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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE : PAST AND PRESENT A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

1. Introduction

Religion is a way of relating oneself to God, to the Ultimate or to the meaningfulness of one's own life. As relatedness to the Ultimate it also becomes a way of relationship to others through whom the Ultimate is seen or experienced. The nature of this relation is coloured by the nature of faith by which the religion is characterized.

The reality today is that both in the East and the West we are living with people of other faiths. What was every day experience in many parts of the East is becoming a matter of daily experience in the West. In the classroom, in the factory, in the city bus and in one's own neighbourhood, one meets followers of other faiths. Their sincerity, their authenticity, their commitment to their own religion and their moral excellence is beginning to affect one's own self-understanding and the understanding of his religion. Inter-religious experience is increasingly becoming part of any religious experience. If authentic human existence is co-existence as existentialists argue, religious experience, when lived among other religions is called to become inter-religious. "A religion, however exalted, can no more define itself in splendid isolation from other religions. Rather it has to evolve its own self-understanding, its manifold forms of relatedness to other religions. This takes us to the reality of dialogue in our life."¹ This concern of modern man is further strengthened by the awareness of several other complementary factors.

2. The Awareness of the Inexhaustible Nature of Mystery

Revelation, by the very fact it is God's self-communication in a possible otherness, is bound to be associated with finitude and hence, every acceptance of it should also include the transcendence of its

1. I.T.A. Satment, 1989 in *Religious Pluralism*, Ed. by K. Pathil (Delhi: I.S.P. C.K., 1991), p. 343.

own inherent limitation. Religions are life expressions of the experience of revelation in a given historical context. They are, therefore, limited by factors of history, culture, language, etc. Dialogue becomes necessary in order to transcend this limitation and liberate the very truth that is encapsuled in particular traditions. Since no expression is ultimately complete and exhaustive and since a complete expression of the infinite is a contradiction in terms, one way to advance in the experience of the fullness is to get more and more enriched by the contributions of complementary expressions. This does not, however, mean that one has to quit one's own tradition or religious heritage. But he is placed against the reality of another heritage which may positively contribute to his own self-transformation and realisation.

After an era of scientific clarity and verifiability in the matters of truth, humanity is beginning to experience the limitations of science and the inexhaustibility of the divine mystery. A transition from a scientific attitude to a faith attitude is especially visible in the contemporary youth, more so in the West. Truth is sought not only in technology and prosperities of life promised by the advancement of science, but in faith, in God-experience, in meditation presented by any religion as the ways and means of one's self-realisation. This points to an inward conviction that the divine is inexhaustible and is revealed in different religions and it is upto us to learn from the manifold manifestations available to us. Naturally this takes us to the task of inter-religious dialogue.

3. The De-absolutization of Truth in all Fields

There is a sharp distinction between Truth and all its expressions. The absolute claim of truth in itself never becomes a fact in its contextualized expression. Truth is always asserted with human limitations. This, however, does not mean what is asserted is untruth, and therefore, untenable. Rather, it means that the truth experienced and asserted, be it in religion, is to be de-absolutized because it is essentially affected by factors of historicity, linguistic limitation and social and cultural superstructures. And, therefore, every theology practically becomes a contextualized theology, a theology among theologies, one of the theologies that takes stock of man's manifold articulations of the Ultimate. This awareness of historicization of truth and the contextualization of truth-expression is an added reason to the contemporary thrust in inter-religious dialogue.

4. Awareness of Mutual Complementarity

Theoria follows praxis. It is an undeniable experience of man that we learn a lot from other religions. Apart from the modern phenomena of mass movement of young people from the West seeking God experience in Oriental Religions, there had been traces of traditions both in Christian and non-Christian religions, seeking clarification and articulation of one's own faith, with the help of philosophies developed by other religious world visions. Once again, this does not mean a complete borrowing of an entirely new experience to one's own religion. But it does mean that with the encounter of a new religion, a hidden gem of truth in my own religion is now awakened, and a new potential comes to blossom. The influence of Aristotelian or Platonian philosophy in Christian Theology is a brilliant example for this. In our own time Thomas Merton had a new interpretation of Christian religious experience after his encounter with Buddhism.² Fr. Bede Griffiths,³ Swami Abhishikthananda⁴ and several other mystics witness to the fact that encounter with another religion, in this case Christianity's encounter with Hinduism has brought about profound changes in their own Christian religious experience. This phenomenon of dialogue between religions point to a deeper awareness that religious experiences are mutually complementary, and we are growing in our own religious experience, often through the encounter with another religion. Since we all are pilgrims, walking on the path of realizing the Divine in our own life, and since the future consummation and completion can never be fully anticipated, we have to *grow* in our religious experience, in our God-realization and the inter-religious dialogue, is one of the golden means set before us for achieving that goal.

