

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP AND INTER-RELIGIOUS APOSTOLATE

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CMI Major seminary's shifting from its earlier existence as S.H.Theologate, at Chethipuzha in Kerala to its reincarnation as Dharmaram College, Bangalore, was itself a theological sea-change. Moving away from a theological curriculum calculated to form priests committed to the Syro-Malabar tradition and its ministry almost exclusively to Syro-Malabar Catholics, and coming to more central a place like Bangalore, one had to take stock of the whole Indian situation in which Catholics or even Christians are a small minority. It had to widen the scope of apostolate so as to embrace the whole population of India. This has greater importance in the modern age when faith and reflection on faith have lost their impact on a majority of people. Christian mission is to communicate to all what God did in Jesus of Nazareth for the sake of all his children. As *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II clearly states what unites all humans is the fact that they belong to the same race. Since the religious history of humanity is one, the various religious leaders like Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed and their unique contributions belong to all. Similarly the existential questions like the origin and sustenance of things, life after death and the meaning of suffering are common to all and the answers to these riddles provided by the different religions form the common patrimony of all. So the leadership, which Christians can provide to the world today, is to enter into dialogue with people of all faiths and see how the various questions common to all humanity can be resolved in fidelity to Truth.

In this theological apostolate, the Indian cultural tradition in which we have to discuss various religious issues, is the birth-right of all Indians and has special relevance for the world at large where the old philosophies traditionally invoked to support faith have lost their glamour as perennial philosophies and a good deal of their influence as well.

Theology itself is faith seeking rational understanding and has to be geared to the effective service of all God's children. We are all one people of God, in which some happen to be Christians, some Muslims and others

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Hindus or people of other faiths. A few major events at its beginning went to define the identity of Dharmaram and its commitment to theological leadership in a multi-religious context. One was the All India Study Week organized by the Catholic Bishops of India at the Catholic Centre, Madras, 6-13 December, 1956 on "India and the Fullness of Christ", to discuss the missionary approach appropriate to the Indian context. Another was the follow up to the same, a meeting of the Seminary rectors and teachers of India held at Bangalore an year later from 28th December 1957 to 2nd January 1958 to think about the proper adjustments to the seminary curriculum. A third decisive event was the All India Seminar held in Dharmaram College in 1969 on how to implement the decisions of Vatican II in the Indian context. There were several other events in the life of Dharmaram such as the starting of the Centre for the Study of World Religions, publication of the *Journal of Dharma* and the establishment of the Pontifical Atheneum, the central scope of all of which, was how to provide religious leadership to the multi-religious and multi-cultural population of India.

Situation of Theology Today

One has to recognize that today's world has little appreciation for organized religion and systematic theology. A quarter century ago *Journal of Dharma* in its first editorial wrote: "Today a good number of our fellowmen find religious traditions disillusioning and irrelevant to their life and context. Moreover, there is a growing consciousness that we are living under a common threat of physical, moral and even spiritual cataclysm."¹ The situation has not changed a quarter century later. If at all it has only grown worse. Henri J.M.Nouwen says:

"There is little praise and much criticism in the Church today. The secular world around us is saying in a loud voice, 'We can take care of ourselves. We do not need God, the Church or a priest. We are in control. And if we are not, then we have to work harder to get in control. The problem is not lack of faith, but lack of competence. If you are sick, you need a competent doctor; if you are poor, you need competent politicians; if there are technical problems, you need competent engineers, if there are wars, you

¹*Journal of Dharma*, Vol. I, # 1, 1975

need competent negotiators. God, the Church and the minister have been used for centuries to fill the gaps of incompetence, but today the gaps are filled in other ways, and we no longer need spiritual answers to practical questions”².

On the other hand “Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time there is a deep current of despair, loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression.”³ Bret Easton Ellis in his well known novel *Less than Zero* gives a most graphic description of the moral and spiritual desolation behind the present façade of wealth, success and power, particularly the life of sex, drugs and violence among the teenage sons and daughters of the rich and famous entertainment personalities of Los Angeles in U.S.A.

