

Reflection: 1

RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN INTERFAITH CONTEXTS

Narratives from a Pilgrim's Interfaith Encounters

Albert Nambiaparambil♦

1. Introduction: Matching Words by Deeds

As I sit down to take note of the very first lessons learned in the path of interfaith dialogue, the very last statement of the declaration that emerged as the findings of the very first interfaith event, the World Conference of Religions, Kochi, Kerala, November 15-21, 1981, echoes in my mind: “*Let our words be matched by deeds.*” We have come a long way. These parting words of the Meet, however, continue to ring new notes for us, as we continue our interfaith pilgrimage, trying to learn new lessons in interfaith literacy. Back in the seventies, I had to cover long distances in the train, mostly in the 3-tier compartments. These travels provided very good opportunities to discover new interfaith friends. One of these friends was P. Govindapilla, a Marxist leader and writer, from Kerala. I recall one of those meaningful exchanges.

Our conversation was around the ‘hope that is in us’. He shared his dream of the society of tomorrow, without class, exploitation, and alienation. I was sharing with him a packet of banana-chips along with the conversation. To give him a taste of the society of my dreams, I took off from the Gospel of Mathew, chapter 25, about the norms set therein, of sharing our resources, about the last judgment, etc. His response was, as I recall now, that he was not hearing this vision lived out or spread out by the Christian community at large. Well, let me remind me and our dialogue friends this note, that our words are to be matched by deeds, and that our deeds speak louder than our words.

♦**Dr. Albert Nambiaparambil CMI**, after procuring his doctorate in philosophy and a long academic career, is a full-time dedicated dialogue partner of religions. Apart from arranging regular dialogue meetings among the members of different religions – nationally and internationally – and holding different offices in this regard, he is a regular contributor to various periodicals and scientific journals on world religions.

1.2. Religions Divide!

We were around thirty interfaith fellow-pilgrims winding up our three days of ‘live-together experience’ in CSR, Pariyaram, Kerala, in April 2007, sitting by the side of the Chalakudy River. We were narrating our own stories, sharing our interfaith experiences and experiments. We found time also to share our dreams, our failure-stories too, as we were moving on and on. In that parting session, so-to-say, one of the participants, Joseph Puthiadam, who was rather silent all through the proceedings, had this to tell: “Our family got settled near Peerumedu in Kerala. In our village, we were Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. A church was established in our village. Slowly this church became the unifying point, the meeting point of us all, especially during the celebrations. Our communities did not feel, then, any distance between us. Later on, a temple and, then, a mosque were established. Now we realize that we are different, that we are separate. In Bangalore, I received an invitation from Father Albert to join this interfaith pilgrimage. I am now here in this path of dialogue.” He is now a regular partner in our dialogue meetings, always ready to extend a supporting hand, as we meet.

1.3. Dividing and Uniting Religion

The question that Joseph Puthiadam raised, however, is delicate. Is ‘religion’ a dividing factor within human community or a unifying one? Often we hear statements such as ‘religions divide’ and ‘religions unite’, of course, in different linguistic contexts. It can also be said that ‘religions’ divide while ‘religion’ unites. I also hear others saying that religion, at a superficial level, divides while, at the deeper level, it can be a unifying bond. Leaving these two ‘slogans’ about religion for further discussion, let me now turn to another slogan gaining ground in inter-religious circles: “to be religious is to be inter-religious.”

2.1. Bonding Religion to Inter-Religion

Recently, in a meet organized by the CBCI Commission for Dialogue, I heard once again this slogan “to be religious is to be inter-religious.” In interfaith gatherings, I have heard partners from different religious traditions giving reasons for their dialogic involvement, picking up one or other assertions or statements from the particular tradition. Our Hindu friends very often pick up the Vedic assertion “*ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*,” truth is one, seekers call it by different names. Our Muslim partners often repeat their position: we accept all the Prophets, and give

them same respect. Thus, from the different religious or inter-religious circles, this formulation that “to be religious is to be inter-religious” is getting general acceptance.

2.2. Goal of Dialogue

While taking part in an interfaith meet associated with the *Kumbhamela* event at Allahabad, a Catholic religious leader asked me very personally as to what is the end or purpose of this ‘dialogue’. He was, as I understood then, asking me to give the reason or motive of our involvement in interfaith dialogue. The context and participants were predominantly Hindu. Was he asking me to link this dialogue-commitment to the important task of proclaiming the ‘Good News’? I wonder! I did not wait or ask for a further clarification. Rather, my response took a different route – that of presenting the Christian Mission of Dialogue as the continuation of the Mission of Love. My reason for *dialogue* is nothing but the expression of Love, which is the essence of being a Christian (1 Jn. 4:16).

2.3. Proclamation and Dialogue

Will this my understanding of dialogue, as the expression of the Christian vocation of Love, be understood or accepted by all Christians? Need not be, I would say. The Christian vocation to ‘proclaim’ the Good News cannot be compromised and side-tracked. How does one relate or link these two commitments is a valid question. Let me not pick up that here. All that I would like to hold or say here is that the commitment to interfaith dialogue flows from my being a Christian and needs no further justification. So too, the task of proclamation of the ‘Good News’ is the path of any Christian.

