

## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM – CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

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### Abstract

Religious pluralism is a fact of life. It can be approached from different points of view like sociological, political and religious. Here a religious point of view is adopted. Two factors that condition the way that religions look at each other are fundamentalism and communalism. Fundamentalism holds on to what it considers the fundamentals of its faith when it is under attack from scientism and other ideologies. Communalism thinks that the people who share a religion also share the same economic and political interests. A philosophical approach to religious pluralism speaks of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. But from a religious point of view each religion has its own approach. Traditional Islam was open to and tolerant of other religions, especially Judaism and Christianity. Hinduism sees all religions as ways to the same goal. Buddhism considers the religions as preparations to its own eightfold path. Christianity in Asia has learnt to be open to other religions in dialogue. Such an open attitude has now become official with Popes John Paul II and Francis.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Christianity, Communalism, *Dominus Iesus*, Fundamentalism, Hinduism, Interreligious Dialogue, Islam, Religion, Religious Pluralism

That people follow different religions in the world is not news. It is a fact of life, especially when we have ongoing conflicts between

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religious groups. Relations between religions is conditioned by many factors. The pluralism of religions can be approached from different points of view like sociological, political and religious. My focus here is from the religious point of view.

From the point of view of religion as such, I think that there are two problems that need to be considered. These are religious fundamentalism and religious communalism. Religious fundamentalism holds on to religious beliefs and practices which the believers of that religion consider as fundamental to it and, therefore, as true. Religious communalism, however, looks at religious identity in a social context. It asserts that a group of people who share a particular religious belief also share the same economic and political interests. While the fundamentalists defend their religious identity as believers, the Communalists assert their common or shared economic and/or political interests.

### **Fundamentalism and Communalism**

As a matter of fact, the term 'fundamentalism' with reference to religion had its origin in the USA in the 1930s. When the theory of evolution of Darwin was becoming popular around the world, a group of Christians in the south-eastern USA felt that it directly challenged the story of creation as narrated in the Bible, according to which God created the world in six days. They opted to believe the story of the Bible, as revealed by God, than the theories of Darwin. They thought that the Bible as a revealed narrative and their own belief in it were fundamental to their religious identity. They were proud to call themselves fundamentalists. Of course they added to the story of creation other doctrines like the incarnation – that is, God becoming human in Jesus Christ –, the virgin birth – that is, the birth of Jesus from Mary without any male intervention, etc. In course of time, the term 'fundamentalism' was also applied to other believers, like Muslims, who believed in the literal interpretation of their revealed scripture, the Quran. Today the term fundamentalism evokes the image of Muslims, rather than Christians. But, as a matter of fact, there are fundamentalists in all the religions.

The term 'communalism' is used more in India than elsewhere, I think, though the situation it indicates is everywhere in open or hidden ways. Communalists believe that the people who share the same religious belief, also share the same economic and political interests. Religion then becomes a source of communal and political identity. The Bharatiya Janata Party in India, for example, wants to make India a Hindu *rashtra* or kingdom. Pakistan is an Islamic state.

India has chosen to be a secular state that is positive to all religions. France is another kind of secular state that is negative to all religions. Is this precisely because it is afraid of the influence of religious beliefs on political attitudes? Is it not a problem that such a secularism is not merely neutral towards all religions as claimed, but often actively anti-religious in a general way, so that an anti-religious attitude itself becomes a sort of religion?

