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QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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1. Introduction

"I feel within me a crisis between identity and openness!" This is a confession from Monsignor Pietro Rossano, the secretary of the Pontifical (Vatican) Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue. This frank confession occurred in a Meet of the coordinators and directors of inter-religious dialogue, held in the Shivanandashram of Rishikesh, in North India, in November 1980. This meet was organized by the Commission for Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), and I was the secretary of the Commission. After an hour of inter-religious songs, mediation and prayers the participants were sharing their expectations, fears, and hopes in the paths of interfaith pilgrimage.

"I cannot say anything about this fear of tension between identity and openness" was a rejoinder from Swami Chidananda, the President of the Shivanandashram, the venue of the Meet. He continued: "the more open you are, the more open we will be, in the process of openness eliciting openness." This planning session of the dialogue-directors came after seven years of my moving around India pushing through different steps aimed at bringing about a change of attitude in different local Christian groups and in other communities, of freedom from hidden fears, of trust and openness. That process was neither easy nor smooth. Two of the participants left the place the very next day early in the morning, taking objection to certain dialogue-oriented steps taken in the very opening session.

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2. Dynamics of Living in a Pluralistic Society

The two friends who left the meet took objections in two points: (i) They were unhappy that the opening *bhajan*, devotional song had the word "*om*" in it; and (ii) that I as the organizer of the Meet responded to a sign of greeting from Swami Chidananda in the very same form of salutation (with which he personally greeted me). Today, looking back on that shock in my dialogue-life, I have no surprise at all. I do not blame the two partners who had to leave the place. Living just juxtaposed in a pluralistic society may not create difficulties so long as the individuals opt to live in splendid isolation. There existed a situation wherein this kind of isolation was considered faithfulness to ones own heritage and tradition. In this isolation, however, one need not feel the pain of looking for a language of communicating beyond the enclosing walls of one's own community.

Yet, when an attempt is made to go beyond these walls to meet those of other faith traditions, communication is often bound to fail. You meet with built in prejudices, or stereotypes in the understanding of those of other faiths. A model of self-understanding that was working, successful and meaningful within, so to say, a closed community may be questioned by the openness to those of other faiths, in confronting their models or pictures of self-understanding. Let me explain: In those early days of my dialogue-life, I was happy to hold on to a picture wherein I found myself at the very centre, with those of other faiths as moving around or belonging to the outer circles. I had to give up this picture and searched for another picture, wherein I had to place myself as a fellow-pilgrim with those of other faiths, without in any way sacrificing my self-identity.

Let me bring in an instance: Moving around India, organizing interfaith live-together-sessions of three to four days, one difficulty that I had encountered was to get the right participants from different communities. In 1974, the very first "live-together" was being planned in Shantivanam, the ashram of Father Bede Griffiths. We were looking for the likely invitees. When it came to invite a particular Hindu, I was warned about the person. He was known for his rather critical remarks in periodicals on Christian 'mission', especially on the steps taken to convert others. A high official from Vatican too was expected to take part. I went all the way down to the Ashram to persuade Father Bede not to invite the person. He, however, gave me convincing reasons that the said Hindu should be invited, especially because he was from the neighbourhood.

Reluctantly, though at that stage, I had to give in. Being invited to share personal stories of religious experience this Hindu partner very frankly shared his story. His sharing of the experience was deeply personal, and never said an offensive word to any one. At a later stage in meet, on every participant being invited to contribute any offering to meet the expenses, this fellow-pilgrim gave me a contribution with the words "this is Lord's work, Father Albert, please carry on!"

Even if all precaution were taken in picking up the right partners in interfaith meets, the language of the partners, some times, fail. There was such a moment in Kochi, Kerala, in 1981 during the very final session of approving the draft declaration that emerged in and through four days of deliberation of about three hundred fellow pilgrims from India and from other countries. Father Amalorpavadas, the then director of the NBCLC, Bangalore, was the president of the session. The draft declaration was read out, and it was time for the participants to air their opinion whether the draft of the committee can be accepted as a draft for consideration or to be rejected. There was objection from a section of the participants about certain words as God, Divine, etc., used in the draft. The objection was from the Buddhist Participants. The suggestions to replace some words by others too failed.

