

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: An Asian Christian Response to Religious Pluralism

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Abstract: The present article is an attempt to find an adequate Christian response to the religious pluralism in Asia. Religion has a unifying power that promotes peace and harmony and also divisive power which devalues the diversity and generates violence in the society. The author suggests inter-religious dialogue as a creative and positive response to bridge different religions and promote its unifying power and to prevent the divisive forces from using religion for one's own interest. The requirements for the effective inter-religious dialogue are the rootedness in one's own religion, relatedness to the followers of other religions and openness to the Spirit. Based on the experiences in Samanvaya Vidya Dham in Rishikesh, the author proposes a progressive model of inter-religious dialogue as tourists, pilgrims and seekers of God experience. The article concludes with a recommendation to develop a culture of dialogue that is open and inclusive through a dialogue of life, prayer, discourse and action.

Keywords: Culture of Dialogue, Inter-religious Dialogue, Pilgrimage, Reign of God, Religious Pluralism, Religious Fundamentalism, Spirit.

1. Introduction

We are living in times when we witness religious pluralism as an undeniable fact and irreversible norm of today's global family. Nobody can ignore or bypass this reality. The walls of religious, cultural, racial, linguistic and geographical separation have crumbled due to modern science and technology, revolutionary

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changes in the mass media, means of transportation, economic growth of the nations, and mass movement of the people for various reasons. Therefore, the rejection of religious pluralism or refusal to recognize the *otherness of the other* with all its uniqueness and specificity is considered to be unacceptable in today's world of interaction, intercommunication and inter-personal relations.

Religion is a force that has unifying and divisive powers. The unifying elements of religion promote peace, build up human community and foster fellowship while divisive tendency indulges in fighting, devalues the diversity and generates violence. Religion is a powerful force that influences the world-view, decisions and interpretation of Asian society. Despite the influence of modernization and secularization, the people of Asia are very much religious in their heart and take pride in their religious and cultural values. Therefore, Asian bishops suggest: "Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength."¹

Inter-religious dialogue is one of the most important ways to bridge different religions and promote its unifying power. This is attained by a search for understanding of the other religious traditions through courteous interactions with adherents of other religions, collaborating in matters of common concern, seeking to know beliefs and values of other religions and coming together to pray in one's own religious tradition or sharing one's spiritual experiences. Dialogue becomes imperative in the context of Asia because religion touches on deeper levels of human identity and answers the ultimate questions about human life and destiny. Moreover, religious feelings can mobilize people faster than any other elements of their identity and they are often exploited by politicians and others to spread

¹Statements of Bishops' Institute of Religious Affairs (BIRA) IV/II, in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Vol. 1, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arévalo, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, 321. (Henceforth cited as *FAPA*,1).

violence and communal riots. Inter-religious dialogue becomes an effective means to reduce religious conflicts and provides opportunities for the followers of different religions to know each other, to work for the common good of humanity and to promote peace and harmony in the society.

The relevance of Christianity in the world of religious pluralism depends on how far it is open to journey with the followers of other religions. It is the clarion call for the Christians to shed their prejudices and recognize the presence and work of the Spirit in other religions and develop a culture of dialogue which will be the unique contribution of the Asian Church towards the Universal Church. In this article, I deal with the unifying and divisive power of religion in the Asian context and then suggest inter-religious dialogue as a creative response to the religious pluralism through the example of Samanvaya model. Finally, I shall strive to develop a culture of dialogue that promotes fellowship, harmony and peace in the Asian context.

2. Religious Pluralism in the Asian Context

Asia is the cradle of the world’s major religions and the birthplace of many spiritual traditions. The plurality of religions is natural for the people of Asia where each one seeks out to know, engage and build relationships with the neighbours of another faith. It is also rooted in a tradition, which has approached the religious experience of other religions with respect and with a sense of sacred. It is different from the West where different religious traditions often exist side by side without knowing or engaging with one another or even detached from and indifferent to each other. Felix Wilfred calls western pluralism as ‘systemic pluralism’ because they try to create a philosophy of religions abstracted from their concrete context.² The western systemic pluralism thrives in the culture of post-modernism, while in Asia the vital concern is peace and harmony among different religious groups.

²Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, 48.

Although differences in religious traditions are seen as complementarities, Asians live in an atmosphere charged by religious conflicts. Recent years we witness religions increasingly becoming sources of division and conflict in Asia: Indonesia (Muslims and Christians), Philippines (Christians and Muslims), Kashmir (Muslims and Hindus), Gujarat (Hindus and Muslims), and Sri Lanka (Buddhists and Hindus).

