

Biblical Evidence for Dialogue with Cultures and Religions in Asia

Rev. Dr. Shaji Joseph Puykunnel SDB

Plurality of living cultures and religions is a fact of our times especially in Asia. Asia is the cradle of the major world religions. It is also a mosaic of cultures and indigenous peoples. Evangelization in Asia must take into account this rich heritage of pluralism of cultures and religions through genuine inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. In fact, the only way forward for peace in Asia and for meaningfully living out our human and Christian existence is to engage in a true and honest dialogue with peoples of other cultures and religions. As Christians we turn to the Bible for inspiration and guidance in all our actions. So we ask ourselves, "Does the Bible envisage such a dialogue?" This paper tries to analyse, though not exhaustively, some of the evidence that we find in the Sacred Scriptures for such a meaningful dialogue.

A superficial reading of the Bible may give the impression that the Scriptures advocate an exclusivist thinking about one's own religion and an intolerant attitude towards other cultures and religions. But on a closer look we find that the Bible itself is a dialogical book and speaks of dialogue at various levels of relationship between God and humanity and among human beings themselves in their manifold cultural manifestations. In fact, the deepest meaning of the Christian Scriptures and the real significance of the Christ-event is that of open dialogue.

1. Scriptures as the Result of a Dialogue between the Divine and the Human

The very process by which the Scriptures are formed is an illustration of the dialogue between the divine and the human.¹ The Scriptures, in fact, is the written testimony of God who "in many and varied ways spoke to our fathers by the prophets; but in the last days has spoken to us by his Son..." (Heb 1:1). Now when God spoke it was to form a people, as is the case with the promise he made to Abraham, which made Abraham the father of the Old Testament people of God (Gen 12:1-13; 15; 17:1-17), or the case with the Word of God which came to Moses, which made him the liberator and leader of a people to be led into the promised land (Ex 3). God continued to speak through each of the prophets of the Old Testament to re-fashion, reconstitute and restore the people of God. When God spoke in the last days through his Son, it was also to form a new people of God. Thus the primary purpose of the Word of God is to form a people.

When the Word that formed the people of God passes into the written form we have the Scriptures. The people of God gave expression to their experience of the Word of God that gave them an identity. The written Scriptures thus take shape and are born in the womb of the people of God – the community of Israel in the Old

Testament and the Christian communities in the New Testament. Thus the Scriptures themselves are the product of a dialogue between the Word of God and the cultural milieu of the people formed by that Word. The Bible is therefore God's word enfleshed in the cultures of a people. The Old Testament is thus the encounter between the Word of God and the cultural heritage of the Ancient Near East in the 2nd and 1st millennia B.C., and the New Testament the dialogue between God's Word and the cultural heritage of the Greco-Roman world in 1st Century A.D.

We see this dialogue taking place in the way Israel gives expression to their reflection on the creation of the world using the cultural moulds of the Mesopotamian myths such as the Gilgamesh epic. The entire legal tradition in the Bible has Mesopotamian and Egyptian parallels especially the Babylonian Hammurabi Code. The covenant relationship between God and Israel is expressed in the rhetorical mould of the vassal treaties of the Ancient Near East.²

2. The people of Israel in Dialogue with Surrounding Cultures and Religions

When we consider the religion of Israel in relation to the culture and religion of the land of Canaan where Israel settled, we notice two trends. The Old Testament on the one hand is resolutely opposed to the polytheistic religious practices and fertility rites of the Canaanite religion. On the other hand there is a tendency to adopt elements of the Canaanite religion adapting them to Israel's own unique faith.³ The Old Testament equates Yahweh with the Canaanite god El. The patriarchal narratives depict the people as worshipping various manifestations of El, especially El-Shaddai (Ex 6:2-3). Parallel to the "sons of El" we have the heavenly court of the "sons of God" (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1). Several motifs of the Baal cult of the Canaanites are also adopted into the Old Testament Theology, although the Old Testament itself condemns the Baal cult. Thus Hosea, who is a champion of Yahweh worship as against the Baal cult, incorporates imageries and motifs from the latter. He applies the imagery of death and resurrection – an imagery derived from the fertility cult of Baal – to Israel's coming exile and restoration (Hos 5:14-6:3; 13:1-14:7).⁴

