

# RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

## Right to Identity as the Right Path to Unity and Solidarity

Paulachan Kochappilly♦

### 1. Introduction

Reality is *that which is* or *that which exists*. What is, is manifold. So reality is expressed as many. According to the ancient Indian Wisdom, *Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti* (that which exists is one: sages call it by various names). Such an understanding gives rise to the perennial discussion on the one and many. To recognise, respect, and respond to that which is real is the call and challenge of reasonable human beings. The phrase Triune – one-and-three – is an example of ‘Unity in diversity’, which is the right vision for harmonious living. This vision has been the governing and guiding principle of Indian cultural ethos. Such a vision embodies the openness to truth, goodness, and beauty. The search for reality takes people to encounter multiplicity, and in turn the experience of many leads to unity. Diversity is the matrix of reality. Unity is the axis of reality. The right perception of reality depends on one’s ability to engage in dialogue with diversity. Dialogue presupposes many. The more the dialogue with diversity, the greater is the unity. This holds true for religions, as in other areas of life.

Religious plurality has always been a reality, as it is today. Religions are many; some of them are recognised as world religions and others as regional or tribal religions. More than ever before, religious pluralism is a world-wide reality which is gaining greater recognition today. There are local, regional, national, and international forums for dialogue with other religious traditions in order to deepen the understanding of one’s own faith as well as the other faith traditions. Inter-religious dialogue is taking place all over the globe. Moreover, interfaith dialogue has become the need of the hour, in order to promote peace and harmony in a world torn apart in

---

♦ **Dr. Paulachan Kochappilly** CMI, Associate Professor of Theology, is presently the Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. A moral theologian by training, Kochappilly is interested and involved in analysing various aspects of religious faith and worship with a view to evolve a life-related moral outlook. He regularly contributes to various theological journals, and his major publications include *Celebrative Ethics* (1999), *Evangelization as Celebration* (2002) and *Life in Christ: Eastern Perspectives on Christian Ethics* (2010).

the name of religion, due largely to the politicisation of religion and its use as a rationale for acts of violence and terror. People of good will, belonging to different faith traditions, are coming together to sort out and settle the current issues, such as communal conflicts leading to societal unrest which sow the seeds of hatred and fuel the flames of brutal acts. Such untoward incidents often take place in the name of religion due to ignorance of the faith of others and the reluctance of some to accept religious pluralism. Living with people of other faiths is an art, a challenge and a privilege. It is an art to walk with others and remain true to one's own faith. It can also be a challenge, for others may question one's belief and practice. It is likewise a privilege, for other faith traditions can offer insights into the mysteries of life and the solutions to various contemporary problems one confronts.

## **2. Be Oneself, Growing, and Going Beyond**

Plurality is the order of reality and in plurality one is confronted by diversity. Diversity presupposes identity and individuality. Individuality is the foundation of diversity and leads to a sense of unity. This means that the recognition of the identity of individual reality is essential to the understanding of plurality. Plurality is the sum total of all individual realities.

Identity – to be oneself – therefore, is foundational to the discussion of plurality and unity. Identity is a prerequisite to dialogue. Ignoring the identity of reality, which is the basis of dialogue, is equivalent to the denial of truth. It is precisely the sense of identity consciousness, coupled with openness, by which the path of dialogue opens up. Dialogue is the way to wholeness and fullness, so, too, to the way to holiness. Life commences, continues, and culminates in the context of dialogue on diverse spheres and levels. Dialogue presupposes partners, and should protect the right and privilege of being different. 'To make a difference' is the challenge and claim people make today. Differences are no longer seen as a threat, but are understood as contributing to unity and solidarity. Hence, identity, unity, and solidarity are understood best in the context of dialogue. Dialogue makes things happen in an amicable way; so also it makes people work for the common good thereby uplifting human nature and dignity. Eva Hoffman gives expression to the necessary ingredients in the engagement of dialogue. She observes, "In order to grasp another culture's inner life, we need to develop some empathy for its tonalities and textures, its expressive palette and affective norms. At the same time, one's original

language has to remain as a point of reference, and a place from which to speak and to make oneself intelligible to the other.”<sup>1</sup> Differences, therefore, do not indicate a danger zone, rather they are the horizon in which one can experience life to the full. Identity, thus, becomes the hallmark of unity and the ground for solidarity.