There are many factors that have led to these conflicts. Exclusivist tendency that derives from the conviction that one's own religion is the only way to salvation or one's own community is the only place where God is encountered undermines the very notion of religious pluralism. Such exclusivism leads inevitably to attitudes of superiority towards people outside one's religion and to a stereotyping that perceives them as spiritually inferior and eventually to actions to eliminate them.³ The religious fundamentalists claim that salvation is exclusive to their group and they are responsible for the salvation of everyone in the world. They may even use force, such as, political, social, economic, and media, to exclude and eliminate others. Religions that are exclusive and consider themselves unique would naturally tend to be inflexible, aggressive and intolerant.⁴ Exclusive attitude divides people into 'we' and 'they' and those on the 'inside' and those on the 'outside.' When this attitude of exclusive claims is mixed up with sociological factors, economic interests, political considerations, and military power, it becomes hardened and lead to communal riots and terrorist activities in the society.

The Asian culture has been a religious culture in which there is an inter-connection and inter-dependence of society, politics and religion. It is religion that legitimizes the social structure and

³George Soares-Prabhu, "Religion and Communalism: The Christian Dilemma," in *Responding to Communalism: The Task of Religions and Theology*, Arokiasamy, ed., Ananda: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1991, 155.

⁴Noel Sheth, "Freedom from Fundamentalism in Buddhism," in John S. Austine, ed., *Religious Fundamentalism: An Asian Perspective*, Bangalore: South Asian Theological Research Institute, 1993, 222.

political authority. Therefore, people who pursue power can manipulate religion to their own advantage. Religions themselves claim that they are promoters of peace and harmony but often they become sources of conflict because of political and economic reasons. The people who are struggling for economic advantage or political power see religion as a source of their group identity. People who belong to the same religion are made to think that they share the same economic and political interests. Hence, they become “aggressive towards other believers for economic and political reasons.”⁵

Threatened by the emergence of secularisation, some sections in all religions tend to rediscover their identity through a fundamentalistic adherence to their religious traditions. Secularisation refers to a vision of life that sought to explain all reality in humanistic and empirical terms, without reference to supernatural realities. In Asia, religion provides the overall meaning system for everything. The institutions like culture, economics, politics, society and religion which were seen in an integrated way is becoming towards autonomous social institutions with their own structures and goals as a result of secularisation and thus religion is losing its role in today's society.⁶ Religion is being relegated to strictly private affair. T. N. Madan says, “Imposing secular solutions on religion-inspired communities is both moral arrogance and political folly”⁷ and it drives believers into fundamentalism. A fundamentalist ideology often generates hatred, suspicion and fears in the minds of the people towards other religions⁸ and such ideology becomes the breeding ground for communal riots and terrorist activities in the world.

⁵Michael Amaladoss, *Walking Together: The Practice of Interreligious Dialogue*, Anand: Gujarat Sahithya Prakash, 1992, 98.

⁶Amaladoss, *Walking Together*, 164-65.

⁷Thomas Menampampil, “Learning to Live in Pluralistic Society,” Bangalore: Convocation Address at Dharmaram College, 2006, 16.

⁸K. C. Abraham, “Introduction,” in *Religious Fundamentalism: An Asian Perspective*, ed., John S. Austine, Bangalore: South Asian Theological Research Institute, 1993, xii.

3. Inter-religious Dialogue: A Creative Response

To respond creatively and positively to religious pluralism and its divisive forces, Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) looks at the Asian pluralistic situation from a universal vision of salvation history⁹ that includes the past, present, and future of Asia and reinterpret faith in Christ in such a way that motivates the disciples of Christ to journey with peoples of other faiths as co-pilgrims towards the fullness of the Reign of God. This grand design of God's universal plan of salvation which was kept secret from eternity (Romans 16:25) realized through Jesus Christ (Romans 16:26-27). His proclamation of the Reign of God, which points to the gathering of all peoples and nations into one family as brothers and sisters under the fatherhood of God, embodied God's universal plan of salvation.¹⁰ With Jesus, God's universal plan of salvation has come to the last phase but not yet to its fulfilment.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Spirit sent at Pentecost continues extending this Reign to all times and to all places until a new heaven and a new earth is refashioned (Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17).¹¹ The Spirit is "the bond of relationship between God and humankind, a relationship established through the Word of God."¹² The BIRA IV/11 states,

It is our conviction that the Spirit of God, bestowed on all the peoples of different nations, races, cultures and languages, as represented in the event of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12), continues to weave bonds of unity among them today, and guides them towards wholeness and integrity. And in this forward

⁹Felix Wilfred, "Image of Jesus Christ in the Asian Pastoral Context," in *Any Room for Christ in Asia?*, eds., Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, Concilium 1993/2, London: SCM Press, 1993, 54.