The feasts and festivals of Israel are also an illustration of how the existing cultural forms and practices were adopted into the religion of Israel. The Sabbath is probably derived from Mesopotamian and Canaanite observances.⁵ It is more certain that the Canaanite agricultural festivals of 'Mazzot' and 'Sukkot', celebrated at the onset of spring and autumn, and the semi-nomadic spring festival of 'Passover' were transformed by Israel into a celebration of its Exodus experience (Ex 12:23; Dt 16:1ff).⁶

In the field of art and architecture too Israel was open to the neighbouring cultures. It is a generally accepted theory that there was Phoenician architectural involvement in the building of the temple in Jerusalem by Solomon (2 Kgs 5:15ff). The plan of the temple is also similar to several Canaanite temples excavated in Palestine.⁷

We are also told of the altar that king Ahaz set up in the temple in Jerusalem modelled exactly on the altar he saw in Damascus (2 Kgs 16:10ff). Legrand analyses the relationship between Israel and Canaan and concludes that Israel's cultural roots are cast deeply in the culture of the western Semitic Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite area. "Israel partook of the various aspects of this culture in all its various forms, such as technology, ways of life, social and political structures, language, art, poetry, religion."⁸

The above instances go to show that although Israel had its own concept of God as immanent and transcendent, and of human beings as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27), the writers of the Old Testament were very much open and appreciative of the religious and cultural realities of their neighbours. They used mythological concepts and literary forms of these cultures and religions to reformulate and give expression to their own beliefs and experience of Yahweh, their God. The people of Israel were not to totally isolate themselves from their neighbours and enter into a ghetto mentality but enter into dialogue with their neighbours among whom they lived. Prophet Ezekiel reminded them about this great truth when he said: "Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an amorite and your mother a Hittite." (Ez 16:3). When Israel looked down upon the neighbouring nations as sinful and held on to a false hope of not being punished for their own iniquities basing themselves on the privilege of being a chosen nation, Amos reminds them to be appreciative of the other nations too: "Are not you and the Cushites all the same to me, children of Israel? – declares Yahweh. Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Aramaeans from Kir?" (Am 9:7).

3. The Exclusivist Tendency of Israel during the Post-exilic Times and the Biblical Critique

Israel did have moments of exclusivist thinking and intolerant attitude towards other cultures and religions especially during and after the Babylonian captivity. Such attitudes must have been the result of their struggle to survive and maintain their identity during the difficult period of the Babylonian exile by observing the laws associated with Moses.⁹ Besides the task of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, the exiles who returned to Jerusalem were also concerned about purging the society of all foreign elements and establishing a purified Jewish community. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are examples of this attitude. Ezra undertook to purify Judaism of all forms of religious syncretism especially by expelling foreign wives (Ezr 9-10). In this context the didactic story of Ruth can be seen as a challenge to such exclusivist tendency.¹⁰ In the book a Moabite woman is presented as an ideal wife, a succinct critique of the exclusivist attitude of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Another book that serves as a criticism of an exclusivist Theology is the book of the prophet Jonah. No doubt, God loves Israel. But that does not mean that he loves other peoples less. The book shows that he loves Nineveh and all other

peoples. There are many positive descriptions about other peoples in the book (Jon 1:5-6,12-14,16). In contrast to a disobedient Jew, Jonah, the Ninevites listen to the preaching of Jonah and repent immediately and God forgives them (cf. Jon 3). Jonah is upset about the mercy of God shown to Nineveh. God teaches Jonah a lesson by making a castor-oil plant grow in order to give him shade from the scorching heat and then suddenly making it wither. When Jonah complains about this in anger, God says: "You are concerned for the castor-oil plant which has not cost you any effort and which you did not grow... So why should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people..." (Jon 4:10-11). The ultimate lesson is that peoples of all cultures and religions belong to God and he cares for them all and wants all to be saved. No one people can claim to be the exclusive beneficiary of salvation. That the Jewish Council of Jamnia in 90 AD included the books of Jonah and Ruth into the canon of Jewish Scriptures without any hesitation is also indicative of a theological pluralism that is open to other views.¹¹