One has to bring out clearly the need of faith in this situation of despair. “Most people turn to their reserves of faith in moments of distress and stress, expecting some metalogical cure of their problems.”⁴ This reaching out to faith is quite reasonable, since “we are accustomed to speaking of the sacred as an entity intrinsically vaster than life; we regard it as a transcendental energy of presence that animates the world, a cosmic ordering principle that helps us make sense of our experience.”⁵ There is complementarity between faith and reason, because without the reasonable reach out to faith we are led either to mere sentimentality or mere mechanical ordering of life by mere do’s and don’ts. Trust in another’s experience and witness is a normal way of knowing things that do not come directly under our perception. Faith is a constitutive element of human existence. Hence it is naturally inter-religious with a common basis across cultures and traditions. But knowledge so gained has limitations, and even with an appeal to divine revelation, what is revealed is filtered through human consciousness, which demands verifiable evidence. Blind faith is bad faith. We have to be wary of the underlying, socially derived presumptions, which prejudice our presumed objectivity. Since we are not the ground of our being, faith, as an act, reach

²Henri J.M.Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, Bandra: St.Paul’s 1997, P.26.

³Ibid.

⁴Gowri Narayan, “Seeing in the Dark” *Hindu*, 23/9/01 folio 4/8.

⁵Ranjit Hoskote, “Faith in Transition”, *Hindu*, 23/9/01, folio 0/6.

beyond the horizons of the human. But to reach the content of faith one has to go beyond Enlightenment rationalism which absolutized reason, and pure empiricism that absolutized sense experience, and make use of deconstruction of traditional statements and alternative methods of hermeneutics to reach the truth. Only a self-reflective experiential methodology is meaningful to the discourse of faith. An inclusive humanism must embrace both meaningful faith and sensitized reason in order to bring about a healing wholeness to a broken totality.⁶

Dharmaram Identity

When it was question of raising Dharmaram College to a Pontifical Athaneum there was an urgent need to define its academic identity. First for many years it was affiliated to the theological faculty of the Gregorian University, Rome. When in 1971 the Archbishop of Bangalore wanted to include it as a constituent member of the proposed Catholic University of Bangalore, the Dharmaram community strongly resisted the move. After strong representations to the Roman authorities Dharmaram was permitted to retain its oriental, Indian and interreligious theological perspective, and the Archbishop of Bangalore generously withdrew his objections. Rather than any fidelity to a presumed Chaldean connection what was emphasized was the clearly Oriental tradition of the Apostolic Church of St. Thomas. Besides, to be relevant to the Indian population one had to follow thought pattern of the Indian religious tradition and also be open to the concerns of the many Eastern religions which considered India as their Mother land.

So *Journal of Dharma* from its very beginning in 1975 held that in the present situation of a loss of faith facing all humanity, world religions, which deal with the deepest concerns of humans, have a great responsibility to present a justification for the hope they preach to humanity. In the very first editorial it discussed the six basic dimensions of inter-religious theologizing today, the convergent history of religions, their common hope, their need for each other, the communications explosion today, the unique contribution that each religious tradition made to the one religious history of humanity, and the temporality of the transcendental.. i) Religions are fast moving to a crucial

⁶See Rudolf C. Heredia, "Dichotomy or Dialectic: Ten Sutras on the Faith-Reason Dilemma," *Hindu*, 23/9/01 folio 3/9.

moment in their convergent history, when their differences hold only a second place in the dominant awareness of their common tasks. ii) In spite of the widening gap between the rich and the poor, between the developed and the developing nations there are some signs of hope that encourage religions in their common endeavour. iii) There is also an increasing realization that no nation, group or religion can make it alone. At the same time the untold dimensions of Truth have always been explored anew by each religion, and this has brought growth and maturity to move towards an ever fuller understanding. iv) Today owing to tremendous progress in communication and conveyance the world has shrunk to a large village, where the encounter of people of different faiths in a single community has created its own problems, to solve which one has to take into account the religious outlook of his neighbor. So interfaith dialogue has to examine in depth the basic religious problems, perspectives, methods and approaches of the different traditions. v) The scope, however, is not to discover the common denominator among religions, either a common concept of God or a common *humanum*. A God reduced to a minimum concept is no God, and in a common *humanum* the individuals are lost. So the task is rather to bring out and acknowledge the unique contribution of each tradition. What we find, therefore, are common issues, the existential problems or riddles confronting all humanity. But the human concerns themselves are different: For the Greeks thinking started in wonder at the phenomena of nature and the problem was the flux and instability of things and the search was for a point of stability. The Hebrews and people of the Middle East as a whole ran against the existence of evil in a world created by a good and all powerful God as the main question, while for yet others human suffering was the primary question. The solutions also are different, though they are rather complementary than contradictory. vi) As the transcendental is realized in the temporal, religion is always time-bound and culture centred. Since different religions took shape in different cultures an inter-cultural understanding is necessary in order to grasp the various dimensions of the articulated faith. At the same time as being committed to one's own faith and its cultural expression, one has to reach out to other faiths and their cultural expressions. This means one should have a critical attitude towards one's own culture in order to clarify its obscurities in comparison with the expressions of the same faith in other cultures. This means that "there must be an inner dialogue in