¹⁰Bishop's Institute of Religious Affairs, IV/11, 9, *FAPA*, 1:319. (Henceforth BIRA)

¹¹Seventh Plenary Statement of FABC, in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001*, ed., Franz-Josef Eliers, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002, 5. (Henceforth *FAPA* 3).

¹²BIRA IV/12, 36, *FAPA*, 1:331.

movement humankind is drawn the entire ‘creation (which) has been groaning in travail together until now (Romans 8:22).’¹³

“The great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures.”¹⁴ Asian bishops state that this Spirit is “the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church.”¹⁵ This discovery led the bishops to “affirm a stance of *receptive pluralism*. That is, the many ways of responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit must be continually in conversation with one another.”¹⁶ Dialogue with other religions in such a relationship may open the way for mutual information, inspiration, support and correction. The Spirit is thus calling the Church of Asia to a “fuller understanding of mission and innovative forms of witness, service and dialogue” which will initiate “a new era when we (the Church), along with Asian brothers and sisters, will jointly make the Reign of God more visibly present, a Reign of freedom, justice, love and peace.”¹⁷ Therefore, Christians are called to be sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit and respond through inter-religious dialogue to fulfil the plan of God’s salvation.

Asian Christians consider interreligious dialogue as one of the most important dimensions of its life and mission. For example, out of the 191 interventions at the beginning of the Special Assembly for Asia, 43 dealt on the theme of dialogue.¹⁸ Inter-religious dialogue is not a debate between followers of various religions; not a means to acquire knowledge about other religions in order to defeat and belittle them; not an effort to persuade the other person to embrace one’s own religion; not an attempt to seek collaboration and fellowship with a purpose of

¹³BIRA IV/11, 10, *FAPA*, 1:320.

¹⁴BIRA IV/7, 12, *FAPA*, 1:310.

¹⁵BIRA IV/3, 6, *FAPA*, 1:259.

¹⁶BIRA IV/3, 16, *FAPA*, 1:261.

¹⁷BIRA IV/3, 17, *FAPA*, 1:261.

¹⁸Edmund Chia, “Inter-religious Dialogue in Pursuit of Fullness of Life in Asia,” *FABC Paper* 92 k.

indigenising the gospel, of preparing others to accept the Gospel; but a meeting of religiously committed persons of different religions in an atmosphere of freedom and openness in order to listen to and learn from each other and to seek possibilities of collaboration to resolve conflicts and work for peace, justice and other fundamental issues affecting the people of the locality.

Theological Advisory Commission of FABC spells out the goals of interreligious dialogue as

mutual understanding, that dispels prejudices and promotes mutual knowledge and appreciation; mutual enrichment, that seeks to integrate into oneself values and experiences that are characteristic of and better developed by other believers for cultural, historical or providential reasons; common commitment to witness to and to promote human and spiritual values, like peace, respect for human life, human dignity, equality and freedom, justice, community and religious liberty, through awareness raising, prayer and action programs; shared religious experience, that constantly reaches out, in a deeper way, to the ultimate.¹⁹

While engaging in dialogue, the partners have to be aware that all religions belong to humankind and all are concerned about the unfathomable mystery of God, and, no religion can claim to exhaust that mystery of the Divine. It is not the private property of any particular religion. According to Felix Wilfred "Belonging to a religious group does not entitle the possession of that particular religion, because believing is a witnessing to what one has experienced of the mystery."²⁰ Religions are not the ultimate end of one's life but only a means to experience the mystery that unites all religions and confers meaning and sustenance. FABC affirms that religions are "doorways to God."²¹

¹⁹FABC-TAC, "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection," 4.3 in *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, ed., Vimal Trimanna, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007, 9.

²⁰Wilfred, *Margins*, 155.

²¹FABC I, *EAPA* 1, 23.

3.1. Principle of Interreligious Dialogue

Dialogue does not require giving up one's commitment, bracketing it or entering into easy compromise, but rather it deepens one's commitment to one's own faith²² and "leads the partners to re-view one's own religious convictions and worldviews in the light of the new learnings from the other."²³ Therefore, the basic principles of interreligious dialogue are rootedness in one's own religion tradition, relatedness to the followers of other religions and openness to the Spirit who works wherever it wills.

