

## INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN INDIA

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### INTRODUCTION:

India has the privilege and fortune of being the mother and matrix of many religious traditions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are born and have grown in India. Zoroastrianism (the Parsi religion), though not originated in India, exists only in India today. Judaism struck roots in India long before the common era. Christianity came to South India just after the death and resurrection of its founder Jesus Christ. And Islam also came to India immediately after the death of prophet Muhammad.

Thus India in its entire history never was a country with a single religion. In its continuous search for the Absolute, India has not only given birth to several major religions but also accommodated number of world religions. It has been aptly called the cradle of religions. According to the religious census of 1991 there are 672.5 million Hindus, 95.2 million Muslims, 18.8 million Christians, 16.2 million Sikhs, 6.3 million Buddhists and 3.3 million Jains in India<sup>1</sup>. Religious pluralism in Indian context simply means democracy among religions, in which beauty is understood as unity in diversity. The foundation for this unity and harmony is seen in ancient *Vedic* literature, where it is said, "*Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti*" - 'Truth is one, but the wise speak of it variously' (Rg. Veda 1. 164.46). In such a religiously pluralistic society, encounter between religions has become an unavoidable necessity and a day-to-day experience. There is hardly any public function or celebration without this intermingling of several religions. In short, no religion and religious function can be thought of in isolation. Thus, in Indian soil, religious amity is at the heart of every human endeavor.

Today there is a growing awareness among Christians living in India that they have to integrate themselves with this reality of pluralism and the ideologies of the land if they want to fulfill their Christian obligation and responsibility in building up a new humanity in the likeness of the Kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup>*Manorama Yearbook* 1996, 31st Year of Publication, Kottayam, India., p. 461

This vision of Christian mission calls for an in depth dialogue between Christians and people of other faith traditions.

## CHRISTIAN INITIATIVE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN INDIA

### i. Basic Unity

All religions, in general, try to unravel the mysteries regarding man, his relationship with his Creator, his fellow human beings and other forms of creation in the universe. Because these religions are born in different times, against different background, differences are bound to be present in them. But a serious reader of world religions will easily notice that beyond the ritual and doctrinal differences, they do share certain common feelings, ideas and sentiments while answering some of the perennial questions regarding the existence of God, meaning of life, problems of evil, predestination, suffering of the innocents, final destiny of man, etc. Besides, all religions have a basic unity in the level of deep spiritual experiences, in the sphere of moral and ethical heritage, in their teachings of service to suffering mass and in promoting ecological and cosmic harmony.

### ii. Common Foundation

Thought pattern, religious language, symbols and rituals may differ from one another but at the bottom there is always a tendency for unity in their quest for something beyond. To put it in Indian context, in matters that pertain to religious experiences, *samanvaya* - 'harmony' is always possible between opposites on the basis of *samana adhikarana* - 'common foundation'. Hence to see the real beauty of Indian religiosity as unity in diversity, we have to do away with the two extreme positions, namely, one religion is totally different from another or all religions are same. This common foundation or unity in diversity may be seen further in the fervent prayers and supplications of Indian sages and saints. The *Vedic* sages pray:

*"O God, the giver of life, remover of pains and sorrows, bestower of happiness, and creator of the universe, Thou art most luminous, pure and adorable. We meditate on Thee. May thou inspire and guide our intellect in the right direction*

- *The Gayatri or Guru Mantra*

*"O Supreme Spirit lead us from unreal to real, from darkness to light and from death to immortality."*

- *Brihad, Upanishad 1. 3.28.*

These prayers, and other similar ones, do not in any way contradict Christian prayers and their aspiration for spiritual perfection. In the same way, the serenity and compassion taught in Buddhism, the total renunciation and detachment preached by Jainism, the desire for right social order and the courageous life of Sikhism and the life of holiness and purity stressed in Zoroastrianism simply reflect the essential teachings of Christianity. This common pursuit of all religions makes it clear that different religious tenets necessarily complement each other, and therefore there is always a possibility for religious fellowship and mutual sharing between religions. They support each other in their common journey, towards the ultimate goal of human existence here and hereafter

