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INTER RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE PRESENT WORLD CONTEXT

I only want to offer some general reflections on preliminary questions which may be of some use for situating and assessing the importance of Inter-Religious Dialogue (IRD) especially for the European mind.

In a first remark (1) I want to underline the overriding importance and strategical role of IRD at the present moment of the general evolution of the global system. From this flows (2) a short reflection on the - what we may call- "dialogical nature" of religion. Further (3) - from my Indian experience - I wanted to stress the primacy of the lived dialogue over preconceived theories about dialogue and its openings. From this also follows (4) a recognition of the inappropriateness of classical categories like exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism and of the problematic of dogmas and doctrines in IRD (5). But this cannot (6) dim and water down a sort of inescapable decisiveness and uniqueness challenging the IRD. Finally (7) I want to close my response with some remarks concerning the question of absoluteness.

1. I readily agree with Francis Vineeth that the problem of IRD and the question of its theological foundation is and will become more and more one of the most urging claims for a theology which wants to correspond to the "signs of time"

Of course, the ongoing process of globalization is a fact - the world becoming apparently this famous "global village" - and no part of the world, not even continents with a so homogenous "mono-religious" culture, like Europe, will further be exempt from the process of a universal religious and cultural "throwing and lumping together". But it is also a fact that this enhanced globalization- process, that this "One World" interpenetrating - inescapably and mercilessly pushed by world economics towards more imbalance and asymmetry - rebounds tragically in all sorts of ethnocentric, nationalistic, racial, chauvinist oppositions, resistances and violent

confrontations. And it is an utmost tragedy that these tensions are usually reinforced as religions in this situation of a universal mix and flux generally are tempted to become the spoke persons of threatened ethnic and national identities. The scenario of a generalised battlefield of cultures and religions (a vast Bosnia-Herzegovina) which may blow up in a destruction of the total system seems not to be too far fetched. That religions in this situation would fail to go in the direction of co-operation and dialogue (in my view co-operation and dialogue are inseparable-dialogue never can be a self-sufficient goal for itself, without degenerating to a luxury for some privileged high-caste-theologians) for the benefit of the well-being of human species and the planet would be one of the greatest paradoxes of our era. But on the one hand we indeed can state a rising awareness of the religion's responsibility for a successful achievement of this risky process by fostering the ethical commons and the basis of practical co-operations.¹ But - on the other hand - we are threatened by a contradictory dynamic of religions towards fundamentalist and nationalist captivity and hostility. One may expect that the clash between these two conflicting tendencies will be "the most important spiritual event of the century".² Only a strong effort to re-interpret and to re-structure the essence of religion in the sense of the "inter" (the inter-religious dialogue), the "between", the crossing of frontiers and divisions will be of interest for humankind - as there seems no other viable alternative to "dialogue or death".

2. This "strategical dialogical imperative" at the present moment should lead us to some deeper reflections on the-what I would call-*dialogical nature* of religion. This means that dialogue is not something only secondary, derived from faith, in some way opportune and even necessary as strategic means to overcome the deadly conflicts of our present converging world.

On the contrary dialogue turns out to be *the very essence of religion*. Religion itself, from its very foundations, urges and pushes to dialogue-in the same way as dialogue itself opens to the infinite and

1. Cf. K \ddot{u} ng, Hans, 1990: Projekt Weltethos, M \ddot{u} nchen/Z \ddot{u} rich and "The of a Declaration Global Ethic" of the World Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1993, in: Studies in Interreligious dialogue 3, 101-113.

2. Cf. Heisig 1993, 42.

ever new riches and possibilities of the Absolute which-at least for us Christians-reveals itself as dialogical.