each religion, by which it will with a constant reference to its own inner logic examine each religious problem anew in the ever changing actual situations, using also all the help provided by other religious traditions.”⁷

God, a Relational Absolute

The first issue in any theological exploration is the very conception of and approach to God. This was somewhat indicated by Swami Vivekananda’s criticism of Christianity and other historical religions: “The sacred books of the Christians and the Buddhists are different from ours because they are historical, not religious books. They deal with histories of the deluge, kings, dynasties and great men. These are just historical accounts (Puras) and nothing more, whereas the Vedas were never written; they were never made.. They have no historical character. Therefore they are right. Because the Christian Scriptures are historical, it is clear they were made at some time by someone; they are man-made whereas the Vedas are not so. The non-historicity of the Vedas proves their superiority.” This statement of Vivekananda, who was imbued with British logical positivism represented the average Indian’s approach towards his culture permeated by an air of self-sufficiency, which rendered him hostile, and impervious to new and external influences. God is conceived as an impersonal absolute, *nirguna*. All our relation to God as *saguna*, present in history and human life is considered as our mental projection. Abbe Monchanin (Swami Paramaarupiananda) in his keynote paper at the Madras Study Week in December 1956 showed that the divine Absolute whom all religions recognized as God, the One-alone-without-a-second was not the projection into infinity of any abstract concept like being or truth or goodness or consciousness denying it all limitations. Any absolutist understanding of God which pretends to view all things from the side of the Supreme Being, or the pure Subject of consciousness, is simply a projection of one’s limited concept.

During the Axial Period between 900 and 200 B.C., when humanity passed from the logical stage of thinking to metaphysics, religions had split among themselves on the score of differing perceptions of the Deity. It took a long time for people to understand that God is incomprehensible for finite minds and that even if one were to put together all the different conceptions

⁷*Journal of Dharma*, l.c.

about the Deity it could never be adequate, but would only be like the composite picture of an elephant drawn by a bunch of blind people. The very term 'absolute' is a negative qualification, just removing the limiting conditions of human conceptions. Hence religion is seen to be more about humans and the meaning of their lives in relation to God as their ultimate goal, than about the inner nature of the divinity. God is fundamentally relational: Good is diffusive of itself, Consciousness emerges into self-consciousness as Word and Self-gift. In fact, as Aphrahat, the Persian sage stated, the moment we recognize that Divinity cannot be understood from within itself, we who are made in the image and likeness of God can project that image up to God himself, his eternal Word and the divine Spirit. .

This relationality is found implicitly in the Vedantic definition of Brahman as 'saccidananda' - Being-Consciousness-Bliss. There is a mental dialectic involved here. Finding the world out there, the source of pleasure and pain, as limited and perishable, its experience is characterized as non-knowledge, *avidya*, and *maya*, something produced by will and desire, like the things produced by a magician. So the innermost core of the experiencer is seen as 'atman', Self. Then the world out there appears as a sort of message, a limited world, which reflects and communicates the eternal Word, the *Vak*, *Nadabrahma*. This eternal Word points to the *Ekam Sat*, the one Being. So *saccidananda* is the inner dialectics of the Godhead, the self of the Self leading inwards to the Word and finally reaching the silence of Being..