Promoting differences and diversity is an open invitation for all to exist and flourish. All members are significant, however small they may appear to be. The words of Saint Paul illustrate the significance of each member for the well-being of the body.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many . . . If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Every part is important and constitutive to the whole. (1 Cor 12:12-14, 26-27).

If the metaphor used by Saint Paul were to be expanded, it would illustrate the reality of a community or society. The metaphor of ‘body and members’ sums up the issue of identity, unity and solidarity. What is important for the health of a community is to have all its various members function in unison and cohesion. If society is conceived as a living organism, then all people of all walks of life, without distinction, are constitutive of the organism, and all have a role to play for the integral development and flourishing of the whole. Religious plurality is a reality and it should be acknowledged and appreciated as the fabric of our society. Consequently, all religions have functions proper to them. As different members of the body, each has its own tasks to fulfill in supporting the life and activities of the society.

The web of relationships is further substantiated by recent scientific studies on ecology, which emphasise the interconnectivity and interdependence of all things. Any change at any level may affect the overall harmonious performance in the ecosphere. Likewise, the communities of different religious traditions pave the way for harmony and consequent peace and progress. Recognition of, respect for, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Eva Hoffman, “Engaging in Cross-Cultural Dialogue,” *Seminar* 610 (June 2010), 15.

response to differences make up the web of life – recognizing that each is great in one’s own place. To acknowledge and appreciate differences is simply a rendering of minimum justice. The right to life is fundamental to all beings. It is in showing respect to the individual that society works towards the building up of the community.

The life of a seed is a good illustration of how growth and development take place while the seed retains its identity all through the different stages of growth. The parable of the grain of wheat narrated by Jesus illustrates the complex dynamics involved in the process of life. Jesus taught, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (*John* 12:24). In gaining and giving life the grain embraces a process of *kenosis*. Saint Paul puts the same message another way, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross” (*Philippians* 2:5-8). *Kenosis* is the key to the reality of life and its full flowering. Jesus walked the way of life – the way of *kenosis*. Being thoroughly a man of his time and tradition he went beyond the time and tradition of his community, setting a horizon and providing an orientation for others to walk the way of life. Raimundo Panikkar interprets the implication of *kenosis* in the context of religious pluralism. “Only when a Man is completely empty of himself, is in a state of *kenosis*, of renunciation and annihilation, will Christ fulfil his incarnation in him. Only *kenosis* allows incarnation, and incarnation is the only way to redemption.”<sup>2</sup>

Being rooted in and going beyond the limitations of his community, Jesus, according to Joseph Pathrapankal, “On the one hand, ...would have his people benefit from his mission and ministry; but, on the other hand, his mission demanded that he should reach out to the other and make his services available to others as well.”<sup>3</sup> He set an example of being faithful to one’s identity and working towards unity and solidarity with people beyond the boundaries. The author reflects on the meeting of Jesus with

---

<sup>2</sup>Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, New Edition, 1982, 61.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Pathrapankal, “Jesus and the Greeks” in *Critical and Creative: Studies in Bible and Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1986, 75.

Greeks, “He did not want his Jewishness to become a limiting factor for his elevated and transformed human nature to operate beyond the barriers of his religion.”<sup>4</sup> Pathrapankal raises a pertinent question at the end of his article, “What, then, is the criterion of religious identity? Is it a question of being everything else except being oneself?”<sup>5</sup> He also suggests an answer, “It seems that the true criterion of religious identity is ‘being oneself and growing, and going out of oneself.’ In other words, a Christian has to be a Christian; but his being a Christian should be such that it should not hinder him at any given moment from acknowledging and appreciating any authentic reality in other religious traditions.”<sup>6</sup> This has been the genuine tradition of the Catholic Church – a Church simultaneously learning and teaching. The Church exhorts the faithful “to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.”<sup>7</sup> She reiterates the need to seek truth together, for she “rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.”<sup>8</sup>

Living together marks the beginning of this pilgrimage, which highlights the importance of dialogue. It is in the living context of religious pluralism, which today is almost a global phenomenon, that there is the need of walking together and seeking the truth together. “The challenge facing our plural world, therefore, is not to oppose cultures and traditions, but to start from the principle that each culture contributes a part of the whole.”<sup>9</sup> This has always been the great tradition of the Saint Thomas Christians of India. They were always unflinching in their faith in Christ and yet lived in cultural symbiosis with people of other faiths. The philosophy or theology of co-existence and collaboration flourished in their living together. Unfortunately such a texture of the society is being threatened today due to the politicisation of religion, which is rampant in the political scenario of India. What is important is to find “values that bind rather than divide.”<sup>10</sup> Emphasising the importance of living together, Jahanbegloo observes: “Nothing is more important in learning to live with others than our ability to listen to and talk.”<sup>11</sup> In the context of intercultural

---

<sup>4</sup>Pathrapankal, “Jesus and the Greeks,” 75.

