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JESUS AND THE GREEKS: REFLECTIONS ON A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

One of the characteristic trends in our times is the 'discovery of identity' practised at all levels: political, social, cultural as well as religious. Even as there are visible expressions of humanity growing into a big human family transcending the barriers and limitations of caste, colour and creed, there are also concrete manifestations of specific groups within this human family trying to assert and establish their identity at the expense of the community on which they depend and of which they are a part. The movement towards—decolonialization characteristic of the latter half of the twentieth century, the self-awareness created in the developing countries of their right to be and to become and, above all, the phenomenon of human consciousness becoming more and more independent, all these have helped build up a yearning short identity at all levels.

It is true that at the religious level, the struggle for identity is some what different from that of struggles. After centuries of hatred and mistrust religions are now discovering a new dimension of dialogue and complementarity by which they try to appreciate and recognize the positive values of religious traditions. Every religion feels the need of its being complemented by the valid insights of other religions. All religions feel that they have a common task to fulfil and a common goal to achieve. Many serious religious thinkers now feel sad about having wasted much of their energy in the past over trifles in inter-religious feuds and acrimony.

However, we are not yet altogether free from the real problems that beset inter-religious relationships. We are still struggling to discover and establish the identity of religious traditions and sometimes new identities within the same religious tradition. The outcome is that such identities become goals in themselves and what is expected

of each religion in its historical process is seldom achieved. Religions are no goals in themselves: they are only means for achieving the total and integrated growth of the human family.

Christ is very often presented as the "Founder of Christianity." If we scientifically analyse the person and work of this Founder, it would become clear that he is not a Founder like other Founders. He is so completely identified with the cause for which he stood, suffered and died. He had to carve out a new group of followers from the very religious reality of which he was a member in every respect. Even the group comprising his disciples was called the "sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5), thereby making it appear that many regarded the new religious movement as a sectarian affair. But for the New Testament writers Jesus was far from being a leader of a 'Sect' or the founder of a new religion. John presents Jesus as "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Jesus is the one who teaches the meaning of a non-localized religion and form of worship (Jn 4:24). The author of the Acts of the Apostles understands Christianity as *the Way* while his adversaries considered it a 'sect' (*haireisis*) (Cf. 24:14-16).

In the light of these considerations we will now attempt to analyse a passage from the Gospel according to John, namely, John 12:20-26, since it throws light on what it means to belong to a religion at all. It is the story of some non-Jews desiring to meet Jesus, who by religion was a Jew. In this connection it is important to note that the various events narrated in the Gospels are to be seen not only as narratives but also as symbolic stories. So also the story of the Greeks coming to see Jesus and Jesus' response is not only a narrative but also a *symbolic story* which has an abiding message for any and every follower of a religion in his inter-religious attitudes and relationships. The question is not whether the author of the Gospel had all these thoughts before him when he wrote this story in the first century of our era. What is important for us are the insights this story provides living as we do in the context of a multi-religious society. In fact, the power of the written word lies in its capacity to generate new ideas and new insights which can inspire the readers of succeeding generations.

The Greeks wanting to see Jesus (Jn 12:20-26)

The story of the Greeks wanting to meet Jesus is narrated in the Book of Signs (Jn 1:12) immediately preceding the Book of Glory

(Jn 13:21). The various signs which Jesus performed created a division among the people, some not at all willing to acknowledge the supernatural origin of Jesus and the others eager to recognise Jesus as the messenger of God. To this latter group belong the Greeks who came to Jerusalem from Galilee for worshipping in the Temple. Their openness to transcend the loyalty they owed to their own religion and to appreciate the religious worship of the Jerusalem Temple enabled them to see a new dimension of meaning in religiosity in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time, being Greeks and not being members of Judaism, they were not sure whether Jesus would welcome them. So they sought the advice to Philip who was also a native of Bethsaida in Galilee. It seems Philip too was not quite sure about the feasibility of the whole proposal. So he in turn consulted Andrew and at last they decided to go and speak to Jesus and find out whether it would be possible for him to meet the Greeks. Of course, there are other cases of non-Jews meeting Jesus. The Roman officer of Capernaum came to Jesus with a request to cure his servant who was ill (Mt 8:5-13). The Canaanite woman approached Jesus with a request to heal her daughter (Mt 15:21-28). But here it is different. Here what is involved is a religious dialogue. The Greeks are willing to listen to Jesus provided he is prepared to receive them. We do not know from the Gospel itself whether they met Jesus at all. But the reactions the proposal of Philip and Andrew generated in Jesus reveal the radical conception he had about belonging to a particular religion.

