

A. Pushparajan
Arul Anandar College, Madurai

Prospects of Christian Dialogue with other Religions

The prospects of Christian dialogue with other religions depends upon finding a proper solution to the various problems encountered and likely to be encountered in the future. These problems are many and varied. A detailed analysis of these problems and their solutions is not the principal aim of this article. For, in my opinion, there is one problem which is basic to all others, and which has not been given the attention it deserves. My endeavour here will, therefore, be to identify that fundamental problem (Part III), and suggest a few grounds for finding a solution to it (Part IV). To begin with, it would serve our purpose better if we go into the origins of the recent changes in the attitude of Christianity towards other religions (Part I), because that will bring into focus the problems the changed attitude of Christianity has generated (Part II).

I

AN AGE OF DIALOGUE

Ever since Pope John XXIII ascended the papal throne, a new age has dawned in the history of the Catholic religion. It was that 'good Pope' who proclaimed the 'new openness' of the Church to the whole world. Again it was he who convened the Second Vatican Council on 11 October, 1962, which marked the beginnings of a new era for the Church. His successor Pope Paul VI, while inaugurating the Second Session of the same Council, articulated the openness of the Church even more definitely, by stressing the various areas of dialogue in which the Council and the Church must engage themselves. Little wonder then that the Council deliberations were all dominated by a dialogic tone which was clearly reflected in all the principal documents of the Council.

Thus the Pastoral Constitution on the Church, *Gaudium et Spes* opens up a new vision of the Church with a readiness for engaging in dialogue with the world. Perhaps for the first time in her history, the Church addresses herself without hesitation to the whole world, and not merely to the Christians.¹ Casting off her traditional ghetto mentality, she enters into dialogue with the whole of humanity, clearly acknowledges the changed conditions in all the spheres of life, social, psychological, moral and religious, and gives evidence of an explicit understanding of the deeper questionings of modern man.² The document even takes pains to dispel false notions about the Christian attitude towards temporal involvement, and imposes a stringent duty on Christians to help to build up the world and to involve themselves in its welfare.³

Against the backdrop of this global openness, it was easy for the Church to give a further expression to her willingness to enter into dialogue with the major religions of the world. Thus the Conciliar Declaration, *Nostra Aetate* recognizes, in addition to the socio-cultural values of every great religion like Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, their spiritual and moral values as well, and thereby paves the way for a religious dialogue.⁴ And a basis is provided by the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*. It affirms in positive terms that "the human person has the right to religious freedom", and that he is not "to be forced to act in a way contrary to his own beliefs".⁵ This is further confirmed by *Dei Verbum*, which declared the one and all-embracing divine plan of salvation, and that the supernatural revelation belongs to the whole of mankind.⁶ Moreover, in the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* an open acknowledgement is made of the fact that "many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structures".⁷

It is, thus, clear that the general approach of the Council was certainly prepared for dialogue with the world in general and other

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1. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, Art. 2, W. M. Abbott (ed.) *The Documents of Vatican II*, 1966, p. 200.
 2. See *Gaudium et Spes*, Arts. 5-11. (Abbott, pp. 203-209).
 3. Cf. *Ibid*, Art. 34, (Abbott, p. 233).
 4. Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, Arts. 2-4 (Abbott, pp. 661-667).
 5. Cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, Art. 2, (Abbott, p. 679).
 6. Cf. *Dei Verbum*, Arts. 3 & 6, (Abbott, pp. 112 & 114).
 7. *Lumen Gentium*, Art. 8, (Abbott, p. 23).

religions in particular. However, there was a certain amount of ambivalence in the approach of Vatican II towards the major religions of the world. Though, on the one hand, the Council took note of the specific religious and moral values in other religions, it still maintained, on the other, that those values are "only rays of truth"⁸ and not Truth itself. Whatever good is there in those religions lies latent and is mixed up with imperfections which the Church must salvage by sanctifying them.⁹

This ambivalence was overcome by the Papal Secretariat for Non-Christians, as is evident from the purpose for which it was set up and the activities it has since conducted. Pope Paul VI, when announcing its formation on Pentecost Sunday, 1964, clearly stated the purpose of setting it up as follows :

By this institution, and by others of the same kind, we believe a clear proof is given of the catholicity of the Church. In the present Conciliar time and climate she not only strengthens within herself the bonds of understanding, friendship and fraternal collaboration, but also seeks a level on which she can open the dialogue and meet with all men of good will.¹⁰

Cardinal Marella, the founder president of the Secretariat, also explained the purpose for which was erected the Secretariat :

It is evident that the present time calls for a new contact between the Church and the non-Christians (distinct from that through her missionaries) the contact of sympathy and mutual understanding, based no doubt on study but also on frankness, and the rejection of every prejudice. This will lead to mutual esteem, to a sincere *reapproachment* and to cordial collaboration in all possible fields. . .¹¹

True to its purpose, the Secretariat has been promoting the cause of dialogue both within as well as outside the Church.¹² Its activities

8. *Nostra Aetate*, Art. 2, (Abbott, p. 652).

9. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, Arts. 4 & 16, (Abbott, pp. 16 & 35).

10. Quoted in *The Clergy Monthly Supplement*, Sep. 1964, p. 125.

11. *Ibid*, p. 124.

12. Cf. *Bulletin*, Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians, No. 37, 1978-XIII/1, p. 9. Also *Religions, Fundamental Themes for a Dialogistic Understanding*, Preface, p. 5. Rome, 1970.

within the Church were meant to prepare the members of the Church for an authentic dialogue with the members of other religions. By establishing contacts with the local churches, especially those that are situated in pluralistic religious contexts. Through periodic visits, by attending meetings organized at the local or regional levels, and by assisting them to organize meetings, the Secretariat encourages them to develop a brotherly openness to the believers of other religions and to spread the spirit of dialogue among them. A quarterly *Bulletin* is being published by the Secretariat with a view to providing the Christians with information, documentation, suggestions etc., and to stimulate them to reflect on the problems of dialogue.¹³ A series of booklets in the form of *Guidelines* or *Suggestions for Dialogue* have also been issued from the Secretariat "in order to help the Churches come to a knowledge of and to actual dialogue with the great religions".¹⁴ Besides, a systematic and comparative study of the major components of the different religious experiences of mankind has been attempted by the Secretariat in the form of a Manual,¹⁵ which provides the basis for comparison between the Christian positions and those of various other religions.

While, thus, the Secretariat has been assiduously preparing the Church for dialogue from within, it has also been paving the way for an in-depth and cordial dialogue with other religions, in many ways. Having established initial contacts with great exponents or centres of other religions, the Secretariat has developed them into friendly dialogues, and renewed them at the level of the responses which the great religions offer for man's deepest aspirations. At times it has invited knowledgeable representatives of major religions to express the views of their faith on imminent problems confronting humanity today such as economic imbalances and inequalities, racism, violence, abortion, economic crises etc.¹⁶ It has also a network of local and regional organizations and has specified methods and forms of dialogue suitable for different people and their cultures.

13. P. Rossano, "The Secretariat for Non-Christians from the beginnings to the present day: history, ideas, problems," in *Bulletin*, 41-42. 1979-XIV/2-3. p. 94.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Cf. Secretariat pro Non-Christianis, *Religions, Fundamental Themes for a Dialogistic Understanding*, Rome, 1970.

16. The same as foot-note 13.

The Secretariat was able to do such sustained work as long as there was Pope Paul VI who extended his loving patronage to it, and guided it by the deep "love, interest and inspiration he lavished on non-Christians."¹⁷ But would it continue to enjoy similar attention and care from Pope John Paul II? This question must have troubled quite a few people in the Church when Pope John Paul II ascended the papal throne. Dispelling all such doubts, the present Pope has said :

The non-Christian world is indeed constantly before the eyes of the Church and of the Pope. We are truly committed to serve it generously. . . I am happy to see that the Secretariat has adopted as its own this will to enter into communication, which is characteristic of the Church as a whole and that it has put this communication into practice. . . It is my hope and my desire that commitment to the dialogue should be strengthened throughout the Church, including the countries where there is a Christian majority.¹⁸

Thus it is evident that dialogue has come to stay in the Catholic Church and the non-Catholic Churches are deeply involved in dialogue with other religions. Already, at the start of this century, the World Council of Churches had begun interfaith studies. It created a special wing called, 'Dialogue with Living Faiths and Ideologies (DFI)'. Ever since its inception, this wing has been taking a variety of initiatives aimed at promoting a genuine dialogue. Some Churches, like the Church of Sweden Mission, have tried to make dialogue one of their top priorities¹⁹ and are promoting it in many countries and in the most varied contexts all over the world.

From the above, then, it is clear that a new age has dawned in the history of Christianity. The old animosity is fading away. The constricting traditions have been abandoned. Formerly she used to express her relationship with other religions in terms of such polar models as truth *Vs.* falsehood, perfect *Vs.* imperfect, supernatural *Vs.*

17. *Ibid.* p. 92.

18. Quoted in *Bulletin*, 41-42, 1979-XIV/2-3, pp. 79-80.

19. Bjorn Fjarstedt, "Checkpoint for attempts at dialogue", Dayanandan Francis, ed. *New Approaches to Inter-faith dialogue*, (Uppsala: 1980), p. 3.

natural, divine *Vs.* human, Revelation *Vs.* enlightenment etc. Such models are no longer valid in the Christian Churches. Even the dynamic models like fulfilment and aspirations, act and potency, fruit and seeds are disappearing. She has positively begun to recognize the universality of the efficacious salvific will of God and the idea that every religion worth the name is a means of salvation. True, she is fully conscious of the Truth she possesses in the Person of Jesus Christ. At the same time she also realizes that she is not exempted thereby from journeying alongside other pilgrims on the road to finding the Truth in more concrete terms, and clearly. Hence she comes forward to 'esteem and respect' all other religions, to meet them not merely at a socio-moral level, but also on a religious level, and to establish a truly religious dialogue with them. Hence it is fitting to call this new way of relating herself with other religions as a relation of dialogue. It is fitting, then, to describe the present era of Christianity as an age of dialogue.