<sup>5</sup>Pathrapankal, “Jesus and the Greeks,” 84.

<sup>6</sup>Pathrapankal, “Jesus and the Greeks,” 84.

<sup>7</sup>Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, §2.

<sup>8</sup>Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, §2.

<sup>9</sup>Ramin Jahanbegloo, “The Problem,” *Seminar* 610 (June 2010), 13.

<sup>10</sup>Jahanbegloo, “The Problem,” 12.

<sup>11</sup>Jahanbegloo, “The Problem,” 12.

dialogue “understanding other cultures and learning from them is a crucial aid to understanding and evaluating one’s own. The capacity to engage constructively with conflicting values is an essential component of practical wisdom and empathetic pluralism in the process of intercultural dialogue.”<sup>12</sup> Recognition of and respect for the differences of religions is the starting point of harmonious living together.

Religious pluralism invites us to be free, fair and fearless in our living together. There is a growing tendency to lock oneself up in a gated community for the sake of safety and security. Inside the walls and the gate, there is neither community nor solidarity, but people have only lonely and isolated lives. “Locking oneself into a gated community in order to chase away fears is like draining water out of the pool to make sure that the children learn to swim in complete safety.”<sup>13</sup> The dream for safety and security in a community devoid of relationality is never a reality. Relationality – being-in-relation-with – is the foundation of existence of a true community. Reflecting on the artificial gated community, Bauman observes, “Those lucky enough to have bought themselves into a closely guarded ‘gated community’ pay an arm and leg for ‘security services’, that is, for banishment of all mixing. Gated ‘communities’ are heaps of little private cocoons suspended in a spatial void.”<sup>14</sup> The modern gadgets of security promise to provide a guarantee of safety, but, in fact, they build up anxiety instead. “Behind the walls, anxiety grows instead of dissipating – and so does the dependence of the residents’ state of mind on the ‘new and improved’ high-tech gadgets, marketed on the promise of keeping the dangers, and fear of dangers, out of court. The more gadgets one surrounds oneself with, the greater is the fear that some of them may go wrong.”<sup>15</sup> All this shows that there is no substitute for the human community and its guarantee towards safety and security through a living together – acknowledging and appreciating the differences, including religious beliefs.

### **3. Be Informed, Form and Follow One’s Conscience**

In this age of religious pluralism of walking together and seeking truth together, there is the need to be formed and informed. Understanding of people and events undergoes change as studies uncover the layers of

---

<sup>12</sup>Jahanbegloo, “The Problem,” 13.

<sup>13</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, “Conversation III,” *Seminar* 610 (June 2010), 29.

<sup>14</sup>Bauman, “Conversation III,” 28.

<sup>15</sup>Bauman, “Conversation III,” 29.

reality. In this age of technology, religions are also being studied from different scientific perspectives, thus contributing to the deeper understanding of religious truths and their various traditions. Hence, as human beings live together with traditions other than one's own, there is a pressing need to know one's own tradition in depth and to appreciate other traditions in order to seek truth together. By learning from each, there comes the understanding that the other is not a threat but a means to enlighten and enhance one's own beliefs.

Knowledge is of paramount importance in community living. Differences will be made more comfortable and enjoyable through interaction with the other. Though the world is said to be a global village, the divide and distance among people do not seem to be declining. People, in fact, are more egoistical and enslaved in their own small world. A typical example can be seen from the fact that although people are living in the same building, there is often little interaction among the dwellers therein. People may talk on the telephone from the different flats of the same building, but do not make time to meet and interact. There is no connection or relation with the other. People simply are more mechanical and business-minded in their relationships.