The reaction of Jesus is quite unexpected. It is doubtful whether Philip and Andrew ever understood the meaning of what Jesus said: Jesus has an entirely new approach to this issue. He must have been sad about the protocol arranged for such a visit. He exclaimed "The hour has now come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (Jn 12:23). As we are accustomed to the glamour of glory, we may be inclined to think that Jesus was happy about the glory he received through a few more visitors, and that too, from among the gentiles. Looked at from the point of view of ordinary human beings, it would mean that Jesus was happy about his name and fame reaching out to the outer world, his influence becoming more and more increasing. This would be the most uncritical understanding of Johannine theology. For John, glory is not the glory of the final exaltation of Jesus, rather it is the glory of his passion, death and resurrection seen as one reality. The passion is the beginning of the glory and the resurrection is the

climax of it. But both are one and the same reality. The passion is a moment of being lifted up from the earth and consequently it is a moment of glory. What emerges is a picture of religion in which suffering and glory are bound together.

Lifted up from the Earth (Jn 12:32): Transcending the Barriers of Identity

The passion and death of Jesus are moments of his being lifted up from the earth. This is not so because he died on a cross which was lifted up in order to let Jesus die between the earth and heaven rather it is a moment of transcending the limitations and barriers of one's human condition. The most fundamental human condition for Jesus was the fact of his being a Jew. Jesus was a Jew in every sense of the word. With Paul he could say: "I was circumcized when I was a week old; I am an Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Judah, a pure blooded Hebrew" (Cf. Phil 3:5). But there his identity ends. Though Paul was a Pharisee, Jesus was not. Jesus transcended all the sects. He was non-sectarian. His human nature was transformed by the divine nature. All the same, he was a Jew; and he was considered a Jew in all aspects. That is why he was criticized for his actions, his breaking the law of Sabbath, his mixing with the sinners and the publicans.

Being a Jew, Jesus must have had his own predilection for the Jews and for judaism. But at the same time he must have also realized the embarrassment it would create for him to stand for his cause. On the one hand, he would have his people benefit from his mission and ministry; but, on the other hand, his mission demanded that he should reach out to others and make his services available to others as well. He did not want his Jewishness become a limiting factor for his elevated and transformed human nature to operate beyond the barriers of his religion. In fact, what he wanted was to make every human person rise above the limiting factors of their human nature, such as its selfishness, its earth-boundness; its time-boundness and its caste-mindedness very much in vogue in the practice of religion.

On several occasions Jesus is said to have transcended this limitation helped, no doubt, by the sublime character of his human nature. We have the story of the Roman Officer whose faith Jesus readily

appreciated: "I tell you, I have never found anyone in Israel with faith like this. I assure you that many will come from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of heaven. But those who should be in the Kingdom will be thrown out into the darkness" (Mt 8:10-12). Mathew narrates another story of Jesus going to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon when a Canaanite woman came to him and said: "Have mercy on me! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition." Although the story apparently gives the impression that Jesus was depreciating the Gentiles, the final conclusion of the story is clear enough: "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you" (Mt 15:21-28). Jesus knew only too well that there were people belonging to other religions whose faith far surpassed that of his own compatriots, the Jews.

The attitude of Jesus towards the Samaritans is yet another piece of instance to show how keen he was to bring together communities of opposing loyalties. In the parable of the Good Samaritan it is a Samaritan who turns out to be the ideal person for he proves by his action what it means to be a neighbour. In all simplicity and majesty Jesus illustrates the authenticity of his being an ideal neighbour. As a Jew Jesus should have hated him; but as a man with a capacity to transcend mere appearances, he praised him and presented him as an example: "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:25-37). The same truth is once again affirmed in the story of the ten lepers. The one person who came back to thank Jesus was a Samaritan. Jesus' reaction to this extraordinary turn of events is noteworthy: "There were ten men who were healed; where are the other nine? Why is this foreigner the only one who came back to give thanks to God?" (Lk 17:11-19). It is clear that the nine were Jews who might have thought that they had a right to be healed and so they did not owe any gratitude to God. It was not easy for Jesus to make such statements. He had to soar above his own natural feelings and step outside his own religious identity to see the goodness in people not belonging to his own religion.