But, often I wondered, in contexts of dialogue as to who is the agent of proclamation. Christians? ‘Yes’ should be the answer. But, interfaith encounters expose us to those of other faiths becoming agents of the ‘Good News’. I recall an incident. An interfaith ‘live-together’ was being organized in Pune, in *Christ-prema-sevaa Ashram*, back in 1974. We were having our simple, vegetarian lunch, seated on the floor. Towards the end, Swami Chidanandaji of Shivananda Ashram, rose from his place and started distributing printed copies of the *Prayer of Assisi* – “Lord make me an instrument of thy peace” – to all the participants. I recall the instance of another Hindu Swami – whom I wanted not to invite for that ‘live-in’ – made his contribution for the expenses to be covered, with the words: “Father Albert, this is Lord’s work, do carry on.”

2.4. Eucharist and Dialogue

In a poem that I wrote with the title “*This is My Body*,” I tried to depict the commitment to dialogue as flowing from the Eucharistic experience. It came as a surprise and reward to me when Honourable Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer took note of these meditative lines and wrote: “What is the significance of ‘This is My Body’ in dialogue? That is the methodology of Nambiaparambil” (See my *Pilgrims on the Seashore of Endless Worlds*, xiii; henceforth as PSEW). Tuning in to the music and *bhajans* of the Hindu pilgrims on their way to the uphill shrine of Lord Ayyappa of Sabarimala in Kerala, repeating the words that everything and everyone is the same Lord, “*ellamellamayappan*,” I wrote the following lines:

Floating in this river of sorrow,
Searching for a ray of hope in darkness,
Humans, pilgrims, repeat this cry: *this is my body* (PSEW 3).

I do understand the question of Justice Krishna Iyer. The lines that I have cited here flow from the Christian faith celebrated in the Eucharistic experience. This may not have any vibration for one looking at Eucharist from a secular perspective. Nor will it, perhaps, ring any note to one who is worried at the Eucharistic celebration as a dividing factor in the sense that others are not allowed or invited to inter-communion.

2.5. Dialogue as a Pilgrimage

I return to the slogan “to be religious is to be inter-religious.” This spirit was latent in the call of the Holy Father Pope Paul VI to the fellow pilgrims who met him in Mumbai: “to meet not in buildings of stone and brick but as pilgrims set out to find God.” For any pilgrim, for that matter, the focus is on the ‘further shores’, on the ‘not-yet’, on the Beyond. The baggage, the heritage of every tradition, is not side tracked, is not denied, is not compromised; but the attention, as fellow pilgrims, is focused on the goal. With this ‘focus’ of all fellow pilgrims, “*to be religious is to be inter-religious*” is a very suggestive slogan.

3. Dialogue as Celebration

As I started off finding my paths in this dialogue-pilgrimage, along with the supporting hands of a few friends, I took steps to begin a few centres for dialogue. One of them was ‘*Sopanam*’, a township on the way to the uphill town of Munnar, in Kerala. As is natural with any institution run by a religious congregation, it was but natural that those who are in charge need not have this charisma for the ministry of dialogue. Later, a very

well run English medium school was started there and it was but natural that the focus and attention shifted to the efficient running of the school.

A few years ago there was too much of the monsoon rains. The students of the school were playing football in the playground by the side of the school. The ball fell in the small but almost overflowing river. Two boys – both Hindus – trying to get back the ball, fell into that river and were drowned in the flood. The body of one of the boys was recovered; all attempts to get back the other body failed.

It was now the very first anniversary marking the death of the two young boys. The school principal rang me up and asked for my opinion about any meaningful way of marking the death anniversary of the two school boys. I suggested that we observe the day by an interfaith prayer service, with songs, prayers, readings from sacred scriptures, followed by moments of silent reflections. A parent of the young student, whose body was not recovered, lighted the very first wick of the oil lamp. The prayer session lasted one hour and a half. The students, staff, and the few parents who joined us were very much moved and touched by this celebration of the painful memories. I mention this at the outset of these reflections, to point out that the language of celebration may be the most meaningful one in our interfaith pilgrimage, and that interfaith language can take different expressions.

4.1. Openness Eliciting Openness

It was the year end of 1980. After almost eight years of continuous travel in India, forming interfaith groups and organizing interfaith ‘live-together’ sessions in different centres, it was time for us to take stock of the interfaith steps so far taken. The directors of different dialogue groups and centres, along with a few diocesan coordinators of dialogue, came together in the Shivanandashram, Rishikesh. During the prayer-reflection session on the very first evening, Monsignor Pietro Rossano, the Vatican Secretary in charge of dialogue, shared his intimate feelings of ‘tension between identity and openness’ that he was experiencing there and then. Dialogue as a movement was setting in motion different waves in the Christian communities, especially in the Indian church. Liturgical experiments, attempts at inculturation and adaptation were being tried out in different places. There were reactions and doubts. We started off with a prayer-hymn, *bhajan*, “*om jagadeeswara.*” Taking up the sharing mood, Swami Chidanandaji, the president of the Shivanandashram had this to offer: “I

will not say anything about the tension between ‘identity and openness’; but, I can tell you that openness elicits openness; that, the more open you are, the more open we will be.”

