

DIALOGUE: THE WAY OF BEING CHURCH TODAY

Jacob Parappally MSFS*

Tejas Vidya Peetha, Bengaluru

Abstract

This article argues that dialogue is essential to the identity and mission of the Church today. Tracing the historical development of the Church's attitude towards other religions—from exclusivism and superiority to recognition and dialogue—it highlights the importance of an open, humble approach. Drawing on the insights of Kuncheria Pathil and Church documents, the author argues that interreligious and intrareligious dialogue is not merely supplementary to evangelisation but an essential part of the Church's very nature. Through dialogue, the Church advances the Kingdom of God by fostering mutual understanding, reconciliation, and collaborative action for a more human and just world.

Key Words: Dialogue, Interreligious dialogue, Church identity, Ecclesiology, Second Vatican Council, Kingdom of God, Mission of the Church

A theology of dialogue presupposes an attitude of dialogue, which is a personal conviction. Prof. Dr. Kuncheria Pathil was a man of dialogue. R. Panikkar well describes the blessedness of those who live and practice dialogue in his Sermon on the Mount on Intra-religious Dialogue. It fits in well with Prof. Pathil's attitude and understanding of the theology of dialogue. Panikkar says:

* Dr. Jacob Parappally MSFS is an Indian theologian specialising in Christology, as well as a teacher, research guide, and author. He holds a doctorate in theology from the University of Freiburg, Germany. He taught systematic theology at Janana-Deepa, Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Pune, for 14 years, where he served as the dean of the faculty of theology. He was also the Rector of *Tejas Vidya Peetha*, Bengaluru, and served as the President of the Indian Theological Association from 2005 to 2011. He is the chief editor of the Journal of Indian Theology. He has published 12 books and 250 theological articles. Email: parappally@gmail.com

Blessed are you when you do not feel self-sufficient while in dialogue.

Blessed are you when you trust others because you trust in Me.

Blessed are you when you face misunderstandings from your own community or others for the sake of your fidelity to the truth.

Blessed are you when you do not give up your convictions, and yet you do not set them up as absolute norms. Woe unto you, you theologians and academicians, when you dismiss what others say because you find it embarrassing or not sufficiently learned. Woe unto you, you practitioners of religions, when you do not listen to the cries of the little ones. Woe unto you, you religious authorities, because you prevent change and (re)conversion. Woe unto you, religious people, because you monopolize religion and stifle the Spirit, which blows where and how she wills.¹

Prof. Kuncheria Pathil would have underlined all the blessings and woes of this sermon on the mount because, in his writings, while holding on to his faith, he was willing to enrich it with his dialogue with the people of the sister churches and the people of other religions. He exhibited the same attitude in his efforts to foster ecumenical dialogue among the various churches and within various theological positions within the Catholic Church itself. He admits that it is a challenge to recognize the role of other religions in the universal salvific plan of God. He says: "The discovery of other faiths and the recognition of their role in the universal salvific plan of God is perhaps the greatest challenge to Christian theology today, which calls for inter-ecclesial and inter-religious dialogue for articulating a new theology of religions and for the creation of a new human society."²

The need for dialogue among the different Christian churches and denominations, as well as the dialogue of the Church with other religions, calls for an attitudinal change in the mindset of the members of the Catholic Church to recognize that the other ways of salvation offered by all authentic religious traditions are to be recognized as the ways of salvation. In the history of Christian encounters with other religious traditions, many theologians see an attitudinal change in the approach of the Church to these religions. K. Pathil also shares with others that this is a positive evolution of the understanding of the

¹ R. Panikkar, *Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 1.

² K. Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 91.

Church about God's presence and action in all authentic religious traditions and cultures.