### **A Philosophical Approach**

People like John Hick seek to approach the situation of religious pluralism from a philosophical point of view. His classification of approaches to religious pluralism as Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism is well known. These are presented as religious attitudes. Religion is related to some sort of goal like salvation or liberation. Exclusivists think that their religion is the only true and valid one leading to salvation. Other religions are ineffective. So they seek to convert others to their religion. Pluralists affirm that different religions are different ways to the same liberative goal. All are valid in their own way. So we have to accept and respect each other. Inclusivists suggest that though the different religions have their own value at their own level, their own religion has an all-embracing character and can be useful to others. It is like the Christians saying that Christ is the only saviour and he is active also in other religions in ways unknown to us. Or a Buddhist might say that all the different religions are various means or *upayas* to bring people to follow the eight-fold path in indirect and unacknowledged ways leading to egolessness. They have a role in the earlier stages of one's spiritual journey and this journey may take place through various births too, which means different historical circumstances which can include different religions. This is a rational, philosophical approach which true believers may not feel comfortable with. I know some Christians who place themselves between pluralism and inclusivism. But I think that this is artificial. I do not think that this framework is helpful in understanding the phenomenon of religious pluralism adequately.

### **A Religious Approach**

The experience of religious pluralism must be approached from a religious point of view, not from a rational and philosophical point of view. So we have to ask the different religions how they look at religious pluralism. For my purpose in this article, I am not going into an elaborate enquiry but only offer some brief indications that would be sufficient for our purpose here. Let us then look at the various religions.

## Islam

Islam may be considered the most negative to other religions. And yet, in practice the Prophet Mohammed himself seems to have been open. When he had to run away, so to speak, from Mecca to Medina he had to live with Jewish and Christian communities. He must have developed tolerant relations with them. Though there is a slogan: "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet," Mohammed was actually seeking the true God and one of his sources was the Bible and he respected and accepted the prophets in the Bible, including Jesus. He is clear that "There must be no coercion in matters of faith." (Quran 2:256). He goes on to say: "If it had been thy Lord's will they would all have believed, all who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind against their will to believe?" (10:99) He had been living and dealing with the Jews and the Christians in Medina. His approach to them was: "Unto you your moral law, and to me, mine." (109:6) After Mohammed, the leaders of the community had also political power and religion and state became one and the political power was less tolerant of other religions. But in India we have the tradition of emperors like Akbar, who were tolerant of and open to other religions, even inviting Jesuits from Goa to his court.

The Sufi mystics in Islam were also open to other religions. Jalal as-Din Rumi, for instance, says:

Purity and impurity, sloth and diligence in worship,  
 These mean nothing to Me.  
 I am apart from all that.  
 Ways of worshipping are not to be ranked as better or worse than one  
 another.  
 Hindus do Hindu things.  
 The Dravidian Muslims do what they do.  
 It is all praise, and it's all right.<sup>1</sup>

The same saint says: "Though the ways are various, the goal is one. Do you not see that there are many roads that lead to the Kaaba?"<sup>2</sup> A modern Indian Muslim leader, Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) said:

Islam does not command narrow-mindedness and racial and religious prejudice. It does not make the recognition of merit and virtue, of human benevolence, mercy and love dependent upon and subject to distinctions of religion and race. It teaches us to respect every man who is good, whatever his religion.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, London: Vintage, 1999, 278-279.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, New York: Schocken, 1977, 149.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Rajmohan Gandhi, *Understanding the Muslim Mind*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1987, 223.

## Hinduism and Buddhism

As for Hinduism, a short text from the *Rigveda* is often cited. “Being is one; the sages call it by various names” (1.164.46). The *Katha Upanishad* says: “There is one Ruler, the Spirit that is in all things, who transforms his own form into many” (5). In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna reveals to Arjuna: “In whatever way men approach me, in the same way they receive their reward” (4:11). “Even those who, devoted to other Gods, sacrifice filled with faith, even they sacrifice to me alone” (9,23).

In more modern times, Ramakrishna worshiped God under various forms as presented by different religions in their scriptures or religious practices. He says:

God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope... God himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

It is significant that the diversity of religions is attributed, not merely to the diverse experiences and perceptions of the humans, but to the different manifestations of Godself to suit the need of God’s devotees. Mahatma Gandhi also tried to reach out to God through different religious symbols. His evening prayer sessions were inter-religious. His favourite bhajan is well-known: “Chief of the house of Raghu, Lord Rama, uplifter of those who are fallen, Ishwar and Allah are your names!” (Ishwar stands for the name of God in Christianity).

