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INDIAN SECULARISM: A THEOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL SPECTRUM OF HINDU-CHRISTIAN MEETING

Introduction

Encounter of Christianity with Hinduism is traditionally envisaged as an exclusive concern of their mutual relationship. Theological issues involved in such an encounter are usually discussed in the framework of a comparative critique or dialectic of which we can see different models like exclusivism, inclusivism or parallelism. Such a restrictive and stereotyped approach is rendered redundant in the present pluralistic culture, especially in the Indian multi-religious context. What is needed today is a comprehensive vision and approach in which the uniqueness of both the religions is respected as well as a creative relationship is maintained in their encounter on the wider spectrum of religious pluralism. In such an orientation Hindu-Christian meeting is not a mere academic debate or an eclectic discussion but is a mystery of mass theology and spirituality unfolded and formed in multi-religious interactions and endeavours of social life.

If so, the social and cultural complexities of Indian polity are presumed in the phenomenon of Hindu-Christian meeting. In the aftermath of the demolition of Babri Masjid the Indian social and political scenario is radically changed. This demolition has a devastating impact on mutual perceptions and approaches among the religions of the land. The well acclaimed religious tolerance of India is silently being replaced by political and economic equations in the name of religions. Consequently religions are becoming more and more assertive and, embracing fundamentalistic and exclusive stances leading to political polarizations and militant-radical groups. What we see is a convulsive in-gathering of ethnic and minority groups. Dialogues between religions are perceived with suspicions and as implicit threats to the very survival of minority religions. The Indian society is now under-

going a destructive structural strain in its societal relations because of the imperceptible and invincible conflict going on between the identity politics of minorities and hegemonical power of the majority Hindu religion. All these indicate that the whole context and horizon of Hindu-Christian meeting have acquired new dimensions of intricacies and uncertainties. Now the whole problem is to be seen anew; new paradigms and perspectives are needed to address and engage the concerns of Hindu-Christian meeting. The focus of the present article is not on the specific dogmatic issues involved in this encounter. Rather, taking into account the social and cultural realities of Indian polity, an attempt is made to probe the possibility of an overarching theological and spiritual base for a creative meeting between Hinduism and Christianity.

I

TOWARDS A PARADIGM SHIFT

What is demanded, today, is a holistic and all-inclusive perspective toward the mystery of Hindu-Christian meeting on account of the new awareness of religious pluralism in the God experience of modern man. The constituent of this perspective is the acceptance of religious pluralism as a theological and spiritual coordinate of one's faith experience. It implies that a religion understands its identity and commitment preferentially in terms of its relationship with other religions in a multi-religious context; however it does not mean the denial of its unique faith dimension or cultural and historical roots. Implicitly it posits the challenge that the existential relationality dimension of a religion should be preferred as the point of departure to its transcendental *point* in its self-understanding. It implies a shift of focus to centripetality from traditional centrifugality. That is to say, the self-identity of a religion includes an appropriation and approximation of mankind's divergent religious quests in a coordinating relationality; identity consciousness of a religion is not an exclusive introversion to its roots and archetypes but a shared consciousness of the mutuality of religions in a reconciled diversity. Moltmann says: "The goal of interreligious dialogue cannot be the melting of all religions into a unified religion but rather a mutual acquaintance and discovery of one's own identity in relationship to others".[1] If such

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1. Jürgen Moltmann, "Christianity in the Third Millennium", *Theology Today 51* (April, 1994): 86.

an approach and perspective to interreligious encounters, it implies and entails a theology of religions, of which the text and context is the inherent relationality of religions in the common pursuit of the mankind towards the Absolute. If we envisage Hindu-Christian meeting on a wider spectrum of the mutuality of religions then we are at the threshold of a paradigm shift in the whole conception and status of the present inter-religious dialogue; a shift from a social and cultural tolerance to a theological and spiritual relationality among religions. It means that each religion, while defining itself, should take into account sister religions as a theological and spiritual constituent of its own self-identity. If we accept this paradigm shift in vision and approach to the inter-religious dialogue the meaning of religion is to be understood from a new premise, contrasting it with the faith of a community.

