

CHRONICLE

The following is the statement of the thirteenth annual meeting of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) held at St Paul's Seminary, Thiruchirappalli, from December 28-31, 1989 on the theme, 'Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism.' Of the four research papers presented in the seminar by Gispert Sauch, V.F. Vineeth, Dominic Veliath and Raimundo Panikkar, the paper of V. F. Vineeth is reproduced in this issue with the kind permission of the ITA. Editor

Introduction

1. Finding ourselves in a country engaged in an incessant search for the ultimate, which has expressed itself in giving shape to some of the world's great religions, and witnessing the novel phenomenon of numerous Christians seeking the fulness of their life through the spiritual experience offered by other religions, we the members of the Indian Theological Association, gathered at St Paul's Seminary in the vicinity of Srirangam – a fertile ground of intense religious experience of Vaishnavite Hinduism – wanted to devote ourselves to deeper reflection on the reality of religious pluralism and its role today in understanding and defining our own true identity as disciples of Christ. But the deeper we tried to go into our own self-understanding, the more it became clear to us that we should follow the path of a kenotic Christ stripped of all shades of triumphalism and treading the path of the pilgrim Christ who will take us to the vast and unbound horizon of divine experience from where God our Father beckons us. It is with this wide vision, freedom of mind and sincere desire to be open to the signs of the times, that we propose these reflections, the result of our prayer and painful thinking. We do not claim to have developed a complete theology of religious pluralism. We wished to be honest to ourselves and to the pledge that we had made last year to continue our search for a more meaningful encounter with other religions.

In Retrospect

2. In the statement we made last year we humbly acknowledged that we had not succeeded in formulating any adequate theology of religions and that our work remained unfinished. We had decided, therefore, to continue this search by delving deeper into the question of religious pluralism and to move towards a truly relevant theology of religions.

3. After examining the role of religion in society from a sociological perspective and underscoring the fundamental religious dimension of people, last year we looked at the fact of religious pluralism and the emergence of world religions in their revivalist and missionary dimensions. The side-by-side existence, and the creative encounter of the major world religions have qualitatively changed our pluralistic context and raised several important questions : Could religious pluralism be affirmed *de jure* in God's plan of creation and salvation? Is not religious pluralism the cultural expression of the infinite riches of the Absolute which cannot be adequately contained in any one historical event, person or tradition? What is the relation between revelation, faith and their expressions in belief-systems, rituals, symbols and the ethical behaviour which emerge from a particular socio-cultural context? Could there be a genuine dialogue without accepting the partner as the other, with total openness, not, of course, without one's own faith experience and convictions? Could a committed Christian holding the uniqueness, centrality and finality of Christ, enter into a sincere and open dialogue with the believers of other faiths?

4. With these and similar questions in mind, last year, we examined the Christian attitude to other religions and discovered in the history of the Church a variety of Christian responses, such as, a totally negative attitude, categories of natural-supernatural, partial-full, complementarity, which are often referred to as ecclesiocentrism, Christocentrism, and theocentrism. We could not, however, critically examine these different responses, categories and the ensuing theological controversies. But we realized more and more the limitations of those theoretical approaches to the faith of other people which often came from a monoreligio-cultural society and a mere academic and speculative point of view. We became convinced that any authentic and living theology of religious pluralism can emerge only from the context of an inter-religious praxis of liberation, dialogue and inculturation. Where we have to accept other faiths as the other, but in the actual context of relatedness.

5. We had therefore proposed in our search for a theology of religious pluralism to have a deeper theological reflection on the ongoing inter-religious liberative praxis and the liberation hermeneutic of religions, on inter-religious dialogue and on the phenomenon and process of inculturation. We hoped that this would give us new light to understand and if needed, to reinterpret the role of religions in our life, and the inter-relatedness of

different faiths, and thus help us to spell out an authentic theology of religious pluralism.

The Meaning of the Theology of Religious Pluralism

6. We want our reflection to be authentically theological i.e., emerging not from a mere intellectual effort but from the depths of our being as committed believers touched by the Absolute Reality.