Rootedness in one's own religion is the ground on which a religious person enters into interreligious dialogue. Sincerity in dialogue does not mean that we negotiate or compromise or reduce our religious faith but witness to the integrity of our faith. Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of FABC states: "Dialogue will be useless if one is not totally loyal to one's own faith experience."²⁴ Jacques Dupuis says that our religious faith "is not a commodity to be parcelled out or exchanged; it is a gift received from God, of which one may not dispose lightly."²⁵ Authentic dialogue admits neither the 'syncretism' nor the 'eclecticism,' rather it admits the contradictions among the faiths of different religious traditions and faces them patiently and responsibly.²⁶ "It is in this fidelity to personal, non-negotiable convictions, accepted on both sides, that interreligious dialogue takes place 'between equals'- in their differences."²⁷ Arriving at peace and mutual understanding among religions is not through

²²Davis Varayilan, *Spirit and the Pilgrim Church: A Study of Yves Congar and the FABC Documents*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, 175.

²³Edmund Chia, "What is Interreligious Dialogue?" in *Dialogue Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia*, Bangkok: FABC-OEIA, 2001, 181.

²⁴FABC-TAC, "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection," 5.2 in *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, 10.

²⁵Jacques Dupuis, "The Church's Evangelizing Mission in the Context of Religious Pluralism," *The Pastoral Review*, 1, (Jan/Feb, 2005), 27.

²⁶Dupuis, "The Church's Evangelizing Mission," 27.

²⁷Dupuis, "The Church's Evangelizing Mission." 27.

relativizing question of truth and of God but through pursuing such questions together. Tolerance is maintained not through setting aside our concerns for truth but through our deep commitment to the truth that God has revealed.

Relatedness to the followers of other religions means accepting the other as *other* and respecting the faith of the other in its difference. *Ecclesia in Asia* states, "Interreligious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers."²⁸ In a pluralistic society, every person and every religion has to be open to welcome good ideas coming from elsewhere. "Let noble thoughts come to us from every side" (*Rigveda* 1-89-i). For every believer, his/her own religion is unique and the readiness to share that uniqueness enriches one another. Relatedness demands that what is relative be not absolutized. In every religious tradition there is the danger of absolutizing what is not absolute and often that lead to fundamentalism. Hence, relatedness requires a kenosis that implies death and resurrection, dying to self and growing more and more in openness to our partners in dialogue.²⁹

Openness to listen and discern the movements of the Spirit in other religions and translate into deeds what the Spirit bids us to accomplish is imperative for dialogue. This listening to the Spirit must take place, first of all, in deep contemplation in order to discover God's active presence in other religions. Secondly, we must listen to the Spirit speaking through the religions of the Asian continent to learn "what the Holy Spirit has taught them," especially the spirituality characteristic of these religions such as "a deeper awareness of God and the whole self in recollection, silence and prayer, flowering in openness to others, in compassion, non-violence, generosity."³⁰ Every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every human person.

²⁸John Paul II, "Ecclesia in Asia," in *Apostolic Exhortations*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2005, 332.

²⁹BIRA IV/12, EAPA 1:331.

³⁰FABC II, 35, FAPA, 1:35.

3.2. Samanvaya Model of Interreligious Dialogue

Samanvaya Vidya Dham at Rishikesh in north India is a centre for Inter-religious Relations where a batch of students of Samanvaya Theology College comes to this Centre every year for ten months to study theology. While I was in-charge of this Centre for eight years we have developed a progressive model of inter-religious dialogue as tourists, pilgrims and seekers. The students begin their life in the context as tourists through exposure and move towards becoming pilgrims through immersion and finally oriented to become seekers of God experience.

The context in which we live can deeply influence and radically change our outlook towards other religions. Rishikesh, situated on the banks of the Ganges and surrounded by Himalayan ranges, is known from medieval times as the celestial abode. It is one of the gateways to the *Chār Dhām*: Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. Therefore, it is considered to be a base for devotees on their journey to the *Char Dham Yatra*. The beauty of the surrounding scenery along with the holiness of the river Ganges makes Rishikesh a truly unique place. From ancient times onwards, sages used to retire into the forests of Rishikesh for prayer, meditation and spiritual practices. *Sannyāsins*, *sādhus*, *sādhakas*, *gurus* and pilgrims populate the place. Hymns, chants, *bhajans*, *kīrtans*, *mantras* and the sound of the bells reverberate everywhere in Rishikesh. The flowing river Ganges and the thick forests of Himalayan ranges energize the atmosphere. *Āśrams*, temples, hermitages and shops of religious articles occupy the locality. Rishikesh vibrates with the peaceful energy created by all these elements. Coming to Rishikesh one experiences a special energy, inspiration and a disposition to mental silence. It is this spiritual vibration that attracts thousands of people to visit Rishikesh frequently.