1. Religion versus Faith

The etymological origin of the word religion (*religio*) can be traced to the Latin words like *religare, referre or re-eligare*. They all connote: "to bind up", "unite", "relate". If we take insight from this etymological sense, religion means relation. Relation is presence with and towards; it is inter-relatedness and inter-dependence; it is correlation and coordination. Religion as relation includes a re-lationality among the religions. For, as a human attempt to know God who reveals Himself, religion has a constituent relatedness with such attempts of mankind, which are realized in myriad contingent cultural settings. This inherent relatedness among religions is obviously transparent in the universality of the basic religious tenets on love, justice, peace, forgiveness, brotherhood, sharing so on and so forth. All religions like Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam converge their religious teachings and experiences ultimately on these universal values.

More than ever before, today the relationality of religions is to be stressed positively in the context of the ongoing interreligious dialogue. One religion cannot simply exclude the presence of other religions in the present *one world*, and remain as an island. On the contrary, today, a religion can play its creative role of building up a community of harmony and peace in the present pluralistic society only in the framework of its concordance and compatibility

with other religions. If so, one religion's existential and experiential rapport with other religions – inter-religious dialogue – is the text and context of its identity. A religion is unfolded and molded in the arena of partnership and co-operation among religions while addressing human concerns and problems.

But, what we see when religions meet is not this inherent re-latedness or dialogue but dialectical or polemical strain and stress. Dialectic is defeat of dialogue; there religion ceases to be relation. Very often it is our experience that well intentioned inter-religious dialogues drift to monologues of fundamental or exclusive positions. Is it because of the fear that the uniqueness of a religion is at stake in the presence of another?

Such fear is the result of a misconception of the real nature of re-ligion. This may be because faith is often confused with religion. What is the relation between faith and religion? At the first instance it should be admitted that faith has an innate quality of exclusiveness and absoluteness on account of the following reasons. Firstly, every faith has a fundamental experience which is fashioned by its initial vision of Reality. Based on this vision there is a unique response to the Reality. This vision and response constitute the core experience (*anubhava*) of a faith. The faith experience is self-evident and does not need any further clarification or authentication. Naturally, the commitment to this experience is spontaneous, unconditional and complete; commitment cannot be divisive or diffusive but should be cohesive and comprehensive. Moreover, the core experience of faith embodies an innate quality of exclusiveness and absoluteness; it is non-negotiable and normative in the self-understanding of that faith community.

Secondly the experience of faith is explained and expounded in contingent cultural and social categories. This is done through a specific creed, code, cult and community-structure. These four "Cs", as concrete expressions of faith experience, are conceived and en-visaged within the constraints of a particular socio-cultural vision and historical pedigree. Specificity and concreteness, thus, mark the expression of faith. But often the contingency of faith categories embodies the nuance of normativity because the absolutism of faith experience is transferred to its provisional concepts and categories;

expression is identified with experience. This identification or transference seems justifiable because absolutism belongs to the experiential logistics and faith linguistics. For an outsider it may seem unconvincing and cannot comprehend this absolutism simply because he or she does not belong to the experiential core of that community. It is nobody's fault; faith expressions are simply so. The *raison d'être* of such absolutism is *sui generis* in a faith language and faith commitments. However, the absolutism of the contingent faith expressions embodies meaning only in its exclusive context. In one sense this relativity of faith experience and expression is its absolutism! In the inter-religious meeting, if the absolutism of faith and its concepts are blindly transferred to another faith context the dialogue will become a dialectic and polemic. Problems mushroom up when a faith meets another faith at the faith-level. Here we have to point out the subtle distinction between faith and religion.