5. Interreligious Dialogue: A Critical Look into the Past

Preamble

To make it easy quite often the major world religions are grouped as semitic/prophetic and mystic. Semitic/prophetic religions include

2. Cfr. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (N.Y: New Direction Books, 1973) Cfr. also. T. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (N.Y: 1967).
3. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* (London: Collins, 1976); *Vedanta and Christian Faith* (Los Angeles: The Dawn Horse Press, 1973); *Christiran Ashrams* (London: Longman and Todd, 1966).
4. Abhishikthananda, *Saccidananda* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974), *The Future Share* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1975); "The Upanishads and the Advaidic Experience", *The Clergy Monthly*, Vol. 38 (1974), No. 11, pp. 474-86.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam, three great religions linked with Semitic tradition. The great Oriental religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism constitute the mystic religions. Paul Tillich groups them as religions which seek salvation 'above history' (the mystic religions) and 'as the aim of history' (the prophetic religions).⁵ If salvation is sought 'above history' as *moksha* or the ultimate emancipation of the self, the historical events pertaining to the salvation become comparatively less important. Such a stand is naturally conducive to inter-religious dialogue. Since the decisiveness of the one historical event is not accented, the transcendence over the particular, including the modality of one's own religious experience, is more natural and a similar expression of another religion can easily be accommodated. This may be what makes a Hindu possible to look at Christ as one of the *avatars* and fit him into his/her system. Whereas, if salvation of all is sought 'as the aim of history' which is necessarily related to one historical event, then that event plays a decisive role in realizing our salvation. The believer in dialogue has to put this historicity central to his faith, even though he is open and acknowledges the genuineness of the experience of the other and believes that both are moving to the final goal to be realized beyond history.

The Mystical Religions and Their Approach to Interreligious Dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue is a vast subject. Several religions meet in dialogue. An elaborate exposition of these dialogical forms are not given here. The paper has especially selected Hinduism and Christianity as representatives of the mystical and prophetic religions respectively and deals with their orientations to other religions. Other forms of inter-religious dialogue, such as Christian-Muslim⁶, Christian, Buddhist⁷, Hindu-Muslim⁸ Jewish-Christian⁹ are not directly treated-although some of these forms are very much alive today.

5. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, London, Nisbet, 1968), p. 100.

6. Christian Muslim dialogue is promoted in the Church mainly through the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican, and the Dialogue Sub-Unit in the World Council of Churches, Geneva. Institutions like the Pontifical Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies (PISAI), Rome, Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies, Hyderabad (India), Islamic Studies Association, Delhi, etc. function specifically for promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The famous vedic dictum *ekam sat viprah bahudha vdanti* (The seers call in many ways that which is One)¹⁰ lays a solid foundation for inter-religious dialogue.

This attitude was continued in the ancient Hindu tradition with its spirit of tolerance of many gods, namely the many expressions of the One and the freedom the individual had in choosing one's *Ishtadevata* (favourite deity) and *Kuladevata* (family deity). According to Max Mueller, this polytheism was characterized also by a spirit of henotheism where the individual/family considered its god supreme and yet respected the other gods as equally supreme to their devotees. Though the prime object here was not dialogical, this attitude of tolerance and co-existence was conducive for a healthy dialogue. However, when a different religious experience was asserted by Buddha in course of time, there was severe controversy and condemnation of the new experience. But we find that after the initial opposition this new religion was to a great extent absorbed and remained in force until a second set of attack was launched by Sankara and the whole *Advaita* movement. In spite of the antagonism that is seen overtly it is a fact that many of the Buddhist values were deeply absorbed by the Hindu movements that emerged later.

Hinduism approached Christianity with a dialogical spirit in a big way during the period of the Hindu Renaissance. Confronted with the Christian West and Christian values expressed in religion and social life many Hindu thinkers came forward with a critical review of Christianity

7. Aloysius Pieris, 'Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism, a Theological Reading of Historical Encounters', in *Dialogue*, New Series, Vol. VII, No. 2, 1980, pp. 49-85; Antony Fernando, *Buddhism and Christianity, Their Inner Affinity*, (Colombo Ecumenical Institution for Study and Dialogue, 1981); Howston, G.W., Ed. *The Cross and the Lotus: Christianity and Buddhism in Dialogue* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1985).
8. There are many interreligious Centres in India where Hindus and Muslims regularly meet for interreligious dialogue or for programmes connected with it. Most of these Centres are run by Christian institutes or organizations, but with a wholehearted co-operation from others. Divyodaya in Coimbatore, CSWR at Dharmaram, Bangalore and Ashirvad in Bangalore are examples. Cfr. also S.J. Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions*, (N.Y: Orbis, 1991; Bangalore: SATHRI, 1992), pp. 19-22.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-25.
10. *Rg Veda*, I. 164. 46.

