the Muslim King of Mauritania: "...we believe and confess one God, although in different ways, and praise and worship him daily..." He prays that God may lead him "to the bosom of the holy patriarch Abraham, after long years of life here on earth."²⁰ Vatican II refers to this letter in *Nostra Aetate*, N. 3. By praying together with Muslims, or at least in each other's presence, Christians would be witnessing to the truth of this Pope's teaching. The oft quoted example of Pope Gregory I is limited by expediency.²¹ At first, he instructed Augustine, apostle of England, to extirpate everything non-Christian. When he found that this did not achieve the goal, he counselled that the temples be not destroyed but converted into churches; also the pagan sacrifices and sacred meals are not to be discontinued, but given a Christian meaning.²²

2.2. Modern Times

It would be surprising if more than fifteen centuries of negativity towards other religions did not leave its impact on the Western church in modern times. Fr C. Valles, a Spanish missionary who came to India in 1950, relates the struggle he went through trying to cope with the new situation. He thought to himself: "'Lord, what a pity that these magnificent people... must go to hell!'"... It was anguish to me. The Catholic doctrine 'Outside the Church there is no salvation' was in full force at the time."²³ He wrote about his anguish to his teacher in Spain, who answered: "Have you just now arrived in India and you are already losing your faith? Be careful lest you fall into hell yourself!" Yet he felt in his heart of hearts that things could not be that way.

When one follows the meandering path of papal teaching since Vatican II, one realises that the church's magisterium is in a flux, lacking consistency and searching for proper self-expression, even

²⁰ND, 1002.

²¹R. Mc Culloch, "Gregorian Adaptation in the Augustinian Mission to England," *Missiology*, (1978, no. 3) 323-334.

²²ND, 1102.

²³The clarification of the Holy Office, though hedged in with many conditions, was issued too late (8/8/1949) to have been able to impact him (ND 856-'7). *Jivan* (Oct 2009) 5.

though it may not admit as much.²⁴ In May 1964 Pope Paul VI instituted a "Secretariat for Non-Christians," renamed "Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue," by John Paul II in 1988. In his inaugural encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (6/8/1964) Paul VI committed himself to dialogue with the religions, while asserting that "the Christian religion is the one and only true religion" (N. 107). This conveys the sense that other religions are simply false, which would leave no space for dialogue. The following year (Oct 28) Vatican II approved the "Declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions." This document represents the Church's official stamp on the transition from monologue to dialogue. In fact, it is the first document of any General Council of the Church to deal with this theme, and that too in a positive manner. Still, the history of the document exposes the euro-centrism of the Roman Church. It began as a document "On the Jews" in May 1962, since the Jewish question was a burning issue in Europe. Thanks to interventions from bishops, including many from the younger churches, it survived as an independent document in its present form. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975, Pope Paul VI acknowledged innumerable "seeds of the Word" in other religions. Nevertheless he considers them as a mere human effort of searching for God. Hence he called them "natural religions" (N. 53). He concluded: "Our religion effectively establishes with God a true and living relationship which the other religions cannot, even though they have, as it were, their arms stretched out towards heaven." His Exhortation makes no mention of inter-religious dialogue, although Asian bishops in the preceding Synod of 1974 insisted on its importance.

John Paul II advanced beyond the position of his predecessor, Paul VI. He strongly recommended inter-religious dialogue, not least during his visit to India in 1986. He was convinced, that there is much in the religions which is not a purely human creation, but "has been brought about in humans by the Spirit, which 'blows where it wills.'"²⁵ He acknowledged "the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit" in other religions; he spoke of mutual enrichment and "mutual advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience."²⁶ On the other hand, he insisted that the

²⁴J. Saldanha, *Mission Today: Themes and Issues*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2006, ch. 11.

²⁵John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 12.

²⁶*Redemptoris Missio*, 55-56.