Phenomenologically, we can see God-experience of a community on four levels: superstitions, faith, religion and mysticism. The first and the last do not come in the purview of the present discussion. Faith of a community can become either a dogma or religion (relation). If she or he understands and interprets her or his faith in an exclusive reference to its sources his or her faith becomes a mere dogma; her or his faith commitment may drift to fanaticism or fundamentalism. On the other hand, if the focus is on universal values like love, service, forgiveness found in all faith experiences, faith becomes religion – relational. These values call for different faith communities to embody a universal perspective and to engage themselves in concrete collaborative endeavours for the goodness of the society. In this process one attempts to understand one's faith and define its identity in its relationality with other faith pursuits; then one's faith becomes *religion*. Every faith has an innate power to become a religion (relation) on account of the fact that each faith is a spontaneous participation in the corporate human search for the Truth. Therefore faith can meet faith on the plane of *religion*. Thus the God experience of a community has two profiles: it is absolute and exclusive as faith and it is universal as religion (relation).

The inherent relationality (religion-dimension) of faith is not an academic construct but is the corporate experience of humanity when the people inspired by values like love and justice, the respective faiths

collectively address and engage the social issues and problems in partner-
ship and co-operation. India, the mother land of world religions,
offers us a proven model of healthy co-existence and partnership of
religions. This model is envisaged in Indian secularism of which the
latent principle is tolerance, mutual appreciation and appropriation
among faiths. In that sense Indian secularism is not merely a political
ideology but a theological and spiritual perspective, and an approach
toward the concern of a peaceful coexistence of religions. Underneath
India's 'secular' view we can decode a theology of religions built upon
a spirituality of relationality among the different faith pursuits of the
Divine.

2. Religious Nuance of Indian Secularism

Sadly, the social and political context of the ongoing inter-religious
and intrareligious dialogues in India is the ominous social scenario
which ensued the destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6
1992. It brought into sharper focus the question of Indian secularism.
We used to conceive Indian secularism as a political ideology in line
with its Western counterpart. In the Western secular democracies like
that of the USA the principle followed is the neutrality of the State in
the matters of religions so that religious liberty and independence
of the state are guaranteed and protected. This understanding of
secularism approaches religions academically and treats them as a pri-
vate concern of the citizens. Against the backdrop of the violent
political events after the demolition of the Masjid, Indian secularism
has lost its credibility, and as a neutral political ideology it has become
passé to address the fears of religious minorities. That is why Bha-
ratiya Janata Party argues that ours is a pseudo-secularism.

Now Indian political psyche is pressed to accept the fact that
religion is an inviolable constituent of Indian polity and is to be accept-
ed positively for national integrity and progress. Here we may not
have Western models to ape. In one sense it is an opportunity to
retreat to our cultural and social heritages to build up a peaceful nation.
It is an uncontested historical as well as social truism that religions have
always played a crucial role in the organic growth and survival of Indian
polity. S.J. Samartha says: "The survival of the political unity of India
is based on its cultural unity within which there persists a 'core' of
religion . . . to which the mind set that holds together diversities by

refusing to be exclusive, makes an enduring contribution".[2] The inner orientation of India's acclaimed religious tolerance is precisely this refusing to be exclusive by the religions of the land. The role of Indian secularism has been that it functioned more as religious and social principle than as a political ideology to promote and protect the mutual openness of religions in the social interactions. The urgency of the situation demands a reinterpretation of Indian secularism more as a theological and spiritual perspective than a political ideology or a cultural principle.

Indian secularism has provided a socio-cultural milieu in which the different religions of our land could exist together in an organic way; it gave a creative context of mutual recognition and appreciation rather than alienation for diverse religions; there had taken place a good deal of mutual assimilation and accommodation among religions. To phrase this phenomenon theologically, the core of Indian secularism is the acceptance of religious pluralism as a shared experience of divergent religious pursuits of the Divine in the day to day social life. To frame differently, Indian secularism implies a religious, theological and above all a spiritual context for peaceful religious coexistence; it points to a world vision in which all religions have to realize their tasks and goals by incorporating and appropriating the spiritual and social presence and aspirations of all religions. That is to say, Indian secularism is not a profane and neutral concept but is a vibrant spiritual and theological vision whose focus has been on the relationality of religions in a multi-religious context; it is a relationality of dialogue and mutual appropriation for social and political cohesion.