Tourists: The students expose themselves to the context in the initial months with the curiosity of tourists. They go out in the evenings to observe the customs and rituals of the place, to listen to *bhajans* and *kīrtans*, to see temples, *āśrams*, and hermitages; and to engage in conversation with *sādhus*, *sannyāsins*, hermits

and pilgrims both Indian and foreign. Exposure brings the students closer to the contextual realities. The purpose of the exposures is not to diagnose problems in other religions and correct them but to understand and appreciate the goodness in other religions.

Dialogue takes place during the exposure to the context not in an organized way but rather person to person. It is ignorance, prejudices and suspicions of other religions that perpetuate exclusive claims of one's own religion. The remedy is to get out of oneself, confront outer realities and meet the followers of other religions. Being tourists, they come across more negative than positive aspects of the context. Their attitude to the other is conditioned by their own prejudices and stereotypes, often fed by biased information. The only way of overcoming prejudices about other religions is to surface these unconscious attitudes and confront them with experiential reality. Experience consists in an interaction between inner world and outer world. Our inner world is very much influenced by our cultural and religious factors, worldviews, prejudices and acquired interests. Our tendency is to remain locked up in our preconditioned world or absolutize our inner world. When we are exposed to realities of other religions, we enlarge our inner world and begin to appreciate the goodness in other religions.³¹

To appreciate and engage creatively with other religions, the intellectual knowledge of the other religions alone will not really help; that requires an experiential grasp of other religions as other experiences it and lives it. TAC observes:

Exposures to the experience of others have a way of clarifying one's own experience and of deepening it. Trying to explain to another believer one's own benefit is also one good way of clarifying to oneself what one believes. In this way, dialogue would lead to mutual enrichment rather than mutual impoverishment.³²

³¹Davis Varayilan, ed., *Rishikesh and Beyond: Theology in Inter-religious Context*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 11.

³²FABC-TAC, "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue," 5.2.

When we encounter other religions and experience them as they are, we realize that there is goodness in others too.

Pilgrims: In the second stage, the students immerse themselves into the context as pilgrims. The immersion implies more than contacts and sources of information. It means participating in the *ārati*, *bhajans*, *kirtans*, *pravachans*, etc. and having a live-in experience of Hindu ashrams and Sikh gurudwaras whereby the students are deeply moved by the fervour of worship, the deep devotion, the living faith of the people, etc. When followers of other religions gather to pray, it can enrich one’s own experience of prayer. Coming together to pray is not to cancel the differences between religions but to attain peace through prayer that will unleash profound spiritual energies. “Being together to pray, fast and walk in silence, has been a limpid sign of profound unity of those who seek in religions spiritual and transcendent values in response to the great questions in the heart of human beings in spite of the divisions.”³³ As part of the immersion programme the students also collaborate with a local NGO called Clean Himalaya Movement. Along with other members of NGO they spend two hours on Saturdays to pick up the plastic items and keep the town clean.

The purpose of the immersion is to enter into a dialogue-of-life like the visit of a genuine friend by following the basic principle of the Incarnation of Jesus, that is, kenosis and solidarity. It will provide the students with an experiential knowledge of the other religions and to encourage them to enter into dialogue with the followers of other religions to learn what the Holy Spirit has “taught others to express in a marvelous variety of ways,”³⁴ especially, in their ways of prayer and worship and to integrate them into the treasury of our Christian heritage. A week-long live-in experience of Hindu *āśram* life in one of the *āśrams* of Rishikesh and staying four nights in gurudwaras on their week-long pilgrimage to Badrianath and

³³Kuruvachira, “Pope John Paul II,” 249.

³⁴FABC II, 35, FAPA, 1:35.

Hemkund help them to look at other religions objectively and see the positive elements in them.

Inter-religious pilgrimage is a means of immersion and living as pilgrims. Pilgrimages are usually undertaken either for a penance for sin, or for a special favour or out of devotion. But in Samanvaya Vidya Dham, the inter-religious pilgrimages are done for understanding the other as co-pilgrims towards the final destination and to challenge the students to get out of their comfort zones and face challenging situations in life. From the *Letter to the Hebrews*, Johnsson locates four essential elements as pilgrim motif: (1) a separation from home; (2) journey towards a definite goal; (3) hardships along the way; and (4) promised blessings at the destination.³⁵ Pilgrimage begins as soon as a person departs the threshold of the home where he/she was sheltered, safe and protected. The destination of the pilgrimage mitigates the sufferings and difficulties of separation. The endurance to the end “depends upon the pilgrim’s ability to focus” on the goal and to continue the pilgrimage, difficulties notwithstanding.³⁶