1. The Distinct Stages of the Church's Encounter with Religions

In the history of the Church, one can detect three distinctive ways the Church judged other religious traditions and developed its attitude towards them. It is evident from the New Testament that some of the NT authors had a dialogical relationship with the Hellenistic philosophy and worldview in their articulation of their faith-experience of Jesus Christ. John's Logos Christology and Paul's anthropology are examples of such a dialogue with Greek philosophy. As the apostles went beyond the boundaries of Jewish religion and encountered other religions and philosophies, especially the Greek and Roman, they had no other way to make the message of Jesus Christ except through dialogue in a language and categories of thought different from their Hebrew worldview and language.

As it moved beyond an initial small group of disciples from Galilee, the Christian movement encountered new languages, religions, and philosophies. As it did so, it sought to make them its own. Sometimes the engagement was explicit. The book of Acts recalls Paul at the Areopagus in Athens as having quoted the Greek Stoic philosopher Aratus, who said that we are all God's offspring. Other times, the engagement appears to have taken place at a deeper, implicitly conceptual level. The book of Hebrews offered an allegorical exegesis that resembled the Jewish-Platonism of Philo of Alexandria without stating as much directly.³

The initial attempts at entering into dialogue with the philosophies or religions because there was no separation between philosophy and religion were successful in communicating the message of Jesus Christ. When the Church was separated from the Jewish religion and sought its own identity-centered round of worship of Jesus Christ as its Lord and God, it began to think of itself as an exclusive way of salvation or liberation. The Church began to understand other religions as a threat to its experience of salvation in Jesus Christ. So in the first stage of the Church's encounter with other religions, it considered itself the absolute, the universal, and the only way to salvation. It claimed to have the monopoly over all truths and the whole truth. Other religions are condemned as 'false religions', man-made and magical, and as a 'devil's work'. Walter Buehlmann says, "When the great missionary Francis Xavier wrote, 'the true God

³ Dale T. Irvin, Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement Vol I: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 22.

cannot dwell among heathen or hear their prayers... the idols of the heathen are of the devil, and they must be destroyed at the first opportunity, he was only echoing the attitude and thinking of the Church of his times".⁴ In this context, all other religions were considered sinful humans' attempts to reach God. As the tower of Babel, they were doomed to fail. This attitude generated a lot of missionary energy to conquer other people and their religions and convert them to Christianity.⁵

In the second stage of the encounter of the Church with other religions, there were attempts to look at other religions more closely and scientifically. It resulted in understanding other religions as having human values and truths, though there were many errors. However, it was affirmed that these values and truths were not on par with the truth that the Church believes in. In this period, the reality of other religions was theologically interpreted as human and natural, while affirming that the Christian religion is supernatural and divinely revealed as the fulfillment of other religions.⁶ This was a little change in the understanding of other religions from an exclusivist attitude with absolute claims.

The third stage of the Church's encounter with other religions is dialogue. The way of interacting with other religions has overcome its own attitude of superiority and the absolute claims about being the only true religion possessing Truth. Though it is convinced of the fact that it has the absolute Truth it recognizes that other authentic religious traditions also share the same truth, at least partially because they "reflect a ray of that truth that enlightens all." (NA 2). This understanding of the Church about other religious traditions was founded on the revealed truth that all humans are created in the image and likeness of God, the Absolute Communion, or the Trinity, and that God is present and active in all authentic religious traditions. Therefore, these traditions may be considered to have elements of salvation for their believers, and this salvation is to be seen as related to salvation in Christ. Therefore, the Second Vatican Council "exhorts the members of the Church to acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods" in other religions (NA 2). The same

⁴ Walbert Buehlmann, *The Church of the Future: A model for the year 2001* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 45.

⁵ K. Pathil and D.Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology* (Bangalore: Theological Publications of India, 2003), 77.

⁶ K. Pathil and D.Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 77

approach to other religions was also expressed a few years later, in 1974, by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) when it said, "We accept them (the Great Religions of Asia) as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. 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... And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our people to Himself through them?" (FABC, Taipei, 1974).

