INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS A POLITICAL QUEST

Felix Wilfred*

Inter-religious dialogue is today an ethical imperative. Any religious tradition which cares for the well being of the society cannot fail to realize the crucial importance of harmony and understanding among the religious groups in India. The dialogue has been taking place mainly at two levels: At the first level, which can also be called the formal level, there has been sharing and exchange in matters of doctrines, world-views and the ideals the various religious traditions propose, and the experience to which each religion leads its followers. At the second level, which can be called the *informal* level, we have the dialogue of life, by which is meant the good-will and understanding fostered in day-to-day life among the believers of various religious traditions.

While not denying the importance of the practice and theology of religions,[1] I must however, point out that they do not deal with *religious groups as units of power,* nor do they take into account the *power relationships* in wider society. Hence, I want to underscore in this contribution, the growing necessity of a politically-based dialogue among religions today in the present context of our Society.[2] Here religion is seen

---

*Felix Wilfred: Professor, School of Philosophy and Religious Thought, University of Madras, India.

[1] The efforts made on the part of Indian Christians in the area of religious dialogue during the last few decades are very well surveyed in a doctoral dissertation, which gives also an elaborate list of documents and works on the theme: Jose Kuttianimatathil, *Practice and Theology of Inter-religious Dialogue. A Critic Study of the Indian Christian Attempts Since Vatican II,* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 1995). For an Asian perspective. cf. Theses on Interreligious Dialogue. Document of the Theological Advisory Commission of FABC, *FABC Paper No. 48,* (Hong Kong, 1987); *Living and Working Together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths in Asia An Ecumenical Consultation,* (Singapore., July 5 - 10, 1987, Joint CCA-FABC Report, Hong Kong. 1989).

[2] I am deliberately speaking of Interreligious dialogue, and not of inter-faith dialogue. The latter could subsume under it also the relationship to the so-called secular ideologies which share some of the traits of religion. For greater focusing of

primarily as a social reality in interplay with many other forces and factors making up the present context of India. There is often a lot of hesitation to bring the political question into inter-religious dialogue fearing that this would prejudice and mar the dialogue-process. I want to argue why a politically-based dialogue is not only helpful, but is really inevitable. I shall also indicate some of the dynamics of this dialogue.

Given the widely differing ways in which the word "political" is employed today, we would risk serious misunderstanding unless it is clarified what is meant by this concept in relation to inter-religious dialogue. We can understand politics as "the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power proportionate to their importance to the welfare and survival of the whole community"[3]. Religious groups as social units wield power, and their actions affect positively or negatively other groups and units in society. And hence they are consciously or unconsciously, part of the political interplay. Moreover, the conflicts among religious groups and the necessity of evolving consensus indicate the importance of the political realm. Therefore, the fact of being "religious" does not force them out of the political sphere.

1. The Context of a Triple Disillusionment

Let me, in the first place, situate the necessity of a politically-based inter-religious dialogue in the contemporary context. It appears to me that in India we are living at the moment through a threefold disillusionment regarding the ideals for the shaping of our society. They concern (i) a critical questioning of the concept of nation, (ii) skepticism about the ideal of the secular (iii) the challenge to the institution of the state as provider of unity. I want to limit here only to some brief comments on these three disillusionments.

---

the issue, as will be clear from the following pages, I have chosen to limit myself to the question of inter-religious dialogue.

[3]This is a definition by Bernard Crick influenced by Aristotle. Quoted in Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought*, (London: Pan Books, 1983) 361; cfr also Ali Ashraf L.N.Shanna, *Political Sociology. A New Grammar of Politics*, (Madras: Universities Press, 1983).1-17.

It is generally recognized that the idea of nation is an import from the West into India and to other parts of the colonial world[4]. In spite of it, there has been an indigenous shaping of this ideal in the process of our history over one and half a century. Within this rather short span, it has come to mean different things. The struggle for Independence brought to the centre-stage an understanding of nation in the context of anti-colonialisms.[5] That kind of understanding had an integrative function - though very limited one.[6] Today we are assisting at another conception of nation, whose characteristic is *exclusion: Some* people, some groups, some religions are excluded from this understanding of nation; or, least, they should fit into a narrowly defined understanding of nation in terms of *Hindutva.* Similar "religious nationalism" could be found also among the minority groups.[7] The ambiguity of the conception of nation, and consequently of its misuse, for narrow ends, caused serious disillusionment among many groups.