The students make pilgrimage to different centres of Hinduism at Haridwar, Neelkanth and Badrinath; Sikhism at Hemkund and Buddhism at Clement Town, Dehradun. Trekking 48 kilometres in two days to Hemkund and 28 kilometres to Neelkhant in a day is a challenging and enriching experience. The hardships pull them out of their comfort zones and instil confidence in them to take up challenging tasks in the future. In these inter-religious pilgrimages, they find themselves in a process of sharing their experiences with the co-pilgrims, and being enriched by them in return. It is also an occasion for the students to learn the prominent values of other religions like voluntary service, hospitality and generosity of Sikhism; silence, interiority, detachment, renunciation and simplicity of Hinduism; and compassion, peace, non-violence and prayerfulness of Buddhism.

³⁵William G. Johnsson, “The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97/2 (1978), 240-241.

³⁶Johnsson, “The Pilgrimage Motif,” 240-241.

Since life has a pilgrim character, the “neighbors of other religious traditions are our fellow pilgrims on the way.”³⁷ Asian bishops define the Church as “a community in pilgrimage journeying with peoples of other faiths towards the Kingdom that is to come.”³⁸ St John Paul affirms that the Church and followers of other religions are all “co-pilgrims accompanying one another towards God.”³⁹ The essence of a pilgrimage in its physical nature is the discovery of humanness, with values common to all. This human experience is given religious content and form by the mysteries and myths of particular religions. In this dialogue of life during the pilgrimage, we need not have to compromise our faith, but only its protective coverings, such as self-complacency, prejudices, misunderstandings and ignorance of facts about others, which are supposed to insulate our faith from the other’s faith.

Seekers: In the third stage, the students move from the outer journey to an inner journey and enter into the depth of the realities around and live as seekers (*sādhakas*) to experience God who is present everywhere. Seekers are those who have already set the path for themselves. They search as Christian theologians to find new meanings in their faith and practices. Seekers keep moving, changing pace and approach but not direction. Every step is an arrival. Direct experience provides them with a kind of evidence that cannot be mediated through rational argumentation. John said: “We speak what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched” (1John 1:1).

Seekers focus more on spirituality rather than on religiosity. It is at the level of spirituality one experiences the relatedness to the Divine, to all people and to Mother Earth. “Religion conveys the idea of a particular framework endowed with a belief system, a moral code, a form of worship and an authority

³⁷BIRA IV/6, 6, *FAPA*, 1:304.

³⁸BIRA IV/4, 2, *FAPA*, 1:300.

³⁹Quoted in FIRA IV, 15, *FAPA*, 3:143.

structure to keep it together."⁴⁰ But it is spirituality that gives meaning and a sense of direction to the believers. Religion is not the ultimate end of one's life but only the way to the Ultimate.⁴¹ Spirituality is the essence of religion. Without the deep roots, which spirituality supplies, religion would not be able to produce fruits. Encounter with other religions can be a challenge to focus on the depth dimension of one's own religion. When the students are exposed to the context, one question that comes up invariably from the *sādhus, sannyāsins* in Rishikesh is: what is your experience of Jesus? Spiritually enlightened people are not interested in theological discussions but in sharing of God-experience. *Lineamenta* for the Asian Synod strongly emphasizes that "Asian people are not moved by logic, doctrine or authority, but by the power of witness and holiness."⁴² The seekers in other religions challenge the students to go beyond the customary routine prayers and practice of religion to experience God.⁴³ Spirituality calls on a person to go to the higher self and indeed to go beyond self and have deeper relationship with God. As one experiences the depth of spirituality one discovers convergent lines at the depth of religions.

Religions must meet and move on together in pilgrimage at a deeper level of spirituality. The religiosity of the people in Asia is easily manipulated by vested interests, partly, because religions do not provide deep spiritual experience. Therefore, to journey together with the followers of other religions the emphasis should be on spiritual experience. The experience of God is a basic requirement to witness credibly to our brothers and sisters in the inter-religious pilgrimage. Both in the Old and the New Testaments, mission is always linked with some kind of powerful experience (Exodus 3:1-12; John 20:19). Bearing witness is emphasized in Asia because "in the Asian vision of reality,

⁴⁰Cardinal Francis Arinze, *Meeting Other Believers*, Shillong: Vendrame Institute Publications, 1998, 61.

⁴¹Francis Vineeth, "Diversity of Religions and Unity in Spirituality," *Jeevadhara* 33, (2003), 378-79.

⁴²Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Asia, *Lineamenta*, 32.