The story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman and through her the whole community of the Samaritans is yet another challenging story of the Gospel of John. The importance of this story does not lie in the fact that the woman was converted and that the Samaritans recognized Jesus as the "Saviour of the World" (Jn 4:23). About the

controversy regarding worship either in Jerusalem or in Mount Gerizim Jesus' answer is based on a transcendent approach: "Believe me, woman, the time will come when people will not worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem . . . The time is coming and is already here, when by the power of God's spirit people will worship God in spirit and truth, offering him the true worship that he wants. God is spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people worship him as he really is" (Jn 4:21-27). Officially Judaism would regard this as nothing less than heresy, and the meaning of this saying is more than what is contained in his saying about the temple: "Destroy this temple; and in three days I will build it again" (Jn 2:19). Through this statement on true religion Jesus meant more than what Stephen tried to establish in his speech (Acts 7:2-53).

Jesus was aware of his identity. At the same time he was trying to transcend the limiting factors of his identity to make it an identity that can reach out to every human being. He did not remain a prisoner of the established boundaries of his religious identity and the many restrictions of his parent religion. Being a recognized person in the society, Jesus was not expected to mix with the tax-collectors and the so-called "sinners" of the society. He was criticized for receiving the outcastes and eating with them (of. Lk 15:1-2). All this was against the conventions and customs of Judaism. But for Jesus the human person was more important than conventions. The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27).

It is in his struggle against official Judaism that we find Jesus uncompromising. Jesus had to purify the religion from within. The cleansing of the Temple of Jerusalem is a symbolic action of his cleansing Judaism. It was a judgement in action. He was prophetic in his criticism and he made no compromise with the convictions he had maintained. His condemnation of the external features of religion as practised by the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law (Mk 7:1-23) and his denunciation of the Pharisees and the Scribes (Mt 24:13-36) are all proof of his reaction to the wrong leadership of Judaism during his earthly ministry.

No wonder Jesus was singled out as a heretic and traitor. He was even considered mad by his own people (Mk 3:19-21) so much so that they came to seize him. The teachers of the Law said: "He

has Beelzebub in him" (Mk 3:22). The Jews asked him once: "were we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon in you?" (Jn 8:48). Jesus' tendency to reach out to the non-Jews exemplified in his going to the Samaritans was interpreted by the Jewish leaders as the beginning of a Gentile mission: "Where is he about to go so that we shall not find him? Will he go to the Greek cities where our people live, and teach the Greeks?" (Jn 7:35). Faced as he was with such misunderstandings about his real identity, it was but natural for Jesus to see his suffering and death as a moment of glory, a way of being lifted up from the earth so that he could draw all men to himself. His Jewish existence was an obstacle to his being the Man he wanted to be, the authentic Man the Father wanted him to be.

The Grain that Falls to the Ground and Dies: Transcending through Death

The glory Jesus speaks about as associated with his suffering is illustrated through the parable of the grain that falls to the ground (Jn 12:24-25). In the Synoptic Gospels we have the parable of the Sower and the Seeds, the seeds that fell on the wayside, among the thorns and on rocky grounds which did not produce fruit. Then he speaks about the seeds that fell on good soil which produced corn: some thirty-fold, others sixty and some others even hundred (Mk 4:3-9). There the focus was on the environment; here it is about what happens to the grain itself. The comparison is between two seeds opposite in quality—one that falls and dies and the other that remains alone. The grain that does not die remains all alone for some time and later it disintegrates and becomes part of the soil in which it lies. Nobody can even trace its existence as it is destroyed once and for all. Whatever be the reason that prompted its isolated existence the outcome is that it is lost for ever.

But not all grains are like that. There are many grains which are waiting for a chance to fall to the ground so that they can die and initiate a process of producing hundreds and thousands of grains. The moment those grains opted for death they started giving meaning to their existence. Consequently, it happened that they sprouted, produced roots and leaves, and later came flowers, and lastly fruits. If it was one seed that died, it now gave birth to hundreds of such seeds, thus making them available for human beings to nourish themselves.

