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## DIALOGUE AND THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

### 1. Theology of Religions and Inter-Religious Dialogue

#### i. *The Context: The Emergence of a Dialogical Attitude*

Man is dialogical by nature. Characterized by self-awareness he communicates himself to others through dialogue. Thus dialogue is not something novel to the human race. It is an essential part of human nature. However the word dialogue has assumed new dimensions of meaning in recent days. This is especially so when the word is used in relation with the world-religions or world-visions which in the contemporary world very often work as quasi-religions.<sup>1</sup> We are now living in a world of dialogue between religions and world-visions. Some sort of a dialogue was going on between religions from time immemorial. Any encounter of one religion with another religion calls for some kind of a dialogue. But this need not be a dialogue that brings about any transformation in the partners. A real dialogue presupposes an attitude which is open to the other person, respectful towards him and even a readiness to be changed by the graceful touch of his presence. This is what is new to the word dialogue today, when it is applied in the context of religions. Human communication is no more in the style of an unilateral monologue as it was in the time of imperialistic monarchies and the colonialist expansion of the West to the East. Mankind has developed its own consciousness that it now understands the anomaly of the dictatorial approach to the factors of life.

Very often it is the secular consciousness that brings us to the sharp awareness of the dichotomies of life we are living in. Secular consciousness, though it is understood to be of this world, is at times deeply

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1. Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, (New York: Columbia, 1964), pp. 5-7.

religious, on account of the values it stands for and tries to bring about. We owe very much to the leaders of the secular world who have raised their voice in many ways against the imperialistic attitudes in the world and in the Church. The present dialogical attitude in the world and in the Church is the result of so many converging factors that were at work in recent history of mankind.

ii. *Consciousness of national identities and the breakdown of the political empires*

One phenomenon that changed the face of the modern world very considerably is the emergence of so many independent nations in the non-Christian world. These nations were mainly in Asia and Africa. Paradoxically the conquering nations were Christians and the conquered were largely non-Christians. The awakening of the political consciousness in the colonial nations forced the empire nations to come in dialogue with these people of different culture, religion and value system. Though equality was not accorded immediately, it was a movement leading to the recognition of the sovereignty of each nation. This political move indirectly brought about a mentality of looking at the cultural and religious patrimony of these nations as having its own autonomy and spiritual wealth. The master nations were slowly getting ready for a dialogue between religious heritages of the world.

iii. *Scholarly Study of Religions*

The move for political independence and the consequent autonomy of religious cultures of the world is only one factor that contributes to the present attitude. Another important factor which is not directly associated with politics is the scholarly studies on religious literature of the world that came to light in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These scholars, many of them were from the West, made independent studies of the non-Christian religious scriptures and the allied literature and with great respect and appreciation published them for the benefit of all. The famous series 'Sacred Scriptures of the East' edited by the Indologist Max Müller deserves special mention here. In his small booklet *India, what it can teach us?* he wrote:

If I were asked . . . under what sky the human mind has mostly developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which will deserve the attention even of those

who have studied Plato and Kant, I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we, here in Europe, we, who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thought of Greeks and Romans, and of the Semetic race, the Jewish, may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact, more truly human life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life – again I should point to India.<sup>2</sup>

Max Müller was a pioneer of profound dialogue between religions. One hundred years ago neither the average consciousness of the world nor the awareness of the Church was ready for such a dialogical attitude which Max Müller has already developed in his heart. It is interesting to note that Professor Max Muller who was then professor in the university of Oxford wanted to include the Holy Bible also in the proposed series of the *Sacred Books of the East*. But Professor Pusey of the Anglican Church who was very influential in Oxford circles objected to it so vehemently that Max Muller had to give up his cherished desire of including the Bible in the series. Whole incident was very symbolic. As Bible should stand outside of the Scriptures of the world, so must also the christian doctrines of the Church. Dialogue on the basis of certain equality of partnership was something unthinkable at that time. Nor did then Christian consciousness seriously take into consideration what Max Muller said with his prophetic insight. Can the Christian nations seek a corrective from the religious traditions of the pagans? Now, one century later, we see with our own eyes how thousands and thousands of the young from the West going to the East in search of some spiritual experience which they think they miss in the West. Max Muller was perhaps prophetically right.