That religion can be *reduced* to an ethics of communication, of inter-religious solidarity in the struggle against oppressive and destructive forces seems to be the most revolutionary discovery, a lesson which even Europeans learned under the impact of totalitarian regimes³. This-I think-should lead us to reshape and to redefine the traditional self-understanding of religion. In the sense as did the famous French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas⁴ who himself suffered hard under the atrocities of the totalitarianism: religion as the link, the *bond* which binds together (religere) the Self (le (Même) with the Other (l'Autre). This understanding of "religion" as ethical, dialogical binding together-mainly with the victim who interpellates us-opens up a new perspective, perhaps the only one, which is capable to found a society free of totalitarian and oppressive claims and to resist the religious temptation as sectarian, fissiparous and destructive forces. The nature of religion is dialogic and dialogue has essentially a religious nature. One could say that the "miracle of dialogue" is identical with the miracle of faith. By this strict and inner identity of religion and dialogue it becomes evident that any separatist and nationalist use of religion is *against the nature* of religions and has to be stigmatised as such. The Bosnia crisis clearly shows how reluctant religious authorities are in speaking a clear language against this sin *contra naturam*.

3) Here a third preliminary remark seems to be necessary mainly to remind theologians who are far from experienced in dialogue, i.e. the primacy of the concrete lived dialogue over the theoretically conceived dialogue. There is a certain danger in discourses and writings about dialogue which are not really rooted in inter-religious life and in the everyday experience of inter-religious neighbourhood-which therefore deal with the issues of IRD "in abstracto" and create a sort of "dialog-ology"⁵. It is the danger to "escape from history," to "forget its significance as a world event", its own performative, auto-poietical dynamics, which lets untouched nothing and untrans-

3. Cf. *Tischner*, Jozef, 1993: Glaube in düsteren Zeiten, in: *Hünemann*, Peter (ed.), 1993: Das neue Europa. Herausforderungen für Kirche und Theologie. Freiburg/Basel/Wien, 111-127 (Quaestiones disputatae 144).

4. Levinas, *Totalite at Infini*, Books, London 1980, 104.

5. Cf. *Heisig*, 1993, 42.

formed, neither the partners, nor their world views, nor the course of the history. A classical example of such a misconception, based on "dead" texts and assumptions predating the outcome of the ongoing dialogical process between Christians and Hindus, seems to me John Milbank's statement: that dialogue (as a post-modern endeavour) "that respects otherness and loyalty, and yet at the same time still seeks the goals of justice, peace, and reconciliation, can only, in fact, be a Christian (or probably a Jewish) position."⁶ On the contrary, the lesson of the lived dialogue shows that there is generated "the ideal of a religious commons, to which no country, no doctrine, no culture, no economy has more right than any other"⁷ Also the response of S.N. Rao (in this volume) shows in a significant way that there exists an advaitic "atmology" which is founded exactly on the same values which are reclaimed by Milbank as exclusive Christian. Simple sincerity to the facticity and reality of an ongoing living dialogue demands to be careful with such generalised assumptions of an a-priori and highly ideological character.

What we have to learn from this is the pre-eminence of the "real" reality over the imagined and preconceived reality. In this sense we have to allow the "miracle of dialogue" to take advantage over all logical constructions and conjectures and to accept that it really leads to a sort of common denominator, i.e. "the spirit of non-acquisitiveness or renunciation" - the evangelical poverty (as Pieris spelled it out).⁸

There exists an imperative for the European theologian to leave his comfortable arm-chair position and to wander along the dusty roads of the Indian dialogue, to immerse deeply in the "burning waters" of Indian spirituality, to enter the theological laboratories of *ashrams*, *inter-religious dialogue centres* and *basic human communities*, where people of different religious and ideological origins co-habit and co-operate-testing and experimenting out their respective uniqueness. We European theologians have simply to assume our practical and theoretical backwardness in this regard and to learn from the "Indian lesson"

6. The End of Dialogue", in: *D'Costa*, Gavin (ed.), 1990: *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, NY, 174-191, 176.

7. *Heisig* 1993, 41.

8. *Pieris* 1993, 133.

which stems from a heuristic leadership, from a "pole-position" acquired by centuries of an inter-religious coexistence and tolerance.

4. From this experience flows the recognition how inappropriate the categorialization in exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is, which was forged by Western theologians with regard to the question of Christian uniqueness.