On the part of the seeds it was not a conscious action involving suffering and sacrifice; it was part of nature's law concerning seeds that fall to the ground. Jesus took up this law of nature to illustrate his own feelings in the face of a predicament which made him think like the grain that did not die. His being a Jew was an obstacle to his becoming available to the Greeks. His being a Jew would have prompted him to exclude the Greeks from his concern and keep him to himself. In that case he would be following the established custom of the Jews.

But Jesus came to do away with many of the established practices and customs of the people of those times. His actions were critical. He would break the law of Sabbath to cure a person with a paralysed hand. It was not an act of being 'radical', always bent on violating established conventions. He was conscious of what he was doing. He cured the man after asking the people some crucial questions: "What does our Law allow us to do on the Sabbath? To help or to harm? To save a man's life or to destroy it?" He meant *our* Law, not *your* Law. But the people could not answer his question (Lk 14:1-6)

During his earthly ministry, Jesus was gradually preparing himself to face the great challenges which he had to face during the last hours of his earthly existence. That he could see this crisis and challenge as a participation in the glory of God is the uniqueness of Johanneine theology. The Synoptics would not accept that interpretation. For them the glory is something which he would acquire through the resurrection and exaltation. The story about Jesus facing the crisis of this situation, which immediately follows the story of the Greeks illustrates the inner agony he was undergoing: "Now my heart is troubled and what shall I say? Shall I say, 'Father, do not let this hour come upon me.' But that is why I came—so that I might go through this hour of suffering. Father, bring glory to your name." —Then a voice spoke from heaven, "I have brought glory to it, and I will do so again" (Jn 12:27-28). The Father of Jesus is one who is determined to establish a new principle of God-man relationship, for which the attitude and action of Jesus are decisive. Even if it means suffering and death, it is important that Jesus goes through it, thereby making it possible for all persons to be related to each other, not on the basis of Caste and Creed but on the basis of the dignity of the human person.

Service: The Disciple beyond Self-Identity (Jn 12:26)

The attitude of Jesus revealed in the story of the Greeks is not something which he wants to keep to himself. He wants all those who wish to serve him to follow his example; "Whoever wants to serve me, must follow me, so that my servant will be with me where I am. And my Father will honour anyone who serves me" (Jn 12:26). The Father wants to glorify Jesus by making him come out of the limitations of his religious identity. He would lift him up from the earth so that Jesus can draw everyone to himself. Anyone who claims to be a servant of Jesus must be willing also to follow the example of Jesus. Here 'following Jesus' does not have the broad meaning 'believing in him'; rather it means the following of what Jesus is ready to do with his religious identity. It is a question of having the courage to transcend the limitations of one's being, whether it be social, cultural or religious. That is the only way in which "he can be with Jesus where he is" (Jn 12:26). Jesus has been lifted up from the earth and he wants to draw all human beings to himself (Jn 12:32). But that being drawn to him demands that those who are so drawn must be ready to cut themselves off from their religious, cultural and social moorings.

It is this profound truth that the Gospel tradition in general gives about 'loving and losing' 'hating and keeping' life: St Mark writes: "Whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it" (Mk 8:35; cf. Mt 16:25 Lk 9:24). Although this statement sounds paradoxical deep down it implies a law of life. In the same way as the grain of wheat 'loses' its life by trying to 'save' its life by its not falling into the ground and dying, so also a person who wants to keep his identity at all costs will naturally lose his whole life and its goal in that selfish attempt. On the other hand, he who is ready to 'lose' his life for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the Gospel which he has preached, will make his life meaningful. It means "forgetting oneself, carrying his cross, and following Jesus" (Mk 8:34). It means loving Christ, more than loving one's own father, mother, one's own wife and children, one's own brothers and sisters and one's own self (Cf. Lk 14:26).

It is this basic teaching of the Gospel which John is formulating through the concepts of 'loving' (*philein*) and 'losing' (*appolluein*) 'hating' (*misein*) and 'keeping, for eternal life (Jn 12:25.). It is only natural

for everyone to 'love' his life and not to 'hate' it. But since life has a dimension that far exceeds the horizons of physical and biological life, it is to be looked at from a more comprehensive perspective. Everyone is born in a historical and cultural context and he is brought up in a specific religious context. These spatial and temporal limitations are not to be seen as the most important and decisive factors of one's life. Even as he leads his life characterized by such limitations, he has a duty to transcend them and belong to a new system of values. Jesus did that and he taught his followers to do the same.