It was in this impasse that a new paragraph was brought in by Raimund Panikkar, a key speaker in the Meet. Here it is: We are aware that we do not have a common religious language among ourselves. Although we have tried to express ourselves in the most general terms, still much of what many of us shared together was coloured with meanings and connotations which may not be fully acceptable to persons of all religious traditions. Theistic words like 'God', for instance, 'creator', or 'divine' are unacceptable to Buddhists and Jains and others of the atheistic religious traditions. We want to state, however, that it is always our intention in this declaration to include all genuinely religious experience, even if our limitations of language some times prevent us from doing this with sufficient clarity and accuracy.[1]

[1]"Declaration, no. 5," in Albert Nambiaparambil, ed., *Religion and Man* (Proceedings of the World Conference of Religions, November 15-21, 1981), Kochi: WFIRC, 1982, 130.

The moment this new paragraph was voted in as an additional number into the declaration there was approval of the draft to be taken up for discussion. Being invited to address Christian and inter-religious groups, often I take off pointing to the limitations of our religious language and the boundaries. I harp on the reflections of Ludwig Wittgenstein on "linguistic use" and on "language-games."[2] Let me recall an instance: I was in the office of Pontifical Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue in Rome along with a Hindu Swami, Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati. I introduced this well-known writer and partner in dialogue to the President of the PCID. The conversation touched the question of reincarnation with the President raising the question, pointing to the divergence in the two traditions, Hindu and Christian. The spontaneous response of the Swami was that both the Christian and the Hindu believe that everything is not over with this life, and that the life is to continue, knowing well that they do not *know* much about the life after.

My effort in interfaith gatherings often begins with an attempt to point to the trespasses from faith language to knowledge language and vice versa. Many a problems of interfaith encounters – I feel – can be resolved or dissolved the moment the partners observe the boundaries of the religious language-games. Often I had been witness to situations wherein matters of faith were raised and discussed in interfaith gatherings as if the discussion was about matters of knowledge. Many an instance of identity crisis in interfaith meets can be faced and a way out found, if the dialogue-partners of different traditions observe the limitations of the language-games involved. I borrow often, to mark out the boundaries of the different uses of language, the paradigm of the language of the kitchen. Every kitchen language is precious, beautiful and meaningful within the kitchen. Once the members are out of the kitchen care is taken to avoid the use of the kitchen language and a shift is made to a language meaningful to the outsiders.

In the sixties, as I started off this dialogue-life, the expression "non-Christian religions" was very much in use in order to speak and write about those of other faiths. I was not that happy with the use of a negative expression in referring to others. My own Hindu and Muslim friends told

[2]*Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Ludwig Wittgenstein" by Norman Malcolm.

me that they too were not happy with the use of the word 'non-Christian' in addressing them. They asked me if I would be happy to be addressed as a 'non-Hindu' or a 'non-Muslim'. However, it must be admitted and positively appreciated that dialogue-partners have started using more affirmative words about each other.

3. Fundamentalism or Fanaticism?

There is a feeling left in me that the encounter of religions or of religious traditions is creating an atmosphere of mutual suspicion, of misuse of language, of calling names! Here is a quote from a note that I got from the e-mail group Interfaith Action sent by P. N. Benjamin with a disclaimer that he doesn't endorse the views of one Rajeev Srinivasan who wrote the essay:

> The Catholic Pope came to India a few years ago and gave a fundamentalist and insensitive speech. Violating the *atithi maryada* of not embarrassing one's hosts, he showed his disdain for the religions and cultures of Asia, expressing his wish for a 'harvest' of souls of Asia in this millennium. Mocking Deepavali, he suggested that true light is only in the acceptance of Christian dogma. What he did not acknowledge is the key: that the native religions of Asia are valid spiritual paths. He did not ask his flock to live in peace with them: cross planting is all he was interested in. This qualifies as communal, provocative speech…[3]

Perhaps it would be good to take note of the use of the word fundamentalist in the very first line quoted. Religious fundamentalism is, I am afraid, a misused word. Is not fundamentalism a positive word? If holding on to the fundamentals of any tradition is what makes one a fundamentalist, isn't this note something positive? I have my Muslim friends who object to the negative overtones given to the word fundamentalist, perhaps after the "September 11." Perhaps the word 'fundamentalism' has to be replaced by 'fanaticism' in the emerging context of the encounter of religious traditions.