and their own religion. The spirit of the movement was, in general, dialogical. Authors like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, K.C. Sen, Brahma Bhandhau Upadhyaya took the lead in this dialogical movement. Roy's famous book, *The Precepts of Jesus: The guide to Peace and Happiness* (1820)¹¹ was a Hindu appreciation of the teachings of Christ. K.C. Sen's admiration of the Oriental Christ was another big step in this movement.¹² Brahma Bhandhau Upadhyaya composed the famous hymn *Vande Saccidanandam*¹³ which was the fruit of an ongoing dialogue between two religions in himself. The hymn is a theological summation of basic Christian doctrines in classical Hindu terminology and rhythm. M.K. Gandhi began to teach lessons from the Gospel to the Hindu inmates of his *ashrams*. Hinduism looked ready for dialogue in spite of counter self defensive movements such as Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, etc. But hundred years ago, at the beginning of Hindu Renaissance, Christian attitude to dialogue was very much different. The then dominant missionary outlook largely led by an exclusivist attitude could not appreciate the Hindu initiative in this field. This was mainly because the Hindu understanding of Christ according to many missionaries was, seen from the Christian perspective, not genuinely Christian, but a Hindu interpretation of Christ. However, a Hindu appreciation of Christ expressed in a way congenial to the Hindu believer was still to be appreciated, though the Christian difference in one's faith could have been rightly pointed out. That would have paved the way for a better dialogue. But the recent Christian studies of this Hindu initiative in its approach to Christ and Christianity are much more sympathetic and appreciative.¹⁴

6. The Contemporary Scene

The contemporary movement of interreligious dialogue is largely initiated by the Christian wing. This clearly marks the shift of accent from a colonial and dominant attitude, to an attitude of Christian presence in the non-Christian world. The Hindu stand, for the moment, seems that Christianity is slowly growing in its realization of the Hindu solution to the problem of conflict or religions. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan says:

11. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, *Collected English Works*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1982).

12. K.C. Sen, *Lectures in India* (New York: Cassel and Co., 1904).

13. Brahma Bhandhau Upadhyaya, *Sophia*, Oct., 1898.

14. G.S.S. Sreenivas Rao, *Interfaith Dialogue and World Community* (Madras: CLS, 1991). This quote appears on p. xxxii.

We can transform the religion to which we belong so as to make it approximate to the Religion of the Spirit. We must look upon Hinduism or Christianity as part of an evolving revelation that might in time be taken over in the larger Religion of the Spirit.

He continues:

That the Hindu solution to the problem of the conflict of religions is likely to be accepted in the future seems to me to be fairly certain.¹⁵

Though Hinduism, in general, gave a welcoming response to the new phase of interreligious dialogue, it is to be noted that there have also been pertinent studies by Hindu authors who have approached the problem from a different Hindu perspective and raised many critical questions regarding the authenticity and propriety of the interreligious dialogue as practiced today. *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1989) by Sita Ram Goel, *The Word as Revelations: Names of gods* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1980) by Ram Swarup and several other works from the Voice of India Publishers, New Delhi, are examples of it. These writings by Hindu intelligentsia show that any claim of superiority of Christianity or any other religion will be vehemently opposed and rejected by them. Quoting S. Radhakrishnan, Goel summarizes this Hindu view towards Christians as follows. "You Christians seem to us Hindus rather ordinary people making extraordinary claims."¹⁶ Genuine dialogue is possible only on the basis of certain equality, both learning, giving to and accepting from each other.

7. The Prophetic Religions and Interreligious Dialogue

Of the three prophetic religions of Semitic origin I am treating here the religion of Christianity and its approach to interreligious dialogue in the past and present.

15. Sarvepalli Gopal, *Radhakrishnan: A Biography* (1989), p. 195 as quoted in Sita Ram Goel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

16. Sita Ram Goel, *History of Hindu Christian Encounters* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1989), p.v.

Christianity appeared on earth as a movement initiated by Jesus Christ and his disciples, around 2000 year ago. The *guru's* unconditional demand was that his disciples be filled with the divine spirit which he identified with his own spirit and actually breathed into them. The identification of the *Guru* with the divine *Logos* or the pre-existent Word of God became part of Christian faith. The disciples of Christ as well as the community of first Christians, filled with the divine Spirit imparted to them, did proclaim the Kingdom of God reigning in them and which they wanted to impart to every one. The thrust of the movement was, then, of communicating what one existentially is, rather than imparting a theological doctrine about the salvation of others. The confession made was the result of an unconditional personal commitment to the Master and his teachings even against the imminent threat of their very lives. It was an absolute commitment expressed in equally absolute powerlessness, and, therefore, stood for its veracity and authenticity. Religion is a commitment to an intimate Divine experience and a humble, sincere and non-aggressive expression of it, is its own beauty, and as such can very well go with the spirit of dialogue. But in course of time, when a persecuted community becomes well-established, institutionalized and powerful both politically and socially, and when the original experience is rationalized and converted into universal doctrines such as *extra ecclesia nulla salus* (there is no salvation outside the Church), and the universal doctrine is applied to all, then it looks anti-dialogical. It seems to me that the course of events has led Christianity to such a position or, at least, of being interpreted and understood in such a manner.

8. New Factors and New Thrusts

The contemporary thrust of Christian consciousness regarding interreligious dialogue is the result of several world events all of which have contributed to it in one way or other. To mention a few of them: i) the breakdown of the Western colonial empires in Asia and Africa and the consequent revivalism of indigenous cultural, and religious values of the people of the liberated nations. The Christians in these countries, as people of the place, naturally, take part in this revivalist movement and this places them in a situation of dialogue with their own nation's religions and values. ii) The change of mind among many Western thinkers and scholars who set themselves to unbiased research into the oriental religions and their wisdom. The famous series *The Sacred*

Books of the East, edited by Prof. Max Muller and published from Oxford University one century ago deserve special mention.¹⁷ iii) The opening up of faculties of religious studies in several western universities where each religion is studied and expounded from its own perspective instead of being treated as a side-issue in a faculty of Christian theology. Parallel to this, it is to be noted that several Indian universities have opened 'Chair of Christianity' in this country. iv) Thanks to the amazing achievement of science and technology our world has been reduced to a 'global village' and contact with men of other faith has now become a day-to-day reality for many, both in the East and in the West. Our society today both in East and West is religiously pluralistic. All these factors have contributed to the development of interreligious dialogue we are now going through.