⁴³Varayilan, *Rishikesh*, 18.

there is an intimate correspondence between the exterior world and the inner world of the self; one reflects the other.”⁴⁴ Therefore, communication of something would presuppose the integration of that which is within oneself. The challenge for us is to show the marks of God-realized persons by sharing our lived spiritual experiences. It is expected from Christians in the inter-religious dialogue “to be on fire with the love of Christ and burning with zeal to make him known” (*Ecclesia Asia*, 23).

The strength of the model of inter-religious dialogue followed in Samanvaya is the attitudinal change in the students towards other religions. The prolonged exposure and constant interaction with the followers of other religions destroys deep-rooted prejudices and overthrows certain narrow outlooks and helps them enter into the inner world of the “other” and appreciate and appropriate the richness of the other religions into their own spirituality. The exposure and immersion is a platform for mutual enrichment. It enriches, deepens and purifies their own faith and enables them to discover at a greater depth certain dimensions of the Divine Mystery and the teachings of Christ that have been communicated less clearly in the Christian tradition like hospitality, renunciation, simplicity, solitude, non-violence, etc. The students’ dynamic presence in the context influences the people they encounter, especially in the Ashrams to shed some of their prejudices against Christianity. Immersing themselves as pilgrims in the context challenge them to get out of their comfort zones and take up challenging ministries in the future and also makes theological classes more interactive by bringing questions from the context. Challenges from the context make students creative, innovative and dynamic.

The effectiveness depends to a great extent on students’ relatedness to the context and openness to the movements of the Spirit in other religions. This kind of method may not have immediate effect but over the years changes will occur in attitudes and approaches towards the followers of other religions. It fosters a spirit of dialogue and active cooperation to

⁴⁴BIRA IV/11, 17, *FAPA* 1:321.

live and work with the followers of other religions. In spite of its weaknesses, it is a method worth persevering to have a positive understanding of other religions.

4. A Culture of Dialogue

The unifying and divisive powers of religions demand that we develop a culture of dialogue in the Asian context. The twenty first century is moving in the direction of becoming a century of dialogue because of the globalization and the alarming rise of religious fundamentalism, communal violence and terrorist activities in the world. Therefore, we make an attempt to develop a culture of dialogue from the perspective of FABC towards the other religions and the Samanvaya model of inter-religious dialogue.

To develop a culture of dialogue we must focus on God's grand design of salvation from a holistic perspective which includes the origin and the end of human beings as well as the entire creation. The "providential significance" of the religions that have played and still play in giving meaning and direction to hundreds of millions of human beings create a positive atmosphere to build up a culture of dialogue. The Indian Theology Association points out,

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 the 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 complementary and divergences are changed into pointers to communion.⁴⁵

Every religion has a responsibility to create a world where people can live with freedom and dignity, a friendly and peaceful environment where all issues in religion are resolved

⁴⁵Kuncheria Pathil, ed., *Religious Pluralism: An Indian Christian Perspective*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1991, 347-48.

through peaceful dialogue. St John Paul affirmed this responsibility while he was before leaders of other religions in Madras: “As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare and civic order.”⁴⁶

In dialogue culture one must respect the followers of other religion and their beliefs and practices. It begins not in an organized way but rather person to person through exposure and immersion. An experiential grasp of other religions as other experiences it and lives it is necessary to develop a positive attitude towards other religions. This experience helps to appreciate and respect others and avoid exclusive claims that lead to fundamentalism and adopt a more positive and realistic attitude towards other religions, which will promote harmony.⁴⁷ In the process of sharing one’s own faith or listening to the sharing of the other, each one purifies and enriches one’s own faith by insights from the other’s faith. It is incumbent upon religions to exercise its moral and spiritual leadership that stem from the very understanding of religion in the society as its meaning dimension.⁴⁸

The culture of dialogue must be inclusive in nature. It is developed through discourses during the pilgrim stage where the focus must be on what unites the religions rather than what divides. Through the centuries, Christians have pursued what we might call a theology of confrontation rather than a theology of identity.⁴⁹ Christians believed that identity depends on clear oppositions: I know who I am because I know what I am opposed to. Therefore, in relations to other religions we asked: how is Christianity different and distinct from other religions? But in the multi-religious context of Asia, we must follow a

⁴⁶Pope John Paul II, *Origins* 15 (1986), 598.

⁴⁷Joseph Kuttianimattahil, *Practice and Theology of Inter-religious Dialogue*, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 1995, 514.

⁴⁸T. K. John, “Inter-religious Relationships Today,” *Jeevadhara* 23, 197, 2003, 358.