Church possesses “the fullness of revelation” and “the fullness of the truth.”²⁷ This raises the question: if the Church has the fullness of revelation and of the truth, what can one seek from dialogue with believers of other religions? Hence some Hindu organizations and individuals have been quick to suspect ulterior motives in the Church’s involvement in inter-religious dialogue. We know that Vatican II had a more nuanced view when it said, that “the Church constantly moves forward towards the fullness of divine truth” (DV 8).

In the year 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its Declaration, *Dominus Iesus*, signed by its Prefect Cardinal Ratzinger. The problems in the papal teaching mentioned above re-surface. The document affirms “the universal salvific mediation of the Church” and not only of Christ (N. 4). Non-Christian religions exist only *de facto*, not *in principle (de jure)*. Could this imply that they are evils, which have no right to exist? Still, the Church’s relationship with other religions is one of “reciprocal enrichment”. However, dialogue is devalued when it is said that proclamation “*makes use of the practice of inter-religious dialogue*” (N. 2; italics added). The other religions are merely “the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration” (N. 7). Accordingly, their prayers and rituals “are occasions or pedagogical helps” to be open to God (N. 21). Six years later Cardinal Ratzinger, as Pope Benedict XVI, delivered the much publicized Regensburg address, with disastrous consequences for relations with Muslims.²⁸ The influence of the European context may also be seen in the following statement of his colleague Karl Rahner, who could well be ranked as the greatest theologian of the 20th century: “...non-Christian religions are in principle, and in themselves, overtaken and rendered obsolete by the coming of Christ... the historical expansion of Christianity... coincides with a progressive abrogation of the legitimacy of these religions.”²⁹ This would mean that these religions, including the Jewish religion, have lost their legitimacy in Europe, not to speak of the Americas and Australia. That could have unwanted practical consequences.

It is not that positive assessments of other religions are not found in the modern Roman magisterium. The problem is that such

²⁷*Redemptoris Missio*, 56, 55.

²⁸I have analyzed this speech in *Jnanadeepa* (2007, no. 1) 145-154.

²⁹“Church, Churches, and Religions,” *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 10, 30-49. Rahner probably never visited Asia nor had a living exposure to its vibrant religious pluralism.

assessments are merely juxta-posed with negative statements. The latter, rather than the former, become the basis for practical decisions. Quite exceptional was a document from the Secretariat for non-Christians in 1984, on "The Attitude of the Church towards Believers of Other Religions." It affirmed: "A person discovers that he does not possess the truth in a perfect and total way, but can walk together with others towards that goal... Dialogue is thus the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it..." Every believer must humbly refer the religious differences to God who is 'greater than our hearts' (1 Jn 3:20). Dialogue can "purify" and "enrich" the religious experiences and outlook of the partners.³⁰

3. Reflections

Historically, the negative evaluation of the other religions has prevented Christians from deriving greater benefit from their contact with the followers of these religions. Soares-Prabhu warns: "Such exclusivism leads inevitably to attitudes of superiority towards people outside the Church...; to a stereotyping that perceives them as spiritually inferior; and eventually to actions that treat them as less than human." Hence, notwithstanding the protestations of humility and commitment to religious freedom, "what is to prevent the Christian champions of religious freedom today, becoming (like the Christians under Constantine) the religious persecutors of tomorrow...?"³¹ – given the right combination of circumstances. A chilling possibility.

Pope John Paul II rightly emphasized the crucial importance of *context*, in the opening chapter of *Ecclesia in Asia*. The churches in Europe and in Asia have different contexts and different histories. These have given rise to different mentalities and attitudes. Soares-Prabhu tries to describe the basic orientation of the 'Indian mind':

It always tries to grasp the whole, because things have meaning only as parts of this whole. Because of this passion for wholeness, the Indian mind is prepared... to risk the chance of error rather than the loss of any part of truth. Its thinking is therefore inclusive, not exclusive... tolerant of ambiguity, and is able to hold together

³⁰L'Osservatore Romano (25/6/1984); *Omnis Terra*, (1984, no. 151) 388-400.