‘Know thyself and others’ should be the slogan in the journey with religious pluralism. Very often those of other religions are approached as strangers, if not enemies. In the absence of the knowledge of different religious traditions, it is almost impossible to live and walk together. Therefore, the learning of other religious traditions must be a priority. This could begin in the schools. The tenets of all the religions could be handed down without adulterating the orthodox teaching of each. Genuine celebration of the different religious festivals could be made part of the public educational system. In such a programme all religions would be given their rightful representation. Such celebrations would be the right first steps in building up communal harmony, which has been the matrix of the society and which is fast disappearing because of the growth of religious fundamentalism and the politicisation of religion. Only accurate and truthful information of the different religious traditions can bring about a desired change in this vulnerable and sensitive area of society.

Other areas of common interest and commitment could be channelled in view of strengthening the social ties among the diverse faith traditions. People of all faiths could join hands and work together towards realising justice in the social, political, economic, cultural, and ecological arenas of the society. All religions say they promote equality of the human person.

Therefore, all could work together to guarantee this equality. Discrimination of people on the basis of religion, colour, race, gender, creed, etc., could be eradicated through a concerted effort of all who believe in God.

Human rights is another area of common interest. Religions claim that all are children of God, created in the image of God. Hence a recognition, respect, and response corresponding to this belief, needs to be inculcated in the minds and hearts of the people. It is not in fighting or hating, but in the loving embrace, that the faithful protect, propagate, and perpetuate the values of the kingdom of God.

Dharma (ethics/morality) is an area of common concern and commitment. Dharma supports and promotes people in attaining their end in life. Establishing peace on earth or *dharmā samstapanarthaya* (establishment of dharma) is an urgent need of our times. In one way or the other, every religion promotes peace and harmony. The different paths, for the realisation of the harmony of life, could be brought together and measures taken to ensure peace – the welfare and well-being of all or *poornodaya* – in the society. All people of good will could extend their cooperation to raise their voices against the atrocities being perpetuated against the voiceless, those without hope, and the hapless of our society. The culture of death, for example, abortion, euthanasia, wars, suicides, homicides, etc., is spreading far and wide, and could be curbed through a culture of life, a task fundamental to all religions. A land known for *ahimsa paramo dharmā* (non-violence supreme duty) should take leadership to fight against the culture of death in a compassionate and non-violent way.

Living together and learning from each other empower people of all faiths to work together towards the realisation of the common good. Trust and confidence could be built up among the people of different religious traditions to pave the path for wider cooperation and deeper commitment. Religious leaders could take leadership uniting the people to address the needs of their own members and then working together to attain the common goal. Special attention should be paid to the weaker sections of the society to assure that their basic needs of *rôti*, *kapada*, and *makān* (food, clothing, and shelter) and *bijali*, *sadak*, and *pāni* (electricity, roads, and water) are met. Right to education and the right to food are welcome legislative acts of the Indian parliament in addressing the basic needs of the Indian mass. Religious leaders should take every step to ensure that every child is educated in the society. In the case of *antyodaya* (flourishing



of the last) religions can do much toward eradicating abject poverty and malnutrition. People of different faiths can join hands in creating job opportunities in the neighbourhood and thus improve the economic conditions of the poor in society.

Religions address matters not only of divine importance, but of material concern as well. The code of conduct is formulated on the basis of a balanced faith vision. And the core of the code of conduct is conscience. Conscience is the inner voice of a person or the divine law written on the human heart, the subjective immediate norm of morality. It is also said to be the judgement of practical reason on the goodness or sinfulness of an action. Conscience discovers the divine design or *rta* or *satya* (truth) in the given context, which according to the good conscience, is always in agreement with the moral law or eternal law. It is enough for a person to follow one's right and certain conscience. Since it is a matter of discovery and decision-making, conscience needs to be informed and formed constantly and consistently. As a person's knowledge about things and persons undergoes change, refinement of conscience is inevitable and natural. What is important is to be open to the light of knowledge. Understanding of a thing matters in the judgement. The greater the knowledge, the better is the judgement. So also the better informed the subject, the more mature is one's conscience, because knowledge gives light to see things in right perspective and to judge what is right and wrong, good and evil.

Saint Paul gives a classical exhortation on conscience,

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them (Rom 2:13-15).

According to Saint Paul, all are to follow the law of the heart or inner voice, the criterion of divine justification or salvation. He taught with clarity that obeying one's conscience is the key to salvation. This teaching has far reaching implications and ramifications when read and reflected on in the context of religious pluralism. Its unambiguous words teach the faithful to follow the law written on the heart or to respond to the voice echoed in the inner depths, of a person, the criterion for liberation. It is the

doing that matters. Doers of the law are close to God and to divine justification.