Moreover, secularism as a nonpartisan stance to religions is deeply insensitive to religious consciousness of India. It forces people to think of their religions as a matter of private preference; it breaks the living bond between community and religion, and thus deprives people of their sense of identity; it will only help us build up a pseudo-identity and to live in deception, estranged from the sources. In India religious consciousness is the overarching and comprehensive horizon in which the whole life and its activities are envisioned and realized. Politics, economics, sociology, and

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2. S.J. Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions, Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll, New York: Oribis Books, 1992), 126.

every aspect of Indian reality is stamped and inspired by the pervasive presence of religious values and motives.

What I am trying to drive home is that Indian secularism is or should be characteristically distinct from that of the West owing to her cultural heritages and legacies. In India religions should be appraised as a constituent part of the social fabric of the 'secular' polity. Indian secularism, in this sense, offers an all-inclusive and comprehensive politico-cultural spectrum of which the basis is the creative co-existence of religions.

The ingenious co-existence of religions can be envisaged in a process of redefining the identity of each religion in terms of its relationality with other religions. This will be realized in a theology of religions whose subject matter is primarily a sociology and spirituality of relationality among religions. The theological categories of such a spirituality of relationality would be "interdependence", "mutuality", "correlation", "cooperation", "partnership," "dialogue" etc. In this vision the identity or the 'personality' of a religion is a phenomenon to be molded and unfolded in the spectrum of relationality among religions; identity is a corporate and dialogical existence, in which each religion defines its identity in a shared consciousness of diverse pursuits toward the Divine. This corporate existence of religions can be envisioned and realized only if religions embrace religious pluralism as an indispensable theological and spiritual constituent of their self-identity in a multi-religious context. Indian Secularism as a theological and spiritual perspective protects and promotes religious pluralism. Therefore the phenomenon of Hindu-Christian encounter is to be envisaged in the matrix of a theology of the relationality of religions in the framework of Indian secularism.

II

HINDU-CHRISTIAN MEETING, A PARTNERSHIP IN PURSUIT OF THE DIVINE

The above discussion indicated that religious pluralism is to be accepted as the social and theological constituent of any Hindu-Christian dialogue. As a matter of fact, the question of religious pluralism is not a new phenomenon to Christianity. Christianity was born and brought up in a multi-religious historico-social context. What is new

about the talk of religious pluralism in India as well as in the whole world is the qualitative change that has taken place in the awareness and perception of it. In the past religious pluralism has been interpreted and addressed either within the ambit of socio-political concerns, or has been treated as an academic problem. In today's human experience, religious pluralism is no more a mere academic or socio-cultural issue; it has become the very fabric and texture of man's God experience and his relationship with his fellow beings. As a consequence of the on-going intercultural exchange, changing patterns of mobility, and the international collaboration, world community is stepping into a new-world order in which the plurality of religions and cultures has become "a newly experienced reality".[3] Panikkar would say: "Pluralism is today a human existential problem which raises acute questions about how we are going to live our lives in the midst of so many options".[4] Indeed, the very matrix of Christian theology is religious pluralism, especially in India, the mother land of the major religions of mankind. Any responsible and relevant intellectual statement of Christian faith must incorporate and appropriate the insights of major religions: Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Jainism, if it is to embody credibility and plausibility in Indian consciousness and society.

In the past we used to consider non-Christian religions as fragile human attempts to reach God ('unbelief' according to Karl Barth; missionaries considered non-Christian religions 'magic' or 'devil's work'). Great missionaries like Francis Xavier thought: "true God 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".[5] These words sound the mentality of total rejection of non-Christian religions among the Christians till the beginning of 20th century. The approach of both Christianity and Protestants, till 1950s and 60s (sometimes even now) was of conquest and displacement of other religions. Christianity was understood to be unique, superior, normative

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3. See Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (London: SCM, 1985), 2ff.

4. Raimundo Panikkar, "The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel – A Meditation on Nonviolence", *Cross Currents* 29 (1979): 201.