Before and beyond these labels created by the *academic magisterium* of the West⁹ we have to be aware that there is a "third way" of approaching the problem by a slow and careful questioning and testing out what really unites us with or separates us from other religions. By this way the possibility of some further deeper understanding is left open in the ongoing process of IRD.

I am very sympathetic with Aloysius Pieris¹⁰ who asks the *academic* (theologians) and *pastoral magisterium* (bishops) to listen more attentively to the *magisterium of the poor* which shows how in the common struggle and co-operation of the basic human communities something grows out what we can call the respective uniqueness of the different religions and how the Christian uniqueness results from this unique *defence-or solidarity pact of God with the poor in Jesus Christ*.¹¹ From this point of departure theologians are urged to show how the classical understanding of the uniqueness of Christ as God-Man corresponds to this experience-laden uniqueness.

What we have to learn from the "Indian lesson" is that dialogue is in the first instance a "seeking process" and not a final "judging process" starting from some dogmatic definitions. We should be ready to realise that even contradictory and opposite claims could stick together without an all too soon or even without any definite "no" or "yes". Perhaps we can learn from epistemology that in science even contradictory theoretical explanations could be true (wave and corpuscle), and that therefore different frames of references could also work for the believing community. This attitude corresponds in

9. *Pieris* 1993, 129.

10. Cf. *Pieris* 1993, 133.

11. Cf. *Pieris*, Aloysius 1993: Three Inadequacies in the Social Encyclicals, in: *VJTR* 57, 73-94, 94.

my sense very much to the attitude of Hinduism which admits a doctrinal pluralism stressing only the necessity of a respected set of common moral customs and disciplines. As Amaladoss pointed out in India "orthopraxis was considered the necessary thing, while pluralism at the level of orthodoxy was considered acceptable."¹²

To enter the dialogue means therefore to be aware of the *long and very sinuous way* we have to share with the other religious partner towards a truth which is always greater, "veritas semper maior," towards the "inexhaustible mystery" as Vineeth correctly underlines. And as it is supposed: God is not only greater but also different and therefore we need the other to penetrate deeper the *Otherness* of God.

On this trajectory together with others it could be arrived at that we have to *change* substantially the comprehension of "our own" Christian LOGOS and that our faith may be enlightened by the truth of the other in a surprising and perhaps even ground-shaking new way.

5. Common seeking does neither mean the imposition of dogmas on the other believer - as Vineeth rightly shows, nor to force his assent, nor to make an apriori agreement to all the claims of the other. I even can have the strong conviction that my faith-proposition cannot be totally irrelevant for the other. What is asked in the dialogue is simply to be prepared to give justification of my faith and to listen to what the other believes to be in correspondence with the "will of God" in the light of his faith tradition.

Creeds, doctrines and dogmas - Vineeth seems to me sometimes too strict with their contingency - have in this process the function to secure the normativity, finality and definitiveness of the "LOGOS." They are important and necessary for members of a community to remember what was excluded on the way through history and to get a better orientation about future steps of faith. But the assent to doctrines has not the same quality as the assent to that, what the logos demands us as the decisive option "*today*." We are asked not only to look back but to make new decisions and options at any moment corresponding to the challenges we have to meet and the temptations we have to resist.

12. Amaladoss, Michael, 1992: "The One and the Many: Reality and Manifestation. The Search for the Ultimate in the Indian Tradition", in *Indian Theological Studies* 29, 310.

IRD could therefore be conceived as an encounter of committed persons who help one another with their questions, affirmations and convictions but also with their dissent and opposition to find out what attitude is really demanded of us today.¹³

6. To accept the inexhaustibility of the mystery does not mean that the mystery is a totally vague, formless, endless withdrawing, only eschatological appearing reality. The Christian is on the contrary confronted with a sort of inescapable *decisiveness*, which always forces us to reflect how our thinking and acting could better correspond to the "will" of this ultimate reality which had revealed itself historically in Jesus Christ. By this we are inevitably urged to make some concrete options: to say "Yes" to something and to say "No" to some other - to take a prophetic stance vis-à-vis some established situations like the social, economical, cultural, political, religious realities. IRD, even when the sweet language of harmony often prevails, also means discussion, controversy and conflict, struggling about that which really corresponds to the concreteness and decisiveness of the ultimate reality. As the theologians of liberation like to point out: who says "Yes" to a God who has revealed himself as the "God of Life" of the poor necessarily says "No" to the "idols of death" in whose name the death of the poor is generated and legitimated. And he has to take the deadly risk of opposing their interests. In these confrontations also will be filtered out the "uniqueness" of a religion, its specific contribution in the inter-religious co-operation, without making a priori absolutist claims.