7. We are not speaking of a general interest in or even of a scientific study of other religions, however much these are necessary in the theological task before us. For if one dared to say a word about other religions from a distance, so to say, or from a superficial acquaintance with them, one's word would lack authenticity and credibility. Nor are we speaking about a comparative study of religions, though such a comparison can enrich the critical understanding and articulation of one's own faith.

8. We want to express what the plurality of the religions we meet every day of our lives in India means to us as believers, as people who experience themselves as touched and strengthened by the ineffable Mystery of Existence. As we perceive the signs of the Absolute Presence also in the lives of our sisters and brothers around us professing various religions, we ask in the light of the divine Truth revealing itself, what we should affirm about these religions, and how we understand the purpose and meaning of the wonderful religious variety around us and its role and function in the attainment of Salvation. We are not called to sit in judgement on them, but we wish to understand them not merely from a rationalistic or historical angle but in the light of the Truth coming to us from above.

9. As Christians, we approach these questions from our own faith perspective. We shall necessarily use the imperfect categories and the language at our disposal. We have been educated in the Christian religion, and our theological language cannot but be influenced by the two thousand years of its existence. Followers of other religions may not always be able to make our imperfect expressions their own, and it is not our expectation that they do so. However we should make sure that they do not feel that our expressions do violence to or distort their own self-understanding in its vital core. After a long experience of living with friends of other faiths and of dialogue with them, we are called upon to speak theologically about these faiths with integrity and total respect, and to find a place of honour for them in our own theological world.

10. Undoubtedly, believers of other religions also reflect on the plurality of religions from their own perspectives and using their own theological language. Perhaps one day, when dialogue will have progressed further, we shall be able to evolve a common language in which each tradition will recognize its own identity and its relatedness to others.

11. Our task is truly tremendous. We are not just dealing with a recent concern of believers all over the world or developing a peripheral section of the discipline we call theology. An authentically dialogal theology of religions will necessarily affect the whole of our theology as it naturally raises radical questions concerning our own beliefs and the way we have articulated them. What we say about religions in the light of faith will have an impact on what we say about God, about Jesus Christ, about his Spirit, and about the Church. It is the awareness that the Spirit of God is active in the world and in the heart of our deepest religious convictions that emboldens us to persevere in this task so necessary today.

Liberative Praxis and Theology of Religious Pluralism

12. In a situation of imposed poverty of the masses and of pluralism of religions and humanist ideologies, the combined struggles of the peoples of different faiths and ideologies for liberation, especially those of the awakened poor and marginalized, become the significant *Locus theologicus* and term of reference for a theology of religions from a liberation perspective. In this connection, we are aware of the great contextual pluralism of liberation experiences, such as dalit liberation, feminist liberation, tribal and workers' movements and human rights movements. Underlying such a pluralism of liberation experiences, there is an implicit transformative understanding of religions. Such an understanding seems to be operative in all critical inter-human and inter-religious action and struggles for liberation.

13. This calls for a *kenosis* and a crucifying purification of the distortions of religions by which they become countersigns. In a situation of socio-political and cultural divisions, alienations, ideological manipulations and cooptations, religions have often become great obstacles to liberative praxis. These distortions are based on categories that make religions a historical in their concern and dichotomising and spiritualising in their interpretation. Liberative praxis makes an ideological critique of these interpretations.

14. The primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy brings sensitivity and attunement to the recovery of the liberative core of religions manifesting itself as a liberation-salvation process. We are thereby called to a rereading and a rearticulation of the fundamental faith-affirmations for a liberating inter-human and inter-religious fellowship of peoples. In this hermeneutic, liberation is understood in terms of a wholeness of humans, nature, cosmos and the Ultimate. In a world divided between the powerful and the powerless, wholeness of liberation always includes a preferential option for the powerless and marginalized.

15. If this is a liberation hermeneutic of religions, it will reinterpret every religious specificity in its fundamental affirmations and release its liberative *élan* as a source of vision and a *dharma* of transformative praxis, leading to a holistic and dynamic inter-human relatedness of ideologies and faiths. Such a transformative praxis is rooted in dialogue and calls for inculturation. A liberative hermeneutic of religions thus opens up towards a liberative ecumenism of religions. This will lead to a liberation of religions themselves from their exclusivism, fundamentalism, and superiority claims and bring them closer to each other in mutual acceptance and relatedness.