⁴⁹Kuttianimattathil, *Practice and Theology of Inter-religious Dialogue*, 600.

theology of identity, similarity, which allows room for inclusion and relation.

An understanding of the other is one of the characteristics of dialogue culture. It is realized through occasionally coming together to pray. This prayer will deepen the relationship among religions, which may counter the secularizing trends that seek to reduce religions to a private affair and fundamentalist interpretations that become tools of communalism and terrorism. As one becomes a seeker of God and experiences the depth of spirituality one discovers convergent lines at the depth of religions. Common sharing of scriptures, common prayers and common reflection on conflicting situations of the society can lead to a deepening of understanding both of one's own religion and the religion of the other. In October 1986, St John Paul convened a World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in which about 200 leaders of the world's great religions participated. This prayer meeting strengthened the bond of religions in the world and recognized their spiritual wealth.

A dialogue culture builds up a caring community, which is realized by going beyond the matters of faith to socio-political issues by protesting against inequality, discrimination and injustice done to the poor and the minorities. The basic principle of the globalized world is highest profit at any cost and the consequence is the survival of the fittest. In such situations, the poor people get organized in terms of religions or ethnicity and spread violence and terrorism to get the attention of the people concerned. The interreligious dialogue should create multi-religious voluntary groups to become the voice of the voiceless in negotiations to get justice done to the poor and to resolve conflicts. Multi-religious groups can collaborate with government and non-government agencies to promote the equal development of all without discrimination. When there are communal riots, often the civil administration and police act according to the dictates of majority community or political parties as it happened in Gujarat after Godhra incident in 2002. In such occasions, multi-religious groups should keep the State in check by voicing public opinion or public protests.

In this globalized world, our life is so interconnected and interdependent that there is no alternative to dialogue culture in promoting communal harmony at the national level and cooperation and peace at the international level. St John Paul says, “The task before us therefore, is to promote a culture of dialogue. Individually and together, we must show how religious belief inspires peace, encourages solidarity, promotes justice, and upholds liberty.”⁵⁰

5. Conclusion

The religious pluralism in the Asian context offers challenges as well as opportunities to enrich one another as we move together as co-pilgrims towards the final goal. Encountering other religions is an existential necessity for Christians because of our faith in Christ and minority status in Asia. The Christian involvement in dialogue with other religions is founded on our faith that Christ is at work through his Spirit in all religions, cultures, and human persons to extend the Reign of God to everything and to all times - until a new heaven and a new earth is refashioned. Dialogue is an integral and constitutive aspect of living out the Gospel message in Asia. The experience of Samanvaya model of dialogue is that it deepens one’s commitment to one’s own faith and leads the partners to conversion if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit. It also helps us to understand the mystery of Christ and be transformed by the Spirit of God active in other religions.

Religions are capable of the best and the worst, of peace or war. Peace and harmony originates from spiritual and moral values which are promoted by religions. Therefore, unless there is understanding among people belonging to various religions, there cannot be lasting peace and harmony on earth. Against this multi-religious backdrop, a clear and unprejudiced perception of other religions is necessary to live in harmony and peace in the world. Inter-religious dialogue, with its principles of rootedness

⁵⁰ John Paul II in his speech at the Interreligious Assembly held by the Vatican and the Pontifical Interreligious Council in October 1999 quoted in Shekhar, *Religions in Public Life*, 64.

in one's own religious tradition, relatedness to followers of other religions and openness to the Spirit, is one of the effective means to resolve conflicts and promote a community of fellowship, justice and peace.

Samanvaya model of interreligious dialogue with its three stages of tourists through exposure, pilgrims through immersion and seekers through experience help one to enter into the domain of other religions. Proximity and familiarity facilitates a better mutual understanding and a readiness to accommodate differences and live together as brothers and sisters. Asian context makes it imperative that Christians evolve a culture of dialogue which calls for the recognition of the role of the other religions in the plan of God. The culture of dialogue which begins through the interactions with the followers of other religions, deepens through discourses, strengthens through coming together to pray and grows through reaching out to the marginalised, must effect in respecting others, taking inclusive approach, understanding the other and creating a caring community. This culture of dialogue is the response of the Asian Christians and "a new way of being Church" in Asia. According to the Indian bishops, "Dialogue is not merely one ecclesial activity among many. It is a constituent dimension of every authentic local Church. After Vatican II, to be Church means being a faith community-in-dialogue."⁵¹ This is one of the ways the Church fulfills her role as "sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people."⁵²

⁵¹"To Be New in Christ for Asia," Indian Church's Response to the *Linamenta* for the Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for Asia, 1.

⁵²"Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," no.1 in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, Bombay: St. Pauls, 1997, 320.