#### iv. *The Personal Encounter of the Living Religions*

A third factor that has contributed greatly to a change of attitude towards other religions is the personal encounter with the believing people of other religions. One great achievement of the modern scientific world is that technology has reduced the contemporary world to a global village. People belonging to different religions began to live in nearness and constant communication. While many from the Eastern countries of non-Christian religions came to the West in order to participate

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2. Max Muller, *India, What it can teach us?*, P. 6.

in the material and intellectual boost of the West, many from the West proceeded to the East just to encounter Eastern religions and their spiritual traditions. In either way these movements greatly helped the interaction between believing persons of different religions. Since these interactions were not politically motivated people were free to admire what they discovered in the life-style of a non-Christian believer. The West perhaps with its natural tendency to be faithful to history, produced historical films about some of these leaders who were deeply religious and politically committed. Attenborough's award-winning film *Gandhi* is an example. The film *Gandhi* shows how a believer of a non-Christian Religion, a Hindu, brings into sharper awareness the teachings of the Gospels in a world which is dominated by the spirit of colonialism and discrimination of nations. Paradoxically all the master-nations of the colonial era were Christians and it is a Hindu who awakens the Christian conscience among the ruling nations. Gandhi's campaign for political freedom with the practice of *ahimsa* was a living challenge to the Christian nations to purify their own Christian consciousness as well as to admire the values and life-style emerging from the believer of a different religion. Quite unconsciously a certain kind of a dialogue was taking place in the heart of so many people.

It is really surprising to note, within a short period of half a century, the world-consciousness has changed so drastically in its approach to nations and their religions. In the recent decades we have witnessed the publication of so many books and articles on the theme of dialogue. I may specially mention the *Journal of Dharma* from Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, a review for dialogue between religions and the recent series on the 'Theology of Religions' from the Orbis Books, New York.

v. *Dialogue and the De-absolutization of Truth*

Human consciousness has continuously shown an inherent tendency to identify truth with its expression. When truth is identified with its own expression, the expression tends to become absolute. If one claims to possess the absolute expression of truth, whether it be in philosophy or religions, hardly will there be any place for a meaningful dialogue with another world-vision or religion. The claim of truth absolutized was a real hindrance for dialogue. This was especially so in the case of such religions which claimed special historical revelations of the Absolute. In short, all the religions of semetic origin have shown such a tendency in course of history. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are con-

sidered to be of semetic origin. The reason of this exclusive tendency need not necessarily be something emerging from the nature of true revelation, but perhaps from the nature of true semeticism and its hangover in all these religions. It is also to be noticed that there had been prophets and saints in all these religions who have come out with word of protest against such exclusivism and have even faced persecution from the fellow-believers of their own religion.

Today, however, the situation has much changed. The mankind is approaching the phenomenon of religion as the outpouring of a divine mystery than a ready-made answer to his problems. A mystery is something to be relished and wondered at, than to be intellectually analysed and answered. Implied in this approach is also the attempt of humanity to answer the creative call of God to find out true unity of humankind in spite of its variety in religious and cultural traditions. Something great is happening in this world, in spite of its modern tendencies of secularism and humanism. The world is giving up exclusive universal claims of truth, while remaining open to the mystery of divine self-communication. Even the Communist Russia, which held another form of ideological exclusivism is now showing a new attitude of openness and dialogue with other ideologies and traditions of today. It is in this world of today that we have to speak of dialogue between religions.

Mankind has come to this recent position after having gone through different stages of religious consciousness. Professor Raimundo Panikkar observes five periods in the evolution of the consciousness of the Church in its attitude towards other religions such as that of 1) witnessing 2) conversion 3) crusade 4) mission and 5) dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

Other authors may divide it differently. One thing we are strongly made aware of is this: the church-consciousness is subject to evolution and needs growth into greater maturity as any other consciousness.

## **2. Towards understanding the terms: Religion, Faith and Dialogue**

Before we come to a proper theology of religions, we have to define the terms such as, religion, faith and dialogue.

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3. Raimundo Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* ed. by John Hick and Paul Knitter (New York: Orbis, 1987), pp. 93-95.

i. *Religion*

Religion can be understood in a primitive way as any kind of worship directed to any super-human power, including spirit or God. It can also be understood in a different way, where the idea of God seems to be absent. Thus religion is often worship of God or gods in the ordinary sense, whereas is pure quest for transcendence in original Buddhism. Religion is also associated with its forms of expression. Thus cult, celebrations, rituals and traditions of ways of life, all belong to one's religious expression. Very often people think these expressions are the essence of religion. When we come to a theology of dialogue we have to bear in mind the real religion and its varied expressions. Paul Tillich defines religion as "directedness toward the unconditional and culture is directedness towards the conditional form and their unity."<sup>4</sup> Though one is not bound to follow this definition it seems that religion is one's quest for the ultimate and the unconditional which gives him a profound meaning of his being. In the quest for this profoundness, which may be sought either in the innermost depth of one's own being or above all beings as Ultimate Transcendence, one discovers his own wholeness and meaning. This is religion.