In Buddhism, what are important are the four noble truths and the eight-fold path to attain liberation. Unfulfilled desire is the cause of all suffering and it can be overcome by self-discipline, both physical and mental, leading to egolessness. The kind of God or gods one believes in and the rituals and practices one undertakes are secondary and acceptable. They may be useful as a preparation. All religions can play this role. Buddhism sees itself as beyond the religions.

## Christianity

Christianity has been an aggressive religion. Over the centuries it has sent out missionaries across the world to convert people and

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, 35 and 5.

make them members of the Church. It had a famous slogan going back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE: "There is no salvation outside the Church." As late as 2000 CE, it published a document *Dominus Iesus*, in which it affirmed, not only that the Lord Jesus is the only saviour, but that Christianity is the instrument of salvation for all humanity. Somehow, I have the suspicion that the authors of this document were more interested in affirming the necessity of the Church for salvation. However, I am not interested in this tradition, but in the progressive openness of the Christians to the other religions and in the practice of dialogue and collaboration between religions. We have to recognize, moreover, that this openness to dialogue has been more present in Asia than elsewhere, though it has been slowly accepted also by the world Church. I think that Christianity, because of its dominant position in the world due to historical circumstances, has also been instrumental in promoting a positive approach to religious pluralism expressed in the practice of interreligious dialogue.

Already in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a certain positive appreciation of the other religions was shown in a series of booklets by Pierre Johanns, a Belgian missionary, under the general title "To Christ through the Vedanta." He analysed the philosophies of Indian thinkers like Sankara, Ramunuja and others and tried to show that some of their questions find their answers in Christian philosophy, especially of St Thomas Aquinas. His approach to Hinduism was not negative.<sup>5</sup> In 1950, two French priests, Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, started an Indian Benedictine ashram in South India acknowledging a positive approach to Indian spiritual traditions.<sup>6</sup> The Second Vatican Council (1963-65) encouraged these initiatives by its own positive approach to other religions. A document on Religious Freedom insisted on the freedom of conscience to practice any religion of one's choice. Another document on Other Religions, affirming that God is the common origin and goal of all peoples and their religions suggested the process of dialogue. The document on the Church in the Modern World also insisted on the freedom of conscience and suggested that God makes his salvation available to all through the Spirit of God in ways unknown to us.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>P. Johanns, *To Christ through the Vedanta*, Ranchi, 1944.

<sup>6</sup>J. Monchanin and H. Le Saux, *A Benedictine Ashram*, Douglas: Isle of Man, 1964.

<sup>7</sup>Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*. Bombay: St Paul Publications.

The post-Vatican period saw the emergence of interreligious dialogue groups in India. In Japan, Christians showed a growing interest in the practice of Zen meditation. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences said at their first general assembly (Taipei, 1974):

In Asia especially this (evangelization) involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honour? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?<sup>8</sup>

At their second general assembly in Kolkata (1978), they were positive to the prayer methods and traditions of Asian religions. They said:

Sustained and reflective dialogue with them in prayer (as shall be found possible, helpful and wise in different situations) will reveal to us what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in a marvellous variety of ways. These are different perhaps from our own, but through them we too may hear His voice, calling us to lift our hearts to the Father.<sup>9</sup>

In 1986, Pope St John Paul II invited the leaders of all the religions to Assisi to pray for world peace. Though they did not pray together, the fact that they were there together to pray for peace was a significant moment of interreligious encounter, going beyond mere intellectual discussion. Defending his action, St John Paul wrote an encyclical on mission in which he affirmed the presence of the Spirit of God in every human heart and also in their cultures and religions.<sup>10</sup> Let me remark in passing that the Asian bishops were open to pray together with the members of other religions eight years earlier.

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<sup>8</sup>*For All the Peoples of Asia*, I, 14.

<sup>9</sup>*For All the Peoples of Asia*, I, 35.