II

PROBLEMS OF DIALOGUE TODAY

The changes in the attitude and outlook of Christianity towards other religions were indeed welcome. However, it was not all smooth sailing. Many problems had to be encountered. We should identify them first to assess better the prospects of the dialogic move of Christianity. Three categories of problems may be identified :

1. Intra-religious problems
2. Inter-religious problems
3. Organizational problems.

1. Intra-religious Problems of dialogue

They are those which arise in Christianity because her very move for dialogue comes into conflict with certain aspects of her faith which are supposed to be the core of her faith and tradition. Among them, the following are worth mentioning :

- (a) The uniqueness of Jesus Christ
- (b) The uniqueness of the Church, and
- (c) Missionary vocation of the Church.

(a) *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ*

The one truth which is fundamental to the Christian faith, the one which is authoritatively presented in the New Testament and consistently developed in the early centuries of the Christian tradition is the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Jesus the Nazarene, that historical person was identified by his disciples to be the very God-made-man, the focal point of history, the one mediator between God and man in the one economy of salvation for the whole humanity. Therefore, it is in Jesus Christ that "men can find the fullness of religious life;"²⁰ and hence, any religious tradition of mankind can be judged and justified only in relation to Jesus Christ.

Can such a faith of Christianity be in harmony with present-day dialogue? A true dialogue calls for a sincere esteem and respect for the other partner and recognition of his distinct identity. If Christianity is to consider and justify its move for dialogue with other religions, it must accept other religions as valid means of salvation, and recognize them as such in their own rights. If, on the contrary, Christianity were to retain its faith in the uniqueness of Christ, it must judge and justify other religions only in relation to Jesus Christ. How then is Christianity to accept the identity of another religion and yet retain the unique revelation of Jesus Christ? In other words, how could Christianity relate her faith in the once-for-all and the universal revelation in Jesus Christ and the distinct and different revelations in other religions?

(b) *The Uniqueness of the Church*

Closely connected with the Church's claim to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is her claim to the uniqueness of her own nature *vis-à-vis* other religions. The most categorical statement of her understanding about her uniqueness is made in her *Decree for the Jacobites* (1442):

... no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; they will go to the 'eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels', unless before the end of their life they are received into it. For union with the body of the Church

²⁰. *Nostra Aetate*, Art. 2, (Abbott, p. 662).

is of so great importance that the sacraments of the Church are helpful to salvation only for those remaining in it; and fasts, almsgiving, other works of piety, and the exercise of a militant Christian life bear eternal rewards for them alone. And no one can be saved, no matter how much alms he has given, even if he sheds his blood for the name of Christ, unless he remains in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church.²¹

This kind of understanding and attitude does not quite characterize the Church today. True. Nevertheless she does not seem to have given up altogether her feeling of superiority even during this age of dialogue. No less a person than the Secretary of the Papal Secretariat for Dialogue has recently made the following observation:

Each of the parties in dialogue has the right of adhering to his absolute, of feeling basically sure of his own position. He has the right (and the duty, if he is a Christian) to think that the other is not achieving human and religious fullness as willed by God. A Christian cannot place his own faith and other religions on the same level. He cannot hold that the Holy Spirit dwells equally in the Church, in Hinduism and in the dar-es-Islam. There cannot be agreement that each party in the dialogue is equally in the truth, or that different religions are only cultural and historical experiences of a transcendent one. . .²²

If one compares the two citations given above, one will notice that there are two significant points of difference: First, while the former is categorical and emphatic, the later is mild and yet candid. Second, though the Church considers it her right as well as her duty to adhere to an absolute position, yet she is ready to concede at least the right to the other party to entertain a similar feeling of superiority about his own position.

From these points of difference it is clear that the Church still claims a position of uniqueness to herself, although she is trying to be sincerely open to other religions and is ready to grant them a similar right. This has generated a tension between conserving her own identity as the unique mediatrix and her present openness to other

21. Cf. J. Neuner & J. Dupuis (Eds.), *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, Bangalore, Third Edition, 1978, p. 215.

22. P. Rossano, *op. cit.*, in foot-note 13, p. 104.

religions, between the absoluteness of her claims about herself and the flexibility of approach to other religions.²³

(c) *Missionary Vocation of the Church*

Arising from the Church's claim to the uniqueness of Christ and to that of herself *vis-à-vis* other religions is the realization of her vocation to be an essentially "prophetic, missionary and evangelizing community". That is why it is said that even the "dialogue takes place only in the ambit of the evangelizing mission."²⁴ That is the reason again why the various activities of the Church such as mission, evangelization, witness and dialogue are all said to be derived from the same vocation of the Church and that the differences among them depend only on the priorities and aspects which are underlined in the various historical contexts and situations.²⁵

If dialogue is, thus, understood by the Church as essentially connected with her evangelizing mission, the other partners in dialogue may harbour suspicion about the very motives of the Church in conducting the dialogue. They may view it as a political move—another dubious way of conversion.