Christians also follow the same method. St. Augustine, for example, finds the best image of God in the human soul, generating its own self-image and self-gift. The Bible looking for the Creator of heaven and earth, comes to a personalistic understanding of God. According to the *Book of Genesis* the first experience of Man, the conscious crown of creation, is that he is in some manner made in the image and likeness of the Creator. It is not the relation of a furniture to the carpenter nor of a building to the masons, but much more intimate like that of a child to its parent. So humans find the courage to call God, Father. Since God is spirit he does not work with his hands but with his *dabar*, the Word. This Word is distinct from God but at the same time equal to him as his perfect image, and also identical with the one divinity. Only in this creative Word can creation itself return to its origin, as its final goal. This

is why Thomas Aquinas made the radical departure from the theological perspective of Peter Lombard, for whom theology was essentially the discussion of the nature and attributes of God. For Aquinas its basic theme was the emergence of all things from God and their final return to Him. God makes man alive by the gift of breath. That breath is God himself, his self-gift as Spirit.

Nature of Faith

Naturally allied to the conception of God is the idea of faith. Though one cannot have an adequate knowledge of God it is possible to surrender oneself to the Supreme Good as the ultimate goal and meaning of one's life. Here again there is possibility of a diversity of approaches. Faith is accepting something not for its objective evidence but on account of our confidence in someone who bears testimony to it. So there is a tendency to reduce all faith to the acceptance of a series of propositions or statements. The Scholastics tended to reduce all divine revelation to statements of God about things that cannot be discovered by human experience such the triune nature of the divinity, immortality of the soul and the like. But behind this acceptance of propositions is the acceptance of the witness, God who bears testimony. For Buddhism *sraddha* or faith is the magic ring that by a mere touch makes muddy water crystal clear. It is taking one's whole life in hand and making a leap in the dark trusting in the word of the guide, the Buddha. For Judaism, Christianity and Islam one aspect of this faith is the confidence that God as pure intelligence and consciousness has disclosed himself to rational beings through the various created things, many special events in history and through intermediary beings. It is not simply the subjective confidence that what one believes is true. Faith is necessarily objective and inter-subjective. But it is not merely believing a few propositions or statements as coming from God through revelation. When Jesus tells his disciples that it was owing to their lack of faith that they could not cure the epileptic brought to them (Mk 9: 19-28; Mt. 17:14-21; Lk 9:3-43) what he meant was not mere subjective confidence in their power to cure, but rather their closeness to God, who can accomplish all things. The faith that moves mountains comes from the power of God. (Mk 11:22-24; Mt. 21:20-22) The essential aspect of this faith is recognizing that one has come from God and has to return to him. This is the meaning that some give to the words of Christ to Nicodemus in the

Gospel of St. John: "No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:6). Water and Spirit indicate the emergence of things from the primeval waters by the blowing of the Spirit that was brooding over it like a hen over its eggs.. According to Martin Buber, Judaism tries through this faith to find the eternal in the temporal, in its contradictions and difficulties. Christianity, on the other hand, finds a transcending of the temporal through the Incarnation, the definitive entry of the Word of God into human history, in the birth, life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus a true human being was at the same time the eternal Son of God.

The Fullness of Christ

The central issue, therefore, is the "fullness of Christ", the Incarnation. For all religions including Christianity and Hinduism there are two poles of religious experience, one, the divine, the ultimate ground of being, the Self of one's own self, the paternity of God from which all fatherhood in heaven and earth derives its name, the Allah, the one Creator of heaven and earth, and the other, the human, which represented the ultimate perfection that man could aspire to. In Islam the human pole was the Prophet or rather the Quran, the Divine Law, which he received, and in Sikhism the Guru who through *sangat* and *pangat*, common discipleship and community table, brought all people together. Hinduism presented the human side of religious experience through the different *avatars* of Vishnu who took a creaturely form as fish, tortoise, boar, man-lion, and the like, whenever there occurred a decline of dharma and ascendancy of evil, in order to protect the righteous and destroy the wicked and to re-establish the rule of law. For Judaism the problem was the fall of man through pride and disobedience and the loss of the original innocence and happiness of Paradise, and the remedy for it was a divinely promised Messiah who coming on the clouds of heaven would re-establish the reign of God.

