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WHERE DOES OUR DIALOGUE GO FROM HERE?

It is very exciting today to look ahead into the twentyfirst century, from the long way we have come in our pilgrimage of interreligious dialogue. The first interreligious seminar I attended was held at Madras in December 1955. The theme of the seminar was "India and the Fullness of Christ" and the leading question was: What can Christianity learn from the Indian religions and what can Christianity contribute to India? We were then in the exclusivist mood: A Christian could not be a Hindu, and a Hindu is totally different from the Christian. J.N. Farquhar in his classical work "The Crown of Hinduism", published in 1913, had boasted that in the climax of world civilization all religions of the world had been weighed and all but Christianity had been found wanting. At a time of crisis the other religions based in human traditions would fall apart and Christianity alone could survive. World War I which began the very next year gave that boast a crude shock with the European Christian nations at the throat of each other. In 1927 when the World Missionary conference met in Zion in Jerusalem the conclusion was that all religions including Christianity were judged by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. At the Tambaram Conference in 1938 Ernest Hocking, Chenchiah and others argued that there could be a smooth transition from other religions to Christianity; but Heinrich Kraemer who wrote a special book for the occasion won the day saying that Hindus had to die to Hinduism before they could receive the unique historical revelation in Jesus Christ. Course of events disillusioned us again when our faith in history was shattered by the World War II. In 1961 and 1962 when J.A. Cuttat organized dialogues, the meetings were held at Almorah and Raypur, at the foot of the beautiful Himalayas, with the deliberate intention of creating a setting for our meditations on doctrinally divided religions in an aesthetic continuum. Later we moved on to the inclusivist model with Raimundo Panikkar's Unknown Christ of Hinduism and Karl Rahner's characterisation of people of other faiths as "Anonymous Christians." Then came the model of "pluralism" with its flexible connotation.

Hindus with their mystical emphasis may not feel the need of dialogue beyond sharing their consciousness simply to help others attain

the same consciousness. Similarly Muslims, with their identity firmly rooted in the Qura'n, are rather reluctant to seek any justification for their faith in other religions. On the other hand, for Christians with their Good News for all human beings united in a single salvation history and moving to a common destiny, interreligious dialogue is a must in order to fulfill their God-given mission. Unfortunately our ideas about other religions have not moved much beyond the spiral stages of Hegel's dialectics and the minimalist universal religion of the Spirit of Sarvapilli Radhakrishnan. When people like Hans Kung propose to create a global ethic taking the core values of all religions as a norm of immutable and irrevocable principles to unite all religions, I feel like asking: What happens to the rest of the precious faith of religions left outside these core-ideas, and who are we to dictate this universal norm to be obediently accepted by all.

Today interreligious dialogue has come of age; the period of honeymoon is over. The believers, especially knowledgeable leaders of the different religions today are in a position to face squarely the hard realities of our multi-religious world. It will be sheer wishful thinking for any religion today to imagine that its doctrinal system is going to supplant and substitute those of others. The old comparisons among religions as error vs. truth, rudiments vs. fullness, natural vs. supernatural and the like are models which do not lead anywhere. Every major religion based in the experience of the divine in faith claims to provide comprehensive answers to all human beings regarding the ultimate existential questions of human life, man's role in the world and his final destiny. They are not partial answers to be completed or complemented by other religions. Hence the crucial question is what are the basic principles according to which these independent religions can work together for the service of the human race, not only provide individual and subjective satisfaction and salvation, but also create one world of social harmony and allround progress for all human beings? what are their immediate tasks today?

Surely we are still in a situation of religious conflicts and we have not yet seen the end of religious wars. But the resolution of a situation of conflict is not, as in games, that one side should win and others should lose. Nor is compromise, in which both sides give up something, the answer. Any element of faith, which is a total and unconditional assent to the divine reality, is too precious to be compromised simply for politeness

sake. The only answer is for both sides to move towards a point where the legitimate concerns of both are fully realized. *For this each religion has to go back to its own original sources and discover there the interface to those valid, yet neglected dimensions of faith emphasized by others.*