Secularism appeared to be another concept that could serve as a force of integration. But the misunderstanding surrounding this much-debated notion has left little room for hope in terms of unity and overcoming of divisions. Today this concept is being opposed in different quarters for different reasons, of course. Most glaring example is the diatribe against this concept by the Hindutva forces and a sizable section of the Muslim community. All kinds of explanations to say that this concept has a different connotation in India than the West, do not seem to carry any persuasive force.

---

[4]On the development of nation as a concept and institution in the West, see the excellent work of E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[5]CL Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India,* (Delhi, 1979).

[6]CL G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (second impression), (Oxford University Press, 1999)

[7]For an international perspective on the issue, cf Ninan Smart, *Religion and Nationalism. The Urgency of Transnational Spirituality and Toleration,* Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies, (Rome, *1994); cf.* also the special issue *of Conciiium 1995/6,* entitled "Religion and Nationalism", (London: SCM Press, 1995)

It is interesting to note, that, of late also some of the well-known Indian sociologists like M.N.Srinivas, T.N.Madan and Ashis Nandy have expressed themselves sceptical about this concept something which cannot but be very disturbing to people who had reposed their faith in what this concept came to represent.[8] Besides, from the perspective of integration and unity, the secular has not been able to achieve anything much. We are far from forging a model of secular unity centered on the working-class, or founded on the rights of individual citizens as the common point of reference.

It looks to me that secularism in India has been an attempt to blend the Western ideal of non-control and non-interference of religion in the public realm on the one hand, and the ideal of harmonious pluralism of various communities, specially the religious ones, with India. What has happened is that the Western component of the secularist ideal has been found not feasible and practicable, and at the same time the Indian ideal of pluralism embodied in it has been weakened and betrayed by the assertions of fundamentalist ideologies. All this has led to a general distrust about the effectiveness of the secular paradigm.[9]

---

[8]See Joseph Tharamangalam, "Indian Social Scientists and Critique of Secularism", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (March *4, 1995*): *457-461*.

[9]In her recent work, Neera Chandhoke argues that the contemporary discussion on secularism may not take us far in confronting Hindutva and majoritarian ideology. The discourse on secularism is today conflict-ridden with mutual accusation of "pseudo-secularists". The whole book is an attempt to found minority rights on a more basic principle than on secularism. She enunciates her main thesis, when she states: "It may be preferable to approach the issue of minority rights from the vantage point of democracy and not from that of secularism or the nation-state ... Note that the principle of secularism is not self-validating, for we can justify it only when we derive it from, and validate it by reference to the antecedent moral principle of democratic equality. Consider this- secularism as equal treatment of all religions makes sense only when we refer it to the (prior) principle of equality. Correspondingly, a polity will be locally committed to treating all religious groups equally *only when it is antecedently committed to the generic principle of equality"*, Neera Chandhoke, *Beyond Secularism: The Rights of Religious Minorities*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4

Finally, there is the attempt to find a point of unity and cohesion in a common mode of governance symbolized by the state, which was also held as the instance that dispenses justice and equity. The state was seen as the institution which overcomes narrow and parochial interests. But this has been betrayed. For the state, in the eyes of many, has become more a problem than a solution. Through its interventions and partisan politics it has caused divisions, conflicts and discord among the various communities in our society. Ever more, far-from containing violence, the state has become the originator of violence for opportunist ends. I think this is quite obvious from the quotidian experience in India. A respected statesman of India, C.Subramaniam, has given sharp expression to the disillusionment with the state when he observes, "in India, of course, unless he wields knife, or a gun, or a bomb, the citizen is treated like a dirt, his letters are not ever acknowledged, his phone calls not returned, and requests for interviews not heeded. The cult of violence could, in this sense, be said to be the consequence of the insensitivity of the state."[10]

2. The Necessity of a Politically-Based Dialogue

Against the above characterized situation, the possibility of a politically based interreligious dialogue emerges with clear relief, and assumes great importance. The religions which had been kept at bay through a policy of the secular and whose defenses now seem to be collapsing, have come to occupy the void left by them! By this, no claim is made that interreligious dialogue could substitute or make up for the general climate of disillusionment, suspicion and conflicts. The present position is ambiguous. In such a predicament, the religions are prone to clash with one another, by allowing themselves to be manipulated by vested interests.