Suppose that the Church wants to remove such misconceptions from the minds of the partners in dialogue and that she wants to show her total commitment to dialogue. In that case, the members of the Church may entertain the fears that the Church is compromising her essential missionary calling. In fact, it has been officially stated by the Secretariat that "the aim of dialogue is not to convert the other party, nor to make them doubt their own faith".²⁶

Thus, the sincerity of the Church is bound to be questioned either by the partners in dialogue or by the members of the Church. This is one of the dilemmas in which the Church finds herself entangled because of the question of reconciling her missionary vocation with present-day dialogic spirit.

23. Cf. P. Rossano, *Ibid.* p. 104.

24. *Ibid.* p. 100.

25. *Ibid.* p. 101.

26. *Guidelines for a dialogue Between Muslims and Christians*, Secretariat for Non-Christians, p. 9.

2. Inter-religious Problems

Christian dialogue generates problems not only because it comes into conflict with its own claims, but also because those claims themselves come into conflict with those of other religions. It is the problems of the latter kind that we recount in this section as inter-religious problems of dialogue, because they arise in the actual encounters of Christianity with other religions. The list is not exhaustive, but only illustrative of the principal difficulties which Christianity faces in her dialogue with Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism.²⁷

(a) Problems in Christian-Islamic dialogue

It is a known fact that Islam claims to be the definitive, universal and the final revelation. This is diametrically opposed to the Christian claims that it has the final and full revelation in the Person of Jesus Christ. Further, the juridical character of Islam is also a well-known fact. The Islamic faith, expressed in submission to the Shari'a, determines and rules every social and religious act. So much so, one can rightly say that there is a lack of any clear demarcation between the spiritual and the temporal, the religious and the political, among the Muslims. This will offer considerable difficulties to the Christian partners who are used to distinguishing clearly between the sacred and the profane, the holy and the worldly, Church and State.

(b) Problems in Christian-Buddhist dialogue

Buddhism is a religion which avowedly denies the existence of God, Soul, and is explicitly disinterested in dealing with the ultimate questions about the metaphysical realities. In contrast, the basic beliefs of the Christian affirm the existence of a personal God, that man is a rational soul, created as the object of God's love, and that his salvation is really a gift of God. With such contradictory beliefs, then, there can be little hope of any progress in the dialogue between these two religions.

(c) Hindu-Christian dialogue

The difficulties in the Christian-Hindu dialogue may arise out of the vastly different kinds of tenets characteristic of each. Thus, for

27. P. Rossano, *op. cit.*, in foot-note 13, pp. 106-107.

instance, the ahistorical (*sanātana*) and apersonal (*apaurusheya*) view of Revelation in Hinduism may not offer a common ground for dialogue with Christianity whose view of revelation is historical and personal. Chief among the difficulties in the Christian-Hindu dialogue is perhaps the popular Hindu notion that all religions are paths that lead to the Ultimate or that they are all rivers joining the same ocean. Against this background Christ would be considered as just one of the many manifestations of the Divine. And this would naturally go against the Christian's basic claim to the uniqueness of Christ and also that of the Church.

3. Organizational Difficulties

The problems we have listed so far are those which arise either on account of the difficulty in reconciling the dialogic spirit of today's Christianity with her basic claims or on account of the difficulty in reconciling the claims of Christianity with those of other religions. But, besides these, other problems may come up in the actual conduct of the dialogue meetings. A couple of these may be mentioned here.

One is in relation to the *terminology* employed by the dialogue partners.²⁸ Those religions which have a common cultural heritage may be using a list of terms which is common among them. Yet, in the specific framework of each of these religions, there may lie a different connotation behind each of those words and thus ambiguity is bound to occur in their actual dialogues. Thus, for instance, in the Christian-Islamic dialogue, such words as Messiah, Word, prophet, apostle, revelation, inspiration are terminologically the same but conceptually quite different.

Another obvious difficulty of the organizational type is with reference to the *approaches* of the different religions. Thus, for example, the exegetical approach of today's Christianity to the Bible is based on the historico-critical methodology. But this would not be accepted by Islam. Likewise, its approach in its search for a social order based on faith would be quite different from that of the Christian's. If such methodological differences involved in the approaches of the different religions is not duly appreciated by the partners in dialogue, it can give rise to a lot of misunderstanding.

28. Michael Fitzgerald, "The Secretariat for non-Christian and Muslim-Christian Dialogue", in *Bulletin*, 37, 1978-XIII/1, pp. 10-11.