Concerning this third stage of the encounter with Christianity and other religions, K. Pathil says, "Religious pluralism has been established today not only as an irreversible historical fact but also as a theological principle. Christianity has begun to acknowledge and accept other religions as 'ways of salvation for their believers. This seems to be the only honest and open approach to other religions.'⁷ The evolution of the approach of the Church towards other religions, from exclusivism to the recognition of the reality of religions and then to dialogue with them, has not happened one after another in different periods, as described above. Even today, there are members and groups in the Church who still have a fundamentalist idea of exclusivism and superiority in their approach to other religions, though the Church has changed its attitude toward other religions. Pathil says that today the question is not whether the believers of other religions are saved or not, but how they are saved. According to him, "We find both 'Christocentric' and 'Theocentric' schools of Christian theologians and their different interpretations. According to some, in this economy of salvation, everybody is saved in and through Jesus Christ, and the saving grace comes from 'Christ', whether it is inside the Church or outside it. For others, God's saving action is not limited. There are other names and events in and through which God offers saving grace."⁸ Whatever the basis of understanding dialogue, whether it is from the Christological perspective or from the Trinitarian perspective, for Pathil, dialogue with other religions is not a luxury but a necessity flowing from one's commitment to God manifested in Christ. A Christian disciple is a person of dialogue. To be a Christian means to discover and experience God in Jesus Christ and enter into dialogue, especially with the members of other religions who do not share our Christian experience of God, the Absolute

⁷ K. Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 92.

⁸ K. Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 93.

Communion! The Church can be a true witness to Jesus Christ, its head, only by being in dialogue within itself; in fact, the synodal Church does it and in dialogue with others who think they are beyond the borders of the established boundaries of the Church.

2. Past Anti-Dialogical Attitude of the Church

Pathil admits that it is a futile attempt to seek a biblical foundation for dialogue with the people of other religions. Both the OT and the NT testaments are generally negative in their attitude towards other people of other religions. There is a reason for this negative attitude towards other religions, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Pathil says,

The negative attitude of Israel towards the religions of other peoples is very conspicuous throughout the Old Testament. The strict monotheism of Israel and its constant fight against the polytheism of the surrounding peoples forced Israel to adopt absolutism and exclusivism vis-à-vis the other religions. Sociologically and psychologically speaking, this posture of exclusivism and absolutism was a natural response to the survival, identity, growth, and security of any socio-cultural, ethnic, and religious group, especially when its existence was threatened by the aggressive presence of other dominant groups.⁹

Further, Pathil says that the reason for this exclusive attitude was necessitated by their need to preserve their identity and heritage. Israel was not allowed to enter into any treaty with the so-called pagans or make marriage alliances with them. "So, Israel did not make any compromises with the neighbouring religions. On the contrary, they were asked to tear down the altars of the pagans, smash their standing stones, cut down their sacred poles and set fire to their idols."¹⁰ Some of the texts of the OT and some explicit statements of the NT apparently exclude the people of other religions from the way of salvation offered by Yahweh in the OT and Jesus Christ in the New Testament. "The New Testament writers, especially Paul, shared very much the negative attitude of the Old Testament toward other religions. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that the Gentiles offer sacrifices to demons and not to God. He rejects both Judaism, as it is displeasing to God, and the Gentile world, as it is immersed in idolatry and immorality. The Church, all through its history, continued this negative attitude and self-absolutionism, as witnessed

⁹ K. Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 94.

¹⁰ K. Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 95.

in the famous dictum, Outside the Church, no salvation.”¹¹ However, since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a new insight into the working of the Spirit in other religions. The Church recognizes them as religions, “as ‘ways of salvation’ to their believers.” Dialogue with other religions and listening to their experiences of God in their own religious traditions reveal to the members of the Church involved in the dialogue how the unfathomable mystery of God, hitherto unknown to them, enters the lives of humans who are not officially members of the Church. Dialogue is, therefore, a mutual search for the depth of the mystery they experience as God, who transforms the partners in dialogue into living authentic human lives that bring glory to God.