But the present state of affairs also offers a unique opportunity for the religions to enter into a fresh dialogue among themselves. Such a dialogue can refer back to the oft-alluded Indian tradition of co-existence and tolerance among the different religious communities. However, it

---

[10]Subramaniam, "The Major Issues Facing Us" in Challenges of the Twenty-first Century Conference, 1991 held in Memory of Indira Gandhi, (Wiley Eastern Limited, 1993), 287.

would be anachronistic and not feasible to sustain the plurality of our society relying on it alone. What I mean is that today it is not enough to invoke the past tradition of tolerance.[11] This is because we are in a situation in which such an ideal state of life has been marred by different kinds of external interventions. What is, therefore, required is that such a tolerance becomes a consciously accepted and politically-based reality in very intricate situation and in the midst of external interventions and provocations. We Indians have become today a "nation of suspicions"; even the most selfless and heroic acts of love and service to other human beings could, in this general climate of lack of trust, get painted as most selfish when interpreted by another suspecting group.

When the concrete situation is one in which identities in a society are defined in terms of nation, language, religion and so on, we need to seriously take into account the political import of their inter-relationships, or power-relationships. One factor which conditions this inter-relationship is the beliefs, tenets, the myths and the claims each group makes. History bears out the devastating experience when one neglects the identity of group and the beliefs and myths sustaining it. It is enough to look at the re-emergence of ethnic and religious issues after decades of their submergence in the former socialist countries.

One may, perhaps, imagine that through the ideology of "secularism" religions could be shown their place and confined to the private realm, or that the identities making up each group could be overcome in such a way that they cease to have any political significance. There are few things as unrealistic as this kind of a view. For, whether one wants it or not certain doctrinal tenets and modes of practice have serious, and often very disturbing political repercussions. These political repercussions depend upon how some of the doctrines and practices come across to other religious groups in the polity. From empirical point of view one can observe, for example, how some exclusivist trends Christian tradition regarding other religions and the practice of conversion have their political

---

[11]See R. Balasubramanian (ed.), *Tolerance in Indian Culture*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research (Delhi, 1992).

consequences.[12] Another example would be the political discussions about common civil code and the Muslim personal law of *Shari'a*. The political role being played by the ideology of Hindutva, purportedly representing Hinduism, is well-known.

When such hot and complex religious issues are at the centre of the contemporary political debate, it would be naive to believe that proper solutions could be found through the state dealing with individual religious communities. Harmony, peace and understanding in society calls for a politically fruitful face-to-face dialogue among the different religious groups themselves, without mediation. It offers each religion the opportunity to clarify to itself, to review and re-think some of its tenets and practices in as much as these affect other religious communities. Besides, as a result of direct dialogue among the religions, these may enter into politically significant new social interactions.

3. Self-Critique A Must

A politically successful inter-religious dialogue would depend upon a very important factor: the readiness of the believers in various religious traditions to be self-critical. It could be conveniently evaded. In fact, the most difficult thing with the religious traditions is that they are so engrossed in projecting their noblest images and doctrines, that they very often fail to cast their eye on the chasm that divides them from the actual life and day-to-day experiences. For a politically-based inter-religious dialogue, it is of utmost importance that the religions make a realistic and genuine assessment of their actual state, and the role they play or fail to play in the contemporary situation of our society.

---

[12]See M. C.Parekh, *Christian Proslytism in India: A Great and Growing Menace*, Rajkot; 1943; K.M.Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, London; Allen and Unwin 1958; Ziauddin Sardar- Ashis Nandy et al., *The Blinded Eye. 500 Years of Christopher Columbus*, (Goa; The Other India Press, 1993); Arthur Mayhew, *Christianity in India*, (Delhi; Gyan Publishing House, 1994); S.Arulsarny (ed.), *Communalism in India. A Challenge to Theologizing. The Statement, Papers and the Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association.*, December 28-31, 1987, (Bangalore; Claretian Publication, 1998).

This self-criticism as the basis of dialogue would become more concrete with relation to certain very crucial questions that affect our life in India today, and which have serious ethical implications.

The first issue to be singled out is that of human dignity and rights. I think the self-criticism in this regard should cover two important areas. First comes the failure of religions to respond in any appreciable way to the blatant violations of human dignity and rights. Questions like religious doctrines, orthodoxy, the scrupulous observance of rituals and worship, guarding the boundaries of one's religious world, maintaining the power-system these and other concerns keep the religions and their agents enthralled in a different world with a different set of values. As a result, they hardly show any genuine interest, much less resolve, in issues of human dignity and violation of human rights.