Today we are holding the dialogue in very exciting times, when great many new religious movements have emerged in every religious tradition, baffling the cocksure complaisance of traditional pundits. We are very much like those herpetologists who find their neat classification of worms demolished by some new four hundred unknown species thrown into their laps. We are back to the drawing boards in search of new paradigms to include the new arrivals. Here the old models of inclusivism, exclusivism, pluralism, and normative models of the past are found totally inadequate. Exclusivism that says my religion alone is true, others false, is sheer arrogance. Inclusivism, which tries to find included in one's faith all other faith-versions is rather condescending. Pluralism denies the unity of the human race and makes dialogue itself irrelevant. Looking for a normative model above all religions forgets the radically different ways in which concepts like religion, saviour, salvation and revelation are taken in different religions. The simple fact is that these paradigms are derived from Aristotelian logic which could not go beyond the theories of truth that restricted themselves to conformity of things to our concepts, or the capacity of concepts to produce a coherent system, or simply instrumentalized the ideas to produce a pragmatic theory which said that only those ideas which worked in practical everyday experience were true.

Here other epistemologies call for our attention. Thus the Indian tradition leaves aside this principle of differentiation and is historically and culturally leaning towards the principles of identity and non-contradiction: Knowledge of the other takes place by reaching out to the other as expressions of one's own authentic self, and not through negation of the other. This was clearly stated by Asoka in his rock edict XII in which he exhorted believers to consider other faiths as dimensions of one's own faith and the act of respecting and honouring other faiths improving and advancing one's own religion. The commitment to one's faith can and should co-exist with due respect for other religious traditions in their otherness. Religion itself is polyvalently described as *marga* (path), *pada* (step), *yana* (vehicle), *adhikara* (competency), *sampradaya* (tradition), *asramas* (stages of life), and *bhum-*

ikas (stages). Hence the necessary attitude in the study of different religious traditions is sarvadharmasamabhavana, tolerance. Even in Christianity this pluralism is maintained as evidenced by the different christologies of the New Testament.

This principle of tolerance is found basically in all major religions. Thus Amos the prophet tells the Jewish people, that Yahweh is the God not only of the Jews but also of the Egyptians, their archenemies, of the Cretans and of other peoples as well. Islam explicitly mentions with respect prophets of all religions along with Mohammed. Hinduism is sanatanadharma only because it is open to the presence of God in the heart of every being. Christianity recognizes the unity of the human race and the unity of the divine economy of salvation for all God's children. Even though it confesses the unique revelation in Jesus Christ, it also recognizes the diversity of the religious and cultural backgrounds of the recipients of that revelation as integral to the divine self-disclosure. We are not preaching the Gospel in a vacuum, but to recipients, who have already heard God's saving word in their hearts. Jesus Christ is not the monopoly of Christians, but common to all humanity. The mediating role assumed by religious authorities, sages, priests, mullas and medicinemen should not instrumentalize the Spirit of God, so as to claim that God acts only through them in the hearts of people. Mediation is not a one-way traffic. Mediators do indeed enrich others, but are also themselves enriched. To talk about salvation to a Buddhist inherently contains the recognition and acceptance of the fact that God works through the Buddhist main frame of reference for those who sincerely believe in it. These genuine Buddhists are co-workers with believers of all religions in the building up the kingdom of God.

We cannot, however, agree that all religions are equal in dignity. Indeed all human individuals and their voluntary associations are of equal dignity, and the fellowships they build up have to be given real freedom. But the systems of doctrines, morals and worship-forms they build up have to be critically evaluated objectively on their own merits. It will be extremely naive to imagine that the Jones town cult, the religious sect that met with tragedy at Waco, Texas, the Unification Church of Sung Yang Moon and other major religions like Buddhism and Jainism have as independent religious systems equal dignity. It will be practically impossible to bring all these diverse systems into

some common agreement. Even in cases where the word of God in scripture is taken as the norm of faith, the diversity of exegetical opinions regarding those texts shows that there are real ambiguities in the texts, gaps in our historical knowledge and problems in reconstructing the historical evolution of a particular religion. One has to retrieve scientifically the original sense and purpose through reconstructive hermeneutics and background theories.