3. Dialogue: A Way of Being a Church

The call of Israel was to bring other nations to Yahweh. They were called to be a priestly people as they had to mediate the relationship between Yahweh and the people of other nations. “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” (Ex 19:5-6). But they failed Yahweh and the mission entrusted to them. They thought that Yahweh was only their God who gave them identity in such a way that he excluded other people in favour of his chosen people. The prophetic literature is replete with the call of the prophets to Israel to ‘repent’ or ‘return’ to their original vocation of mediating the relationship between Yahweh and the nations. God’s plan for humanity cannot be thwarted by human intransigence. God’s word never returns without accomplishing its plans. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it’ (Is 55:10-11). While Israel failed in its priestly mission, from the remnant of the righteous people of Israel, Jesus Christ the Word, the High Priest, comes to reconcile the world to God.

The priestly function of the Church is to reconcile the world to God, and this can be done only through dialogue. Paul says that the

¹¹ K. Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 95.

ministry of reconciliation is entrusted to the Church: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). The priesthood of the people of God is to reconcile the world to God. Peter says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Pet 2:9).

The self-understanding of the Church needs to be such that it reflects and radiates the light of Jesus Christ, the light into which it was called. "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14), says Jesus. The function of light is to reveal, heal, and give warmth. Dialogue is the best way for the Church to be the revealing and healing light of the world. In dialogue, the Church reveals to the partners, to whatever religion or ideology they belong, the transforming experience of the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ, as well as the truth, goodness, and beauty of the religion or ideology they profess as understood by the Church. Dialogue is also an occasion to reveal and challenge certain attitudes and behaviours of some of the members of the Church in relation to other religions and the customs and practices that are contrary to the gospel values, as well as the dehumanizing values and customs of other religions and ideologies. At the same time, listen to their experience of the mystery of God and the consequences of it for their lives, as well as their understanding of Christian faith and the challenges they throw at the life and practices of the Church we believe in. But in all this, what is required of the Church while encountering those who do not share the faith of the Church is to follow the exhortation of Peter: "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (I Pet 3:15).

In inter-religious dialogue, what is required is an attitude of humility to search for the length, breadth, depth, and height of that truth that sets humans free. Pope Benedict once said, "Dialogue should not stop at "identifying a common set of values but go on to probe their ultimate foundation"—the truth that "unveils... the essential relationship between the world and God."¹² Pope Francis says:

¹² "Address to Representatives of other Religions in the United States," 17 April 2008 cited in Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue* (Vatican, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), No.15

An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides. Inter-religious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. This dialogue is in the first place a conversation about human existence, or simply, as the bishops of India have put it, a matter of "being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows." In this way, we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking, and speaking. We can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a basic principle of all our exchanges (*Joy of the Gospel*, No. 250).

Some members of the Church, especially some leaders of the Church, give the impression that dialogue means inter-faith dialogue or inter-religious dialogue and is an appendix to direct evangelization. They are of the opinion that such a dialogue, if at all it is done, must be for evangelization and eventual conversion of the other dialogue partner. Such motives for entering into dialogue vitiate the very nature and purpose of dialogue. It can only create mistrust among the partners in dialogue. In an atmosphere of mistrust, dialogue cannot take place. The dialogue of life, or the dialogue of action, takes place in the context of our righteous relationships as humans.

The conversion of the Church from claiming to be the sole possessor of truth to the understanding that the Church is possessed by truth makes it imperative for the Church to search together with others for the depth of truth that makes humans truly human. It needs openness from the partners in dialogue to the demands of the same truth. Pope Francis says,

True openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest convictions and clear and joyful in one's own identity, while at the same time being "open to understanding those of the other party" and "knowing that dialogue can enrich each side." What is not helpful is a diplomatic openness that says "yes" to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good that we have been given to share generously with others. Evangelization and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another (*Joy of the Gospel*, No. 251).