### **iii. Christian Motivation**

This common journey and mutual enrichment will not be possible without a living dialogue, one faith encountering another faith, openness to critical evaluation of beliefs and practices, interpreting religious symbols and sharing of spiritual experiences with one another. Realizing this fact, Christians who live in a multi-religious society like India should come forward to discover the good things that are found in other religious traditions. Besides they should try to feel at home in the national and religious traditions of the people (AG 11) and promote whatever is true and just, whatever is holy and worth living (AA 14, NA 2). In fact, interreligious dialogue presupposes that all religions have a role in God's universal plan of salvation. All of them in some way or other respond to the voice of God and His self-manifestation in the universe. Besides, as Christians, we believe that the Spirit is at work even beyond the boundaries of the visible Church (GS 22; AG 15) and the seeds of contemplation and asceticism have been planted in humanity before the preaching of the Gospel (AG 11, 18).

If God has so generously revealed Himself to our brothers and sisters of other religious traditions then that revelation is not only relevant to them but also to us who are equally seeking for God's self revelation and the arrival of His kingdom. It is this openness to religious differences, sense of solidarity

with other faith communities as co-pilgrims and the readiness to acknowledge God's saving presence in the midst of all believers that should prompt the Christians in India to have dialogue with the people of other religious traditions of Indian origin. In Indian context, interreligious dialogue can become more meaningful and relevant only when it is motivated by the three-fold objectives, namely, 1.Harmony at All Levels, 2.Spiritual Fellowship, and 3.Cooperative Action. Once again these objectives themselves become valid reason for dialogical relationship with the people of other faiths.

## **1. HARMONY AT ALL LEVELS**

### **i. Indian Tradition**

Ancient and medieval India was known for religious tolerance and non-violence. It supported all forms of religious, philosophical, cultural and social thought patterns. "*Let noble thoughts come to us from all sides*", says *Rig Veda*. The Hindu mind considered truth as many-faceted. Truth has to be gathered from different points of view of Reality because no system of philosophy or religion could claim monopoly over the whole truth. Hence pluralism and diversity did not pose any serious problem. On the contrary, the integral approach to all forms of pluralism made life smooth and peaceful. '**Sarvodaya**' meaning "uplift of all" was the common dictum practiced in Indian soil.

### **ii. Religious Fanaticism**

Religious fanaticism, and hateful intolerance are contrary to the very nature and the purpose of every religion. It simply points to the fact that religion can be used either as a means to build up a harmonious society or can be misused to promote ill-feelings, hatred and unjust aggression. The reason is that in a multi-religious society, every religion wants to stress its individuality and at times the prevailing competition between religions leads to the systematic suppression of one by the other. Every major religion, when it encounters another religion, either it wants to swallow it up or annihilate or marginalize it. The typical example is that when Hinduism encountered Buddhism, it absorbed certain good elements from it and then exiled it. Today it is flourishing in other Asian countries. In the same way Hinduism declared Islam and Christianity as missionary religions and marginalized them on the basis of doctrinal differences. In short, often religions are not

lived in their true spirit, rather the very devotion to religion breaks into fundamentalism and fanaticism. There is a gap between belief and practice. As a result of it, religions themselves have become detrimental to the very cause of religion. In a multi-religious society like India, any more tolerance of these fanatic tendency would lead to national disintegration and division among people.

### iii. Religious Communalism

Tension and conflicts between members of different religious communities have been reported in India since early eighteenth century<sup>2</sup>. But the type of communal violence we are familiar with entered into the history of India only at the beginning of twentieth century<sup>3</sup>. Today *Ramajanmabumi-Babrimasjid* problem, Hindu-Sikh tension and Hindu-Christian rivalries plague every part of India. Besides, religion and religious feelings are politicized when political parties are created in the name of religions. In India we have Hindu *Bharathiya Janata Parti*, the *Muslim League*, the *Sikh Akali Dal* and *Kerala Christian Congress*, etc. It would mean a Muslim must belong to the Muslim League, because that party alone claims to speak on behalf of the Muslims. It would also imply that an attack on individual of a particular religious community would be taken as an attack on his religion. It is not a personal attack but a communal attack<sup>4</sup>.