III

THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM

One way of improving the prospects of dialogue would be to suggest ways and means of solving the problems we have listed above. In fact, many attempts have been made to find solutions to each category of problems listed above. Thus, in the case of the intra-religious problems of dialogue, many attempts have been made to explain the claims of Christianity in a new light or in a way which would accommodate the dialogue without contradicting the previous claims of Christianity. Mgr. P. Rossano's "Lordship of Christ and Religious Pluralism",²⁹ Fr A. M. Lourdasamy's "Theology of Inter-Faith Dialogue",³⁰ and Fr D. S. Amalorpavadass' "*Inter-Religious Dialogue in India*",³¹ are a few of the well-known attempts to solve the first category of problems we have listed above. Besides, there have been some radical attempts like those of Fr R. Panikkar, which also ultimately deal with the same sort of problems which we have described as intra-religious problems related to Christianity's dialogue with other religions.³²

In answer to the second kind of problems mentioned above, namely, the inter-religious problems of dialogue, some serious effort has been made by the Secretariat itself to sort out the points of contact among the different religions.³³ The avowed purpose of such activities has been "to draw attention to the religious disposition as it is revealed in its constants throughout the complex religious history of mankind", and "to leave out of consideration every judgement of value on them".³⁴ The assumption behind such attempts is that even though Christian claims conflict with those of other religions, one can establish a good dialogue with them by emphasizing the areas of agreement between Christianity and the respective religions.

29. See *Bulletin*, 43, 1980-XV/1, pp. 17-30.

30. See, *The Japan Missionary Bulletin*, XXX/3, April 1976, pp. 157-159.

31. NBCLC Seminar Booklet series No. 30.

32. For example, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, revised and enlarged edition, Bangalore: ATC, 1982. *The Intra-religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

33. For instance, *Religions, Fundamental Themes for a Dialogistic Understanding*, Rome, 1970.

34. *Ibid.* pp. 9 & 10.

Regarding the organizational problems also many suggestions have been offered. Thus, for instance, as a solution to the problem of terminology, it has been suggested that the terms used in dialogue must be defined carefully, and that an effort must be made to free certain words of their pejorative connotations so that they can be brought back into current usage.³⁵ Still others have pointed out the need for creating a new language, "a language of communion", to express a new self-understanding in the context of a multi-religious situation, a language which may have to differ from that, for instance, of evangelization as ordinarily understood by the majority of Christians.³⁶

All these, and other attempts similar to these, are indeed praiseworthy. They all manifest the sincerity and enthusiasm with which Christianity has entered into dialogue with other religions. Nevertheless it must be pointed out that we cannot hope for any success unless a more fundamental problem is solved, first and foremost, by Christianity. *Whether Christianity can grant equality of status to all major religions of the world with whom it enters into dialogue.* This is the real problem which has to be squarely dealt with, even before any attempt is made to solve the problems of dialogue which we have classified above.

It must indeed be regarded a great landmark in the history of Christianity, that it has entered into dialogue with other religions. In the past, whenever it faced another religion it was mostly in a spirit of confrontation, with a view to conquering and converting the other. Or, at best, its relation with others was confined to the merely social plane. In all matters concerning religion, the Christian missionaries were dead against others and their rituals, practices, doctrines and beliefs. If, on the contrary, it is possible for Christianity to recognize positively spiritual values in other religions, to glean them out without passing a value judgement on them, on to enter into dialogue with other religions, listen to them, and learn from them, this would indeed be a great advance. Not only that, Christianity has even shown her readiness to recognize and acknowledge the common and constant values among the different religions, as is shown in the Secretariat's

35. *Bulletin*, 37, 1978-XIII/1, p. 11.

36. Albert Nambiarambil, "Dialogue in India A Challenge to Redeem Hope", in *Vidyajyoti*, March 1975, p. 123.

publication *Religions, Fundamental Themes for a Dialogic Understanding*. This shows the earnestness and enthusiasm in the dialogic move of present-day Christianity.

However, dialogue cannot be carried on fruitfully on an arbitrary decision to raise no controversial issues in an interreligious dialogue or by conducting the dialogue only on those matters where agreement is clearly in sight. One must grant that partners might even agree to disagree in an authentic dialogue. This does not mean a breakdown of dialogue. It only shows that dialogue to be meaningful must not stop at a relationship of a superficial nature. Hence the different religions must come forward to discuss also the more delicate problems concerning the differences among them. But this would be possible only if one recognizes as valid the plurality of religions with all their differences in rituals, practices, beliefs and doctrines etc., and yet accepting them all as equal partners on one's journey towards the Ultimate. Only then can there be a really genuine dialogue between the religions. So, any religion which wants to enter into a dialogue with other religions, must first answer this question: Is it prepared to accept as valid all other religions and as equals? This is the fundamental problem which has to be answered before entering into actual dialogue.

The reason for taking the above position is very simple: The fundamental requirement for any dialogue is that the partners should be equals. For instance, there cannot be a dialogue worth the name between a research scholar and a layman. If at all there is any, this will be at best a sort of garnering of data on the part of the research scholar. It can never be an authentic dialogue, involving mutual sharing, mutual enrichment and contributing to mutual growth. Likewise, between two religions, there cannot be a proper dialogue if either of them considers herself superior/inferior to the other. If either of them considers herself unique, without granting a similar right to the other, or if she aims at forcing her views on the other, it would be a debate and not a dialogue. Therefore, the crucial question which Christianity must answer is whether she can accept as valid the plurality of religions, granting them all equality of status. On this alone depends the prospect of success of the Christian dialogue. No doubt, equality among religions cannot be accepted in terms of doctrines, beliefs, rituals and practices. Obviously, there are differences here. Nor can equality be understood in the popular sense of

'any religion is all right.' That would generate indifferentism to religion. Neither can equality be taken in the sense that Truth is inherent to all religions in equal measure. For, in that case, there would be no ground for dialogue at all. How then should Christianity understand and accept equality of religions? This we shall analyse in the following section.