Thus Religion is the fundamental option a man makes by which his life is set on the ultimate. It is a decision of total commitment to God or to the absolute in faith, trust and love. Hence faith becomes very central in religion. Faith in the absolute can also be faith in a meaningful system. Very often earthly ideologies are accepted as absolute by those who have abandoned religion. Thus secular humanism, communism etc. are sometimes accepted and treated as absolute ideologies and thus atleast functionally become a kind of quasi-religion. Our dialogue with other religions not only includes the established religions but also ideologies which are a kind of religions for the followers of those ideologies.

ii. *Faith*

Faith is an act of ultimate commitment which one makes to the reality he has encountered as ultimate and meaningful. It is faith that makes religion a real force pervading all aspects of one's life. Faith in the Absolute becomes faith in the manifested form of the Absolute. Thus an absolutist vision often comes down to a theistic religion where

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4. Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?* (New York: harper and Row, 1973), p. 59.

the formless and the nameless absolute is seen and experienced in names and forms. As religion has its essential form as a quest to the ultimate and its expressional form in varied cultures and rituals so also faith has an essential form as an inner orientation towards the absolute and forms of beliefs by which it remains committed to particular expressions of this one basic faith. Since faith is very delicate and personal truth seen in faith cannot be treated as philosophical doctrines. A vision in faith is meaningful only to one who participates in that experience of faith. It is the result of an inner awakening, an enlightenment from within the context of a particular encounter of the Absolute. Faith is of course directed to the Absolute. But the Absolute is encountered here and now. This acknowledgement of the Absolute in particular is the result of a new vision often accepted as a gift from the Absolute itself. In our traditional language this may be said as the opening of the inner eye. Faith is the vision of the third eye. What is seen through the third eye is not necessarily relevant or understandable to one who looks at reality with his ordinary eyes. This is a crucial fact which we have to take into consideration in the context of dialogue. The language of faith is not understandable for one who does not participate in the same faith. This, however, does not mean that the truth of faith cannot be brought into dialogue. This can be presented as a personal experience which is profoundly meaningful and enriching to oneself, but not necessarily relevant in the same sense to another who has a different faith and a set of beliefs flowing from it.

Hence, the person in dialogue should present his vision with a sense of utter humility, with no tendency of imposing one's own views on the other. As St. Paul says one's sharing of faith, may sound foolishness from the perspective of pure worldly wisdom and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Hence, sharing in dialogue is a humble exposition of one's own religious experience. Of course indirectly, silently there is an invitation to participate in that rich experience but by no means there should be any shade of an imposing attitude.

### iii. *Dialogue*

Dialogue can be primarily understood as conversation, and mutual sharing. In common parlance dialogue goes for exchange of ideas. Dialogue between religions can be seen in this level as sharing one's

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5. I Cor. 1. 18-25.

views on the philosophical and other systems evolved by religious traditions. Thus there is a kind of learning through dialogue. This way of dialogue can lead one to a kind of common search through persons who seek to understand reality in depth by sharing each other's views and experiences. When shared-search is expressed in the form of common worship, dialogue takes one more step and becomes shared-worship. When the attitude of dialogue is extended to action-programmes dialogue becomes co-operation.

Dialogue also leads us to personal transformation as one gets really changed through the process of getting more and more enriched by his partner in dialogue. Dialogue in this way may lead one to conversion, though not necessarily conversion of a person from one religion to another. It is rather the deepening of one's own religion and the emergence of a new person discovering the depth of one's own religion.

A recently published Vatican Document speaks about the dialogue of life as follows :

Before all else, 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. Dialogue is thus the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as well as of every aspect of it, whether one speaks of simple presence and witness, service, or direct proclamation (CIC 787 no. 1). Any sense of mission not permeated by such a dialogical spirit would go against the demands of true humanity and against the teachings of the Gospel.

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. He ought to bring the spirit of the Gospel into any environment in which he lives and works, that of family, social, educational, artistic, economic, or political life. Dialogue thus finds its place in the great dynamism of the church's mission.<sup>6</sup>

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6. Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions*, Roma, 1984, pp. 17-18.