As a movement, theological reflection on religions was started by studying the history of religions. Such study of the history of religions moved into the science of comparative religion and now Christian theologians are developing their own theology of religions in the context of the ongoing dialogue between religions. What is important in dialogue is the unbiased and humble sharing of one's own religious consciousness. But sharing is affected by attitudes. Hence theories about attitudes and models arise. I review a few of them with my own personal comments.

Already in 1971 Dharmaram, which is now Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, opened here a Centre for the Study of World Religions. From 1975 onwards this Centre began to publish the international quarterly, the *Journal of Dharma* with a view to foster interreligious dialogue. In 1978, R. Panikkar outlined four attitudes (exclusivism, inclusivism, parallelism and pluralism) and four models (the geographical, the physical, the geometrical and the anthropological) in the rhetoric of dialogue.¹⁸ Alan Race, an Anglican theologian, develops it further, but reduces the Christian attitude basically to three, such as exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.¹⁹

17. *The Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 1-50: (Oxford, 1904), Ind. Ed., (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1962).

18. R. Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) pp. xiv-xxviii; Ind. Ed., Bangalore: ATC, pp. 15-38.

19. *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (New York: ORBIS, 1982), pp. 1-105.

9. Exclusivist Attitude

The exclusivist attitude which present one's religion as the only way of salvation naturally looks anti-dialogical, and is questioned by the existence of plurality of religions, the followers of which also believe that they are saved in their own religion. Karl Barth; Emil Brunner and Hendrik Kraemer are the modern proponents of this exclusivist vision of Christianity. The texts often quoted in support of this theory are Acts 4:12. "and there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." and Jn. 14:6 in which Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father by me."

10. The Inclusivist Attitude

The inclusivist sees his God and the basic dynamics of salvation communicated to him operative in all religions and even in non-religious ideologies. Several texts from the Acts of the Apostles (10:45; 14:16; 17:22-31) are quoted in support of this view. The inclusivist view is not a new thrust in the Christian thinking. Already in the beginning of the Christian era, Justin, the Martyr wrote:

It is our belief that those men who strive to do the good which is enjoined on us have a share in God; according to our traditional belief they will by God's grace share his dwelling. And it is a conviction that this holds good in principle for all men.²⁰

St. Augustine's comment on true religion (*de vera religione*)²¹ is another statement of an open and inclusivist attitude. What is new,

20. I. *Apology*, 46, 1-2.

21. Eng. Tansl. from "Dialogue with other Religions", Workshop paper, No. IV for the All India Seminar, 1969):

I said in *De vera Religione* that Christianity is the safest and surest way to God. I referred only to the true religion that now is called Christian. I was not thinking of true religion as it existed before the coming of Christ: I was referring to the name and not to the reality to which the name belongs. For the reality itself, which we now call the Christian religion, was present among the early people, and up to the time of coming of Christ in the flesh, was never absent from the beginning of the human race: so the true religion which already existed now began to be called Christian.

therefore, is not the doctrine but the revival of it after an era of dominant exclusivist self assertion of Christianity.

Karl Rahner's doctrine of 'Anonymous Christians'²², is a theoretical elaboration of this vision. The inclusivist vision is basically a way of seeing one's God everywhere and experiencing his religion as all inclusive. This is a practical need of the believer when he wants to make an ultimate synthesis of all in one because in reality a person can have only one faith and one vision to which the whole is to be reduced or which should comprise all. The Johannine expression "everything that was made was made by him" does fulfil this need, and a Christian believer will gladly see the *Logos* operating everywhere. Justin, the Martyr whom we have quoted above makes such a synthesis.

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.²³

Similar tendency is seen also in Hinduism. In the *Gita* Krishna says:

Yo mam pasyati sarvatra
Sarvam ca may pasyati
Tasyaham na pranasyami
Sa ca me na pranasyati

(He who sees me everywhere and everything in me, he never becomes lost to me, nor do I become lost to him.)²⁴

Similarly in the privileged moment of *Visvarupa darsana* (cosmic vision) Arjuna sees all gods and all creation in Krishna

I see all God, O God, in your body
and hosts of all grades of beings;
Brahma the Lord, seated in the Lotus
and all the rishis and celestial serpents²⁵

22. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol. 5, (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1966), pp. 118ff.

23. I. *Apology*, 46, 3-4.

24. *Bhagavad Gita*, 6. 30.

25. *Ibid.*, 11. 15; See also the following stanzas.