7. It is impossible to go for dialogue with absolute claims as Vineeth shows. Therefore what sense will it make to speak of the "absoluteness" of Christ? Is that language of "absoluteness" further legitimated?

May I so approach the painful question of absoluteness because it is in some way a German "invention", a heritage of superiority-behaviour which poisoned our way of understanding and encountering other religions and cultures. It is well known that this claim goes back to Hegel's idea of an "absolute knowledge." In this light,

13. Cf. Werbick Jürgen, Heil durch Jesus Christus allein? Die "Pluralistische Theologie" und ihr Plädoyer für einen Pluralismus der Heilswege, in *Brück/Werbick* 1993, 11-61; 47f.

"absoluteness of Christianity" means nothing less than that the other could be understood and completely explained by my own perspective, that the other religious traditions are included, transcended as inferior moments in the process of the constitution of the absolute religion (i.e. Christianity). In this sense it is correct that we are faced with an imperialism which in last instance maintains that only one religion is really in the possession of the truth and can judge all the other. Taken in this way this claim is in itself blasphemous and corresponds to the terrorist absoluteness of fanatics.¹⁴ Despite this blatant misconception we have to realise that understanding tends towards an all encompassing comprehension. Therefore absoluteness is in some way innate to understanding. It always is on the way to universality and absoluteness. By the way this is the great advantage of reason, as it frees us from obscurantism and irrational fears of all sorts of supernatural powers. But there is also a permanent "idealist temptation" to imprison the absolute in the thought patterns of thinking. And there is always a danger to overlook that our understanding is only "on the way" to fuller comprehension. Therefore all absolutist claim for "our way" of understanding and correspondence to it is completely invalid and unsound. It is not we who grasp the absolute, on the contrary, it is the absolute mystery which is grasping us.

Correctly understood, the language of absoluteness can only be applied to the holy mystery itself. This mystery has revealed itself in Christ to the Christian as the definitive God-Logos who summons us to a life-surrendering commitment.

Therefore it is most crucial, how we have to conceive the relation between concreteness of Jesus Christ and absoluteness of the holy mystery. Certainly, for Christians the absolute has become concrete in the concreteness of the life of Jesus Christ. An understanding which seems to be quite unique in the history of religions. Therefore this concrete is not only one under many "examples" of the absolute, nor one of its possible manifestations. We cannot simply multiply the number of incarnations as far as Christianity is concerned.

But we have to admit that this concrete is the concrete of an "absolute" transcending and overbording it. It is the temptation

14. Cf. *Werbick* 1993, 54ff.

of Occidental Christianity to reduce the absolute to Christ or to the church, or to identify both. What could be learned in the Indian IRD is that by an open communitarian search and through the contribution of the other we are freed from narrowing down the absolute to the concrete and to absolutize it. For Christians all isolated monopolistic approach must fail because of the real nature of the absolute which we conceive as trinitarian structured interrelationship.

A "de-absolutization" and a sort of detention of a too apriorist language of "uniqueness" which separates us and put us on the pivotal of superiority is also asked from Christians by the very self-understanding of the Logos incarnate. As the concreteness of the absolute truth did not appear as the truth of the powerful, nor as the absolutist truth of fanatics, nor as a truth which depreciates other forms of truth. On the contrary, it appears in absolute powerlessness and as a truth which wants to be at the service of humanity. This truth can only appear in the dialogue of the multiple voices of different religions serving the interest of the whole human family.¹⁵

15. Cf. *Werbick* 1993, 60f.