The documents further speaks about the dialogue of deeds for working together, the dialogue of specialist for mutual understanding and the dialogue of experience.<sup>7</sup>

S.J. Samartha defines dialogue as: "an attempt to understand and express our particularity not just in terms of our own heritage but also in relation to the spiritual heritage of our own neighbours."<sup>8</sup> The philosopher Martin Buber understands man as dialogical by nature and defines him in terms of one's fundamental openness to the other. Attitudinal openness to the presence of the other is a favourite theme well developed by contemporary existential philosophers. According to M. Heidegger man is authentic only when he answers to the call from the being of the other.<sup>9</sup> Every presence is a call which demands a response. Inter-religious dialogue seen from this perspective is a religion's readiness to acknowledge the presence of the other religion as distinct from it, yet contributive to its own self-realization. In a world of religious pluralism a state of pure isolation is neither possible nor a perfection to be opted, just like in a world of many entities absolute unrelatedness is not possible for any being. In the light of these studies dialogue is here understood more as an attitude or as a basic option one takes towards the other religion which includes a readiness to acknowledge the contributive presence of other in discovering one's own identity.

### 3. Towards a Theology of Religions from the Perspective of Dialogue.

This theology takes the praxis of dialogue between religions seriously. The praxis of dialogue already presupposes a theology of religions. The task of the theology of the religion from the perspective of dialogue is to bring this theological perspective to clearer articulation.

It also takes seriously the dialogical nature of man, his openness to the other which is the foundation for the dialogue between religions. Two religions in dialogue mean two believing persons in dialogue. Since faith has characterised their being, genuine dialogue between them also brings about the sharing of faith which has given meaning to their being, and

7. *Ibid*, pp. 8-9.

8. S.J. Samartha, "Courage to Dialogue" in *Pluralism, Challenge to world-Religions* (New York: Orbis, 1985), p. 99.

9. M. Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage* (Frankfurt, 1959, p. 28, cf. also V.F. Vineeth, *Discovery of Being* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 1970), pp. 65-69.

thus also an invitation to participate in the inner core of each other's experience. A very stiff dogmatic stand about one's own religion may find it very difficult to go along with this path of dialogue. This brings us to problem of dogma and dialogue.

i. *Dogma and Dialogue*

A dogma is possible and understandable within the circle of people of the same faith. However, a dogmatic articulation is a great conceptual limitation imposed on the faith-experience. Very often the conceptual super-imposition is made because of philosophical contraversies. Philosophical concepts applied to faith-experience gives rise to dogmatic expressions. Dogma is neither a way nor a goal of an authentic religious experience. It is only an attempted articulation of a faith experience in a particular frame-work of conceptualisation and language of religions experience. Ultimately dogmas have to recede once again putting us back into the ineffability of the mystery of the faith-experience. Dogmas are part of the belief-systems which the basic faith experience creates in course of time. Dialogue is not an attempt to make the partner a participant of one's own dogmatic position. It is rather an earnest search into the depth of faith-experience communicated to me perhaps in the form of a dogmatic truth claiming a great tradition.

Drawing inspiration from the shared experience of my partner in dialogue I may break the shell of the present dogmatic frame-work of the religious experience and delve deep into the not-yet-articulated dimensions of the same.

The already said is not untrue or error. But now it is to be understood in the light of the "unsaid." The unsaid comes to light in my encounter with the other religions. That the unsaid may blossom into being in our search for deeper experience we must be basically free from the 'said' from the limitations the 'said,' the dogmas, have imposed upon us.

ii. *Dialogue and Freedom in Religious Faith.*

Freedom in religious faith is often understood as freedom to opt one's faith over against another faith. This is what people usually understand by conversion. What I mean here is freedom to re-think one's own faith. As we have already seen, faith is an inner enlightenment which immediately gets encapsuled in thought-pattern. Thought-patterns actually imprison our faith. In that sense it may be truly said that dogma is a

short of imprisonment of one's own faith in a frame-work of thought-patterns which, though inevitable, is in itself not an essential part of his faith. Freedom from this imprisonment is necessary for successful dialogue. What makes this imprisonment? The domination of a rational approach over against the experience of mystery is the inner core of dogmatism. Religion on the other hand is to be experienced as a thrust into the ineffable mystery of God which is now being communicated to me here and now. The particular is important and beautiful. It is in the context of the concrete the Absolute reveals itself; but no concrete, however supremely beautiful, can exhaust the ineffability of the Absolute. The Absolute is ever *ab-solutum*, free from all articulations. However, it is being revealed here and now. This is *alethea*, unveiling which the pre-Socratic Greek thinkers called truth.