Dialogue and the Theology of Religious Pluralism

16. One insight, among many others, that contemporary thought on human nature has brought to light, is the radical insufficiency of any isolated human existence and its need for dialogue for its own self-understanding and authenticity. This principle is valid also in the realm of our religious existence. A religion, however exalted, can no more define itself in splendid isolation from other religions. Rather it has to evolve its own self-understanding in its manifold forms of relatedness to other religions. This takes us to the reality of dialogue in our life.

17. As the recently published Vatican Document on Dialogue states, "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."¹ This dialogue is "a manner of acting, an attitude and a spirit which guides one's conduct.

1. 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, n. 30.

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."²

18. True dialogue takes place only between authentic persons in the specificity of their own faith. Genuine dialogue demands loyalty to one's own faith, and readiness to share it with members of other faith-experiences and to listen to them with reverence and appreciation. In order to do this sincerely and meaningfully, we should be aware of the structures of limitation imposed upon our own basic faith-experience. While holding on to the specificity of our faith which is ultimately a gift, a sacred trust we have received from God through Christ, we have to transcend the inherent limitations of the same in our orientation to the ineffable mystery of God. It is this sense of transcendence that renders us ultimately free and leads us to further exploration of our own faith-experience through dialogue with other religions. A true spirit of dialogue emerging from the spirit of transcendence, therefore, refuses to identify our faith-experience in Christ with any articulation of the same, although such articulations are natural in the process of thinking and reflecting on the basic mystery of the faith-experience. The depth-dimension of the unarticulated in one's own faith is often brought to light by the challenging presence of the partner in dialogue. It is therefore with an awareness of limitations of our own faith-experience and its expressions and sense of admiration of what is being revealed in the other, that we now begin to look at the other religions. This outlook leads us to a new approach to a theology of religions.

19. 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, this 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 limitations of God's self-communication through Jesus Christ. We therefore do not claim any kind of ultimacy for any of the articulations of our own faith-experience nor do we deny the role of such statements in the course of

2. *Ibid.*, p. 136, n. 29.

history of a lived faith. 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 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 that fullness of truth which is beyond all claims of expression and possession.

20. 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.

Interculturation and Theology of Religious Pluralism

21. We use a new word *interculturation* to express our conviction that there is a mutual fecundation in the dialogal experience of pluralism. Religion and culture are so closely related that religion can be called the soul of culture, and culture gives religion its language. In any open and creative encounter between two religions/cultures there takes place a natural symbiosis which we call interculturation.

22. Interculturation comes from the praxis of sincerely living together, i.e., entering into the human community without reservation, fears or mistrust. It amounts to an acceptance of other communities inasmuch as we establish a fellowship with them. Religions are hindrances for that fellowship as well as the means to reach a communion in depth which transcends superficial exchanges and transactions.

23. A conscious interculturation implies not only adopting external features of the other, but accepting the *mythos* of the other inasmuch as we succeed in establishing a cultural symbiosis. Interculturation

is not a religiously neutral act but it radically challenges both partners inviting them to a new self-understanding which is a continuous process of reinterpretation.

24. Interculturation has profound theological implications. It demands a genuine dialogue with members of other religious communities, implies a common sharing in a liberative praxis even if not identically interpreted, and changes our own self-understanding, overcoming our watertight exclusivisms. Likewise it demands a similar attitude from the other side, and leads to a mutual fecundation of ideas and new community of praxis. However, it has to reckon with mistrust and resistance from those who would wish to keep the religious *status quo* in static immobility; and hence it has to take into account the danger of artificial eclecticism, shallow syncretism and hurried imitations.

Our Vision of Christ and Theology of Religious Pluralism

25. In this pilgrimage we are sustained by the Spirit of Christ who has preceded us to Galilee (Mt 28/10). Journeying with him as disciples to the Father, we are faced with the challenge of articulating a theology of religious pluralism. We need a vision of Christ which will inspire us to commit ourselves to this task.