4.2. *Heaven is Other People*

Worth stressing here is a key-note: that dialogue is between persons and not between systems and organizations. True, systems, organizations, ideologies, etc., are all coming in the picture. They matter and have a great role to play in interfaith dialogue. Dialogue, however, is between human beings. It is in this expression of openness eliciting openness that interfaith dialogue should happen. Dialogue is the flowering of intersubjectivity. Partners in interfaith dialogue are contributing to the great ‘we’ formation. The drama of life that would make us play out in our real life is that of ‘*heaven is other people*’, in contrast with the ‘hell is other people’, in the “No Exit” of Jean Paul Sartre.

4.3. Subject-Subject Relation

There is always the inherent danger of human relations falling from “I-I” to “I-it,” from “subject-subject” relation to “subject-object” relation. Genuine conversation and conversion happen in this subject-subject horizon. I would say that I have no right to make anyone an ‘object’ of conversion. In an authentic dialogue, conversion can occur and does occur in both the partners of dialogue. But this should not be resulting from one partner making the other an ‘object’ of conversion.

5.1. Crossing the Boundaries of the ‘Kitchen Language’

Let me go back to an encounter – Hindu-Christian – that took place in Rome, in Vatican, in the office of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. I accompanied my Hindu friend, Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati to the President of the Pontifical Council. By way of conversation the Vatican official raised the issue of re-incarnation, *punarjanma*, which is a tenet of the Hindu faith-tradition, but not of the Christian tradition. In responding to the issue raised by the Cardinal, my Hindu friend observed: both of us – Christian and Hindu – ‘believe’ that all is not over by this life; that life continues after death. He added that both of us ‘*know*’ practically nothing about the life hereafter and that all the talk thereabout is more or less a kind of ‘*bla-bla*’. The conversation or ‘dialogue’ around *punarjanma* did end there and took up other topics. That dialogue was, indeed, very friendly!

5.2. Kitchen Language

Let me borrow a tool for testing any meaningful language, for sorting out the language that is meaningful from the nonsensical language, offered by Ludwig Wittgenstein. I would say that any language gets meaning within the boundaries of its use, within the particular language-game. This is all the more applicable within the faith-language that is being used in any 'religious language', wherein the faiths, creeds and beliefs, symbols and rituals come into play. 'There are three persons in the Trinity' is a faith language, employed within the Christian faith-tradition. That there is only one, there cannot be two, is asserted in the Islamic tradition. Such assertions get meaning within the boundaries of these two faith-languages, or language-games. Thus, languages get meaning within the boundaries of the particular faith tradition. I would feel like saying that any religious language is beautiful and meaningful as any 'kitchen language' is meaningful within the particular 'kitchen'.

5.3. Crossing the Boundaries

Partners in interfaith-dialogue have to be on guard against crossing the boundaries of the particular faith-tradition. Even if the same words such as, 'salvation', 'incarnation', 'god', 'creator', etc., are used by a Hindu and a Christian, the meanings involved may be so different within two 'kitchens'! This may be the case when one asserts on the need, on the right to 'conversion', and of another partner ruling out the right to convert another as going against human dignity. In this case the faith in the '*karma*' theory may be involved, while in the former case there may not be that faith. Thus, for a Christian, the appeal may be to the duty enshrined in the teachings of the gospel or on certain article in the UN Charter (§18). In any case, it would be important to clarify the boundaries of the kitchens or of the 'games' involved.

5.4. Learning from Failures

Inter-religious encounters often offer to the participants opportunities of learning from failures. Let me illustrate this point by mentioning a failure from which we learned a painful lesson. It was in November 1981, during the last session of the World Conference of Religions, held in Kochi. The draft declaration that emerged from the deliberations of over three hundred dialogue pilgrims was being discussed for approval. The draft was read out. Moderator of the session was Father Amalorpavadas, the director of NBCLC, Bangalore. He sought the permission of the participants to take

up the draft for discussion. There was strong opposition to the draft from a group of Buddhist delegates. They were not happy about the overload of theistic terminology that was used in the draft, as God, divine, absolute, etc. In this delicate situation, Raimundo Panikkar, a key speaker of the meet, brought in an additional paragraph, confessing our failure to arrive at a language meaningful to all, to express all that we wanted to say (PSEW 130). Once this confessional statement was brought in and accepted, the objections were withdrawn.

6.1. Wrong Questions Seeking Answers!

It is important to face and to understand the wrong questions that are being raised in interfaith meets and encounters, in interfaith contexts. Recently, I have heard this question of “salvation outside the church” repeated in two conferences, convened by a Hindu Ashram, in Banaras and Allahabad (during the Kumbhamela of 2006). The question is often raised clubbing the three monotheistic religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, as converting religions. Mentioning the Catholic tradition in particular, the assertion, “there is no salvation outside the church,” is made. I hear a response from the Christian side that this assertion is no more held by Christians, that this is a ‘pre-Vatican’ position, and that it is no more taught by the church.

6.2. Linguistic Confusion?

My position is rather different: it is one of helping the participants to sort out the words in the very question, before jumping into an answer. My effort would be to ask the question as to who is ‘*inside*’ and who is ‘*outside*’; again, the focus should be in pointing out the differences involved in the use of the word ‘salvation’ within the Hindu and Christian contexts. The word ‘church’ may draw different pictures to different partners who raise the question and even to the Christians, who straight away jump with a positive or negative answer. My attempt would be that of helping the dialogue-partners to find for themselves the answer, in clarifying the different meanings involved in the words used. Thus, for a Hindu ‘salvation’ would mean getting out of the circle of birth and rebirth, out of ‘*samsara*’. I would also point out the fact that the official teaching of Catholic Church was against the position restricting salvation to the baptized people – denying salvation to Hindus, to those of other faiths.