Christianity, however, saw the problem somewhat differently. It was not question merely of disclosing the law of God or re-establishing the moral order, or healing the wounds of original sin and restoring humanity back to Paradise, but rather of leading the whole creation all the way up to its divine origin, namely of raising creation to the fullness of divine likeness and giving humans a share in the life of God himself. For this the Saviour had to be fully

human and also fully divine. This would be an entirely new order of things far different from the righteousness envisioned according to the order of nature. St. Paul who was accused by his Jewish critics of denying the Judaic Law and establishing a law of freedom which would be rather lawlessness, states in his different letters that in the historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ there is a new order of salvation open to all human beings. It is a law of love that the one Son, who is in the form of God and equal to God takes the form of a slave learning obedience up to death on a cross in order to raise creation to his own glory (Phil. 2: 6-11). So the promise of salvation is fulfilled through Jesus Christ born from David according to his humanity and constituted the Son of God in power through his resurrection from the dead. (Rom 1:3). So the call to all humans is to turn away from the cult of idols to the worship of the one true God and to prepare for the second coming of his Son Jesus Christ, whom he raised from the dead. (1 Thess. 1: 9-10).

The Incarnation, therefore, is not a change in God, not a divine event, not the story of a god standing out there in his transcendence and through a gesture of condescension freeing humans from their sad plight. It is a happening from the side of humanity, namely what historically happened in Jesus of Nazareth. An ordinary uneducated human being hailing from an obscure Palestinian village, leading a pious and conscientious life according to the tradition of the Fathers listens to John the Baptist preaching about the Kingdom of God, receives the baptism of repentance among other penitents and suddenly comes to the awareness that he has no self-identity of his own except that of the Son of God and of intimate union with God the Father, and that he is sanctified and guided by the Spirit in all his actions. Thus he is able to gather in himself the whole human history and to become a Second Adam, the head of a humanity moving to fellowship with the divine Trinity. Since he is part and parcel of the one religious history of humanity all have the possibility of identifying themselves with his life and becoming adopted sons and daughters of God in the one Son.

Mary and the Meaning of Matter

Another important aspect of religion is the place and meaning of the material world in the new order of things. Here the dichotomy between spirit and matter, soul and body is transcended. In the Hindu perspective matter is the principle of evolution, *prakrti*, nature, constituted of the three gunas of

reflection, action and limitation, and spirit is light shining by itself, and liberation is to realize the unreality of the phenomenal world and the sole reality of the spirit. Untill this realization would be attained, human life remained a series of births and deaths. Greeks conceived a spirit-matter opposition. The ideal of human life was seen as an ascent from the lowest level of existence in matter through various stages to a final stage of contemplation of supreme beauty and union with the One supreme truth and Good. The Hebrews conceived a tripartite constitution of man, flesh, which put him in communion with the world, psyche that constituted him in himself and spirit that made him commune with God. After death one was supposed to end up in a dormant state. But slowly there emerged an idea of a life after death and resurrection; the body, would be raised to the condition of the spirit. This position first defended by the Pharisees ended up as the central theme of Christianity. When the disciples encountered Jesus after he rose from the dead, they came to the realization that their Teacher whom they had known during life was really the Son of God incarnate. Focus of salvation was not an escape from this life but its total transformation. The Resurrection of Jesus was salvation history in miniature, an indication and a guarantee that other human beings also shall rise from death.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a symbol of this new understanding of redeemed human life. Most religions recognize the role of a female principle in human salvation. Many feel the need for a divine Mother to assist in the new birth to a life in God. Many religions have a goddess like Ishtar, Demeter, Lakshmi, or Parvati standing by the side of the Deity as a co-principle, identical with him in essence but with a functional difference towards creation. Judaism and Islam did not provide much help to this emotional side of religion. For Christianity the original tendency was to see the Holy Spirit as the feminine in God inspiring and moving all those who surrounded the birth of Jesus, and all those connected with the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost. But later looking from the glory of the risen Jesus back to his human origins the early Church realized the importance of Mary, who in the name of humanity uttered the 'fiat' to God's plan. If Son of God was really incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, Mary, the mother of Jesus was really the Mother of God. She was full of grace and would be without sin from the first moment of her conception. Intimately united to God in her spirit she virginally conceived her son. At the end of her earthly existence in death,

she was assumed body and soul into heavenly life. All the privileges of Mary were the symbols of the new existence gained by humanity as a whole as the result of redemption. Salvation and new life are not something imposed from the outside but coming from the depth of humanity.⁸