It is legitimate to see, everything in God whom a believer encounters and experiences. The mystics often make clearer expressions of inclusivism.²⁶ This is because they see God everywhere and everything in God. Mirabhai may experience Krishna as the focal point of the whole univers²⁷, Nammalvar, in his *Tiruvaimozhi*, describes the loving presence of Vishnu in all creatures.²⁸ St. John of the Cross sees God on flowery and fragrant mountains, in solitary valleys and sonorous rivers.²⁹ Such a theocentric inclusivism is not at all anti-dialogical though the God in question is particularized. Rather it is only an exuberant outpouring of one's own rich divine experience. What is anti-dialogical is the rating of one's inclusive vision as a supreme model for all, and the consequent degradation of all other models. The statement on non-Christian religions by Vatican II sounds inclusivistic and is often praised as a great landmark in inter-religious relationship.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14,6), in whom men may find the fulness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.³⁰

Though this inclusivist text is really a great contribution, especially in the context of a preceding exclusivist attitude in the western Church, the text does not mean anything substantially new in the Indian sub-continent where mutual understanding and sustained interreligious harmony was a matter of fact for several centuries. In fact the Synod of

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26. Though not necessarily in terms of Inclusivistic Theology, K.T. Kadankavil sees the absolute as a common ground of mysticism of different religions. Cfr. K.T. Kadankavil "The Absolute as a Common Ground of Mysticism", *The Journal of Dharma*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (1975), pp.194-210.
 27. A.J. Alston, Trans, *The Devotional Songs of Mirabhai* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), p. 37.
 28. Shuddhananda Bharati, *Alvar Saints and Acharyas* (Madras: Shuddhananda Library, 1968), p. 82.
 29. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* Trans. and Ed. by E. Allison Peers, Stanza XIV (N.Y: Image Books, 1961).
 30. Vat II, *Nostra Aetate*. No. 2.

Diamper which was convened after the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries attributed 'error' to St. Thomas Christians regarding their amicable contacts with their Hindu brethren. A. M. Mundadan, the Church historian, makes the following comment:

The synod is right in attributing this "error" to the contacts the St. Thomas Christians maintained with their Hindu neighbours. It would be centuries before the Europeans would acquire life-experience of non-Christian religions, before a theology of the religions of the world would emerge which would give due respect to the positive elements in those religions and their providential salvific role for millions of people. But the Indian Christians had been already living for centuries in a positive encounter with the high-caste Hindus and had developed a theological vision of the Hindu religion which was more positive and liberal. Today in the light of modern theological approaches to non-Christian religions one must admit that the vision of the Indian Christians was a more enlightened one than that of their European contemporaries.³¹

A recent Vatican document has issued an excellent call for dialogue to all Christians:

Every follower of Christ, by reason of his human and christian vocation is called to live dialogue in his daily life, whether he finds himself in a majority situation or in that of a minority. This dialogue is "a manner of acting, an attitude and a spirit which guides one's conduct. It implies concern, respect, and hospitality towards the other. It leaves room for the other person's identity, his modes of expression and his values."³²

The World Council of Churches also took a similar positive look at world religions. Since the third assembly in New Delhi (1961), the World Council of Churches turned to other religions and endorsed "dialogue with men of other faiths and ideologies." A sub-unit for

31. Cfr. A.M. Mundadan, *Indian Christians, Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy* (Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 1984), p. 27-28.

32. Secretariat for Non-Christians, "The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions", in *Bulletin of Secretariat for Non-Christians*, 56 (1984), p. 137, no. 30; p. 136, no. 29):

this was founded in 1971. In 1979, W.C.C. issued its *Guidelines on Dialogue*. However, serious theological problems such as whether "God is really active in other religions" stood on the way against making great advance in that direction.³³

A genuine inclusivism implies also the acceptance of other religious operations. The inclusivism becomes necessary only because there are other authentic experiences parallel to mine, and somehow I called to make a synthesis in my search for the Ultimate. But in the inclusivist view his personal experience is normative at least for him and his community of faith.

11. The Pluralistic Attitude

Pluralism acknowledges real differences in experiencing and expressing one's religious faith even if they cannot be included or reduced to one's own favourite experience. The pluralist leaves them as they are though he chooses his own for personal reasons. He refuses to pass judgement over the other, even a judgement of inclusivism. Therefore, the pluralist leaves open the problem of criteria in judging religion, if at all, a criterion is to be evolved. The pluralists think that it should emerge from that very religion. To judge one religion with a criterion of another religion is incongruent and therefore, unethical. But a pluralist may share his consciousness and his experience of religion and this inter-religious sharing may awaken the hidden criterion that is buried in one's own religion to judge itself and to rise above its own inherent limitation.

Pluralism is not necessarily relativism. But the pluralist accepts that every religious experience is necessarily a relative experience. There is no absolute religious experience. Each religion mediates relation to the Absolute in its own particular and unique way. To the believer however his faith is an unconditional and total response to the self-revealing absolute. Religions because they are also human in spite of their divine content, always remain finite and a relative realisation of man's relation with God which is always subject to growth and further fulfillment.