5. Walbert Buhlmann, *The Church of the Future: A Model for the Year 2001* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 45.

and absolute. While Christians say that there is no salvation outsid the church, Protestants would say there is no salvation outside the Word, Incarnate. These are mentioned here not to make any retrospective judgement but for a retrospective evaluation of the Christian approach to non-Christian religions.

But we discern a marked difference in the attitude of the church towards other religions from 1960s onwards. The wealth of knowledge amassed by the branch of science called "Comparative Religions" during the 18th century, the literary enthusiasm in Orientalism in the 19th century and the movement of revival of Tradition in the early part of 20th century created a widespread interest and appreciation in European circles towards Eastern religions.[6] Against the backdrop of this social and cultural appreciation of Eastern wisdom the church began to recognize the immense riches embodied in other religions.

A new approach is quite obvious in the inclusivist vision of the Second Vatican Council. Its point of departure is in *Lumen Gentium*. In 16 it speaks of the universal salvific will (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4) and the acknowledgement of the presence of "good or truth" in the lives of the people. LG 16 sees the "plan of salvation" at work in those who "acknowledge the Creator", who seek the unknown God "in shadows and images", and who "not without grace strive to lead a good life". The *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* elaborates this new openness. It emphasizes the need for promoting fellowship among religions and recognizes the vital role of religions to enlighten human consciousness on life's unsolved riddles (NA 1). It adds that the Catholic Church rejects nothing what is true and holy in other religions; these "often reflect a ray" of the Church's own truth (NA 2). *Lumen Gentium* says that those who strive to do the will of God "as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience" are very much on the path of salvation (LG. 16).

Nevertheless, we should not fail to note that this new openness is balanced with an obligatory stress on the uniqueness of Christ as universal saviour (*LG. 2*). Again the theme of "preparation" is

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6. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), chs 2 & 3.

explicitly stated in *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Ad Gendes* 3. In the Council document we find nothing revolutionary than that of St. Justin's theory of *logos spermatikos.*[7] It should be admitted that the Council's reflections are still founded on the general theory of religion. The arguments are sociological and philosophical rather than theological.

Yet we find a signal change from exclusivism to inclusivism in the Christian approach to non-Christian religions in the vision of Second Vatican Council. The various official teachings of the Church and the National and International theological and missionary conferences[8] since Vatican II, show in no uncertain terms the beginnings of the church's willingness and openness to accept religious pluralism as a constituent of the economy of salvation. That is to say, Christianity is pressed to recognize the authenticity and validity of non-Christian religions on their merit as ways of salvation, at least in existential and experiential terms. To generalize this phenomenon, Church's interpretation of world religions has evolved into a vital theological debate from its old status of a missiological problematic.

It is only a common fact that people (Christians) have accepted religious pluralism in their attitudes towards non-Christians in their day to day existential and experiential rapport with them. Nowadays no Christian will dare to consider non-Christians pagans; if he dares to think so, he will be a pagan (uncivilized) even among his own brethren. They do not consider that Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists are outside the ambit of salvation; they accept other religions as valid paths of salvation; they accept other religions at par with Christianity. In India it is not an uncommon phenomenon to observe Christians, especially those from the West, visit temples and pilgrimage spots; without any qualm they give offerings and receive *prasada* from *pujaris* (priests). In India it is difficult to explain Christian dogmas and

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7. "Christ is the divine Word in whom the whole human race share and those who live according to the light of their knowledge are Christians, even if they are considered as being godless". I *Apology* 46, 1-4.

8. The various encyclicals and teachings of the church: Pope Paul's *Ecclessiam Suam* (1964); Erection of the Secretariat of Non-Christians; Pope John Paul II's *Redempto Homnis* (1979): 227-324; *Redemptoris Missio* (1991) Sacred Congregation for Non-Christians, *Towards the Meeting of Religions* (1967); idem, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of the Other Religions, Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (1984); Assisi World Peace Prayer (1986).

teachings convincingly without pointing out their correlation with their counterparts in Hinduism or Buddhism. Especially the younger generation will not be satisfied if religious questions are discussed exclusively within the framework of Christian vision. It all shows that religious pluralism has decisively entered into the consciousness of the present generation.