Further, he says, "Non-Christians, by God's gracious initiative, when they are faithful to their own consciences, can live "justified by the grace of God and thus be "associated with the paschal mystery of

Jesus Christ." They can be channels that the Holy Spirit raises up in order to liberate non-Christians from atheistic immanentism or from purely individual religious experiences. As Christians, we can also benefit from these treasures built up over many centuries, which can help us better live our own beliefs." (The Joy of the Gospel, No. 254) This is a recognition of the contribution that other religions can make to improve the quality of our Christian faith life.

In ecclesial circles, dialogue without any adjective is identified as inter-religious or intra-religious dialogue. The dialogical nature of the Church cannot be reduced to inter-ethnic dialogue or intra-religious dialogue. Dialogue is to be understood in a deeper and wider sense. Theologically speaking, the Church is always in dialogue. Dialogue means not only words shared by two parties but also a relationship through dialogue, *which means through the word*. The Church lives, moves, and has its being through the Word, or Logos. In the recent history of the Church, especially after the Second Vatican Council, there have been many attempts by the Church to realize its nature as a missionary. Without dialogue, a mission is not a mission, because dialogue constitutes a mission. The universal salvific will of the Father, communicated through Jesus Christ the Logos, is actualized through the Spirit. It is continued in the world through the mission of the Church. Its proclamation about the liberation brought about by Jesus Christ for all of humanity, past, present, and future, must be shared in dialogue. At the same time, the mystery of Christ encountered by others who live beyond the boundaries of the Church in various nations and cultures needs to be listened to in order to experience the same mystery in depth. Through the Word or through dialogue, everything comes into existence, everything is sustained, and everything reaches its fulfillment, guided by the Spirit of God. Therefore, inter-religious dialogue and intra-religious dialogue are the only dimensions of that dialogue that constitute the very being of the Church. But the Church's historical existence as an institution is limited by space and time and has boundaries set by certain laws and regulations. It cannot be identified with the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus.

According to Pathil,

The Church came into existence to continue Jesus' ministry and to nurture the Kingdom of God through its *kerygma diakonia* and *koinonia*. The Church must be constantly on guard against the temptation to identify itself with the kingdom and must be ready to give way to the kingdom. This vision and reality of the kingdom invites people of various races, cultures, languages, and religions to enter into dialogue and establish a

new relationship and fellowship, not by denying or rejecting one's own identity but by transcending it at a higher level. What the Kingdom demands is *metanoia*, or "conversion of heart," death to our selfishness or egoism, and a turning to others or an "other-oriented existence," and not conversion simply from one religion to another.¹³

The Church is at the service of the Kingdom of God. It is called to dialogue with all humans of good will, whatever their religious affiliations or whatever their ideologies, to bring about the reign of God that makes everyone belong to the 'household of God', even those who do not believe in God but in the values that make humans authentically human. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus preached, recognized, first of all, the sovereignty of God and then its values such as love, justice, equality, freedom, peace, communion, reconciliation, etc. The Church needs to cooperate with the Spirit to establish God's kingdom through dialogue with all humans of good who share the same values. Thus, dialogue is the way of being Church today.

Conclusion

The Church is holy yet needs constant purification, *sancta simul et semper purificanda*, with regard to its approach to other religions. It had to evolve from its exclusive claim to possess absolute truth and condemnation of other religions as evil to a recognition of the possibility of God's revelation at least partially and in fragments in other religions. Further, it evolved in its thinking that it needs to be open to the working of God in everything humanizing in other religious traditions sometimes not known to the Church. Therefore, the Church needs to dialogue with other religions to deepen its experience of God's Spirit, which blows wherever it wills. Being at the service of the Kingdom of God, the way of dialogue constitutes the mission of the Church. To be in dialogue in a broader sense is the mission of the Church. K. Pathil says, "All religions have to make a common pilgrimage committed to an open process of dialogue and collaboration for better humanity and the fullness of truth."¹⁴ All religions include the Church, and by its very vocation to be the sacrament of Christ in the world, it was called to champion the cause of dialogue today.

¹³ K. Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 116.

¹⁴ K. Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, 116.