33. Paul Knitter, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 138-139.

Pluralism is not new to Asia. Prof. S. Samartha says:

To people in Asia and Africa, however, it provides a source for the recovery of their own spiritual and cultural values after long centuries of suppression . . . Thus to talk about the "emergence" or the "discovery" of religious pluralism in India is like taking a beehive to a sugar plantation.³⁴

It may still be asked whether the Asian sense of religious pluralism and the pluralism that is now being developed in the West is exactly the same.

A pluralistic vision of religions was proposed in the West by Ernst Troeltsch, Arnold Toynbee, and W.E. Hocking. These thinkers from their study of history and history of religions progressively moved from the then prevailing exclusivist attitude to a position of religious pluralism. This approach was later developed and strengthened by contemporary theologians Paul Tillich and John Hick. Hick terms his pluralist scheme a copernican revolution. He says

As we have to realize that the universe of faiths centres upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. He is the Sun, the originative Source of life and light, whom all the religions reflect in their own way.³⁵

What is envisaged here is that religions meet not in the particularities of doctrines nor the models of worship but in that Ultimate Reality to which mankind moves integrating its historico-cultural contexts and experiences. On the one hand, the acceptance of a kind of pluralism becomes a practical necessity to be realistic in a world of many religions. On the other hand, a pluralistic acknowledgement of religions without a personal option of any of them makes religion deprived of its concreteness, historicity and tradition, and makes it an abstract ideal or a notional acceptance of all religions which ultimately is not a religion at all, because religion is life. The pluralist is profoundly religious and "takes our factual situation as real and affirms that in the actual polarities of our real existence we find our real being."³⁶

34. S.J. Samartha, *One Christ-Many Religions*. p. 9.

35. J. Hick, *God has Many Names* (London: Paul and Macmillan, 1980), p. 52.

36. R. Panikkar, *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.

We have different models of Christian Pluralism. Our relatedness to the Absolute as a unifying force (non-dualistic or theocentric models) or as a liberative source (soterio-centric models) is often presented as its ultimate foundation.³⁷ In 1989 Indian Christian Theologians in their thirteenth annual meeting made the following statement regarding an Indian Christian Theology of Religious pluralism which tries to strike a balance between Christo-centrism and Theo-centrism.

This theology, seen from the perspective of dialogue, is a theology of openness to the inexhaustible mystery of the divine self-manifestation. Since the Christian faith is an experience of this divine self-communication to us in and through the person of Jesus, the Christ, the theology, in all fidelity accepts the reality of Christ and its all-pervading role in shaping the life of a Christian. However, since Christ is experienced as one who denies himself on the Cross in his unconditional surrender to the Father, this theology of religions gives us the vision and courage to transcend the inherent limitation of God's self-communication through Jesus Christ. Keeping our hearts attached to the Christ-event in this way and at the same time throwing our minds open to the vast and ineffable mystery of God communicated to us through Christ, our Christian approach to other religions becomes one of hopeful listening to the other and of humble sharing of our own selves. In this process it is natural that we get transformed as we enter deeper and deeper into the hidden mysteries of our own faith-experience where the specificity of our faith opens up and leads us to a wider and more universal experience of God who is the Saviour of all and who alone knows the ultimate mystery of salvation of all people. We thus recognize ourselves as pilgrims in Christ, but at the same time making our holy pilgrimage of life along with many others to

37. Dominic Veliath summarises the models as follows: An ecclesiocentric model of Danielou, and inclusivistic model of Karl Rahner, the three pluralistic models, namely, the non-dualistic model of Raimundo Panikar, the theocentric model of Stanley Samartha, the Soteriocentric model of Paul Knitter. "Jesus Christ and the Theology of Religions, a Conspectus of Models", *Religious Pluralism, an Indian Christian Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1991), pp. 159-176,

that fullness of truth which is beyond all claims of expression and possession.³⁸

12. Areas of Dialogue

In spite of the limitations and occasional opposition, inter-religious dialogue has been carried out in different fields. Three major fields deserve special mention. They are the Spiritual-Contemplative, the Intellectual-Theological and Socio-Political.³⁹ Those who appreciated the mystic India took the lead in shaping a dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism in the field of its spirituality. Abhishiktananda who appreciated the gift of interiority which "India has received from her creator as a special gift" is one who has made great contribution in this field. Father Bede Griffiths, Sr. Vandana and several other have continued this path further.

The protestant theologians Chenchiah, Chakkarai and Appasamy initiated a doctrinal approach to Hinduism already in the last century. Interpreting Christian and Hindu symbols anew, Prof. R. Panikkar has made great advance in this direction. Several others have continued this search.

Paul Devanandan and M.M. Thomas are pioneers of the third approach in which inter-religious dialogue entered into a phase of socio-political activities. From the catholic field theologians like Samuel Rayan, Sebastian Kappan and many activists are now moving along this line.

With the influence of liberation theology many Indian theologians have turned to think and work with the oppressed and the marginalized of this country. Christianity's encounter with other religions has now turned to the religions of these people which are often without sacred scriptures, articulate Philosophies and highly developed cultural expression. But these theologians are in constant dialogue with the script written in their mind, the stories they tell

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 344-345.