26. We look at Christ as one who, by emptying himself, takes us to the ineffable mystery of God. His *kenosis* signifies a 'not clinging to' his divine status (Phil 2/6). It was an act of unconditional surrender to the Father. It was a presence in submission to His Father's universal salvific will. Christ accepted the human condition to the ultimate consequences. He gave himself totally to others; he did not hesitate to set aside even some of the religious convictions of his people in order to be faithful to his mission. This led him to the final expression of *kenosis*, namely, the death on the cross, consecrated by the resurrection and symbolized in the eucharist.

27. The kenotic Christ is present in every human vicissitude as servant and leaven. He belongs to the whole of humanity. Through this servanthood he gives himself incessantly to men and women of all cultures and leads them unobtrusively to their self-realization. His is a liberative action which makes the person whole, transforms the cultures it encounters by forming them into a community of love in which the other is respected and accepted in his or her self-understanding.

28. This is the Christ we experience in our faith. We are however aware of the fact that as we express our faith by affirming the uniqueness of Christ (*ephapax*), there are also claims to uniqueness on the part of other religions. This indeed poses a problem to us in our dialogue with other religions. To respond creatively to this problem some have suggested a theocentric interpretation of the Christian faith rather than a Christocentric one. Others, however, feel that this would deprive Christianity of its specificity. Therefore we would rather approach the issue from a different perspective. Christ is constitutively the Way to the Father and as such he is theocentric. But to one who is on the Way, the Way is also the goal.

29. In our approach to religions we follow this Christ who responds to the Father, and is with the members of all religions in their journey towards the Absolute. Indeed, we do find in our country, persons belonging to other faiths, who have experienced and expressed Christ as Way to the Absolute.

30. Moreover, in the existential struggles of the masses of our country, people look for a Way that could lead them to the fullness of life. Christ himself had to face such struggles and even today he is fully involved in them.

31. The discipleship of such a Christ demands from us a *metanoia*. The consequences of this discipleship will require from us a greater openness to all humanity. When this happens, other religions will no longer pose a threat to us; rather they will offer us a greater opportunity to express our own commitment in a richer and more meaningful way. This will enable us to build up one community of hope with diverse expressions of response to the Transcendent.

32. The religions of the world are expressions of the human openness to God. They are signs of God's presence in the world. Every religion is unique and through this uniqueness, religions enrich one another. In their specificity, they manifest different faces of that supreme Mystery which is never exhausted. In their diversity, they enable us to experience the richness of the One more profoundly. When religions encounter one another in dialogue, they build up a community in which differences become complementarities and divergences are changed into pointers to communion.

33. This self-same encounter should serve as a corrective which helps religions break out of their shell of egoism, assertiveness and

dogmatism which are deformations in every religion. Our theology of religions can emerge only from a healthy interaction which involves both the sharing of experiences and the critique of expressions.

34. Since no religious language can adequately express the Mystery, we accept the reality of different languages which may not always fall in line with our own expressions and patterns of thought. This calls for the cultivation of a deep-seated respect for religious expressions other than our own. Any attitude of dogmatic absolutism is contrary to the true spirit of religion.

35. Our theology of religions will go one step further when we positively accept other religions – a positive acceptance which does not necessarily mean an intellectual agreement but which manifests itself in a shared praxis which should take place at various levels. This endeavour calls for an attitude of constant listening to one another, persevering involvement and patient watching. What sustains us in this endeavour is our hope.

36. No religion can exist in isolation; nay more, a religion that is not open to the other becomes irreligious as exemplified in fundamentalism and religious fanaticism. In a pluralistic society like ours, genuine religion essentially entails a relationship to other religions and should be lived as such. In short, to be religious is to be inter-religious.

Conclusion

37. Our effort to evolve a theology of religious pluralism has far-reaching consequences for the Christian community and for ourselves. The Church in India has to acquire a renewed awareness of her mission as servant and leaven, as community that can transcend its institutional identity in order to build up a community of hope in which all men and women of goodwill can find a meaningful existence as they struggle towards total liberation. The identity of the Christian community, like that of Christ, the man-for-the-other and the man-with-the-other will be in its relatedness to the rest of the human community. It will be able to find the one in the midst of the many as He who illumines and unfolds the ineffable riches of the religious heritage with which the Spirit of the Lord has endowed our land. "All things shine with the shining of this light; The whole world reflects its radiance."³

3. *Katha Upanishad*, V, 15.