6.3. 'Uniqueness' in Question

There was an issue that was repeatedly raised in the context of interfaith dialogue: the uniqueness of *Christ and of Christianity*. I recall an incident that had happened in 1971. The inaugural function of the Chavara Cultural Centre of Kochi, Kerala, India, was going on. A seminar on "Religion and Culture" was part of the program. A Hindu, Christian, and a Muslim were among the panel of speakers. The Christian speaker, while giving a picture of Christianity towards world culture remarked that Jesus was the only founder of a religion who made the claim to be the "way, truth and light" of the world.

After that meet, I met the speaker and observed that this particular position is perhaps rather misplaced. My reason was that one of the religions in the picture, Hinduism, has no founder at all. I have felt that Christian partners in dialogue often raise this issue of the 'uniqueness of Christ' and seek answers. This effort is very rarely held by Hindu dialogue-partners, although we hear them sharing their vision of Hinduism as the ancient religion – *sanatana dharma*, the most universal and tolerant religion. Muslims come out presenting Islam as the *religion of peace*, as laying out the most perfect code of life. Buddhists point to the *compassion* as the outstanding trait. Christianity is presented often as the religion of *love*.

I recall another instance, where the question of 'uniqueness' was raised in the context of conversion from one religion to another. The conversion of a Hindu writer, Madhavikutty from Hindu religion to Islam was making media headlines in Kerala. Following this news, another Hindu writer, Balachandran Chullikkattu, announced his conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism. This Balachandran was the speaker in one of the programmes arranged in Upasana, Thodupuzha, Kerala. After his presentation, as it is the custom, there was a discussion. A Hindu participant in the meet raised this question to the speaker: 'What was lacking or missing in Hinduism that he found in Buddhism?' Without posing even for a moment of reflection, Balachandran raised a question in return whether the questioner was married or not. On getting a positive reply, the speaker continued whether he married his wife after proving her to be the most beautiful woman around! There was no further question on this topic.

The question on 'uniqueness' continues to be raised and discussed in the contexts of ongoing dialogue. I would say that this is but natural.

Even the partners from other faiths, who are not that bent on raising this question in relation to their own religion, still make efforts to point out the distinguishing features of their tradition. This discussion on ‘uniqueness’ should go on. Answers, I would say, are to be sought and found within the context of the faith assertions of different religious traditions.

6.4. World-Time-Vision Involved

There are other assertions that block dialogue partners from understanding each other. Let me pick up one factor. Here is a statement, “Jesus is the *only* saviour.” The opposite would be that of saying that there are as many saviours as there are religions. In any case, it would be worth the trouble, if we look at the time-frame within which this word ‘*only*’ comes in the Bible, in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 4:12). The context is not at all that of telling that there are no other redeemers, that of eliminating others. Again, the time-vision involved is that of linear-time, all inclusive time. The use of the word in this context is not at all ‘exclusive’, although in ordinary use the word ‘*only*’ is exclusive. My Hindu friends, who raise this question, have a circular or spiral vision of time. For them the word ‘*only*’ would sound ‘exclusive’. The inability or difficulty of dialogue partners to understand each other, because of the differences in the world-time-vision, is a key factor in inter-religious literacy and communication.

6.5. When Language of Documents Blocks!

Often the partners in dialogue are scared away in opening themselves out because they are aware of the existence of documents that give them the impression that one group or other claims some kind of ‘superiority’. The assumption is that dialogue is possible only between ‘equals’. Any claim to superiority by one side may block the dialogic openness.

The document *Dominus Jesus* is often cited as an example. There is here in this document the assertion that Jesus is the universal saviour, and the ‘*only*’ saviour; that the ‘Kingdom of God’ cannot be seen separated from the Church and so on. There are pointers in the document on the dangers of religious indifferentism and relativism. The language used, as I look at it, is one that may be labelled as ‘possessive’ or that of ‘having’. Those who are not familiar with this style may find it difficult to accept the claims made in the document. While an effort should be made from the part of Christians to understand the difficulty of ‘outsiders’ to understand this language, it is important to take note that the document is nothing but a restatement of the traditional teachings of the Church. It would be

important to take note of the particular linguistic context of the language used in this and similar documents. This would help the dialogue partners to differentiate the content from kind of language used, to express the stand against relativism.

6.6. Relativism and Faith

I have often felt that there are contexts in interfaith dialogue wherein the only way to make our faith content absolute is to make relative the language about faith. This is all the more true when the partners who go through experiences in inter-religious prayer, meditation, sharing sessions. One way would be that of avoiding words and symbols that are sectarian and of using those that are suggestive, evocative, and capable of producing vibrations in all the participants.