It would, however, be good to take note of the undue weight or overtone given to the expressions 'harvest' and the "cross planting" in the above passage. In the paths of interfaith encounters, the partners would do

[3]Benjamin, "Apartheid in India" 21 April, 2004, in *Rediffnews.*

a great service if trespasses are avoided and the contexts of the linguistic use are outlined. I recall a sentence that my Hindu friends are fond of repeating: *ekam sad viprah bahudha vadanti* – Truth is one; seekers talk of it differently.[4] A very consistent dialogue partner is never tired of telling me: "all religions are the same." In the early stages of our interfaith *pilgrimage* I tried to spell out the differences between religions. Still he insists on using the word: 'same'. Perhaps the inability of the dialogue partners to understand each other is due to the world views involved: what is said from a teleological world-vision may not be easily understood who hears it from a cyclic or spiral world-vision. A faith statement that Jesus is the 'only' redeemer understood as universal and all-inclusive might sound as exclusive to one who is living in a cyclic world vision. Therefore, the different world-visions involved and the boundaries of different languages involved have to be given due weight. Drawing attention to the limits of the use of the words, especially of the highly loaded religious language may be a step in the right direction to the crises that are bound to happen in the meet of the followers of different religious traditions.

Equally important is the picture or models of self-understanding that the partners keep and cherish as members of any particular religious tradition. Often the models are labelled as 'exclusive', 'inclusive', 'pluralistic', etc. Crucial in the openness to those of other traditions is the equality of others. This equality is very easily threatened by some of the pictures that dialogue-partners project.

Let me not give the impression that the dialogue-partners have to advocate or embrace a position of religious indifferentism, of relativism, of compromising one's own heritage. Nor is there any plea here of holding a position that all religious traditions are equal. I fail to understand the meaning of the word *equal* when applied to different religions and traditions. The uniqueness or specificity of any tradition or religion is not, as far as I can see, or need be an issue in the encounter of the believers. A suspension or even a bracketing of commitment to the faith of a community is not at all in question here. Interfaith encounter happens and should happen within the flow of the particular religious tradition to which the partners belong and never in a "no man's land!"

[4]Rgveda 1.164.46.

A double check of language, modes, and models of interfaith communication is called for, once the partners are seriously committed to meet across the boundaries. They have to do the homework of examining their own understanding of themselves and of others. This should happen within the communities. This is already happening in the communities. This can be called a kind of examination of conscience.

In the early years of interfaith exchanges, the participants of different traditions used to give expositions of the different tenets. The tendency of the exponents was mostly to pick up the positive notes of the tradition in question. The negative notes, if at all any, were more or less attributed to the failure of the believers to live up to the tenets of the tradition represented. True, when it came to the sharing of personal stories, there were confessional contributions, and genuine conversions. The more experiential the sharing was the more enriching were the following exchanges.

Let me mention one of the last interfaith meets, in Kochi, organized by The World Fellowship of Inter-Religious Councils (WFIRC) in December 2003, on Harmony and Non-Violence. In the group discussions that followed the daily input sessions, the participants shared the different expressions of violence in the society. Instances were shared wherein violence of one form or another had religious roots, or tacit or implicit sanctions. It would be in place to cite a few lines from the findings that emerged from this Meet:

> Our weaknesses we humbly admit (1) that some of the texts in our Religious Scriptures are open to misinterpretation and often lead to misunderstanding; (2) that we and some of our religious leaders have often stood as silent spectators, whereas they should have been prophetic in their actions in condemning such acts of injustice; and (3) that rather than engaging in healthy self criticism, some of us have tended to find faults with other religions and spiritual traditions.[5]

There was this ongoing "dialogue intra" within the Christian Churches in India, especially in the Catholic Church. The Church in India Seminar of

[5]"Declaration of the Interfaith Meet on Harmony and Non-Violence," organized by WFIRC, at Renewal Centre, Kochi, Kerala, India, on December 13-16, 2004.