The Indian Approach to Reality

The inherent problem with Christian apostolate is that though Jesus was an Asian and the whole Hebrew thinking was Asian, from the very beginning Christianity had to accommodate and adapt itself to the Greek objectivist way of thinking. There is no doubt that Christian theological thinking has been and still is typically Western. A meeting of rectors and teachers of seminaries held at Bangalore from 28th December 1957 to 2nd January 1958 discussed this issue of an Indian methodology. Several approaches were proposed. Some advocated the method of the *bhasykaras* like Sankara who proposed their philosophical ideas through hermeneutics of Scripture. But in the light of modern biblical scholarship we cannot say about a single verse of the New Testament that this was actually uttered by Christ, or about a single event that this exactly how it happened. The objective of the New Testament writers was not to give an accurate record of events and statements, but rather to actualize their faith experience of Christ in a given context. Some others recommended a cultural approach from the beliefs and concerns of ordinary people. Such a popular religion would have no credibility before modern scientific scholarship shared by people of all faiths. Yet others strongly advocated the presentation of Christianity within the framework of Hinduism, claiming that Christ was already present in Hinduism as *saguna Brahman* or *Isvara*, the "Unknown Christ of Hinduism". But this approach was strongly opposed because it would make the historical reality of Jesus irrelevant to human salvation, throw it into the world of *maya*. It would also deny the real distinction of the Son from the Father, since the Hindu *saguna Brahman* was exactly the same as *nirguna Brahman*. The main thrust of the discussion was that the objectivist approach of Western philosophy that made reality as something out there was alien to Indian thinking. The specific Indian approach to knowledge focused not on the object out there, but rather on the one who knows, catching the knowing subject at the penultimate stage of

⁸Cf. John B. Chethimattam, "Mary and the Meaning of Matter," in *Indian Culture and the Fullness of Christ*, Madras, 1957, pp.36-45

breaking forth into a statement. For Sankara this was consciousness shining by itself, while for Ramanuja it was consciousness illumining the subject breaking forth into self-awareness.⁹

The focus for any Indian study is the meaning that an object or thing has for a conscious subject. This is measured by the *arudhatidarsananyaya*, the method in astronomy of pointing out one star by reference to other stars surrounding it, or *adhikara*, the educational principle that each topic has to be adapted to the psychological competence of the student. One's conscious self is the starting point to go deeper into oneself to see God as the ultimate ground of being, and the Self of one's own self. The basic problem for Indians was not the bafflement at the phenomena of nature as for the Greeks or the presence of evil in a world created by a good and all-powerful God as for the Hebrews. They started with the nature and causes of human suffering and the means to remove it.¹⁰ One interesting fact is that in this very approach to reality through consciousness there is a dialogue among the different Upanishads which present great many *vidyas* or differing approaches to reality, particularly among the six systems of theologizing. India has dealt with reality on three different levels of consciousness. On the outermost level of experience it is a discussion of individual things or *padarthas* or their logical representations as in the Nyaya-Vaisesika schools, while on the psychological level the Samkhya distinguishes the fields of Prakrti and Purusa. On the transcendental level the Mimamsakas deal with values and rites and the Vedantins discuss the knowledge of the really Real behind word and symbol, the One-alone-without-a-second. The basis of theology is a mystical experience of God.

The basis and root of religions on the individual plane is mysticism and on the communal level religious life. It is from the intuitive realization of sages and holy men that the community of disciples gathered around these

⁹Cf. the report of the conference in *The Clergy Monthly Supplement* vol.4,#2, may 1958

¹⁰Cf. John B. Chethimattam, "The Mystical Experience, the Meeting Point between East and West", *The Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 1959 "The Indian Mind," *Clergy Monthly*, 1961; "Christianity and Vedantic Experience" *Indian Eccl. Studies*, 1962; 1963, *Consciousness and Reality, An Indian Approach to Metaphysics*, Bangalore. 1968, London and New York 1972.

holy men developed, and grew into religious movements that sought to communicate the message of their Masters to all human beings