IV

PROSPECTS FOR CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

As stated above, the fundamental problem which Christianity has to answer is whether she is prepared to accept equality of religions. If so, how? One may suggest a few grounds for accepting it and at the same time maintaining the faith intact.

Despite the innumerable differences in the everyday situations in which men live, and of the historical and sociological reality in which men are placed, there are certain specific basic longings in men which make them open to an ultimate concern. There is an inherent dissatisfaction in men with all that is temporal and spatial, a yearning for transcending them all to 'something beyond.' There is in man a plain acceptance of a sheer contrariety in the very nature of man, a mysterious mixture of "wretchedness and his greatness", a "halfway between ape and angel", an innate tension in his relation with his own self and others, and, yet a striving to reach a flawless state.³⁷ That this aspiration for transcendence is universally present in all religions and is expressed in their literature is not disputed by Christianity, despite the immense variety of the ways in which it has been expressed and of the philosophical systems in which it has been clothed. Thus there is no difficulty for Christianity to accept the equality of religions *at the level of aspirations.*

But the real difficulty will be as regards the question: Are all religions able to fulfil the aspiration of man within their own framework and their own boundaries? The open and unambiguous claim of Christianity in the past has been that the inherent aspiration of man is wholly fulfilled in Christianity alone. This claim has been made

37. Cf. Henrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message to a Non-Christian World*. (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938), pp. 94, 99.

not on the basis of its own merits, but solely on account of the 'fact of Jesus Christ'. Christianity is fully aware of the fact that as a concrete and historical institution it has its own share of human frailty and shortcomings, and that it has committed even blunders at times, and hence deserves criticism. Nevertheless it holds that it alone can satisfy the yearning of man fully, because its basis and centre is Jesus Christ who proved himself *to be the Revelation of God in history*.³⁸

Accepting Jesus the Nazarene as the unique and total Revelation of God is the core of the Christian tradition. The tradition has also attached an exclusivistic interpretation to it. It would be presumptuous to suggest that Christianity should give up its faith in the uniqueness of Christ in order to engage in dialogue meaningfully. After all there might be quite a strong foundation for the whole tradition to sustain that belief. One may not alter it without altering the tradition itself. Therefore, all one might say is that Christianity can re-interpret the uniqueness of Christ so as to accommodate the equality of all other religions as well.

My suggestion is that such a re-interpretation is possible on the basis of three considerations :

1. The universality of the fact of saints.
2. The impossibility for any religion to claim monopoly to Truth.
3. The impossibility for any religion to be totally false or imperfect.

1. The fact of Saints in all religions

It is indeed unique of Jesus, a historical person appearing at a particular time and a place, to have claimed to be eternal,³⁹ to be the Truth, the Way, and the Life.⁴⁰ Again, it is unique of Jesus alone to have risen from the dead.⁴¹ This uniqueness of Christ being the very centre of the Christian faith, and the basis of its tradition, Christianity also claims uniqueness to itself. However, it may be pointed out that

38. *Ibid.* pp. 112-114.

39. *Cf. Jn.* 8, 58.

40. *Jn.* 14, 6.

41. *Acts.* 2, 32 ; 3, 15.

the purpose of the Christian religion is not to narrate a historical truth about Jesus Christ, nor to propound an abstract system of theoretical maxims about him, nor simply to hand over a body of doctrines to posterity undistorted, but to enable men to realize the Truth in them, to walk in that Way, and to re-live that Life of Resurrection in themselves. The very proclamation of Jesus' Resurrection by the Apostles was not so much to reveal it to others as to reproduce it in themselves and in others. As St Paul wrote to the Romans, they were to be buried with Christ in order that just as Christ was raised from death so also they might live a new life.⁴² Or as he reinforced it in his Epistle to the Colosians: "You have died with Christ. . . You have been raised to life with Christ. . . so set your hearts on the things that are in heaven. . . Your real life is Christ and when he appears, then you too will appear with him and share his glory!"⁴³ Even about himself St Paul said: "All I want is to know Christ and *experience the power of his resurrection*, to share his sufferings and become like him in his death in the hope that *I myself will be raised from death to life*".⁴⁴

Thus it is clear that the Christian proclamation of Jesus' uniqueness was not so much for its own sake as to make us 'realize' the uniqueness in us too. The very purpose of religion is to transform our lives rather than to invoke God, or to speak about God or to perform certain rituals for Him. Christ's own words attest to this, that religion is a matter of life rather than just calling on Him in prayer. "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who *do what* my Father in heaven wants them to do. When the Judgement Day comes, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord', *In your name we spoke God's message*. . . Then I will say to them, 'I never knew you, Get away from me, *you wicked people*'."⁴⁵ From this it is evident that even according to Jesus Christ's own criterion what is essential for one's salvation is not a profession of faith in the uniqueness of Jesus or preaching about it, but rather living the uniqueness in one's life.