Secondly, religions, far from being guardians of human dignity and rights, are themselves, each one in its own way, violators of human rights. This is very unfortunate. The power of religion and its symbols are such that doctrines, practices, laws and regulations which manifestly go against human dignity and rights could find their legitimation in the definitive authority of some special divine revelation and tradition. That is why much self-critique of institutionalized religions from an ethical point of view is very much required. What validity could there be in a doctrine or practice that glaringly goes against human dignity and rights? How credible is the source on which such beliefs and practices find their sanction?

Another closely related issue with serious political and ethical implications concerns the position and attitude of the various religious traditions to those discriminated against and the excluded in the Indian society. This has been in the 80's and the 90's the eye of the storm in the political crisis in the country, as evidenced by the controversies surrounding the Mandal Commission Report and the policy of reservation. It does not suffice to parade marvellous texts culled out from the sacred writings regarding the poor, the obligation of practicing equality and justice. What ultimately matters is not whether the scriptures have anything to say about the poor and the issue of justice, but what *concrete options* a particular religious community takes, and in which direction it moves supporting the elite and the powerful, or taking up the cause of the least

and the last. This is a serious ethical point of painful self-critique for all the religious traditions.

Finally, a self-critique is required regarding the self-understanding of a religious group as a community.[13] We can observe in almost all religions a two-fold strands: the particularist trend which underlines what singles out a religious community from others, and the universalist trend which reaches out to other communities and groups. Critical external circumstances can lead a religious group to underline its particularist dimension almost the oblivion of the other aspects. Such is the situation which the Indian society is going through. The conditions are such that the religious groups are taking an isolationist position and getting consolidated in it. It is at this critical juncture that every religious group has to make a self-examination of its image as a community in the light of the universalist trends found in its own tradition.

4. The Role of Critical Theology

Here I see the paramount importance of critical theologies within each religious tradition. A critical theology emerging from within will be the most appropriate means to challenge the particular religious tradition and lead it to a self-critique regarding the areas and concerns which I mentioned earlier. Once the critique of religion came mainly from the secular-humanist forces. It is heartening to see that such a critique is taken over by humanistically sensitive and politically conscious theology in each religious tradition.[14] But the degree and intensity of such a theology varies according to the present condition of the different religions. But the task of a politically-based dialogue calls for the activation of this type of theology. A critical theology can contribute to significantly change the perception of the political process on the part of Christians.[15]

---

[13]For the development in the self-understanding of Indian Christianity, cf. K. C.Abraham, "Reinterpretation of Christian Tradition in Contemporary India," *Jeevadhara, vol. 26,* no. 151:35-44.

[14]See Joseph Tharamangalam, art. cit

[15]In an article written in *Frontline* (March 22, 1996), the deceased communist leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad had tried to pain in broad strokes the shifts in the attitude of the Catholic church in India, specially Kerala, regarding the social

Another important issue is the selective use of religious tradition for politic purposes.I just want to briefly mention the question here without elaborating it. Every religious tradition has in its repertoire a wide range of materials, symbols, rituals, cult personalities, and so on. Which of these are selected and interpreted for public consumption has become today a political act. The construction of the identity of a religious community will very much depend upon the use of these materials. In the context of present-day militant and aggressive discourses which press into service a particular brand of religious materials from the past, it is important to highlight from the same tradition more open to a universalistic resources. This should be the work of critical theology reflecting from within which can facilitate a meaningful dialogue among the various religious communities existing in the Indian polity.

5. Critical Reading of History and Tradition

One of the very crucial areas today which affect the relationship among the various communities - specially the religious groups- is the reading and interpretation of history. The Ramjanmabhumi-Babri Masjid issue with the demolition of the mosque in Ayodhya some years ago, has been but one outrageous instance of a much larger problem. The Indian historiography and its periodization, read from the perspective of religious groups, has become a burning political problem.[16]

Political equations change according to whether one presents history in such a way that Hinduism, the original religion, is one that has suffered violence and humiliation under the "alien" religionists of Islam and Christianity; or, whether one sees the identity of India a composite reality made up of diverse religious traditions and cultures, the history of each one

question and attitudes towards political parties. His comments were occasioned by the Statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Indian in view of the 1996 elections.

[16]See the various contributions in Vasudha Dalmia and H. Von Sietencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism. The Construction of Religious Tradition and National Identity*, (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995); Guenther D. Sontheimer and Herman Kulke (eds), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Manohar (Delhi, 1991); cf. also Sarvepally Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation. The Babri Masjid- Ramjanmabhumi Issue*, (Viking, Delhi. 1991)

of which has enriched and enhanced the one nation. The attitude one adopts versus others religious groups will differ accordingly. When Indian identity is defined by one religion to the exclusion of others, then we run into serious political problems. On the other hand, one has to come to terms with the Hindu perception of their sufferings as a result of invasion colonization associated with Islam and Christianity.