In the following words Vatican II sums up the insights on conscience,

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man.<sup>16</sup>

This should not lead readers to the false conclusion that conscience, the subjective law of morality, is all that is important and the objective law, the moral law is of less importance. In fact, there is no conflict or contradiction between the objective and subjective norms of morality, for God is the author of them both. Conscience prompts all to do good and avoid evil. This is the first principle of the rational norm of morality. It is in this context man should engage in the search for truth, goodness, and beauty. The light of understanding helps to discern what is good and what is evil. Every religion instructs its followers to do good and avoid evil, to love God and love the neighbour. Thus, there is an added reason for being informed, formed, and following one's conscience, the common ground for all people of good will – as human beings fulfill the will of God so they fulfill their own human nature.

The Catholic Church in her magisterial teaching has pointed out the need for the search for truth in collaboration with others.

In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality.”<sup>17</sup>

In the context of religious pluralism, Christians are duty bound to search for the truth, goodness, and beauty with people of other faiths. This teaching on conscience is a humble admission of the fact that Christians, if left to themselves, are not equipped to find all the genuine solutions to the

---

<sup>16</sup>Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §16.

<sup>17</sup>Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §16.

mounting problems of our times. The importance of collaboration and cooperation of people of different faiths is not only acknowledged but strongly recommended. Vatican II reiterates the necessity to have a solid foundation in one’s own religious tradition and to work towards unity and solidarity with those of other religious traditions.

#### **4. Be True, Be Conscious, and Be Blissful**

In a religiously pluralistic context, what is of significance is to be true to oneself, to be conscious of one’s performance, and to be blissful in one’s person. The inspiration to present this idea is from the Upanishadic understanding of the Ultimate reality which is triadic: *sat-cit-ananda* (true-conscious-bliss). This approach is in view of safeguarding the identity of the individual tradition and at the same time to foster the sense of unity and solidarity. In following the path of the mystery of the Ultimate reality, this would, to my mind, unfold the identity, intimacy, and the integrity needed in a community of religious plurality.

The first principle of religious dialogue should always be fidelity to the truth. Partners in dialogue should be true and honest to themselves. In every search for religious truth, there should be the humility to acknowledge and appreciate the truth wherever it is revealed. There shall be no cover-up. The words of Jesus should direct the path of dialogue: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). V. F. Vineeth makes a valid comparison between intellectual colonialism and genuine dialogue in the context of religious pluralism. He observes, “The dialogical approach on the contrary will foster an attitude of the spirit of participation instead of domination, admiration instead of interrogation, and mystery instead of problem.”<sup>18</sup> According to the author, in the dialogue of life one should go beyond the “technical dialogue”<sup>19</sup> and “monologue”<sup>20</sup> the essence of which is the exchange of ideas in dialogical form, which is only the starting point. Vineeth points out that genuine

---

<sup>18</sup>V. F. Vineeth, “Dialogue and Theology of Religious Pluralism,” *Journal of Dharma* 14/4 (October -December 1989), 388.

<sup>19</sup>“An attempt to share objective understanding of religion by an individual of another faith-community may have exchange of idea in dialogue form. But strictly speaking it is only a technical dialogue.” Vineeth, “Dialogue and Theology of Religious Pluralism,” 388.

<sup>20</sup>“Monologue in inter-religious dialogue is when one believer simply wants to thrust his religion into others, not listening to the other with a heart of expecting and accepting any ray of truth from his partner” V. F. Vineeth, “Dialogue and Theology of Religious Pluralism,” 389.

dialogue takes place at the level of the heart, “This [technical dialogue] may be a form of a starting dialogue, but is devoid of the fragrance of the flower of dialogue which is kept very much in the humble disposition of the heart rather than in the scrutinizing power of the intellect.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, search for the truth should not be limited to the cerebral level, but it should include a celebrational aspect as well.