Moreover, a dialogical religious co-existence of people belonging to various religions is a social and cultural imperative in a nation like India for its survival as an integrated polity. Such a co-existence will silently lead a multi-religious society to a corporate and collaborative identity, if religious pluralism is embraced as a theological and spiritual category in their God-experience. Once religious pluralism is decidedly accepted it will nurture a social identity rooted in *universal values* enshrined and promoted by religions. Identity of a religion in a multi-religious context should, then, have to be envisaged in the framework of universalistic perspectives and collective profiles transcending as well as ascertaining its faith consciousness. In the evolution of such a corporate identity, as Raymond Panikkar would say, "Veda and Bible alone and in isolation do not possess the guidelines and inspiring force to lead man in contemporary situation".[9] It does not, however, propose an eclectic or syncretic identity; but an identity which emphasizes and appropriates the relationality among religions as seen above.

Above all, in India religious and cultural pluralism is not a provisional situation but the very fabric and substance of Indian polity, the way things are, and function. Indian reality is pluriform which is not a hotch-potch consensus or a negotiated settlement for the survival of India as a polity. In our country we cannot envision many existing as many or, in splendid isolation on a neutral basis; nor many can exist in indignant opposition. In Indian social life religious pluralism is not just a problem of law and order. It is the Indian reality, the basis, the text, context and horizon of Indian experience. It is a challenge in the sense of how to live our lives in the midst of so many options with a sense of correlation and harmony among religions. What I mean, India as a peaceful polity can prosper only

9. Panikkar, "*Rtatattva*: A Preface to Hindu Christian Theology", *Jeevadhara* 9 (1979): 26.

through a fellowship and partnership, which can be accomplished on a multi-religious basis. Religious pluralism should be embraced as a creative principle and constituent of Indian secularism.

Undoubtedly, Indian Christianity should include religious pluralism as a theological and spiritual constituent in her self-understanding, and as the very fulcrum and bedrock. It is not academics as it implies organic partnership with Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or Jainism in addressing existential as well as ultimate questions of life. The self-understanding of Christianity is to be conceived within the Indian experience of religious pluralism – shared consciousness of diverse quests for the Divine. If the function of theology is to interpret Scripture and Tradition in the context of the unfolding human experiences in time and space, Christianity has to attempt an honest reinterpretation of its vision and mission by incorporating and appropriating the Indian religious tolerance – relationality of religions. This interpretation should see the Hindu-Christian meeting as a mystery unfolded and fashioned on a wider spectrum in which religions refuse to be exclusive, and enter into partnership with each other in a *praxis* situation.

III

THE WITNESS AND TASK OF THE CHURCH IN A "SECULAR-RELIGIOUS" INDIA

The witness and task of the church is to be envisaged in terms of a theology of the relationality of religions of which the text is the experiential togetherness of religions in a concrete praxis situation (*Sitz im Leben*). This theology evolves less from a transcendental ideal or an academic theological construct but from a *praxis* of living religious pluralism. This *Praxis* should be the "originating and self-correcting foundation" of the truth of the mutuality and interdependence of religions. It implies that *praxis* must illumine the theory rather than *praxis* that is predetermined by theory. That is to say, doing dialogue before knowing.[10] Only in the ambience of intense existential and experiential inter-religious collaboration and partnership that the "fusion of horizons" of religions will take place (George Gadamer).

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10. See Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 205-6

It will lead to a corporate consciousness and collective identity of religions resulting in a community of religions. The basis and the intelligibility of Indian secularism is precisely the web of relations of this greater community built on the mutuality and correlation of the diverse religious quests.