The real truth is never completely grasped but ever continually revealed. Mystery is the central experience, namely the experience of that which is at the same time revealed and hidden, told and untold. The experience of mystery and holy is not the experience of truth as "*adaquatio intellectus cum re*" which the scholastics called truth. Truth, when it is defined in terms of adequation and precision, takes away the dimension of mystery from our experience. Experience is slowly converted to idea and idea to doctrine. The formation of dogma is not far away from this process. A doctrinal stand devoid of the depth of experience of the mystery behind it, gives little room for a fruitful dialogue.

Freedom in faith is one's basic freedom and right to penetrate into the inner most recess of the mystery of one's own religious experience which ever remains unarticulated. This freedom is a basic human right because the self revealing God is infinite and ineffable, even after the fact of incarnation and the human mind is finite and subject to limited understanding, even if it is characterised by faith. Each understanding is only a flash of light on the reality that is being unveiled by which we have an experiential vision of truth. We should resist to reduce this holy experience to an idea or dogma, a sheer doctrine which in itself is not the essence of religion, though could rightly be a valid part of the conceptualisation of religion. Conceptualised religion takes us to a doctrinal stand and perhaps to dogmatism.

It is the spirit of abstraction that is operative in us which carries us away from the ineffability of faith-experience to a conceptualised form of religion. Though it is inevitable in the human dynamics of

understanding, if left unchecked, it will take us to an uncompromising stand of dogmatism. With the help of abstraction we reduce our religious experience to a system of understanding religion. This system captures our thinking and controls our orientation to others. When we are dominated by the system we tend to forget the mystery of which the system is only an expression. Once mystery is forgotten we identify religion with system it has produced. What is not understandable within the frame-work of this magnificent system is rejected as false or meaningless. What I cannot put into my categories of thinking I hate and consequently reject. The other religion becomes a problem rather than a mystery. This happens because one has converted one's religion into a set of beliefs and systems and is trying to understand the other religion within the categories he has already formed. Indirectly it also shows a tendency of intellectual imperialism which wants to control by its own categories even the experience of the other believers. With this kind of an attitude one may find that genuine dialogue is not possible. Instead, dialogue call us for an attitude of being and mystery over against an attitude of having and problem. In the attitude of being I approach the other as a real presence communicating to me from the depth of his own being. Instead of capturing him by my categories of thought I tend to admire him as something ineffable. The other religion is a mystery, a revelation to be admired than something to be intellectually grasped by abstraction or controled by concepts I have formed. The other is thus an *alethea*, an unveiling of another truth-dimension which I do not fully understand. I would like to know him more; hence I hold myself open to the concrete presence of his being in front of me.

iii. *Dialogue and the Appreciation of the Concrete*

Genuine dialogue is possible only between two persons encountering each other in their concreteness. Two religions in dialogue mean two religions encountering each other in their individuality. Here there is no attempt of reducing one to the other or considering one as a preparation or accessory to the other. It is just like two individuals meeting in their individuality, integrity and openness.

The essence of genuine dialogue consists in the fact that each of the participant acknowledges the other in his/her Dasein, in his particular being. Each one turns to the other with the intention of establishing a

genuine and a mutual relationship.<sup>10</sup> The other religion is a presence, a call and an invitation, silently waiting for a response. A religion becomes authentically complete only when it responds to the call presented to it by another living religion. This call is not for an immediate conversion, but for an admiring look at the religion that is now being revealed in front of me. 'I do not assimilate into my own soul that which lives and faces me, I vow it faithfully to myself and myself to it.'<sup>11</sup> Dialogue is possible only in the context of an I-thou relationship. Every attempt to reduce the thou to an it is anti-dialogical. A religion is reduced to an it when it is looked at from my perspective alone as an object to be analysed, as a system to be defeated and conquered. This is not dialogue. In genuine dialogue, says Martin Buber, I enters into the presence of the thou, that is, it unreservedly accepts the address of the thou and opens itself in response. This appreciation of a concrete and admiration of the particular which is the core of a meaningful dialogue is nipped in the bud by the rationalistic spirit that sometimes dominated our thinking. This is the result of the spirit of abstraction, which we have already seen in the previous section.