All that can be expected of interreligious dialogue on the doctrinal level is to produce strategies by which religions can make themselves intelligible to all and open themselves to critical examination. Even the best of religions are interpretations of the experience of the divine reality, and our perception of absolute Truth is, after all, our perception, and not the Truth itself. Followers of religions have, therefore, to be constantly self-critical of their positions in order to clarify it to themselves and to others. The same service of honest criticism has to be extended to our partners in dialogue. Engaged in a worldwide community of enquirers one has to form a system of abstractions in order to articulate what is important in their experience of divine things. Fundamental comparative categories have to be designated in order to relate alternative claims and understand them without prejudice. In this respect the closing message of Vatican II is very relevant: "Happy are those who, while possessing the truth, search more earnestly for it in order to renew it, deepen it and transmit it to others", and those "not having found it are working towards it with a sincere heart. May they seek the light of tomorrow with the light of today until they reach the fullness of light".

II. Dialogue on the Level of Praxis

The more immediate and easier task of interreligious dialogue is on the level of experience, ethics and everyday practice. Religion is first and foremost experience centered in life and practice. Most religions started out as reform movements, and theoretical expositions were apologetics against the traditionalists. Only when the movement lost its momentum was recourse made to philosophical systems to justify faith and make it intelligible. In this transition from experience to rational interpretation of the same, a good deal was actually lost. Thus the Upanishadic experience of rishis became the polemical treatises of the systems. Sri Buddha refused to engage in philosophical discussions,

because they did not lead to any firm conclusions but only distracted attention from the immediate moral concerns of human liberation. But later thinkers like Nagarjuna and Asvaghosha produced elaborate philosophical systems regarding the nature of nirvana. Christianity started as a religious response of the common man against the elitism of the Qumran community and the Graeco-Roman gnosticism. The Essenes who inhabited the Qumran caves attempted a Jewish revivalism proposing as ideal the Prince of Light and Teacher of Righteousness who went back to the purity of the Law eschewing all the elements gained during the Babylonian exile, and the Greeks proposed an apotheosis of the select few. Over against these, as the Gospels testify, Jesus proclaimed in his Sermon on the Mount that the poor, the hungry and the weeping are the blessed ones. Greeks and Romans would have no difficulty in a god like Mitra or Osiris or Adonis dying and coming back to life. But people like Tacitus and Pliny could not accept this Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Roman judiciary condemned to death and crucified being acclaimed the Risen Son of God. In fact those who discovered first that Jesus is the Son of God were not the scholars and official religious leaders, but the Samaritan woman, several times married and living with a man who was not her husband, the pagan Roman centurion at the foot of the Cross, the thief hanged along with Jesus on his right. The most abject and marginalized experienced in Jesus the definitive manifestation of the self-emptying love of the divine Saviour. Later when Greek philosophy was applied to this concrete experience of divinity it became a metaphysical proposition to be fought over by scholars through centuries.

Every religion starts out as a movement flowing out of a concrete experience in faith of the ultimate meaning of human existence. This experience cannot be understood by the principle of differentiation according to which, "his experience" becomes for us "his ideas", abstract and intangible. We can approach another's religious experience only by an epistemology of identity that says that a Hindu's faith is my own faith; a Muslim's faith is my own faith. Once this fellowship of faith about the ultimate meaning that unites all human beings, believers and non-believers alike, is established, we can stop squabbling about the nature of the Deity and ask what unique contribution each religion can make, to render our world hospitable to all God's children. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel remarked, religion is not an ontology of God for man, but an anthropology of man for God. Our interreligious

dialogue in the 21st century should not be about the intrinsic nature of the God, who is any way infinite and incomprehensible to all. It should be rather concerning our common task to translate our religious faith into the different coordinates of human existence, our common history, our fragile psychology, our social togetherness, the political realities of today, and our own ultimate destiny. Here the possibilities are infinite and there is scope for the greatest diversity without hurting each other. The base religious community in any given locality is that of all the believers there, and the scope of dialogue is to bring out the best in each religion. If we want to go forward in our pilgrimage of inter-religious dialogue this is the only path we can take.

What religion needs is a retrieval of concrete experience of the death of Jesus on the Cross, of the illumination of Buddha under the bodhi tree and the like events of human history. Religion is not an esoteric doctrine or a creed to be blindly recited but an actual opening of the human heart to God. Hence the base religious community is the fellowship of all believers in a particular locality, to whatever religion they may belong. The basic factor of religion is faith, a gift of God for all his children. Further groupings of the believers of a particular religion has an added active missionary task like that of the disciples of Jesus of communicating their interpretation of faith to others.