### iv. The Distinction

Often religion alone is not the root cause of communal conflicts. But religion is used as a powerful instrument by a group of people who wants to play with religious sentiments of the people to uphold their social, economic and political interests. This is the new phenomena in India today. Hence religious communalism can be briefly described as an indiscriminate mixing

<sup>2</sup>Cf George Mathew, "Hindu Christian Communalism: An Analysis of Kanyakumari Riots", *Social Action* 33 (1983) 407-19; and Joseph Velacherry, "Communal Conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Kerala". *ibid.*, 420-42.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Gopal Krishna, "Communal Violence in India: A study of Communal Disturbance in Delhi", *EPWXX/2* (1985) 61-74, 117-31.

<sup>4</sup>Swami Vicrant, "The Roots on Indian Communalism", *Responding to Communalism: The Task of Religions and Theology*, Jesuit Theological Forum Reflections, No. 6, New Delhi, 1991, p.248.

of religion with politics – as an element in the game of power. A group of people become communal when they feel that because they belong to the same religion they also have the same economic, social and political interests; that these are different from those of other religious believers, and that these need to be defended as such<sup>5</sup>. Hence it is often argued that religious conflicts that are based on faith commitment, doctrinal differences, methods of worship, belief in the symbols and myths, etc. should not be mixed with the communal violence triggered off by a struggle for political power, economic welfare and social status between two or more faith communities. Thus, we come across two types of communalism in India. One is purely religious and the other is misuse of religions to uphold the interest of a particular community.

#### v. The Role of the Church

In this regard the Church in India is called to play a significant role for the promotion of religious understanding and communal harmony. Christians must therefore oppose every form of violence and discrimination among people based on status, race or creed (NA. 5). In the past, the single mission of the Church was to propagate its faith in order to increase its number numerically. Today we have to go back to Jesus Christ. His mission was the ushering in of the Kingdom. Jesus came to us not only as God's word and gift (Jn. 1:14), but he came to announce the Kingdom (Mk. 1:15) and called us to share in his task of inaugurating it among all people: "Behold I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). The Kingdom which Jesus preached has to be realized here and now. It is a Kingdom where conflicts, violence, injustice and discrimination are replaced by social justice, harmony and communion: "Let all be one" (Jn. 17:21). Not only Christians, but the people of all religions are also called to the same mission of establishing the Kingdom, though the ways and means are different. Our Hindu friends may call this mission "*Sanatana Dharma*" - eternal law, "*Sarvodaya*"-uplift of all, "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*"- universal family.

The Church exists for the sake of this Kingdom which God wants in this world. Through Interreligious Dialogue, in collaboration with the believers of other faith communities, the Church in India has to work for the arrival of the Kingdom- 'A new heaven and a New Earth' (Rev. 21:1). In a

<sup>5</sup>See Bipin Chandra, "Communalism-The way out", *Mainstream* (May 24, 1986) 11. Cf. also his book *Communalism in Modern India* (New Delhi, 1984).

multi-religious society like India, all religious traditions are expected to be loyal to their rich religious heritage to face together the challenges of the present situation creatively. Secondly, through dialogue and collaboration the religious leaders must provide a common spiritual and moral foundation for the socio-political project of nation building. This approach to religion will not only eradicate religious fanaticism and misuse of religious sentiments but also provide respect for religions and religious freedom. It is the responsibility of the Catholic Church to initiate this movement in India.

## 2. SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP

The Hindu *Sadhana* (spiritual exercise) aims at God-Experience through various *Margas* (ways), namely, *Jnana Marga* (insight), *Bhakti Marga* (devotion), *Karma Marga* (right action) and *Yoga* (psycho-physical-discipline). These different *Margas* meet the spiritual aspiration of the people of different needs and temperaments.