Political motivation of triumphalism has led nations to deny the individuality of many other nations. They were made colonies. 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 approach on the contrary will foster an attitude of the spirit of participation instead of domination, admiration instead of interrogation and mystery instead of problem. Mere exchange of idea that sometimes goes on in the name of dialogue need not be real dialogue in the sense of admiring the unique presence of the other and being genuinely addressed by it in the depth of one's own being. What Martin Buber calls "technical dialogue" and "monologue" can also take place in inter-religious dialogue.<sup>12</sup> An attempt to share objective understanding of religion by an individual of another faith-community may have exchange of idea in dialogue form. But strictly speaking it is only a technical dialogue. This may be a form of starting dialogue, but is devoid of the fragrance of the flower of dialogue which is kept very much in the humble disposition of the heart than in the

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10. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Collins, 1969), p. 37.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

12. Martin Buber, *Ibid.*, pp. 27-36.

scrutinizing power of the intellect. This does not, however, mean a spirit of self-criticism as well as the criticism of the other religion is anti-dialogical.

Monologue in inter-religious dialogue is when one believer simply wants to thrust his religion into others, not listening to the other with a heart of expecting and accepting any ray of truth from his partner. The underlying attitude is: "I am all perfect or my religion is all perfect and therefore does not need to be perfected by another religion." With such an attitude one cannot go for a meaningful dialogue. He needs perhaps a corrective in his understanding of the theology or religions.

#### **4. The Nature of the Emerging Theology of Religions**

We have already seen how a theology of Religions is being shaped out of our dialogical attitude to other religions. In this section we would further clarify some of the characteristic notes of this theology.

i. *A Theology of openness to the inexhaustible mystery of the self-revealing Absolute*

Authentic religious experience is not the knowledge of any religious doctrine, but the encounter of the Absolute revealing himself in time and space, here and now. The inevitable paradoxity implied in the self-communicating process of the Divine takes us to the experience of mystery: the mysterious ways of his self-communication, the inexhaustibility of the same and hence the need of keeping ourselves ever open for further revelations from him. This is true even if Jesus Christ, as St. Paul puts it, is accepted as a decisive and definite revelation of the hidden mystery.<sup>13</sup> Our faith commitment to the fact of Jesus does not take away the essential structures of limitation associated with any revelation. God reveals always in concealing. *Avarana-Viksepa* is the inner structure of any revelation of God in time and space.

Revelation, by the very fact that it is the manifestation of the Unmanifest in certain otherness, is bound to be limited. God cannot reveal without concealing. What is manifested will always be a *namarupa*, a name and form, of the One who has no name and form. As Sankara puts it, all manifestations are *avarana-viksepa* (concealment and projection at the same time).

13. Hebrews, 1, 2.

Limitation is the inherent structure of all revelation, no matter how supreme and singular it is. This is true also with regard to the manifestation of the Word in Jesus Christ, the basic *namarupa* the Word has assumed. Though the Word is supreme and infinite, the manifestation in the form of flesh is definitely finite, subject to the limitations of culture and history. Yet the flesh is that medium through which the Word is manifested. Since the content of the Word is always inexhaustible, no manifestation can claim to have expressed the entire content in such a way that no further expression is needed. The revelation of God in limitedness, therefore, always needs newer and newer expressions of the same as long as it continues to be a process in time and history.<sup>14</sup>

It is this dynamics of *avarana-vikṣepa* which makes revelation a flash of *alatha*, unveiling, yet receding from it for further revelation, that takes us to the experience of mystery. Openness to the Absolute is openness to his continuous self-communication which will never be exhausted. It is continued in one's own religion whereby one is invited to enter deeper and deeper into the very particular experience of mystery one has received. It also continues in a different way in other religions whereby one is invited to acknowledge and admire God's operations elsewhere, and when need be, to complement himself by drawing inspirations from there for what he misses in his own religious experience.

ii. *A Theology of acceptance and transcendence of the particular experience of the Absolute*

Religious experience is a particular experience. As long as we are in time and space this particularity cannot be avoided. Hence the man in dialogue confronts a problem. How to be earnest to the faith and beliefs of his own religion and keep himself open to other religions? A way of solving this problem is to accept his own religion as a precious gift and transcend its limitations at the same time in his ultimate orientation to the Absolute who reveals himself elsewhere. Transcending the particular is not rejecting it. Transcendence over any form of finitude is a basic human dynamism which in reality lays the foundation for our freedom. Freedom is transcendence by which human consciousness

14. V.F. Vineeth, "The Concept of Dialogue and Economy of Salvation," *The Indian Journal of Theology*, vol. 30. No. 3,4 (1981), p. 154.

spontaneously ascends over all that is limited and tends to the Boundless and the Beyond. Man has every right to exercise this freedom also in terms of one's own religion.