39. A.M. Mundadan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 197; Cfr. also M. Amaladoss, "The Spirituality of Dialogue: An Indian Perspective", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, III (1993), p. 58-70.

and the life they live. Dialogue has now become liberative and sometimes even antagonist against the oppressive group, irrespective of their religion who have scriptures and major traditions. I personally think that both the classical and liberative approaches in the field of inter-religious dialogue are complementary.⁴⁰

13. Inter-religious Dialogue : Limits and Responses

Dr. S. Samartha points to several factors which set limits to the christian initiated dialogues and calls our attention to the different types of responses they receive from different religious groups.⁴¹ Wilfred Felix admonishes us about the shift of accents we need for successful furthering of interreligious dialogue.⁴²

The Christian sponsored dialogue is often planned and largely led by a Christian frame of mind which may not be the pattern suited for the follower of a different faith. Dialogue is often carried out in an intellectual level and it remains as the privilege of a few selected and educated ones. To this is to be added the limitation of language, because most of the Christian sponsored dialogues, even in India, are done in English, whereas the original scriptures of almost all religions are in one or other oriental language.

The language of dialogue is a very crucial point. The terms we use in dialogue or symbols we introduce are often exclusive in the sense it has its own socio-historical contexts and weightages. A new language is slowly to be developed. But this is possible only by dialogue itself, as by ongoing dialogue we gain closer and deeper understanding and even experience of the language of my partner.

Dialogue often remains as a movement of the specialists and scholars. It does not have sufficient impact either on the level of leadership or on the mass of believers. The lack or refusal of attitudinal change in both of these groups is one reason for this phenomenon.

40. V.F. Vineeth, "The classical Versus Liberative Approach to Indian Christian Spirituality", *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXIII, No. 136 (1993), pp. 291-300.

41. S.J. Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions*, pp. 15-35.

42. "Dialogue Gasping for Breath? Towards New Frontiers in Interreligious Dialogue", *Sunset in the East* Madras: Uni. of Madras, 1991), pp. 208-230.

As regards response, the motivation of these movements are sometimes questioned by the followers of other religions. I have already mentioned how the much praised statement of Vatican II was commented by certain Hindu thinkers. A theocentric approach to religions is considered by many as better conducive for inter-religious dialogue. However, Ram Swarup thinks that the God figure we project very much depend on the level of consciousness we have. In his book, *The Word as Revelation*, he analyses different figures of God projected from different layers of human consciousness.⁴³ When one's God-concept gets overinfluenced by the lower layers of his consciousness, such as, the sense of mind level a corresponding figure of God also will be projected, namely, a God who is too zealous over his own rights, people and alike. He may be a 'war-God' instead of a peace-God. But if the God figure emanates from the higher layers of his consciousness where man meets the Ultimate Reality in contemplative silence, the figure of this God will be far different. Though religions may claim that the image of God they enjoy emerges from the revelation they have received, I think, this insight has a valid point especially when the formless gets expressed in human forms and figures.

The rise of fundamentalist trends in this country as well as in world at large is another negative response to interreligious dialogue we now face. Return to fundamentalism is a sign of and a means for self-preservation or self-defense. We see fundamentalist tendencies in many religions. In fact fundamentalist trends in religion had always been at work in history especially when a religious community find itself threatened. The revival of Hindu sentiments originated as a means of self-defense against the Islamic and Christian influence or domination gave rise to the nationalist association called the RSS, and its political wing the BJP in India. This contemporary movement reminds us of the medieval Christendom where religion and political power were mixed up. In fact, the proponents of this movement proposed a Hindutva, meaning a Hindu government ruling this country. Though the dialogical attitude of this movement was suspected, in the recent-most official statement made at the Party's National Council at Bangalore in June 1993, the leaders proposed an inclusive Hindutva pointing

43. Ram Swarup. *Word and Revelation: Names of Gods* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1980).

to the fact of readiness of accommodating other religions and cultures of this country.

According to L.K. Advani, the President of the Party, the concept of Hindutva stood for "the strengthening of the national ethos which reflects the historical experience and cultural traditions of the people and which, in case of India, mirrors the innate oneness of the people." He made it also clear that Hindutva did not mean "attachment to any particular form of worship or any particular ritual, but the aggregate of India's historical experience and culture. Hindutva as we see it is a short hand for our commitment to the values, ethics and aspirations of the country . . ."⁴⁴

14. Conclusion

We are called to give an authentic expression to our identity that should emerge from profound inner experience than from the rationalized analysis of the historical past and doctrinal formulas that are heaped upon us. One may have a healthy look into the past to get a proper directedness, but what matters more is the Spirit now living within us. Naturally instead of claims of superiority based on the past event, there will be genuine life of commitment inspired by the abiding spirit. This is what actually matters in a living religion.

An intellectual colonialism can be at work in the religious thinking of man, when one claims to be a possessor of the whole truth and begins to judge every other experience from that perspective. In such an approach, there is no room for genuine dialogue. The dialogical approaches, on the contrary, will foster an attitude of the spirit of participation instead of domination, admiration instead of interrogation and mystery instead of problem.⁴⁵

What has Interreligious Dialogue Achieved?

Though one may not see glamorous achievements the interreligious dialogue has its salutary results. i) It has opened up a critical approach

44. *Indian Express*, June 19, 1993, p. 8: Editorial.