The difficulties regarding the historiography and its political implications is not only a Hindu-Muslim issue, though this may be the most grave and critical case. Such difficulties persist regarding the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity. We may recall here the two controversial works by a well-known journalist Arun Shourie.[17] By no means are these works to be taken as representing *the* Hindu view. Nevertheless what the author expresses is part of the underlying attitude of a section of Hindus towards Christian history.

There is no point in arguing that these are matters of the past. The present politics is very much affected by the way history is reconstructed to persuade and mobilize the masses. In this regard I want to refer here to a very interesting distinction made by Paul Tillich. In political theories, he distinguished between "myths of origin" and "myths of destiny". This is applicable as well to the various religious and ethnic identities in relation to their perception and approach to history. "Myths of origin, be they religious or ethnic, politically conservative; they hold up the past as a model and raise up barriers against outsiders. Myths of destiny, by contrast, look towards the unfolding of the rational possibilities in society. They dream of the future society defined in terms of equality and justice."[18] A reconstruction of history solely in terms of "myths of origin" to the neglect the challenges of justice and equality represented by the "myths of destiny" will turn out be very precarious. For, it harbours a strong fascist tendency to impose with authority on others its own tenets

---

[17]Arun *Shourie,Missionaries in India. Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas,* (Delhi: ASA Publications, 1994) (three reprints in the sanie year); ID., *Harvesting Our* Souls, (Delhi: ASA Publications, 1999).

[18]With reference to Paul Tillich Gregory Baum, "Community and Identity", in Marc H.Ellis – Otto Maduro (eds), *The Future of Liberation Theology. Essays in Honour of Gustavo Gutierrez,* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 227. .

and way of life. This danger is inherent in all religions in varying degrees, and could manifest itself at particular historical junctures.

It is important to realize that history is an area in the reconstruction of which the *subject* with all his or her biases is very much involved, and therefore it is always a history for...'.[19] Historiography is often a mixture of myths and conjectures. "Mythic history" fact, "draws upon a stock of familiar stories and myths. Myths provide open forms which are filled with communal meanings ... Mythic history appeals to people's emotions and plays upon their religious feelings. It seeks to mobilize peoples' anger, hatred and aggression and provides them with a target".[20]

If such is the political implications and religious import of historiography, I think, it is very necessary that dialogue be pursued on this question among the different religious groups. A society cannot function properly when the past is recreated in diametrically opposed ways by the various groups subsumed under it. It may look an almost impossible task, given the emotions the question of historiography is charged with. Against seemingly impossible odds, the various religious groups require to dialogue on such issues.

Strategically this would call for a lot of confidence-building measures, lest such efforts end up in futile polemics, bitterness and further confirmation in one's prejudices. The latter could be the case if dialogue is left to the militant and extremist segments in the different religious traditions. Therefore. people, groups and institutions in every religious tradition who are both self-critical and open need to come forward at various levels to initiate dialogue, and thus create an atmosphere for progressive mutual understanding among the religions on historical issues. As it is, the historiography with its myths of origin is dangerously left in the hands of fundamentalist and militant groups to manipulate the public mind and vitiate it.

---

[19]John Sturrock *Structuralism,* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 56 (with reference to Claus Levi-Strauss)

[20]Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhumi", in Sarvepalli Gopal (ed), p. 137

6. Subaltern Question

The power in society represented by the religious groups and the need for evolving consensus among them through political process, inevitably brings in the question of differentiation within the religious traditions themselves. Religious traditions are not monolithic entities. In fact, every religion is composed of many strands, and some of these reflect the experiences of the marginalized groups. Generally, the religious strands represented by the marginal groups have been challenging ones, with the result that they have often been neglected as belonging to a lower order, or branded as "heterodox", or were even violently suppressed, These marginal religious traditions have been mostly the ones which have voiced forcefully the concerns for equal treatment of all human beings, and have shown in practice greater ethical and humanistic sensibilities.[21] They also contain virulent critique of established mainline religious traditions.

Inter-religious dialogue has not only to gain from the religious experiences and ethical insights of the subaltern traditions, but has to particularly pay attention to the *marginalized groups* representing these traditions. For, the subalterns are an important political force in our society. Their religious experiences need to be highlighted today which is important also for their political and cultural self-affirmation. In fact, *the difference* the subaltern groups represent within the same religious tradition is a means for their self identity.[22] As such it has political implications.