The Father is looking for such people and he wants to 'honour' (*timein*) them. He wants them to have a share in the glory which he has given to the Son. So he says: "My Father will honour anyone who serves me" (Jn 12:26). Serving Jesus means following him, and anyone who serves and follows Jesus will be honoured by the Father. The honour the Father gives is the awareness he creates in him that he is a human person who can relate himself to others on the basis of an elevated human nature. It is a share in the glory which Jesus has achieved through his redemptive death. One cannot attain this glory all on a sudden; he has to work for it and experience it day after day. Christ attained the fullness of that glory through his death after he had exercised his transcending capacity during his earthly ministry. His followers have to do the same. They have to transcend the limitations of their religious, social and cultural identity in the various contexts of their life and the final exercise of this transcendence will be their death, which is not the end of a life but the crowning of a process of growth and perfecting of the human nature.

A Universal Message in a Multi-Religious Context

The story of Jesus and the Greeks is not just one story among other stories which constitute the earthly ministry of Jesus. It is also a symbolic story which has a message for every religious man, especially for a Christian living in a multi-religious context. The attitude a member of a religious faith should have towards others is symbolically suggested in the attitude Jesus had toward the Greeks. It is not a question of hatred or tolerance, but one of total acceptance and appreciation. In the prevailing context of the Jews avoiding, depreciating and hating the non-Jews, Jesus sets the example of reaching out to the Greeks and accepting them.

The tradition of the Church for centuries in the past had been one of intolerance towards non-Christians, a tradition favoured and supported by an uncritical and unscientific study and application of some biblical passages, especially in the Pauline writings (Cf. 1 Cor 10:20-21; 2 Cor 6:14-17; 1 Cor 6:9-10). Today we are gradually moving away from this tradition, thanks to the critical understanding of the Bible. The concrete proof of this new approach is the *Declaration on the Non-Christian Religions* by Vatican II in 1965. Today Christians are enjoined to appreciate and respect other religions and to consider them as positive realities in the plan of God leading men to salvation.

However, the attitude of Christians and for that matter of any non-Christian, has not yet become a spontaneous and out reaching one. It is more in the nature of a condescension. Western theologians may now concede that there could be some "anonymous Christians" among the non-Christians. The Christian West some years back accepted this as the boldest statement a Christian theologian could make, about non-Christians. This would be like Jesus conceding that there were "anonymous Jews" among the Greeks!!

The problem with a believer is that he is very much a prisoner of his identity and a slave of his conventions. Christians have never tried, I make bold to say, to transcend their religious identity when they encounter the reality of other religious traditions. They remain very much tied down to their identity when it comes to relating themselves to other religious traditions. This is precisely what Jesus did not do when he had to encounter a Roman officer (Mt 8:5-13), a Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28), and a Samaritan (Lk 17:11-19). He was only too happy to meet them and he had the courage to appreciate the faith and gratitude of the non-Jews.

What, then, is the criterion of religious identity? Is it a question of being everything else except being oneself? It seems that the true criterion of religious identity is 'being oneself and growing and going out of oneself.' In other words, a Christian has to be a Christian; but his being a Christian should be such that it should not hinder him at any given moment from acknowledging and appreciating any authentic reality in other religious tradition. He should never be a slave to it and a prisoner of his religion and religious authenticity, in fact, he should exercise his religious identity with religious tolerance and appreciation of other religious traditions.

Conclusion

Religions are only means; they are not an end in themselves: This is true of all religions. There is something divine in all religions; but there are also many things human in all religions. To confuse the human with the divine would be a mistake. The religion of Israel was constituted by God through the various historical events which became the framework of that religion. But in the course of history it became overshadowed by many human realities and Jesus was born and brought up as a member of this religion characterized by its legalism and formalism on the one hand, and lack of inner richness on the other hand. Being a member of this religion, Jesus established his religious identity by going and growing out of that religious identity whenever he found it necessary. The many stories we have in the Gospels are proof of that, whether it be the criticism of Jewish regulations such as the Sabbath rest or the appreciation of non- Jews for their profound faith and gratitude.