45. V.F. Vineeth, "Theology of Religions from the Perspective of Inter-religious Dialogue", *Religious Pluralism, Op. cit.*, p. 242.

to one's own religion. ii) It has invited us to understand ourselves against the presence of the other. The other religion is to be taken into account as part of my understanding of my own religion. iii) It has widened the horizons of our understanding of truth which is now looked at from different angles. iv) In our life level it has promoted the experience of our communion in one God by fostering a culture of praying together, living together and seeking together, in spite of the differences of our faith. v) It has engendered a desire in us to grow into a world community of faiths.

Religion and its faith perspective

Religion is not simply a philosophy. It is basically a faith experience which is supported by a faith perspective. Each religion looks at, understands and interprets truth from its own perspective. A faith perspective is integral to one religion. Thus Hindu sees Christianity as another integral religion, and yet may interpret Christ as one of the *avatars*. In other words, a Hindu 'hinduizes' when he understands and integrates the other religion into himself. Such an understanding, though it differs from the Christian faith, is ultimately to be appreciated.

In the same way a Christian will look at reality and another religion and interpret it from a Christian perspective. This is a faith claim, and a faith claim is meaningful only in the circle of that faith. Faith claim is not a philosophical doctrine to be preached, but is a living faith which can be shared in humble acknowledgement of one's total commitment. Sincere sharing of what one really is, is the essence of interreligious dialogue. What makes a faith claim sound offensive is its subtle conversion from confessional language to philosophical language with a universal application and with a sense of superiority complex.

Just as a Hindu is not expected to impose his understanding of Christianity on the followers of that religion, so also a Christian is not expected to impose his Christian interpretation of Hinduism or any other religion on the followers of any other religion. Interpretations naturally arise when encounter is fostering complementarity than criticism and rivalry.

The Religion of the Spirit and the Future of Humanity

I began the part on the prophetic / Christian religion with a reference to the Spirit of Jesus which he promised to his disciples. Christian religion is a religion of the Spirit. As a Christian fond of fostering interreligious dialogue, I think that our understanding of Christianity can have a shift of accent from the historical Christ to the abiding Spirit of the same Christ. This is not the denial of the importance of the historical Christ. But the emphasis on the Spirit means the emphasis on the Christ now living in a Christian, instead of an empty proclamation of a past event which can be done without any commitment to the Christian ideals. Christianity is only there where there is real Christianness,⁴⁶ namely where there are people characterized by the Spirit of Christ. The Divine Spirit abides in all. The Christian understanding of this abiding Spirit becomes characterized by the Christ-event which includes also the pentecostal awakening of the Spirit. But this awakening is not exclusive. It is only a paradigm of God's action in this world, at least as far as Christians are concerned.⁴⁷ The historical is reviewed and looked at again and again not to go backward and to get transfixed on the past, but in order to revive the Spirit and go forward. This is the function of all scriptures and testimonies or *sabda*. Jesus said that none of his disciples should go as his messenger without first being filled with his Spirit. Religion is the religion of the abiding Spirit and Spirit dwells in everyone and this Spirit will guide our lives. Inter-religious dialogue is a meeting in depth of this abiding spirit who is at the heart of any authentic religious experience.

It seems to me that we are better placed in a world of inter-religious dialogue when we are ready to acknowledge the abiding Spirit that guides every human being. The historical context in which each one is placed gives him / her the ways and means for understanding this Spirit and its operation in oneself and in the world.

Our experience of spirit is still subject to evolution, yet it keeps its own identity. The position paper presented by the scholars of

46. R. Panikkar, "Christendom, Christianity and Christianness", *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXI, No. 124 (1991), pp. 324-330.

47. J.M. Pathrapankal "The Contextual and Universal Dimension of Christian Theology", in *Light from the East* Ed. by James Aerthayil (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1993); pp. 3-13.

CSWR at Dharmaram in the inaugural Seminar of the Indian and Inter-religious Centre in Rome in 1977 described it as follows:

The evolving experience of the spirit, though subject to change, evolution and progress, retains its own identity. Each experience may evolve into a particular religious movement. Precisely because it is a particular religious movement, expressing the universal and boundless, there can be several such movements, all unveiling new dimension of the ineffable. This leads us to the notion of the essential complementarity of all religious experiences and religions that are based on them. An attitude of humility to acknowledge the finitude of one's own religious experience and the openness to acknowledge what is true in other religions is fundamental to any one who aspires to know the spirit and to have a fuller experience of the spirit. This is the foundation for meeting of religions and conducting inter-religious dialogue.⁴⁸

In this great pilgrimage of humanity each one's religion is a source of strength and plays a vital role by providing wholeness to one's broken existence and hope to one's search for truth. As harbingers of this freedom, wholeness and hope, all these religions participate in that "Great Religion" which can never be totally identified with any of its expressions though all of them are manifestations of it in one way or another.⁴⁹

48. T.A. Aykara, Ed., *Meeting of Religions* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1978), p. 181.

49. I.T.A.'s Statement of 1989: *Religious Pluralism.Op Cit.*, p. 345.