Concretely, if we take the case of Hinduism - whose identity has become today much-debated political question - inter-religious dialogue cannot limit itself to the elitist strand of it; to the classical doctrines upheld by the upper castes and classes. The religious experience of the dalits, the

---

[21]See Felix Wilfred, "Indian Approaches to the Divine Mystery. A Subaltern Perspective" (a paper presented at the Second International Congress of the European Society for Catholic theology, Freising. August 27 - 31, 1995.

[22]The importance of "difference" can be demonstrated also from the contemporary philosophical, specially linguistic, perspective. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (John Hopkins University Press, 1976); *Writing and Difference*, (London: Routledge, 1978).

backward castes and classes - often represented in movements calling for social and political transformation - have to be drawn within the ambit of inter-religious dialogue today.

7. Structural Mechanisms for Dialogue and Democratization

To my mind, we lack in India appropriate structural mechanisms for a dialogue among religions at the political plane. What we observe at the moment are jarring monologues from each religious tradition about politics aiming at gaining as much-power possible for one's religious group. We need to devise suitable means for the meeting of religions for a dialogue that will build up the democratic process. This is an important task facing all the religious traditions today.

If we observe the political mood in the last few decades, it should be clear that in India the realization of democratic process cannot be achieved with the individual alone as the point of reference.[23] Here, democratic participation takes place collectively, in groups bound up by "primordial loyalties" principal among which is the religious affiliation. One cannot wish away religious groups from the political arena. A secular approach which attempts to keep the religions at bay is not realistic; it simply does not work. The important thing in this situation is that one positively enlists the cooperation of religions. It should take place in such a way that religions do not scuttle the democratic process by overbearing manipulative interventions, but rather contribute to the realization of it. If this should happen, it is indispensable that the various religious groups enter into a dialogue bearing upon the political process.

There is no suggestion here that one unscrupulously hands over the keys of democracy to the religious agents. No religion has yet behaved so credibly as to deserve that. What I mean is that the democratic process should take place at various levels and planes, and one such level is the religious level. And this is facilitated through politically oriented inter-religious dialogue. When religions do not meet at the political level, the consequence is that they try to fight out each other and vanquish one

---

[23]For a very perceptive and analytical study on the foundational concept of democracy, cf. Rajeev, Bhargava "What is Democracy" in *Seminar* 389 January 1992 pp. 36-46.

another in the most unbecoming of ways, jeopardizing the democratic process,

A dialoguing participation in the democratic process will strengthen in its turn the relationship among religious traditions also in other spheres. Besides, a dialogical and democratic mood, free from the feeling of threat from one another, enables the religions to play a much-needed ethical and moral role in the society. Finally, through this dialogue at the level of political concerns and democratization, there could result in each religious group a fresh realization of what religion really is and what moral responsibility it bears towards the larger society.

CONCLUSION

Anyone who takes dialogue seriously, will understand that it is no easy path. It is very challenging, and one important reason is that it affects us quite personally and as a community, as a religious group. But, then, dialogue is today the path of promise, the way to resurrection through death to the many things we have always taken for granted. Our faith, our ideals and way of life, we have to re-discover in transfigured form and dimension as a result of dialogue. And here is the importance of an appropriate theology of religions. From our multi-religious context, we in India are challenged to develop a theology of religion that will at the same time lead to re-constuct the self-identity of Christianity.

On the other hand, the process of inter-religious dialogue is also a political question of identity in today's India. The identity of India is the most crucial political question facing us. For, the country is today, as it were, suspended in the air with the loss of faith in the tripod of the nation, the secular and the state on which it was resting. A re-construction of the identity and unity of India is a matter primarily of understanding and adjustment among the various groups, communities and sections represented in its polity. This, in substance, coincides with the democratic process which we need to continuously pursue.

In this frame, the various constituent religious traditions of India need to meet each other and dialogue. And this dialogue will be part of the political and democratic process with a lot of ethical implications. A

fruitful dialogue on this plane would call for a thorough self-critical activity by every religious group. The process of dialogue will involve such crucial issues as the historiography of India, proper use of the religious heritage, the subaltern groups and their religious experiences.

Finally, for a serious politically based inter-religious dialogue to take place, what we urgently require is the creation of appropriate means, structures and mechanisms. Ashram is not equivalent to dialogue; but it is an environment or a means that can facilitate dialogue at a certain level. Politically-based inter-religious dialogue is very much in need of appropriate and corresponding fora, means and structures. This needs to be evolved both at the micro and at the macro level.