In early 2007, a few of us interfaith-pilgrims went through an 'interfaith retreat' that included an in-depth sharing of our interfaith dreams and difficulties met within our paths. A group of students of the school at the venue of our meet (Carmelgiri Public School, Korandakad, Munnar) expressed their readiness to join us, in an experiential exposure to the interfaith dialogue. They joined us and their contribution was with the song of "Lead Kindly Light." Later on, we sang together the songs: "We shall overcome" and the "Song of Ruth." There was no relativism in this approach. Rather, we were trying to help each other in an experiential exposure. Were the differences between faith tenets blurred by this exercise? Was their faith made relative when the participants – belonging to Hindu and Christian traditions – lighted different wicks of the oil lamp, while all the participants chanted the *bhajan*, "*asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotirgamaya*" ("Lead me from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from death to eternal life")? Far from it, indeed, as far as I could take note of!

7.1. Pictures of Self-Understanding

It would be helpful to pick up another tool from Wittgenstein to test the meaningful language. According to this tool, any language that is meaningful will draw a picture. Thus, if a word doesn't give us a picture, that word would be meaningless, would be 'nonsense'. As a Christian, I have or I should have my own picture of self-understanding, as a member of the particular community. The same should be said about those of other communities. In opening out to those of other faith-traditions, we would

and should look for pictures of self-understanding that are inclusive and open.

7.2. Changing Pictures

Before I took to this path of interfaith, I was happy with a kind of picture that placed me in a circle or sphere, with Christ at the centre. In this picture, those of other faiths are invited to join through the acceptance of baptism. Later on, I found myself more comfortable with another picture wherein others, those of other faiths and ideologies, were placed in different circles around my circle of Christians. At a later stage, as I got more and more involved with those of other faiths, there was a sense of dissatisfaction deep within me about my earlier pictures of self-understanding. I picked up an atomic or star-like picture, with a light placed at the centre. This picture brought home to me the experience of us all being equal, as fellow pilgrims.

My Hindu friends often draw the pictures of different paths leading to the same mountain top, of different rivers flowing and merging in the same ocean, of the same moon seen as many moons in the same pond, with the waves reflecting the One and so on.

7.3. Changing Language

The effort of all dialogue pilgrims, I would say, is to leave out the exclusive pictures and draw more and more inclusive pictures of dialogic self-understanding. There was a time when, from a kind of exclusive self-understanding, I was happy to label others as ‘pantheists’, as non-Christians, as ‘polytheists’. The dialogic discovery of others made me change my labels too: those of other faiths, of other religious traditions, fellow pilgrims, etc.

8.1. ‘Saving Presence’

Any Christian partner is placed in a delicate situation, when he or she is called upon both by the insiders and the outsiders to relate the task of dialogue with that of *proclamation*. I had to find my own responses all through this pilgrimage of dialogue. This was for me a new learning and unlearning process. I recall the time when dialogue was understood as a *means* for proclamation, as a *preparation* for proclamation. Related to this question was the new look at the other religions from the perspective of their redemptive value. There was a time when the word *natural* was used about these other religions while Christianity was seen as the *supernatural* religion.

8.2. Intra-Religious Dialogue

The Vatican Council II gives us a different, positive, picture of these other religions. They are judged as containing *seeds of the Word of God* and as reflecting *the rays of the Spirit that enlightens us all*. Well known in the theological circles is the phrase ‘*Anonymous Christians*’ ascribed to those of other religious traditions, from the perspective of their redemptive value. The issue before us is not only that of the salvation of those of other religions, but of the saving function of these very religions. Any serious inter-religious dialogue calls upon the dialogue partners for *intra-religious* dialogues within the communities on these and related issues.

It was in the context of these ongoing reflections in the Church in India that a fresh look was taken on dialogue in relation to evangelization in the Calcutta Session of the CBCI. This was done in preparation for the Synod in Rome, which was to focus on evangelization. Called upon to draft a description of dialogue, this formulation was accepted by the group that was working on ‘dialogue’. Dialogue was described as “flowing from the Christian faith in God’s *saving presence* in the religious traditions of mankind and the expression of the firm hope in their fulfilment in Christ.” Does this formulation give a satisfactory answer to the questions that are asked by those of other faiths and by the insiders? I feel like answering in the negative. The duty of *proclamation of the Good News* is in no way diminished by this ministry of dialogue. Proclamation and inter-religious dialogue may be seen as mutually related paths of the one mission of Love.

8.3. Religious Education for ‘Outsiders’

Dialogue, *intra-religious dialogue*, when gone through, changes and converts the communities involved in the process. Let me illustrate this by a conversion that the Indian Church went through. The duty of religious education, to those of other faiths in educational institutions run by Christians, was raised and discussed in the Church in India Seminar (held in Dharmaram College, Bangalore, 1969). This issue was again raised in the subsequent meets within the Church. The need of providing religious education – to those of other religious traditions – was brought in for consideration of the drafting committee – with Gispert Sauch doing the drafting work – of the *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* set up by the CBCI Dialogue Commission. The main issue was whether we are bound to provide for the religious education of students of other faiths, by competent persons of these traditions. The practice was that of giving

religious instructions to Christians, while offering ‘moral’ education to the ‘outsiders’, i.e., to the students from other religions. The issue was raised and shelved during the first edition of the *Guidelines*. But the topic was again raised, when the second edition of the *Guidelines* was being drafted. This time, the Dialogue Commission discussed the matter in detail. The new revised edition incorporated the proposal and asserted that it is a duty on us Christian educators to provide for the *religious education* of those students from other religious traditions, by competent persons of these faiths, wherever possible (PSEW 104). On a few occasions, I have cited this fruit of *intra-religious* dialogue within the Christian community in India, requesting, suggesting, and inviting those of other faiths, to go through the home-work of *intra-religious dialogue* within their own home-communities.