If, thus, actual life is to be the core of religion, and if the different religious frameworks are capable of producing such lives

42. *Rom.* 6, 4-10.

43. *Col.* 2, 20; 3, 1 & 4. (*Good News Bible, Today's English Version*).

44. *Phil.* 3, 10-11. (*Ibid.*).

45. *Mt.* 7, 21-23.

within their own system of doctrines, practices etc., then they are genuine religions in their own rights.

And it is a *fact* that the different religious traditions, in spite of their vast differences in the modes of their practices, doctrines, thought-categories, symbolism etc., have produced ideal religious personages of *similar and parallel types*. Thus, for example, St Theresa of Lisieux and Sri Andal present a very close similarity of attainments. Both were able to attain a life of perfection by offering their virginity to their own respective Divine Spouses.⁴⁶ If St Paul, the once persecutor of Christianity, after conversion, became the most ardent missionary of Christianity, so too Sri Appar, though a staunch opponent of Saiva Siddhanta in his early life, became its ardent missionary after his conversion. We can also draw a parallel between St Thomas Aquinas and Sankaracharya, who used their philosophic acumen to defend their respective faiths.

It goes without saying, then, that there is a fundamental unity among religions, in spite of the vast differences among them, as is evident from the fact of saints of parallel eminence. By this is not meant that the different religiously ideal persons have the same religious experience or that the different religions are merely different cultural manifestations of the same experience of equal value. For, there are clearly differences in the quest for the ultimate meaning in life, in the questions they raise, in the facts which they proceed from, and the goal they claim to reach. Thus, for example, in Christianity the hope of fulfilment of all the temporal and the earthly desires in the eschatological glory gives the ultimate meaning to life; in Vedantic Hinduism the ultimate meaning is sought by viewing the world of matter as illusion and by realizing the ultimate identity between the self and the Self. While the starting point of Christian quest is the affirmation of the one God, the Creator and Protector, whose loving protection man refused by misusing his freedom and responsibility, Hinduism sees the ignorance or clouding of consciousness by the residue of the *ādikarma* as the starting point of all the troubles and suffering in the world. Again, the goal of Christianity consists in helping man to extricate himself from the Original Sin, while the goal of Vedantic

46. Parimala Nathan, *St. Theresa of Lisieux and Andal. A Study of their Mystical Quest*, An unpublished M. Phil Dissertation, submitted to the University of Madras.

Hinduism is to enable man to remove the ignorance in which he finds himself inevitably.

Despite these differences, the two religions have actually provided their members with the possibility of tackling the 'Problem of Life', and of achieving a life of Attainment, of Perfection, or Transcendence, whatever way be the term used for it—as is evident from the actual fact of saints in both the religions. Hence, we may say that the fact of saints is the one factor which brings out the oneness of religions. If the oneness of religions is thus accepted, then there is no question of any one religion being unique or superior to any other.

Does this not mean that the Christian must give up the uniqueness of Jesus Christ? Not necessarily. Acceptance of the oneness of religions in the fundamental sense as explained above, can be consistent with the Christocentric view of the salvation-history, provided that one understands the uniqueness of Christ in an *inclusive way*. True, in the Christian faith, the historical Jesus is seen as Christ the Lord. Here identity is established between that historical person and the cosmic lordship. Once the cosmic or transcendental aspect is attributed to that historical person, then it is possible to see that Lord, in his trans-historical or transcendental aspect, may have innumerable ways of revealing himself to people and saving them just as he did save man in and through his historical intervention. Who am I to question His ways? What is needed is humility to recognize man's limitations to see the innumerable ways of the Cosmic Christ, and recognition of and openness to all those resulting religions. Such an inclusive interpretation of the uniqueness of Jesus and acceptance of the fundamental equality of religions need not amount to a contradiction at all.

2. No Religion is wholly true

From the above it is clear that Truth is present in every religion. But, by the very fact that it is grasped by persons who are imperfect, and is expressed by them, Truth is bound to be imperfect. Thus the Truth, present in every religion, is necessarily mixed with imperfections. Perfection is an exclusive attribute of God alone. The moment God's Revelation is received through the imperfect vehicle of human medium, it is bound to become imperfect. Therefore there can never be such a thing as Truth being present in any religion in an unalloyed

way. That means that there is no religion which can be absolutely true. Every religion containing the Truth is bound to be mixed with errors, imperfections, for no other reason than the human instrumentality necessarily involved in any human endeavour. In other words, no religion can claim monopoly to Truth absolutely.