This sense of transcendence enables him to freely accept his own religion and yet remain open to the inexhaustible mystery of the self-revealing God.

For a Christian the particularity of his religion is characterized by his faith in Jesus Christ. It is also associated with the teachings of the church in so far as these teachings are essentially linked with Christ. This modality of religious faith is to be accepted by a Christian. It forms the very core of his faith. Christ becomes the very centre of his life. But the Christian believer has to remember two things:

- i) The centrality of Christ in his life is a faith-claim which should not be refused to a doctrinal assertion universally valid for all.
- ii) Even if it is fully valid for him and his community which shares his faith, the whole life and expressibility of his religion is subject to varied structures of limitations which are ultimately to be transcended. Religion as such is not an ultimate but only a way, to guide us to the ultimate.

By this I do not mean in dialogical theology of Religions we have to de-emphasize Christ and focus our attention more on the Father or the Spirit. Today we find theologians opting wither for a God-centred theology of religions or for a Christ-centred theology of religions. I do not want to put myself in any of these schools. Let the Christian be full of Christ-consciousness. Let him share it from the depth of his religious experience. As Christ came to take us to the Father let him see Christ as the visible face of the invisible Father, as the way, to the Father. He is thus the truth, the way and the life. Let the Christian joyfully accept this in his faith.

But the whole religious experience he has in and through Christ, though it is unique for him in his faith, does not exhaust the expressibility of God who is the ultimate mystery, the undivided unity of the self-revealing Trinity. It is in this orientation to the not-yet-revealed mystery of God, one transcends his entire religious experience, while he is fully rooted in and sustained by it.



This position of simultaneous acceptance and transcendence of one's own religion vaguely reflects the Brahman-Isvara experience of the Indian religious tradition. By this I do not however mean that Christ is just an Isvara along with any number of Isvaras in Hindu pantheon. But the Isvara-dynamics of the expressibility of the inexpressible is operative also in Christ. He is the expression of the manifestative power of God and by his spirit in us. He takes us back to the mystery of the trinitarian God.

Philosophers have spoken about the Beyond and the Boundless. Karl Jaspers speaks about the philosophical faith by which one encounters the cipher which is beyond all forms of the theological faith of revelations. He says:

A refusal to believe in revelation is not due to godlessness: it is due to the faith of the soul created free by Transcendence. Mindful of the truth it has access to, and of the remoteness of a Transcendence that is hidden, yet inclined towards all men, philosophical faith must give up the reality of revelation in favour of the ambiguous movement of ciphers.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously I do not agree with Jaspers in the idea of giving up the reality of revelation, if he means by it a complete rejection of it. But I do find a valid insight, namely about the need of transcendence in our orientation to the Absolute. He continues:

The faith, which appears in many forms, becomes neither authority nor dogma: it remains dependent on communication among men who must necessarily talk with each other, but do not necessarily have to pray with each other.<sup>16</sup>

Today we may even dare pray with each other, as we all share our basic and ineffable experience in our own little ways possible to us.

iii. *A Theology of acknowledging other religious experience as valid means of salvation*

Once we can accept and transcend our own religious experience, our way of looking at the other religions, it is easy for us to see another

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15. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, (London: Collins, 1967), p. 60.

16. *Ibid.*

aspect of the same mystery being unveiled in another religion. Nobody is entitled to have the fullness of all experience. But everybody can hold himself open to the dimensions of religious experience made available to him. Leonard Swidler presents the goals of inter-religious dialogue as follows:

1. To know oneself ever more profoundly
2. To know the other ever more authentically
3. To live ever more fully accordingly.<sup>17</sup>

The encounter of the other religion is now considered as part of one's own self-knowledge and self-fulfilment. This is a salutary result of the awareness of limitations in one's own religious experience. A mentality of adherence to one's own religion and acknowledgement of the other religions is a sign of growth in religious consciousness. James Fowler speaks about six stages in the development of one's faith-consciousness. Regarding the fifth stage he says:

Stage 5 accepts as axiomatic that truth is more multidimensional and organically interdependent than most theories or accounts of truth can grasp. Religiously, it knows that the symbols, stories, doctrines, and liturgies offered by its own or other traditions are inevitably partial, limited to a particular people's experience of God, and incomplete. Stage 5 also sees, however, that in the relativity of religious traditions what matters is not their relativity to each other, but their relativity – to the reality to which they mediate relation. Conjunctive faith (Stage 5), therefore, is ready for significant encounters with other traditions than its own, expecting that truth has disclosed and will disclose itself in those traditions in ways that may complement or correct its own.