³¹G. Soares-Prabhu, "Religion and Communalism: the Christian Dilemma," *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today*, Pune: JDV, 1999, 185.

seemingly contradictory aspects of reality as complementary parts of a never fully to be apprehended whole.³²

From his survey of India's history, Jawaharlal Nehru noticed, "that some inner urge towards synthesis, derived essentially from the Indian philosophic outlook, was the dominant feature of Indian cultural and even racial development." He then quotes C.E.M. Joad: "... it is a fact that India's special gift to mankind has been the ability and willingness of Indians to effect a synthesis of many different elements both of thoughts and peoples, to create, in fact, unity out of diversity."³³ The fourth Colloquium (1998) of Indian bishops and theologians noted that the Indian religious traditions make a distinction between: spirituality ('sādhanā') & religion ('sampradāya'); convergent lines and divergent expressions; sense of being grasped by the Spirit and symbolic expression in diverse forms.³⁴

Many centuries before Christ, the Indian *Shruti* (revelation) laid down a fundamental principle in approaching the ultimate Reality: "What cannot be spoken with words... what cannot be thought with the mind, but that whereby the mind can think: know that alone to be Brahman, the Spirit; and not what people here adore" (Kena Upanishad, Part I). The First Part of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains the profession of faith. Its opening chapter (N. 43) quotes Thomas Aquinas: "concerning God, we cannot grasp what he is, but only what he is not, and how other beings stand in relation to him." It is as if to remind us of the spirit in which we must read the rest of the catechism. This principle has not been taken with the same seriousness in Europe, as it has in Asia.

At the time of the colonial expansion, the Catholic Church was limited to Europe, and that too, southern Europe. In Asia, we are born and live in a multi-religious and multi-cultural environment, and a millennial civilization. Here Church leaders have not led campaigns against heretics or crusades. In other words, our history and context is very different from that of the church in Europe. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Asian churches have developed a more open approach to other religions, which however, cannot be described as syncretism. The response of the CBCI to the "Lineamenta" for the Synod for Asia may be quoted as an example:

³²*Biblical Theology for India*, Pune: JDV, 1999, 274.

³³*The Discovery of India*, Calcutta: Signet Press, 1946 (2nd ed.), 54.

³⁴Report in: *Ishvani Documentation & Mission Digest*, (1999, no. 2) 228.

The Indian Christological approach seeks to avoid negative and exclusivistic expressions. Christ is a Sacrament, a definitive Symbol, of God's salvation for the entire humanity... That, however, does not mean there cannot be other symbols, valid in their own ways, which the Christian sees as related to the definitive Symbol, Jesus Christ.³⁵

The FABC speaks of the necessity of inter-religious dialogue. Through such dialogue the Church will learn "what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in their religious books, in a marvellous variety of ways, different perhaps from our own, but through which we too, may hear his voice calling us to lift our hearts to the Father" (2nd Plenary Assembly, 1978). The Asian Bishops' Institute for Inter-Religious Affairs (July 1988) stresses *harmony* and the complementarity ('yinyang') which exists between peoples, cultures, faiths, ideologies, world-visions, etc.,: "We therefore turn not only to our Christian resources, but also to those of other faiths, so that we might achieve mutual enrichment."³⁶ We realize that to be fully religious, one needs to be inter-religious. Mission is described in terms of a wide-ranging dialogue with Asia's poor, its cultural and religious traditions.

4. Conclusion

It is now well known that Christianity has 'gone South'.³⁷ Here 'a new way of being Church' is taking shape; a new way of understanding and relating to followers of other religions is forming. This may indeed be Asia's, especially India's, contribution to the universal Church. In order to understand this process, there is required a lived experience with non-Christian traditions, such as Asia offers. Rome should consult and collaborate, at least with the Asian bishops' conferences, before issuing documents on these topics. This calls for proper exercise of collegiality and subsidiarity.

So, is Rudyard Kipling's refrain true in this context?

*"OH, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!"*

³⁵*Asia Focus* (10/10/1997) 3.

³⁶Rosales & Arevalo, ed., *For all the Peoples of Asia*, Vol.1, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, 230, 314, 321-322.

³⁷J. Saldanha, "Another Copernican Revolution!," *Jnanadeepa* (2008, no. 1) 140-152.