1969 was one such event. As a participant in that event and as one involved for years in the work of the promotion of interfaith dialogue in India,[6] I am a witness to the growth in the self-understanding of the Christian partners in dialogue and in the understanding of those of other faiths. A new "dialogic-self-identity" is emerging. This was not a smooth sailing. There were tensions and there are still tensions in relating the different paths implied and involved in the Christian vocation, among the paths of dialogue, liberation, healing, education, proclamation, etc. This "dialogue-within" is very healthy and necessary for individuals and communities engaged in the process of openness eliciting openness.

As a participant in the "Church in India Seminar" I witnessed the tension within the participants in the workgroup on dialogue, especially on the duty of the educators to provide for the religious education of the students of other faiths entrusted to their care in Christian educational institutions. The issue was raised, discussed; but we failed to arrive at a consensus. This was raised again when the Commission for Dialogue introduced the very first draft of the "Guidelines for Dialogue" for discussion. Later on, when the Commission, in 1989, brought out a revised edition of the "Guidelines," it was accepted as a Christian duty to provide for the religious education of other faiths as well. A passage from this *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* is an instance of genuine conversion from within:

> Students belonging to other religions in our schools and colleges should be given every opportunity, encouragement and tactful guidance to grow up as truly and personally religious believers. Otherwise, especially if the students are under our exclusive care for a long time, they may drift into a religious vacuum. As Christian educators, we have no authority, and perhaps no sufficient competence, to teach Hinduism to Hindus, Islam to Muslims, Buddhism to Buddhists, etc. Within the limits of our possibilities, we are called to help our students to deepen their understanding of their own religious traditions and scriptures. It is also recommended that

[6]Amalorpavadass, ed., *The Church in India* (Proceedings of the National Seminar, held at Dharmaram College, Bangalore, India in 1970), Bangalore: NBCLC, 1970.

> whenever possible this be done also with the help of members of the respective traditions.[7]

Echoes of this on-going dialogue within or "dialogue-intra," are being heard from outside the Christian boundaries. There are among them apparently critical, not so sympathetic exponents. They too are doing important service for the new self-identity to emerge in the dynamic osmosis of living communities. Arun Shourie's controversial book, *Missionaries in India*, is just one of these reactions or responses to the dialogue-intra in the self-evaluation of the Church in India, in the field of evangelisation. Here are a few lines from Shourie referring to the background paper presented in a Meet of the Church in India to take stock of the evangelisation in India:

> It reiterates what Vatican II acknowledged – that redemption may be attained through other religions too. Where the others used to be looked upon as heathens living in torment, they are spoken of as ones "in whom the Spirit has also worked wonders." Were the fact that so; many were still continuing in their old ways was earlier seen as the challenge that the Lord had put before Christians, as the unkempt field which every Christian was in duty bound to till to garner the "great harvest" for the Church, the fact that the Lord has even till today allowed these others to continue in their old faiths, that fact is now seen as a part of the ineffable mystery of God, and of the way He works to realize His will. The challenge now is to simply to save them by converting them, it is also to comprehend the purpose of God in allowing them to continue in their old beliefs, and in fact also on occasion redeeming them through these beliefs.[8]

My attempt here is not at all that of making critical remarks on the author of the book. Rather, my intention is to point to the fact that the dialogue-within a community (dialogue-intra) will produce vibrations outside. Equally important is the fact that the self-identity of the different communities-in-dialogue is emerging in and through the process of different dialogues-intra within these communities, demanded,

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[7]CBCI, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, New Delhi: The CBCI Dialogue Commission, 1989, no.104.

[8]Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Chances, Dilemmas*, New Delhi: ASA Publications, 1994, 215.

necessitated and occasioned by the dialogue of communities across the boundaries. My hope is that a new self-identity is and will emerge through these exchanges.