<sup>10</sup>John Paul II, *The Mission of the Redeemer*. Cf. [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html)

## The Changing Face of Interreligious Dialogue

Side by side with these theological developments, the practice of interreligious dialogue has also shown a steady development. I can see five stages or, perhaps, kinds of dialogue, since they can co-exist. I think that it would be true to say that it was the Catholics that launched the practice of inter-religious dialogue. At the very first stage, it was a dialogue of spirituality. One could say that it started even before the Second Vatican Council. Many Christian monks/sannyasis sought to live an ashram life, trying to develop an Indian Christian spirituality. It was a dialogue of life. The monks lived a simple life of prayer and discipline. They read the Hindu scriptures in comparison with the Bible. They tried to practice Yoga and other Indian methods of prayer like the singing of Bhajans. At least at the beginning there may have been a motive of conversion to show the Indians that Christianity was not a foreign religion.

A second stage of dialogue was one of intellectual exchange. Scholars of both religious traditions met and exchanged their view on various religious and spiritual topics. Texts of the scriptures were read in common and interpreted. There was an attempt to get a deeper knowledge of the other. Here again dialogue was seen as a way to mission and conversion, though it may not have been explicitly stated. It corresponded to the official Church's view of dialogue. Such dialogue was limited to the experts. My own guru, Fr Ignatius Hirudayam, became such an expert on Saiva Siddhanta, that the Hindus listened eagerly to his commentary on the Saivite texts. This led to mutual understanding, appreciation and enrichment. Just as the first stage of dialogue developed an Indian Christian spirituality, the second stage helped in the development of an Indian Christian theology.

A third stage of dialogue was celebratory. Fr Ignatius Hirudayam, whom I mentioned just now, developed a common celebration of divine light in early December every year. It linked the festival of lights of the Hindus at *Divali* or *Karthigai Deepam* in Thiruvannamalai, a sacred mountain in the south, around the end of November, the feast of Ramzan of the Muslims and the feast of Christmas – Christ the light – of the Christians. In the last few years, the Muslims have started to invite members of other religions to their Iftar parties when they break their fast during Ramzan. This is more celebratory, as I had mentioned above.

A fourth stage of dialogue can be called the dialogue of action. We see the phenomenon of poverty and violence all around. Sometimes there are natural or man-made calamities. At such times, members of different religions come together to pray and/or to plan some common action to help the suffering people or to defend justice and the rights of the people.

I think that now we are entering a fifth stage of dialogue, when it is entering the home. In a country like India with its many religions, inter-religious marriages are becoming common. They face many tensions and difficulties with regard to their religious life and the bringing up of the children. At the moment they hardly have any guidance in facing the problems of such a life together. Lack of understanding and help may lead to the loss of faith. But mutual appreciation may lead to spiritual growth.

These are some of the ways in which life in a religiously pluralistic society is taking shape seeking peace and harmony in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, respect and collaboration.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude these reflections on religious pluralism with a reference to a document on *Human Fraternity* jointly signed and published by Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the grand imam of Al-Azar university in Cairo, Egypt in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019.<sup>11</sup> It starts with references to poverty, injustice, exploitation, persecution, etc. that divide people and make them suffer and declares as ways of countering these “the adoption of the culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.” It goes on to affirm that “The pluralism and diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings.” This divine wisdom is the source of freedom of belief. The document then goes on to describe dialogue.

Dialogue, understanding and the widespread promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others and of living together peacefully would contribute significantly to reducing many economic, social, political and environmental problems that weigh so heavily on a large part of humanity; Dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here,

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<sup>11</sup> <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/02/04/190204f.html>

transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for. It also means avoiding unproductive discussions.

The final sentence is worth noting.

Interreligious dialogue, then, is at the service of promoting human community. In such a context, religious pluralism becomes a source of communion and peace rather than division and conflict. The focus is no longer on religions in themselves as systems of doctrines and rituals, but as ways of life, willed by God, that can and should promote peace through dialogue.