9.1. Exodus from the Prison of Stereotypes

In our meet at CSR, Chalakudy, Kerala, referred to earlier, we made a new attempt to share our prejudices and stereotypes about others. To set the ball rolling, I shared my own inhibitions about Muslims. As I started off, two of my Christian partners expressed their doubts as to the ‘prudence’, about the very purpose of sharing the misunderstandings about our dialogue-partners, of another faith-tradition. My response was that as dialogue-partners we should come out sharing our own prejudices. This way, there will be no divergence between what we share in our own home-communities about those of other faith-families and the language that we use when we come together in interfaith pilgrimage. In response, a long-time dialogue partner of Islamic tradition shared his own inhibited pictures about Christians. This sharing brought about a sense of ‘release’ to both of us. One of the Christian participants, who had earlier expressed his doubts about this attempt, later on shared with me that the sharing of our own hidden prejudices was a great moment in the interfaith openness.

9.2. In a ‘Secular’ Context

The ‘secular’, understood as equidistant from all religions or as equal treatment of all religions, is bringing in a new, an important note, to interfaith dialogue in India. This is affecting our interfaith language, I would say, positively. This ‘secular’ dimension of our nation offers us, dialogue pilgrims, a sense of freedom, openness, and courage. One of the key-notes of interfaith dialogue is the assurance that all of us are equals in this path. It would serve no purpose here to compare religions and place

one religion over another. The ‘secular’ note assures of equal treatment to all believers.

9.3. Equals, Or?

In interfaith contexts, I have often heard expressions like, *all religions are equal*, *all religions are the ‘same’*, etc. I find it difficult to use the word ‘equal’ about religions! The question remains: Is *sarvadharmam samabhavana* – attitude of considering all religions as *equal* – an essential note of interfaith understanding and openness? Is ‘equality’ a note applicable to religions or to the persons as fellow pilgrims? Perhaps a way of looking at other religious traditions as one’s own may be more apt for us all – *sarvadharmam mamabhavana*.

9.4. Tolerance

In dialogue-meets we repeatedly hear partners sharing their deep concern for ‘tolerance’. This word, when said by dialogue-friends, suggests a very positive content – that of appreciative acceptance of different traditions, while belonging to and fundamentally inserted in one tradition. Our Hindu friends in dialogue often point out this ‘tolerance’ as the specific note of Hindu religiosity, while others stress the need of going beyond tolerance to an appreciative acceptance and openness to other traditions. I would say that when a Hindu uses this word, the openness and acceptance of other paths is already there in their use of the word.

9.5. Bilateral Contexts

India is the nation with the confluence of different religions of the world and the birth place of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism among the major religions of the world. India provides an atmosphere that welcomes multilateral dialogues. But, when dialogue happens between followers of two communities – bilateral dialogues – it would demand from the partners more attention and caution in the language selected, in the symbols used, in the background prepared, and in the rituals selected. Just an example to show this point: Christians are inclined to call God, ‘father’; but, our Muslim friends are not that happy with this use of the word ‘father’ about God.

We have to be attentive in picking up symbols. To illustrate this, let me recall the example of Advocate K. P. Alikunju, a Muslim. He was very regular in all the dialogue meets that I took the initiative to organize in the Chavara Centre of Kochi, in the seventies. He would never light along

with us the oil lamp in the interfaith prayer services that we held often, in those early years of our dialogue pilgrimage. But, later on he started lighting the oil lamp or the candle.

10.1. Agree to Disagree

Examples can be given wherein I could not go all the way with certain cultural items as singing certain songs that was very much identified with one particular tradition. Inter-communion is an issue often raised, when Eucharist is celebrated during interfaith 'live-together' sessions. I recall the instance of a Hindu dialogue partner, who lined up and received communion, as we were both resource persons in a course on dialogue, held in a seminary. One seminarian told me of his surprise at this. When I shared this with the Hindu friend, he replied that he accepted communion, so that his not accepting communion may be a cause of surprise to the seminarians!

There are many issues as the use of sacred scriptures of other religions in the liturgy. Bilateral dialogues will demand from the partners answers to many questions likely to be raised in such contexts. As an example, the 'death and resurrection of Jesus' are likely to be raised in dialogues between an Ahammadiya and a Christian; so too the belief in the Trinity may need a kind of delicate sharing between Muslim and Christian dialogue partners. In a dialogue wherein Buddhist members are participants, I would be cautious with the use of monotheistic language. In Upasana, the 'centre for religio-cultural integration' – of which I am at present the director – a few rationalists take part in the regular weekly meet and in the discussion that follows. They may not stand up for the moments of silent prayer at the beginning. I would say, let us agree to disagree.

10.2. A Pilgrimage in Tension

I was a participant in a Meet organized by the CBCI Dialogue Commission, in April 2007, in Bangalore. Directors of various centres of dialogue, regional coordinators of dialogue, members of the commission and a few special invitees were the participants. There was, after the dinner, a get-together of us all. The participants were invited to a rhythmic dance, with a Sufi-touch. The song that was sung along with the rhythmic steps had certain words expressing surrender to a particular Hindu deity, *Gobinda*. Though invited pressingly to join the dance-formation, I found it difficult to repeat the word. A few other Christian friends found no

difficulty at all to sing along and dance with the rest. I noted that one of the members of the commission, who was in the room, walking out, as the dance-song started. Later on, he shared with me his own difficulty in taking part in that item.