The initiative and the role of the church is precisely in creating a context and atmosphere in which different religions can come together without suspicions and prejudices. In contemporary ecclesiology the church is increasingly perceived as a sacrament, sign and an instrument.[11] In its first paragraph, *Lumen Gentium* calls the church "a kind of sacrament – a sign, and instrument"; "visible sacrament of saving unity" (LG 9); even "the universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48). Subsequent Catholic documents have been a further elaboration of this orientation.[12]

This led to the conception "church for others". Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison: "The church is the church only when it exists for others".[13] "Church for others" was a powerful and attractive phrase; it was widely embraced. Nevertheless one should not fail to infer the sentiment of triumphalism in it. This helper syndrome of "pro-existence" implicit in it jeopardizes the possibility of true existence; does not advance dialogue and should be avoided.[14] Instead of talking about "the church for others", we should rather speak of "the church *with* others". If we continue to employ this terminology, some important qualifications are in order. As the Faith and Order (Commission of the World Council of Churches) meeting at Louvain (1971) put it; "The Church .... is a sign. But it is also no more than a sign. The mystery of the love of God is not exhausted through

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11. See Avery Dulles SJ, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1976), 58-70.

12. The 1975 Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, says: i) "While the church is proclaiming the kingdom of God and building it up, it is establishing itself in the midst of the world as the *sign and instrument* of this kingdom" (EN 59). ii) At a consultation held in Rome 1982: "the concrete Christian community *(koinonia)* in its everyday life" was identified as sign and instrument of salvation" (Memorandum 1982:462).

13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1971), 382. Quoted in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 375.*

14. See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 375.

this sign, but, at best, just hinted from afar''. Church is only ''kind of sacrament'', only a sign, not ''fully the reality''.[15]

In the multi-religious contexts of our nation Church *as a sign* and *instrument* should play the *mediatory* and *servant* role of building up a community of religions; it is not a ''World Religion'' or ''World Faith'' but a net-work of relationships among religions. But Church cannot play this role in a unilateral manner but in collaboration with other religions in joint actions in society like that of fighting against social injustice. It is a mere truism that religions cannot simply form a community on a purely religious platform, first, because of the absolutism of their faith assumptions. It is our experience that inter-religious dialogues become often monologues and defence of one's faith tenets; they become discussion and a sharing of academics of religions among elitists and, in the end, they may be able to articulate certain abstract statements and formulations. These dialogues do not form a community of religions because they cannot bring forth 'relation'; relation is context specific and concrete; not deliberations! To build up a community of religions a praxis situation of partnership is imperative. Secondly, plagued by the legacies of religious rivalries and mutual prejudices often religions are socially and historically handicapped to come together on a religious platform with an open heart and mind. But motivated by the great ideals of love, self-offering and brotherhood found in all religious traditions, adherents of diverse religions can come together on a common platform of social issues. If church takes initiatives and shows imagination to bring people belonging to different religions on a common platform it will be a good point of departure to build up the community of religions. This coming together would serve a praxis situation in which religious truths are concretized; truth (*alētheia*) becomes truth only in the process of concretization (unveiling) in an existential situation.

In such situations people witness religious truths meeting in their social engagement with social issues; they experience the ideals of

15. Günther Gassmann, The Church as Sacrament, Sign and Instrument: The Reception of this Ecclesiological Understanding in Ecumenical Debate, in Gennadios Limouris (ed) *Church-Kingdom-World: The Church as Mystery and Prophetic Sign* (Geneva: World Council of Churches (Faith and Order Paper No. 130, 1986), 4. See David J. Bosch, 375-6.

religions unfolded and become tangible in the multi-religious endeavours. There, we do not want any conceptual equations and constructs to establish the correlation of religions, for there we witness the core and content of all religions one and the same in terms of existential experience; hardly any proof is needed there for the correlation of religions; relationality among religions becomes self-evident and self-effulgent. This witness and awareness resulted from the interreligious social actions should be the contours of Hindu-Christian encounter.