### i. Bhakti Tradition in India

It is in *Bhakti Marga* the "I-Thou" relationship between God and man is graphically expressed. Hence it is very popular and most loved means of attaining communion with God. According to *Bhakti Marga* the spiritual journey of the soul has four stages: prayer, worship, contemplation, and mystical union. *Prarthana*, the Sanskrit word for prayer means petition - an ardent request for some favour from God. The *Vedic* word *yajna* for worship stands for offering something to God. It denotes devotee's self offering or self sacrifice. Worship purifies the mind and shifts the focus of man's activities from self to the Divine. This takes the soul nearer to God. This way of approaching God with single-minded devotion is known as contemplation. The Sanskrit word for contemplation is *upasana* which literally means 'sitting near' (the deity). Finally the soul is absorbed into the Bliss of the Lord which is known as mystical union.

### ii. Religious Teachings in India

Hinduism suggests certain essential qualities necessary for spiritual perfection: single-minded devotion to the Lord, good will towards all beings, uprightness, friendliness, compassion, freedom from attachment and egoism, self-control, etc. (*Bhagavadgita* 12:11-20).

Jainism recommends the same virtues, in relation to non-violence (*a-himsa*) and compassion for spiritual purification and total liberation: "For the sake of the splendor, honour and glory of this life; for the sake of birth, death and final liberation, for the removal of pain, man acts sinfully towards the earth or causes others to act so, or allows others to act so. This deprives him of happiness and perfect wisdom.... He who knows these causes of sin relating to the earth, is called a reward-knowing sage" (*Acharanga Sutra* I, 1, 2).

Buddhism proposes eightfold noble ways which gives insight and wisdom and leads to serenity, perfection, enlightenment and *Nirvana*. They are: Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Pursuit, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Same trend is found in Sikhism also. Sikhism proposes five kinds of vows for perfection in moral life, namely, non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, abstinence from sexuality and abstinence from greed. The Sikh ethics teach that work, worship and charity should dominate one's complete life. And self-reliance is the greatest enemy of God-realization and it manifests itself in lust, anger, greed materialism and pride<sup>6</sup>.

Also in Zoroastrianism, spiritual perfection here on earth and the ultimate destiny after life depend upon ethical behaviour: "False brings an age-long punishment and Truth leads on to fuller, higher life" (*Yasna* 30:11). Zoroaster preached good thought (*Humata*), good word (*Hukhta*) and good deed (*Harshata*) to be the essential virtues or duties for every religious man.<sup>7</sup>

### iii. Christian Understanding:

The above mentioned teachings of different religions, which uphold the moral, ethical and spiritual perfection of a seeker of God, go hand in hand with the teachings of Jesus Christ found in the Gospel. Spiritual perfection is a state of blessedness, joy, love, and communion with the Lord. The whole Sermon on the Mount is nothing but an invitation for such state of life and communion with the lord through moral, ethical and religious behaviour.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. W.Owen Cole, *The Guru in Sikhism*, London: Darton, & Todd, 1982, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup>Kedar Nath Tiwari "Comparative Religion", Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1983, p.101



Once again, the concepts like, human bondage, total self-surrender, freedom through divine grace and final bliss are common to many religions of Indian origin. To a greater extent they correspond to the Catholic understanding of freedom from sin and final fulfillment. Absolute Truth is beyond human comprehension. Therefore different religions understand the Truth in different ways and define it with all the limitations of human intellect. In this sense, people of all religions are co-workers and co-pilgrims in their search for the Absolute Truth. Naturally these religions do not contradict one another but complement each other in their common search. Hence the Church looks at the religions of the world not as rivals to her, nor historical moments totally foreign to her but as possessors of values which are intimately related to the divine mystery (LG 16, NA 2). This openness will strengthen the mutual bond, spiritual fellowship and collaboration between religions to march towards one and the same God who wants all men to be saved.