4. Overload of Nationalism and Revivalism

Any meaningful discussion on "identity crisis" against the background of the encounter of religions in India should pay attention to the topic of religious nationalism, to the politicisation of religion, to the so-called Hindutva agenda. There is the cry of "secularism in danger." Due recognition is to be given to the revival that is happening within different religious traditions. Discussions are on *jihad*, and on the fight against 'terrorism' after 9/11. Iraq, Afghanistan, the ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, etc., are just a few wounded memories with which we have to live on. In India, the wounds left by the demolition of the Baabri-Masjid of Ayodhya are not at all healed. Efforts are on to a painful discovery of one's own self-identity along with the efforts at opening out to those of other traditions. This, indeed, is not a smooth sailing.

The changing political situations are naturally affecting the different dialogue partners. When attempts are made to politicise religion to make political gains, the pictures of self-identity that the dialogue participants keep are called into question. If and when the Hindutva agenda is projected as the test of nationalism this very test will become dubious! The dynamic quest of self-identity may become static. A revivalism is setting in within the different traditions to fall back on certain static norms of exhibiting one's faithfulness to one or the other tradition. To be national may, in the process of this politicisation of religion, mean to exhibit a set pattern of behaviour in tune with the heritage of one of the communities involved. The nationalism of the dialogue-partners of other communities will be in question. This may result in power games and displays of certain pictures or symbols of self-identity. In the place of opening out and dialogue, a closing in may happen. This, in turn, my lead to fanatic trends within the different communities. In the place of openness eliciting openness, fanatic closures or isolation may elicit further and deeper isolation. Nationalism demands a great deal from every citizen. When a mix of religion and nationalism happens, however, openness among members of different religions and interfaith dialogue are in danger.

Instances of tension in the very process of openness to those of other religious and spiritual traditions are reported in the media. Even a small tension within a community gains wide publicity when the rituals or practices of the tradition are seen and publicized as the cause of division in a society. I wonder if any community or religious tradition is exempt from this phenomenon. Recently, wide publicity was given in the media to a police action in preventing a ritual known as "*Elavoor thookam*" in a temple, at Elavoor, near Angamaly in Kerala. Here the tension was apparently between two groups or wings within the Hindu community itself. *The Hindu* of April 23 and 24, 2004 carried the report on the tension in the very front page.[9]

Call to revival and a new discovery of one's own self-identity is going on and on within the different traditions and communities. This should follow as the fruit of the dialogue intra. The tension between identity and openness, if this happens in the very process of opening out to the wider horizons of other religious and spiritual traditions, is something healthy and, certainly, to be welcomed. In and through the dialogue intra the partners will come out of their narrow-mindedness, enriched with a new self-confidence and with a language suitable and apt for the encounter of dialogue families.

There is another form of revival too: that of hardening and of closing in. A symbol of a particular tradition, for example, a symbol of harmony and love, may in this very process become a symbol of "closing in." The symbol of harmony and of communion may be made, manipulatively, into a symbol of dividing the communities. The call to 'nationalism' may, thus, turn out to be the call to the discovery of a new religious, but fanatic identity. Any group closed in or hardened in this process can be easily victimized in the political game or in the politicisation of religion. Let me not point an accusing finger at any tradition in particular. This would be a sign of danger. Any political party will be inclined to the vote banks, and a closed-in group may become a vote-bank to a particular political party. The "religion is in danger" card is being played by the players in the game of politics. Nationalism, however beautiful and praiseworthy may it be,

[9]"Ban on '*Thookkam*': Tension at Elavoor," *The Hindu*, April 23, 2004, 1; see also "Bid to Perform Elavoor '*Thookam*' Foiled," *The Hindu*, April 24, 2004, 1.

would, thus, turn out to be a tool of exploitation of the national consciousness and sentiments of the innocent citizens of any nation.