We can identify some important social and cultural common platforms on which all religions can come together. The first and foremost will be the social justice platform. Indeed, Church has all the rights and responsibility to take initiatives in this regard in virtue of her inner call. What Jesus preaches is a social gospel – the good news of the Kingdom of God. It is particularly to those on the periphery of society that he communicates the possibility of a new life. He proclaims the good news of liberty to the captives and the downtrodden (Lk. 4:18). In the vision of Jesus, Kingdom of God is not conceived within a framework of religion; it is a new reality, a new state of affairs, and a new world order in which a community of all people belonging to all religions and culture will be constituted through the worship of the Spirit and truth (Jn. 4. 24). This community of religions as Kingdom of God "means righteousness and peace and joy" (Rom. 14:17). Only through building up a community of religions formed in the fight for social concerns, the cordiality and correlation among religions can be kept alive and meaningful. One should not, however, forget the theological and spiritual fact that this coming together of religions is possible because of the inherent relationality of religions; it should primarily be a movement from within a religion; it must not be an imposed unity from outside compulsions. To cite some other common platforms on which all religions can come together are the human rights issues, eco-crisis, the havoc of the drug on the future generation so and so forth. Church should organize local communities in partnership with the believers of different faiths on such common platforms and build up multi-religious communities of friendship, brotherhood and self-offering. It will slowly help to form a corporate religious consciousness rooted in the concrete action of service.

In multi-religious societies like that of Indian society, the identity of an individual religion is, thus, to be envisioned by appropriating

the corporate consciousness of religions that unfolds in collective social action. The import of Indian secularism is that it offers the social and political fabric for corporate endeavours of religions; thus it protects the inherent relationality among religions. Moreover it promotes a web of relationships that offers enough space for fruitful interchange of religious ideals and forms; there, neither do the religions stay separate nor do they mix up; here what is more desired is plurality in unity than unity in plurality. The mystery of Hindu-Christian meeting has to presume and embody this creative religious pluralism and thus it is to be envisaged in terms of a comprehensive and holistic vision of the innate relationality of religions.

Conclusion

The servant role of the church in building up of communities of religions may be conceived in a 'bridge-paradigm'. Being a bridge means belonging to different shores of spirituality and embodying the various pursuits of spiritual quests without opposition in a broader spectrum, say Kingdom of God or *Ramarajya* (ideal State) of Hinduism or Brotherhood of Islam or *Maitry* (friendship) of Jainism. The challenge for us, today, is to become a 'bridge' in the service to the society. Theology does not "prove" but "probes" and "understands". Let this bridge experience be the "originating and self-correcting foundation" of the Christian theology of religion. This bridge consciousness will be a coincidence of various religious pursuits in the experiential and the interior realm as well as in the service to humanity. Or, it may be seen as an "advaitic consciousness" in the sense that *advaita* is a unifying and uniting creative tension between contrasting religious truths.

Indeed, we should not forget at the same time that we have to start building up these bridges in the interior core of our spiritual being. More than a conceptual formulation, this "bridge" is an experiential paradigm of the meeting of religions. Swami Abhishiktananda, after a quarter century long odyssey in the ocean of Hindu wisdom interprets his realization in terms of being a bridge between Hinduism and Christianity. "The danger of this life as a 'bridge' is that we run the risk of not belonging finally to either side; however harrowing

it may be, our duty is precisely to belong wholly to both sides".[16] After encountering Hindu genius eye-to-eye in 'the cave of the Heart', he says: "I simply find myself profoundly Hindu and Christian at the same time".[17] Holy men of today are those who can embody a transcultural and interreligious consciousness, who can unite people of different religions on a social and spiritual substratum. In the words of John Donne: "Holy man of our time, it seems, is not a figure like Gotam or Jesus or Mohammad, a man who could found a world religion, but a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions, and comes back again with new insights to his own. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time".[18] It is the ingenuity and insight of Mahatma Gandhi that enabled him to build up a 'secular' India on a multi-religious basis. Following Gandhi, our nation's 'secular' identity has to be envisioned and fashioned in terms of a dynamic understanding of the religious pluralism of our society. If so, Indian secularism is a more spiritual, theological and social context than a mere political concept.

16. James Stuart, *Abhishiktananda, His Life Told through his Letter* (New Delhi ISPCK, 1989), 213.

17. Henri Le Saux Svām Abhishiktānanda, *La montée au fond du coeur, Le journal intime du moine chretien-sannyasi Hindou 1948-1973* (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1986), 47.

18. *The Way of all the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), ix. Quoted in Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 206.