## **2. COOPERATIVE ACTION AMONG BELIEVERS**

### **i. Dialogue of Action**

Interreligious dialogue should not be visualized in isolation. Its objectives should not be restricted to mutual respect and harmony among religions for the sake of peaceful co-existence alone. On the contrary, in a country like India, the mission of dialogue should be all embracing; the total well being of different categories of people should be taken into consideration. Without this wholistic approach, dialogue would remain an abstract reflection of certain religious beliefs and self defence game of believers. Hence in Interreligious Dialogue the totality of human life in its all dimensions should be the focal point for discussion and reflection. Such dialogue would result in action, an action towards building up a new humanity where everyone can enjoy true freedom, real fellowship and full Justice. It is here, dialogue of life becomes dialogue of action, and everyone is initiated towards common good irrespective of religious differences.

### **ii. Option for Poor**

The drastic situation in which "the least" (Mt. 25:45) of our brothers and sisters are in constant struggle to defend their rights and dignity are in need of our support and help. Lack of proper nourishment, unemployment,

exploitation at various levels intensify the poverty in India. Religions can certainly come together and on the basis of their fundamental teachings and encourage their members to be the guardians of human values. Dialogue, then, is not a matter of talking but action. It is an openness to the needs of the down-trodden and oppressed, a sharing of material and spiritual resources with the people who are in great struggle for justice and liberation.

### iii. Caste Discrimination

Secondly caste discrimination is one of the major factors in India. Hindu society has divided the people into four castes, namely, *Brahmins*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra*. Their social and economical status are decided by birth. Whatever may be the justification, the caste system has sickened the Indian society to a greater extent. It has pushed a section of the society into background and denied them even the basic human rights. They are made second class citizens and their survival totally depends upon the mercy of the upper class Hindu. The sad thing is that the caste discrimination is observed in India even at political level. Christian dalits do not get the privileges given to other dalits for the simple reason that they are converted from Hinduism. Of late, number of dalit organizations and social action groups have emerged to fight for the rights of the dalits community. Through dialogue, the Church can initiate other faith communities also to fight against the common enemy that affects the society.

### iv. Faith Commitment

For Catholics such option for poor and oppressed flows from the faith commitment to Jesus Christ who identified himself with every person and with every aspect of human life: "The word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14). As Christians we are, therefore, called to live in harmony and grow together in collaboration with all human beings to establish a just and humane society. "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (GS.1). It is this good news Jesus went about preaching by his life, words and action, death and resurrection: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to set free the oppressed and to announce the day of the Lord" (Lk. 4:18-19). Catholics in India, should continue this mission of Christ to do away with the unjust social order in whichever way and in whatever form it

appears. In a multi-religious society this liberative work should become a common venture of all believers motivated by the religious, moral and social teaching of their respective religions. As Christians we consider such work as the preparation for the coming of the reign of God.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Interreligious dialogue in a pluralistic society helps us to arrive at certain conclusions: All religions are pilgrims in search of the Absolute. Since God revealed Himself in various ways and forms, He can be approached through different means. The whole humanity takes part in the same divine essence because it is created in God's image. God is omnipresent and universal. Therefore he is beyond any sectarian rituals, symbols and worship. This is made clear in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman: "Believe me, the time will come when people will not worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem... They will worship him in spirit and truth" ( Jn. 4: 21-24). All people are God's children irrespective of race, religion and belief. "There is no Greek nor Gentile nor Jew. All are God's Children" (Gal. 4:3 1). God being the origin and end of humanity, the ultimate goal of all religions is nothing but the Kingdom of God. Again the Fatherhood of God and the pilgrim nature of all religions motivate the believers to love their neighbours, particularly the poor and the marginalized.

Thus Interreligious Dialogue moves from simple sharing of faith experience to social action for just society. Against this background Interreligious Dialogue becomes an indispensable need of the hour in India. It is indispensable because it promotes harmony in the midst of pluralism and diversity; builds up unity and fellowship among all people irrespective of caste, colour, language, culture, etc. and above all it promotes the spirit of inter-dependence and pro-existence to so many socio-economic, political and religious problems. This vision of building up a 'New India' in collaboration with the people of all religions of India motivates the Catholics to dialogue with them at all levels.