5. Building on the 'Conversion' Fear

In 1981, as we organized the very first World Conference of Religions in Kochi, there was much tension in the south of India around the conversion of a village, called Meenakshipuram, to Islam. The participants of the Meet had this hidden fear, which was voiced in the group meetings and became louder in the group-meetings and in the drafting stage of the final declaration. What surprised many of us was the fact that the then Governor of Kerala, Jothi Vencatachellum, faced the issue squarely in the very inaugural address. Here are her words in a quote from the report that appeared in the *Indian Express* covering her speech:

> The Governor said that there was nothing to worry if conversions took place. Every religion had an in-built, inherent strength, stability and moral force to sustain its adherents, and change of religion was a matter of personal conviction. If man was oppressed and suppressed, he became depressed and looked elsewhere for self-respect and dignity. No religion as such makes any difference between man and man. All were equal before God.[10]

Let this be noted that many a dialogue partner has this hidden fear that the dialogue move, when this comes from a Christian partner, has the hidden agenda of 'conversion'. As secretary of the Commission for Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), back in the eighties, I moved around in India organizing interfaith encounters, multi-religiously organized, on values in the fast changing world. One question that was repeatedly raised and addressed by the panellists and by the participants was: is the right to move from one religion to another an essential ingredient of human rights or is this against humanity? Practically everywhere the response was positive, that this right is integral to humanity. The inhibited fear of the dialogue partners have to be surfaced and cleared in and through interfaith exchanges, which may, sometimes, be painful and hurting.

It may be worth mentioning one painful but enriching encounter that we went through the Millennium Peace in the UN, in New York, in 2000.

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[10]Nambiaparambil, ed., *Religion and Man*, 28.

The topic of discussion was that of giving and receiving financial aids. One of the speakers of the plenary, His Eminence Francis Cardinal Arinze (from Vatican, Rome) in this world of unjust, unequal distribution of wealth, there is a duty on the rich nations to share their resources, to give financial aids to the less privileged, and that the poor nations have the right to receive such aids. This sharing, however, was objected to by a section of Hindu leaders with the argument that extending financial aids is used as a means of converting the poor. The result of such an intervention was an atmosphere of high tension. Later on, a group of us, five from each side made an attempt, to arrive at a reconciliation. The discussion in this group, too, was not that smooth. But we arrived at a reconciliation formula asserting the right of Christians to proclaim the Gospel, that proselytising is to be avoided, that there is the duty to give and right to receive financial aids, that extending of such aids should not be used as a means for conversion, and, finally, that we have to earn each other's confidence that financial aids are not used for religious conversion.[11]

6. Conclusion

Identity is and will remain the central issue in interfaith pilgrimages. The partners in this onward journey have to discover again and again, always anew, their own self-identity. In this process they will go through a process of purification and language-shocks. A hardening may happen as we move on. Fanaticism of any kind, even in the cover of mistaken nationalist identity, is a danger to be confronted by the fellow-pilgrims.

A new atmosphere is being set in India, following the political elections in India. The word 'secularism' was flouted by opposing groups during the election campaign. The word Hindutva, too, was very much in the heated atmosphere. Politicisation of religion is a card that is often played by the different parties to keep the vote-banks behind the contestants in elections. A new soul-searching is on as to the success or failure of the different cards played in the political game. Then, partners in the pilgrimage of dialogue, too, have this challenge of keeping the hope in communion, in openness eliciting openness, in a quest for the dynamic self-identity.

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[11] Albert Nambiaparambil, *Pilgrims on the Seashore of Endless Worlds*, Bangalore: ATC, 2002, 130-131.

I recall Swami Chidananda of Rishikesh, who went around distributing the prayer of Francis Assisi in an interfaith live together, back in 1974. I would end this sharing citing his words that he wrote in the *Festshrift* that was presented to me for my sixtieth birthday. Winding up his deep personal note of felicitation he makes this appeal to be "instrumental in opening the hearts and widening the horizons of perceptions of many others engaged in similar tasks by imparting to them a clarity of vision and a fine awareness of the fundamental spiritual unity of all existence, the essential in-depth harmony of faiths and ultimate Oneness of Cosmic Reality that transcend all human systems that exist in our tiny planet earth. Last but not least, our present-day conflict-ridden human society badly needs more such persons..."[12]

[12]A. Pushparajan, ed., *Pilgrims of Dialogue* (A Collection of Essays Presented to Fr. Albert Nambiaparambil in Honour of His 60th Birthday), Kochi: Vianny Printings, 1991, 179.