10.3. Sensitising Exchanges

There were and there are others among the 'insiders' who may find nothing objectionable in any such items. Is there not the hidden danger of syncretism in certain expressions that a few of our friends dare to take, in certain interfaith meets? I recall a Christian dialogue-partner who was in the habit of greeting others, using the name of a Hindu deity as '*om nama shivaya*', even when he greeted partners belonging to the Christian community! It was difficult for me to respond with same words. Bilateral and multilateral exchanges and celebrations may demand from us sensitivity to sensitivities of each other, of the communities involved.

10.4. Revivalist Trends

There are revivalist groups who look with suspicion on all attempts at inculturation and adaptation. They, in turn, look with suspicion on any move towards dialogue, as compromising on one's own faith. To be religious is to be inter-religious, and to be inter-religious is to move on and on, as fellow pilgrims in healthy tension.

11.1. Converging in Depths

Very often interfaith dialogue remains at the level of exchanges at the knowledge level, of information gathering and sharing, of analytical skills, of comparative religion. This is important, good, and, indeed, necessary. Most of the time dialogue remained at this level, as I entered the field. As I took up the work as secretary of the Commission for Dialogue, in the CBCI, a new step was taken. In February 1973, the Commission organized in Banaras an interfaith 'live-together', of four days, with the participants of different faiths. They shared their life-stories and anecdotes around topics that were deeply personal, intermingled with prayers, songs, and meditation sessions, in which all could join. This was for all of us a very enriching experience. We followed this pattern of inter-religious in-depth encounters on many other occasions.

11.2. Creative Discoveries

Interfaith, in-depth, confluence may and do take at times new expressions. One such expression was that of interfaith procession, with lighted candles in the hand, with the symbols of different religious and spiritual traditions held or raised at different locations, with the prayers said for each tradition by one or other from a different religion, with the *Talisman of Gandhi* or the *Prayer of Assisi*. Converging in a circle with the pattern of a camp-fire, the participants had the time for giving expression to their deep experiences in songs, prayers, with lighted candles in their hands. Perhaps such in-depth experiences are the ones that the dialogue-pilgrims cherish for long, and bring them together again and again to the interfaith celebrations.

11.3. “*Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*”

Called upon to explain the ‘rational’ for interfaith involvements, I often pick up a few lines from a poem of G. Shankarakurup, from *Viswadarshan* – world vision. The poet draws the picture of a butterfly sitting on a globe, and musing that the globe rotates because she moves her wings. Later on, the butterfly is shown the picture of ever expanding horizons, of the distant galaxies, and we hear the expressions in the following verse:

Oh distance, I salute thee! Oh darkness, my salutations to you
When we are afar, we are near! When near, we are afar!
I took my pen in all pride – I lay it down in all shudder
I wish, I could practice a bit more of humility, purity of vision!¹

Lost in this vision, the butterfly goes through a genuine conversion: I am a meagre spot on the *sari* – outer garment – of a gypsy girl!

This poet was living across the street of the Chavara Cultural Centre, Kochi. I used to visit him often in his house. One day I asked him as to what made him write this poem. He told me that the conversation between the fighter Arjuna and Lord Krishna led to the plea of Arjuna for a vision of the real form of the Lord and he got it. It was that moment of divine manifestation at the peak that made him write these lines!

The poet proceeded to tell me his response to a rationalist who criticized him for his rather ‘superstitious’ leanings, for giving the name of

¹“*doorame namaskarinnu nine jnan / andhakaramen ninakumen sadara namovakam. / doorttiladuppamundaduppattinkal tanne, / dooravum prtibhatan mohana prapanchattil’ / -njan ahamkarattode kayyilentiayatanippena- / vakunnu tazhe ku;ninju;m, virapoondum. / Ittiri vinayavum samasudhamam chetovruttiyum- / Seelikuvan eniku sadhicchengil!*”

a temple-deity, *Guruvayoorappan*, to a literary endowment that he established, spending part of the very first *Gnanapeedham award* that he received: A bird soaring high up in the air can look down and say – I have reached so high, these heights. The same bird can look higher up to the unexplored distances and say – I have so much to go further. The poet told the rationalist that his poem is the symbol of the second look.

The point that I would like to make is, that in order to be fellow pilgrims in the interfaith pilgrimage, the partners have to regain this shudder, this awe and dread, that are the typical features or notes, of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the notes of religious experience, as brought out by the analysis of Rudolf Otto, in the *Idea of Holy*. Herein the partners are engaged in new forms of communication, to speak that word, from which words return unable to reach that word – *yatovacha nivartante apprapya manasa saha*. The focus, the goal is the *mysterium*, the unknown, the ineffable with the pilgrims giving expression in total surrender, *saranam gacchami*.

12.1. Where Do We Go from Here?

I am raising a question that I realize is difficult to answer, because no answer is ready at hand. Repeatedly, I hear this question from my friends and from those who are cynical about interfaith dialogues: “What have you achieved?” If you are patient enough, a list of communal tensions and conflicts will follow. In other areas as hospital apostolate, educational ministry, social action, there are clear norms of success and failure. All these tangible norms of evaluating success and failure are simply not there in this ministry of dialogue! Can one measure the emerging sense of communion and trust between the fellow pilgrims of different religions, unless and until you enter this very confluence?