This implies that Christianity must give up an exclusive claim to Truth or any absolutization of its truths. Even on the basis of the Revelation in the Person of Jesus Christ it cannot claim to contain Truth wholly or absolutely. For, first of all, Jesus Christ by the very fact he is historical is not to be equated with trans-historical Truth. No doubt, the first Christians, the disciples of Jesus Christ did recognize, in good faith, that the Person of Jesus Christ was absolute, unique, perfect and permanent. However, Christianity has not realized that absolute Truth—Christ absolutely in itself. Christianity's conception of Christ is bound to be relative and is always subject to a process of evolution, re-definition and re-interpretation of her faith in the light of a re-reading and re-interpretation of the Sources. Such a re-interpretation or re-defining process is not a shortcoming but really a sign of growth. It is characteristic of the phenomenal world to grow, to change and get enriched more and more by the contacts a being has with other beings. In the same way, Christianity being a part of this phenomenal world must grow, evolve, and get enriched by contacts with other religions. As R. Panikkar has aptly put it: "... in the life of religion as in the life of a person, where there is no growth there is decay, to stop is stagnation and death".⁴⁷ Immutability and absoluteness are categories of the other world, the divine realm. If, thus, Christianity is bound to be imperfect, and is in need of growth, then it can never claim absoluteness *vis-à-vis* other religions. All religions are therefore equal in this that they all have the Truth but mixed with imperfections in varying degrees.

3. No Religion is wholly imperfect

We have seen above that the Truth, which is present in every religion, is necessarily mixed with imperfections. But this should not lead one to think that there could be a religion which is totally imperfect. For, if any religion were to be totally imperfect and untrue, it would be impossible for it to provide its members with the means of

47. *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, p. 70.

becoming saints. As we know full well, there have been saints in every religion. This proves that every religion has some truth. Thus no religion can be described as totally false or erroneous.

It follows from the above that if in some religion there are certain falsehoods or shortcomings this need not mean that another religions should despise it. For, although the other religion may not have the same kind of deficiencies within it, it is sure to have some other kind of drawbacks. Hence it is necessary for every religion to look critically at itself and rectify its own defects. How dare one religion says to her sister religion, 'Please, let me take that speck out of your eye,' when she has a log in her own eye?⁴⁸

Even the religion which suffers from some weaknesses need not feel inferior on that count to any other religion which does not have those weaknesses. For, first of all, what is a weakness need not actually be bad in principle. For example, the practice of idolatry in Hinduism. Further, it is always possible to give a new meaning to an actually degenerate practice or ritual, and revive it in such a way as to make it a real source of inspiration for its members to live a truly religious life. This possibility arises partly out of what that practice offers and partly out of what one wants to get out of it. There is, in other words, a possibility of 'modernization' or growth in every religion by a creative response of every religion.

In fact, whenever a religion faces an attack from outside on a supposedly degenerate practice or an outmoded theory of its own, it always gives a new meaning or a new interpretation to it and thus saves itself from the criticism of the rivals. This ability of a creative response which is taken for granted in a religion within itself, is not usually recognized equally in the case of other religions. If this had been recognized by every religion about every other religion, then the different religions might have not only avoided the infighting among themselves, but also made positive contributions this to the growth of all the religions.

To sum up, we have contended in this section that all religions are equal, in a very fundamental sense. The sense of equality has been arrived at not by granting, somehow, an equal status to all religions for the sake of expediency but by a serious search for unity

48. *Mt.* 7:4.

in diversity. This we were able to discover on the basis of three grounds (1) Despite the obvious differences, *all* the religions are able to produce saints, saints of similar and even parallel types, which in turn shows that they all have the Truth in some degree. (2) This Truth, which is in every religion, is always alloyed with untruth or imperfection. So no religion, can claim monopoly to Truth. (3) If every religion thus contains Truth as well as untruth, then *every* religion has both the need and the ability to 'grow'.

V

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The conclusion we have reached above has a significant bearing on the prospects of interreligious dialogue. If every religion has the Truth and yet is not wholly true, and if every religion has imperfections and yet is not totally imperfect, and if all religions have the ability to develop and advance more and more from untruth to Truth, then there is hope and meaning in interreligious dialogue. For one can learn from others, assume the presence of acceptable features in others and grow always from imperfections to perfections, from untruth to Truth. Thus it is clear that unless the dialogic move of Christianity is based on the above grounds, it cannot be considered to be a truly religious gesture. On the other hand, this is likely to be interpreted either as a political move or at best a moral gesture.

The Christian move for dialogue will be interpreted as a political gesture for the simple reason that Christianity which till recently could speak from a position of power and prestige mainly because of the political patronage and backing it received from the Christian colonial powers that dominated the world, now finds itself in a weakened position in the changed conditions of the international political scene.

Or, at best, it would be interpreted as a moral gesture in the sense that the Christian move for interreligious dialogue is in tune with the liberal and democratic spirit now universally present in the world, because she is willing to recognize and respect other religions as valid in their own rights.

If, therefore, the initiative taken by Christianity for the interreligious dialogue is to be considered really as a spiritual move, Christianity

must be prepared to *accept openly the fact of equality of religions* in the fundamental sense specified above. This is a prerequisite. Only then the dialogue will be self-enriching and make it possible to move towards the Truth by overcoming imperfections and absorbing all the acceptable features from all other religions.⁴⁹

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