This position implies no lack of commitment to one's own truth tradition. Nor does it mean a wishy-washy neutrality or mere fascination with the exotic features of alien culture. Rather, conjunctive faith's radical openness to the truth of the other stems precisely from its confidence in the reality mediated by its own tradition and in the awareness that the reality over-spills its mediation. The person of Stage 5 makes her or his own

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17. Leonard Swidler (Ed.) *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (New York: Orbis, 1987), p. 26.

experience of truth the principle by which other claims to truth are tested. But he or she assumes that each genuine perspective will augment and correct aspects of the other, in a mutual movement toward the real and the true.<sup>18</sup>

iv. *A dialogical theology and growth and Self-transformation*

A theology of religions which acknowledges other religions as valid sources of God-experience, as it transcends its own limitations, is also ready to perfect itself by the help of the other. This may be achieved in many ways such as by facing challenges placed by another religions and drawing inspiration from it. One has to be faithful to one's own religion. But all religious experiences and expressions are in need of correctives. At times it can happen that another religion magnificently unveils a certain dimension of religious experience which, due to several factors of cultural transformation, is being lost sight of. This hidden depth of one's own religion can well be brought to light by the presence of another religion. But this is possible only if the religion concerned is ready for a genuine dialogue with the other religion. Mutual sharing will bring about mutual enrichment. Since religion is not a goal, self-transformation in the light of the presence of the other is its right attitude.

v. *A Theology of Evangelization through a threefold dialogue*

India is a land of great world-religions, cultural wealth and at the same time a country of miserable poverty. Hence our dialogue must be with all the three aspects of our being. Dialogue with our cultural traditions takes us to the reality of inculturation. Dialogue with the other living religions is what we now call inter-religious dialogue which in course of time provokes an intra-religious dialogue leading us to conversion and change of attitudes. Dialogue with the poor of our country calls us for a theology of liberation. Evangelization is now to be understood in the form of this threefold dialogue. The statement of the Federation of the Asian Bishops conference says:

The Asian Bishops have understood evangelization as the building up of the local church through a threefold dialogue with the culture, the religions and the poor of Asia. Inculturation, interreligious dialogue and liberation are the three dimensions of

18. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 186 as quoted in *Toward A Universal Theology of Religion*, p. 38.

evangelization. Proclamation is not a fourth dimension added to these three, but is the aspect of witness that is an integral element of all the three dimensions of evangelization.<sup>19</sup>

vi. *A Theology of humble waiting*

A Theology of religions conceived in this way is certainly a theology of humble waiting for the action of God. It joyfully and faithfully shares its Christ-experience. But it is also aware of the fact that what it says is the result of a special vision, an inner experience. It can be fully shared by another only if the spirit opens the inner eye of the partner in dialogue. All shades of triumphalism is therefore to be given up. In its patient waiting for the light of God it also sees the other religions throwing light on different dimensions of our life with God which contributes to its own self-understanding and self-building. The theology moves with the spirit of a basic search with its own faith in Jesus Christ, desirous of delving deep into the very mystery of Christ which though appeared in "certain fullness" will appear in "capital fullness" only at the end of time.<sup>20</sup> The document from the secretariat for non-Christians on "The attitude of the church towards the followers of other religions" concludes as follows:

God alone knows those days, He to whom nothing is impossible, He whose mysterious and silent Spirit opens the paths of dialogue to individuals and peoples in order to overcome racial, social, and religious differences and to bring mutual enrichment. We live therefore in the age of the patience of God for the church and every Christian community, for no one can oblige God to act more quickly than He has chosen to do.

However, before the new humanity of the 21st Century, the church should radiate a Christianity open to awaiting in patience the maturation of the seeds sown in tears and in trust (cf. James 5:7-8; Mark 4:26-30).<sup>21</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

I would like to conclude this paper with a citation from St. Augustine's treatise on Religion, *De Vera Religione*:

19. FABC papers: No. 48, *Theses on Inter-religious Dialogue*, 6, 4 (p. 16).

20. Raimundo Panikkar, "The Category of Growth in Comparative Religion: A Critical self-Examination," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 66, 1973, pp. 115-116.

21. *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions*, p. 22.

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 the 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.<sup>22</sup>

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22. As quoted in "Dialogue with other religions," Workshop paper No. IV for the All India Seminar, 1969.