Truth reveals and conceals. It is a mystery. This holds true of religious truth as well as for all other truth. V. F. Vineeth highlights the ever-widening horizon of truth, “It is this dynamics of *avarana-viksepa* which makes revelation a flash of *alatheia*, unveiling, yet receding from it for further revelation, that takes us to the experience of mystery.”<sup>22</sup> Truth leads us to experience freedom, which ushers in a sense of transcendence. Jesus revealed himself saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Faith in Jesus Christ and trust in the teaching of the Church are central to Christian faith. But faith in Christ and the Church could, as we have seen, be further enhanced through an enlightenment proper to the context of living together, learning from each other, and loving God, fellow beings, and creation. In this sense there is always the room for further refinement and embellishment in the understanding of Christ and consequently the closer following of Christ, the Lord and Saviour of the world. If people search for truth faithfully and freely, there is a room for conversion of heart. Christ as the unique and universal saviour of the world is the fundamental faith experience of a Christian and the tenet central to Christianity. Vineeth presents this facet of the truth convincingly, that the faith “does not exhaust the expressibility of God who is the ultimate mystery, the undivided unity of the self-revealing Trinity. It is in this orientation to the not-yet-revealed mystery of God, one transcends his entire religious experience, while he is fully rooted in and sustained by it.”<sup>23</sup> Seeking truth together guarantees identity and works towards unity and solidarity, for truth is the unifying and strengthening factor of personal and communal life.

In a religiously pluralistic context a person being conscious of one’s own identity within his religious faith will tend to consider others having their own identities. The golden rule, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Mt 7:12)

---

<sup>21</sup>Vineeth, “Dialogue and Theology of Religious Pluralism,” 388-89.

<sup>22</sup>Vineeth, “Dialogue and Theology of Religious Pluralism,” 390.

<sup>23</sup>Vineeth, “Dialogue and Theology of Religious Pluralism,” 390.

holds true. To know the truth is one thing. But to acknowledge the known truth is another thing. In the context of religious plurality, it is not enough that one knows the truth about one’s own religious tradition and of other traditions, but it is important to verbalize it to the other. Only through the process of transferring the truth through communication, can an air of freedom and an atmosphere of co-existence and co-operation exist. It is in the working of the Spirit, enlightening the mind and heart of the people of God to live and share together, that each can learn from the other and begin to love unconditionally.

Jonas Thaliath described theology as “*fides quaerens harmoniam vitae* (faith seeking harmony of life).”<sup>24</sup> In the insight of Thaliath there is a thrust for meaningful theology in the context of religious pluralism. According to him, Christ is the key to doing theology. Doing theology should lead people to live a life of harmony. What is proposed in his statement is to make theology both textual and contextual. In the same vein, but in a different category, John Britto Chethimattam outlines four foundational principles for doing theology in the context of religious pluralism; namely, i) supernatural destiny; ii) moral and religious values; iii) the build up of the human community; and iv) self-criticism.<sup>25</sup> The author suggests the primary objective of theology in India “is not merely to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of academics nor to continue endlessly the tiring comparison between Western and Eastern religious traditions.”<sup>26</sup> According to him, theology has to take into account the earthly and heavenly. “Indian tradition is rooted in a concept of history that looks at time as an epiphany of the eternal, happenings in the world a manifestation of the sport of the Lord who is present in the midst of his people.”<sup>27</sup> In the pluralistic context of the times, theology could be described as “faith seeking celebration of life in Christ.”<sup>28</sup> Religious pluralism is to be celebrated in the community. Religious traditions are to be understood as

---

<sup>24</sup>Jonas Thaliath, “His Vision of Theological Formation,” in *Jubilee Souvenir 1957-82, Dharmaram Pontifical Institute Annual*, Bangalore, Dharmaram Pontifical Institute of Theology and Philosophy, 1982, 32.

<sup>25</sup>John Britto Chethimattam, “Problems of an Indian Christian Theology: A Critique of Indian Theologizing,” in *Theologising in India*, ed. M. Amaladoss, Bangalore, TPI, 1981, 204-206.

<sup>26</sup>Chethimattam, “Problems of an Indian Christian Theology,” 204.

<sup>27</sup>Chethimattam, “Problems of an Indian Christian Theology,” 204.