A second task of interreligious dialogue is to build up a moral framework to guide people in their daily lives. Morality does not make a distinction among religions. What is immoral for a Christian is immoral also for a Hindu and a Muslim. Hence each religion should endeavour to bring its own resources to clarify the do's and don'ts that make or mar a good man. The basic criterion here is the nature of the action itself. Adultery and theft and murder cannot be justified by any religion. Further the circumstances have to be taken into account. But we cannot take any moral concept of a particular religion and compare it with an equivalent concept in another. Any moral concept of a religion should be taken in the context of the total world vision of that religion and the specific meaning that concept has in it. Besides no moral concept appears in isolation but only within a cluster of allied concepts which constitute a moral and religious theme. The specific input of different religions go to build up a solid moral framework for the whole society.

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An important lesson from the history of religious wars and conflicts is that no religion should lend itself as a tool for vested interests. Most theological heresies and religious schisms started out as political conflicts and drew in religion as a motivation to divide peoples into irreconcilable groups. Recently the meeting at Sringeri of the four Sankaracharyas of Sringeri, Dwaraka, Jyotir and Puri and Kanchi muths seems to have realized from the sad experience of Ayodhya that political parties and the sants and mahants were using them in a proxy war. Though religions have to use their influence in shaping politics, they should not unwittingly let themselves to be carried along by the political currents. This is an area which requires an ongoing dialogue of the spokesmen of all major religions of our country.

Perhaps the most important area in which interreligious dialogue has to focus attention today is the preservation of our environment. Scientific and technological progress carried along as its baneful side-effect the increasing pollution of air and water. Dumping industrial waste into our water sources, and the increasing use of pesticides and other chemicals to obtain bumper crops are rendering our planet earth more and more inhospitable to living beings. Ironically the developed industrial nations do not let up in cutting down trees and raping the earth, and at the same time call upon the poorer nations to preserve the rain forests and desist from industrialization. But it will be foolish to let our house burn to spite the mice. It is the responsibility of all religious people to restrain the greed that leads people to acquire goods beyond their legitimate needs. All have to realize that polluting the environment is a denial of the meaning of creation itself, which is to provide a hospitable home for all God's children.

What is important in this respect is the religious attitude to nature. Most of our major religions are patriarchal in structure and outlook and believe in man's freedom to do what he pleases with the rest of creation to serve his own perceived needs. But this is a denial of his relative insignificance in age and stature in our immense universe and also of his rational responsibility to provide leadership to the whole nature in its pilgrimage to the realization of the final goal. What is needed is a change of heart, a feminine and maternal heart to nourish and foster God's creation as an integral unit.

Today the conflict is not among religions regarding their perception of the Deity, but within each religion concerning the outlook on

man himself, his responsibility to his fellow human beings and to the rest of creation. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel has stated, religion is not an ontology of God for man, but an anthropology of man for God. The conservative, patriarchal outlook takes religion as a way of life, keeping the rules of the game and observing the rubrics carefully to gain one's individual end, including spiritual salvation. A liberal and maternal outlook, on the other hand, calls for solidarity with one's fellow beings, concern for their all round health, and compassion for the poor and the oppressed. In the place of the abstract philosophies that once served as handmaids to our theologies, today human psychology and integral sociology have to be the language of religions. More than ever today we come face to face with the ever present reality of human suffering. If once we thought it the well deserved punishment for sin and the fruit of one's karma, today we come to the increasing realization that the poverty, hunger, social and political disabilities and cultural backwardness of large masses of people in the world today are all man-made and a sin.

Leaders of all religions, priests, mahants and Ulamas and mullas alike have a collective responsibility towards people of all faiths in their particular territory and not only to the faithful of their own religion. In the light of the common faith, which is a gift of God to all his children, all religions have to work together towards building up and deepening a spirituality, towards which each religion should make a specific contribution. They should not avoid difficult topics, but endeavour to hold an open discussion of all the aspects of matters that create contradictory reactions such as mission, jihad, fundamentalism, place and role of women, and the treatment of the Dalit people in the different religions. In dealing with conflict situations we should employ the presentday sophisticated social and political analysis methods to isolate and deal with the non-religious roots of the conflicts. They should make a collective effort to create literature that will bring out the best in each religion and make it intelligible to people of all faiths. In this way religions will appear as differing paradigms regarding the one ineffable mystery they all endeavour to communicate.