Inter-religious Ecclesiology

A new factor that affects the self-understanding of the Church today is its acute awareness of the many religions in the midst of which it finds itself. Though it is aware of the universal salvific will of God and unity of the divine economy of salvation for all humans, what stands out in that consciousness today is the plurality of human cultures, the radical difference among different religious traditions and the legitimacy of their differences. Here what is important is an understanding of the origin of the Church as a community among other faith communities. Only very few hold the pre-Vatican II conservative view that Jesus himself created the present structure of the Church, and equally rejected is the opposite liberal view that Jesus expecting an imminent end of the world did not provide for any organized community of believers. The growing consensus is that Jesus gathered a community of disciples which naturally evolved into the Church, with a certain continuity with the New Testament community. In this way the evolution of the Church is seen to follow an inter-religious pattern. All religions recognize a community that share the same experience and feel committed to communicating that experience to all humans. Church sees itself as the sacrament and symbol of the Paschal Mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ through which humanity as a whole gained an access to effective encounter with God. It is the concrete expression of God's will for the salvation of all his children. It is an integral part of humanity's one history of salvation, the common heritage of all. Just as Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree set the wheel of Dharma rolling for all humans, and the revelation of Qur'an to Mohammed transformed the bond of blood of the tribes to a bond faith, the birth of Jesus was the effective entry of the Son of God into human history. As St. Paul claims, if one man, Jesus, was really raised from the dead it is a pledge and guarantee that human race itself is saved in him and that all will attain resurrection through him. (1 Cor. 15:20). In this way Jesus is made both "Lord and Christ" (Acts 1:36) and is "constituted" through the resurrection the Son of God with regard to the rest of humanity (Rom. 1:3). Jesus is present to all human beings in two ways. Firstly he is present through the Church. His status as the Son of God, life,

work, and resurrection are known principally through the living tradition and witness of the Church, which traces its origin back to him, and through a critical study of the books of the New Testament which record the faith of the Church concerning him. He is also immediately present and available to all humans independently of these external means, since through the resurrection he has transcended both space and time and has become "a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor.15:45). It is through this inner presence the word that is externally announced by the Church gains credibility. (2 Cor. 13:)

The more obvious indication of the inter-religious reality of the Church is the presence of the Holy Spirit. This again takes place in two ways. The core of the Church's celebration of the Paschal Mystery is the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit not only transforms the Eucharistic bread and wine but more importantly is also the one who sanctifies and unites the participants to Christ. In the Western conception the power of the Spirit rather than being rooted immediately in the sacramental liturgy and the community, is seen as first rooted in the priestly office. Liturgy is often seen as what the priest does, rather than as the presence and celebration of the Paschal Mystery. But this liturgical celebration is rather *limited* and reaches only the actual participants. The same Spirit, however, is also invisibly present to all through internal communication of the same Paschal event, as the Spirit of the Lord who puts all things in order. The gift of the Spirit is not a product of membership of the Church, but rather the pre-requisite for membership. Only one who has received the Spirit through the initial gift of faith can be baptized by the Church. Another universal phenomenon that makes the Church really inter-religious is prayer. One activity of inter-religious fellowship is praying together and only through the Spirit can we pray.

Conclusion: Towards a Dialogical Theology

As the very first article in the *Journal of Dharma* stated, religion, philosophy and culture should be bonds and links enabling people to share experience, ideas and ideals, instead of being dividing fences between classes and groups.¹¹ Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and other religions are a fact of life of the Indian people. What we need is a communion of

¹¹See J.B.Chethimattam "Man's Dialogical Nature and the Dialogue of Religions." *Journal of Dharma*, I (1975) 6-89

communions. What unites the believers in this communion is a desire to move religious faith away from narrow concerns with personal life and particular material interests which effectively undercut the meaning of religion itself. The true believers become symbiotes who pledge themselves to each other, by explicit or tacit agreements to mutual communication of whatever is useful and necessary for the harmonious exercise of social life with a religious motivation.

There are good many in India who want to build a Hindu India, which would tolerate Hindu-Muslims, Hindu-Christians and the like. But the irony of this Hindu nationalism is that by itself it is a denial of Hindutva as a cultural perspective. The basic understanding of Hindutva is that it starts with an inner realization of the One-without-a-second and is tolerant of all the different expressions of that ineffable experience. Though faith as an act goes directly to God as the ground of all reality, the content of faith is filtered through human consciousness and has to be interpreted according to the demands of the actual context. Here the human pole of religious experience, whether it be the *avatars* of Hinduism, or the Buddha of Buddhism or the Prophet of Islam or Jesus Christ, the one Son of God of Christianity, is the unifying point. Though presented by different religious traditions, they are the common heritage of all humans, and present different aspects of the goal of human salvation, and offer different avenues for interpreting and actualizing the divine gift of faith.