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Editorial

Religious Pluralism: Changing Perspectives

There have been a number of initiatives, especially following the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*,¹ to theologially understand religious pluralism, to promote interreligious dialogue and to develop further a theology of religions. Even before the promulgation of NA, Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*² had emphasised the need of interreligious dialogue. After the Council, there have been many Church documents on interreligious dialogue and theology of religions. *Dialogue and Proclamation*,³ *Ecclesia in Asia*,⁴ and *Dominus Iesus*,⁵ are a few examples.

Nostra Aetate and subsequent documents inspired a number of initiatives and theological developments. These initiatives were more eagerly taken in Asia and other parts of the world, where other religions are prominent, or where Christians are only a minority. For example, study of the scriptures, philosophy and theology of other religions became part of the curriculum in the theological faculties; centres for interreligious dialogue were established; Christian Ashrams were founded in India, integrating Indian/Hindu spirituality with Christian spirituality; in many of the South East Asian countries dialogue with indigenous religious traditions like Shamanism was undertaken; in Japan, Thailand and many other

¹ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* (28 October 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

² Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 August 1964), http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.

³ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (19 May 1991), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html

⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

countries, dialogue with Buddhism became an integral part of theology and Church life; there were also attempts to form Basic Human Communities where people could come together and collaborate irrespective of religious affiliations. In particular, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences has given special attention to dialogue with religions. However, already from late 1970s and 1980s, many such initiatives were discouraged by Church authorities, and many theologians who tried to develop a theology of religions had to face difficulties from authorities.

At the same time, the interest in developing a theology of religious pluralism was revived due to changed and changing contexts: the rise of fundamentalism in recent decades; Western countries becoming more pluralistic due to migration and globalization; increasing tendency to use religion in politics; etc. Besides, theological discussions on multi-religious belonging/multiple religious affiliation give new faces to theology of religions and religious pluralism. For example, can one be Christian and Buddhist at the same time? Or, Hindu and Christian at the same time? The question of multiple religious affiliation is not completely new, but in recent years it is receiving a more positive response from theological circles, though a more profound theological vision is still in the process of evolution.

December 2019 issue of *Asian Horizons* reflects on religious pluralism, especially in the background of changing contexts.

Pointing out that "religious pluralism is a fact of life," Michael Amaladoss emphasises that along with theological developments, the practice of interreligious dialogue has seen a steady progress, and he identifies five stages or kinds of dialogue. He underscores that interreligious dialogue is in fact at the service of promoting human community and thus "religious pluralism becomes a source of communion and peace rather than division and conflict." Here the focus is no longer on religions, but on "ways of life, willed by God, that can and should promote peace through dialogue." Edmund Kee-Fook Chia states that in the development of a theology of religious pluralism, Asian theologians, in spite of various difficulties that they had to face from authorities, have been playing a significant role. Elaborating upon the contributions of some of the Asian theologians, he emphasises that Asian theologians are best positioned to be at the forefront of evolving the theologies of religious pluralism. Archbishop Thomas Menampampil argues that religious differences can be transcended when partners really wish to help, complement and enrich each other. According to him, what has made conversation between religions difficult today is the politicization of religions. He is

convinced that religions have a common mission in a secular world and invites the religions to be instilled by a collective sense of responsibility to address the shared anxieties of humanity today.

Gerald O'Collins elaborates upon the priesthood of Christ as a basis for developing a theology of religions and a Christology of religions. Based on Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and the Letter to the Hebrews, O'Collins presents the priesthood of Christ as a high-priestly intercession that mediates salvation to all human beings. He emphasises that "It is high time for this testimony about the priesthood of Christ to be incorporated into the theology of religions." Precious Nihorowa takes up one of the difficult issues in the theology of religious pluralism, namely, the faith in the uniqueness and universality of the saviour. Though often it is considered as an obstacle to dialogue, Nihorowa argues that the claim to uniqueness and universality is actually a good prerequisite for dialogue as it proves that one is confident with what he believes in. Moreover, it also ensures that the parties in dialogue are grounded in their faith. Dialogue on religious ethics has been a difficult issue. Although some initiatives were taken in the past, they did not make much progress. Ingeborg G. Gabriel argues for a revival of interreligious and intercultural dialogue on ethics and law as an instrument of peace. According to her, rationality of dogmatic beliefs is rather exclusive, whereas rationality of ethics, including religious ethics, is basically inclusive. Giving practical examples, she affirms that, "Peace does not depend on having the same belief in God, but on finding common ethical standards and ground which can be accepted by all as the basis of civil peace."

Following this we have two examples of interreligious co-existence and dialogue, which can contribute to developing a theology of religious pluralism. Roy Vettikuzhiyil Joseph, Emanuel Gerrit Singgih and Abdul Wahid narrate the first Islamic migration, that is, to Abyssinia, a Christian country, in 615 AD, a helpful model in moulding an interreligious harmonious life. Analysing this event, the authors connect Abyssinian model of migration and dialogue with the Vatican II concept of interreligious dialogue. They point out that the greatest obstacle of peaceful co-existence is prejudice, whereas the Abyssinian model shows the success of openness towards other religions. Agatha Hyun-Suk Lee, through an 'encounter' of Chung Tzu and Francis of Assisi, presents a model of dialogue between Taoism and Christianity on ecological concerns. She says that according to both of them, the existence of all things in nature, including humans are gratuitously given, and hence they should be

treated with respect and gratitude. Thus, she shows how the wisdom and experience of different religious traditions can be utilized to work together to face issues like ecological crisis.

Recognition of indigenous religions as active and equal partners in interreligious dialogue has received greater attention now, whereas in the past they were often ignored as belonging to superstitious beliefs. Jojo M. Fung points out that the changed view of the primal religions has enabled theologians to develop a more sensitive theological framework for appreciating their richness. He develops his reflections based on the concept that *Ruâh Elohim*, who emanates creation, has assumed a panentheistic corporeality with the Cosmos-Earth. Thus, Fung underlines that the emerging perspectives on indigenous religions have pushed the boundary of interreligious dialogue for further development. Moreover, he indicates how multiple-religious affiliation can be better understood in such a framework. Elisabeth Steffens illustrates that the recognition of indigenous religions in Abia Yala-Latin America is not only an interreligious, but also an economic and political challenge. According to her, the recognition of their religious rights and freedom is also a matter of human rights. Steffens emphasises that only through direct encounters prejudices against indigenous religions can be overcome and religious freedom can be respected. Francis Appiah-Kubi expounds how culture is important in a theology of religions. Making a critical analysis of the cultural rationality and African religious culture, he attempts to develop an ecclesiological paradigm for Africa, namely, Church Family of God, which according to him, is a privileged space for intercultural dialogue.

There are two articles on other interesting themes. Phyllis Zagano and Bernard Pottier, members of the Pontifical Commission for the Study of the Diaconate of Women, established by Pope Francis in 2016, provide various evidences for the existence of women deacons in the Church, and explain their status and function. In light of their study, they underscore that, "Today, it would seem that nothing restricts women from diaconal ordination." Samuel Obu, based on the New Testament, shows plurality and diversity as ways of living unity. He applies this concept in particular to the Anglican-Roman Catholic relations and presents a theological approach that sees the unity of the ecclesial community as genuine plurality and legitimate diversity.

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