Related to this is the very fact that those involved in interfaith activities cannot hand over to others, the networking of fellowship so far achieved, except, perhaps the address list of the friends across the boundaries. Many a dialogue centre or group has this story to tell: of diminishing membership, of disappearing members, of the centre going through a transition to activities that can show tangible results! Naturally, the interfaith programs will have to give way to other projects, to adjust to the new situations!

12.2. Multiple Memberships

As I started off in this path of interfaith, I met Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati, a Hindu monk, about whom I mentioned in the Vatican Secretariat encounter (PSEW 84). He told me of his school days. There was in the school a questionnaire to be filled in by the students. Names of different religions were read out and the students, one by one, had to say the religion to which he or she belonged. Yati told us in a talk that he used to stand up for all the three religions that were being marked out for each student. He told us that he was scolded by the teacher (PSEW 43). But, he insisted that he belonged to all religions. I have come across a few, who do hold that while rooted in one particular tradition, one can also be experientially inserted in another tradition. Many others, however, deny this multiple loyalty in religions! While I was thinking over this situation in interfaith contexts, though rather rare, I got the following email:

Life offers multiple opportunities to learn and experience our beliefs. My friend, Ann Holmes Redding, is both a Christian and a Muslim. I am a Buddhist-Baptist. The Jewish writer Mark Epstein, who wrote a book called “Going on Being,” told me that there is a whole church of Buddhist-Baptists in Manhattan. Some time ago I went to a Japanese Teriyaki restaurant in the University District of Seattle. The restaurant was run by Koreans. The owner asked me about my religion. I told him. He said that is impossible – to be both a Buddhist and a Baptist. I asked him how a Korean could run a Japanese restaurant? I can’t remember now exactly what he said, but you get my point, don’t you? ...

12.3. Tuning in to Different Vibrations

Let me not take up this issue of dual or multiple memberships any further. Leaving this issue for further search and for feedback from dialogue friends, allow me to mention here the following: the deeper you go into your own religious experience, the closer or nearer you might feel to those of other faiths in their experiential expressions. This affinity or bond is a fruit and flowering of interfaith dialogue. Let me not label this as ‘relativism’ or an instance of compromising on one’s own faith tenets. Interfaith encounters may and do expose the fellow travellers to a situation of recognizing the limitations of one’s own faith languages, in moments when an effort is made to tune in to the vibrations of other faith languages.

12.4. Religious Language as Inter-Religious Language

In answering the question as to ‘where do we go from here’, one approach would be that of sorting out or marking the kind of dialogue that one is involved in. If the focus is on solving or answering a common issue as reaching out to the downtrodden, the oppressed, the marginalized, the environment, etc., the goal can be outlined, targeted and the success or failure evaluated. If it is the reduction of tension in a pluralistic society, the fruits can be felt and experienced. If the aim is that of the ‘Kingdom of God’, as a Christian would like to name it, this too can be measured by the ‘Kingdom-values’.

13. Conclusion: Transcendence in Exodus

These reflections can be wound up by saying that ‘religious language has to be inter-religious language’, if it is true that to be ‘religious is to be inter-religious’. Turning back, I recall an attitude with which I walked, i.e., an attitude of *self-sufficiency*. A few of my personal friends, who had the duty and courage to guide me, reminded me that we have the *full* truth. In my encounters I heard my own fellow pilgrims telling me that they too are walking along with me with a similar attitude of self-sufficiency, expressed in different formulations of being *the most* tolerant, of *the most* ancient, of being *the latest* in the line of prophets and religions, of *the least* ‘dogmatic’ and so on.

There were occasions when I had to exclaim that, after all, there is no ‘Christian’ or ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’ God. When we open out to the Jains, Buddhists, and so on, even the use of the word ‘God’ need not be there in the communication within the experiences of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Can we not point to ‘transcendence’ as the key-note of being religious? If so, the language of transcendence, in the vertical dimension, refers to the ‘Other’; in the horizontal dimension, we reach out to the ‘others’ and to the ‘Nature’. Here we may touch our own boundaries of language, in the transcending experience seeking expressions, of our religious language flowering as inter-religious language.

To illustrate this religious language expressing as ‘inter-religious’, let me recall a lived-out moment in the dialogue-journey: It was the cultural evening session of first day of our Interfaith World Conference of Religions, Kochi, in 1981. A demonstration piece from the ancient art form of *Kathakali* was being staged, with the story of victory of good over evil. Suddenly, the lights went off. We were all in darkness. For a way

out, we used the kerosene lamps and the dance-drama continued. Before the dawn of electric lights *Kathakali* was staged in the light of kerosene lamps.

Recalling the moments when we were all left in darkness, Father George Pulikthiyil, who was helping me out in the organization of the cultural centre, told the mother (she was totally blind) of an actor who was playing a key role in the piece of drama that all of us were in total darkness for a few moments, whereas she was always in darkness. That good mother responded: “Don’t say that; I am never in darkness; my light never goes out!” Let me take this ancient prayer, “lead me from darkness to light” (*tamasoma jyotirgamaya*), as an illustration of ‘religious’ language as ‘inter-religious’ language.