<sup>28</sup>Paulachan Kochappilly, “Theological Formation in the Multicultural Context of Asia,” *Third Millennium* 12, 4 (2009), 10.

epiphanies of the great mystery of the Trinity, the One and Three. The dynamics in the mystery of the Trinity gives us a lead to celebrate life in Christ through the Spirit to the glory of God. “If religions are different musical instruments, dialogue is the masterly stroke of these instruments for the symphony of the evangelisation.”<sup>29</sup>

Religious pluralism should be a blissful experience to all engaged in the dialogue of life. The presence of the Divine is the highest bliss in the life of all who believe in God, for God is bliss. Jesus taught, “Rejoice and be glad” (Mt 5:12) even when one is persecuted. Saint Paul exhorts repeatedly, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4:4). Concluding the sharing of his heart with his disciples Jesus said, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). This sense of joy or blissfulness should also pervade the dialogue in the multicultural and religious context of our times. *Loka samasta sukhino bhavantu* (May all beings everywhere be happy) was the ancient prayer of the sages. People believing in God should live not only in consciousness but present themselves as a blessing – an extended presence of God – in the living together. It is of paramount importance to discover the inner reality of the human person, who is created in “the image of God” (Gen 1:27), there can be no conflict or confusion in being a blessing to all and bless the Lord.

To learn the basic lessons of living together, one must move to the heart of the mystery of the Trinity. The doxology of Saint Paul, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor 13:13), should guide the steps and inspire the heart in reaching out to all in the society. In the multi-religious context of today, this means that the love of the Father, the truth and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit should be reflected in the relationship of Christians with people of other faiths. Most urgent is to live a life of love, truth, grace and fellowship. There are many challenges: religious plurality, cultural diversity, economic poverty, all calling people of all faiths to be a blissful presence, committing themselves to the total and integral liberation of all in the society, a dream surely close

---

<sup>29</sup>Paulachan Kochappilly, “John Britto Chethimattam on the Theology of Religions, Dialogue, and Mission” in *John Britto Chethimattam: A Pioneer of Indian Christian Theology*, eds. K. Pathil and S. G. Kochuthara, Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 2007, 313.

to the heart of God. Whatever is *satyam śivam sundaram* (truth, goodness, and beauty), is from God and, therefore, welcome.

## 5. Conclusion

As we have seen, the context of religious pluralism can be a blessing and it offers an occasion to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths in order to deepen one’s own identity and work towards unity and solidarity in a society. It is an opportunity to be oneself, to grow, and to go beyond the boundaries that limit the human spirit, a participation in and reflection of the Divine Spirit. The context of religious pluralism challenges one to be informed, to form and to follow one’s conscience, the inner voice and the divine law written on the human heart, the following of which assures divine justification. The context of religious pluralism demands that one be true, conscious, and blissful in living together, learning from, and loving each other. It is an invitation to live the life of the Blessed Trinity – the love of the Father, the truth and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

To conclude this reflection, may I present the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-11) as the *aṣṭanga mārga*, eightfold path, towards living together, learning from each other, and loving each other, in order to discover the harmony of life and to celebrate life in Christ in the midst of diverse religious traditions. The Beatitudes are the self-portrait of Jesus, who was faithful to his Father, true to his identity as the Messiah and faithful to his mission, and always free in the Spirit to preach the Gospel and to establish the kingdom of God, for which he did not spare his life, but surrendered it joyfully on the cross to the glory of God.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account (Mt 5:3-11).

The Beatitudes found in the Sermon on the Mount summarize the action plan of every follower of Christ. In essence the Beatitudes spell out the *dharma* of Jesus for now and forever. The eightfold Beatitudes are eight spokes of the *dharma chakra* (wheel of dharma), which keep the *ratha* (chariot) of life moving forward to God with the world. In our earthly *yatra* (pilgrimage), the eight Beatitudes (*aṣṭabhagya*) keep us focused and committed to the glorification of God through establishing peace on earth and hope to human beings. In fact, the *aṣṭabhagya* are *aṣṭanga mārga*, illustrating the way of walking the path of the Lord in the world. They are different versions of the one and eternal bliss. They lead human beings to *dharmik* (ethical and moral) living, acknowledging the identity and appreciating the unity and solidarity in the midst of differences. The person embodying the *aṣṭabhagya*, namely, the blessings of humility, sacrifice, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, peace, and persecutions is on the path of the Lord. The commitment to these values put a person on the *dharma patha* (the path of dharma), which holds us together and support us in recognizing the identity of each one and responding to the diversity and promoting unity and solidarity. Putting on the robe of *aṣṭangabhagya* by the partners in dialogue will pave the way towards peace and bliss guaranteed by truth and consciousness. If we approach the reality of religious pluralism with the dispositions of *aṣṭanga mārga*, then we will be walking the path of joy, the alpha and omega of a pilgrim in faith.