4. Cultural Openness in Wisdom Literature

Another rich and vast field of biblical openness to surrounding cultures and religious traditions is Wisdom literature, which is characterized by "a concrete universalism, an anthropological interest, and an openness to the world and to the human being that set it apart from other biblical currents; rich on account of the variety of its chronological, geographical, social and cultural settings and of the diversity of outlook it manifests."¹² The origin of Israelite Wisdom tradition is disputed.¹³ Some consider them as sapiential sayings which developed within the family, clan or the tribe in consonance with their Canaanite surroundings. Others speak of a more complex origin in official schools of administrative training in the royal court of the kings modelled and influenced by such schools in the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Hellenistic cultures.¹⁴

The book of Qoheleth, composed during the Persian or the Hellenistic period, is the result of a cultural interaction between Judaism and the prevalent philosophies of the surrounding world.¹⁵ Though we may not be able to speak of a positive and deliberate dialogue between Hebrew thought and the surrounding cultural thought patterns of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece in the book of Qoheleth, the book itself is an example of Israel's openness to the cultural pluralism of the time and the mutual osmosis that it gave rise to.¹⁶

The book of Wisdom is considered as an example of inculturation inasmuch as its author, an Alexandrian Jew in the second half of the first century BC, attempts to express his Jewish convictions in the language and thought patterns of Alexandrian Hellenism.¹⁷ The author is primarily addressing his fellow Jews to tell them about the greatness of their traditional faith as against their pagan neighbours who practice idolatrous polytheism which leads them into immorality.¹⁸ So though we cannot find an example of inter-religious dialogue in

the book of Wisdom as we understand the concept today, we cannot lose sight of the fact that this very cultural opposition is expressed in flowing Greek style and typically Hellenistic thought patterns. Such a linguistic inculturation gave an opportunity to the author to present his faith and philosophy from within and in positive dialogue with the predominant culture of his ambient while preserving the spirit of fidelity to his own faith.¹⁹

5. Jesus in Dialogue with Other Cultures and Religions

Jesus of Nazareth is the Word made flesh who pitched his tent among us (Jn 1:14). He took on flesh in a particular cultural and religious context of Judaism in Palestine during the Roman occupation in the first century A.D. The Gospels, however, describe to us that Jesus is a Jew who broke himself free from the narrow confines of ethnic, racial, cultural and religious considerations of Judaism. The Kingdom of God that he preached and bore witness to with his life cannot be reduced to a narrow political, religious or cultural entity as the Judaism of his time had envisaged.²⁰ Instead it is based on the universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all human beings. The implications and demands of this kingdom as Jesus taught them are summarized for us in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) though found all through the Gospels. The good news of the Kingdom is the revelation of God's unconditional love and care for all without distinction. Jesus breaks down the distinction between neighbour and enemy (Mt 5:43-47) and wants the members of his kingdom to extend their love beyond the boundaries erected by class and ethnic differences.²¹

The Gospels narrate to us that Jesus associated himself with all, Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Samaritans, rich and poor, righteous and sinners. John presents to us a Jesus who is able to dialogue with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a teacher in Israel (Jn 3:1-21), on the one hand, and also with a Samaritan woman on the other (Jn 4:1-42), with the same openness and respect. He even stayed in the village of the Samaritans for two days! In his dialogue with the Samaritan woman Jesus emphasized the need for a non-localized religion and a form of worship that is not tied down to structures (Jn 4:23). The very discussion on religion takes place, in fact, in Samaria and not in Jerusalem, the official seat of religious thought and interpretation according to the Judaism of the time.²²

One aspect of dialogue is the capacity to appreciate that which is good in the other. Though a Jew, Jesus is able to transcend the precincts of his own religion and appreciate the profound religiosity of the Gentiles and Samaritans. By his appreciative openness he can be thought of as trying to bring together two estranged communities and opposing religious loyalties, the Jews and the Samaritans. To a Jewish teacher of the Law, Jesus gives the example of the Samaritan as one who proved himself neighbour to the one who had fallen among robbers (Lk 10:25-37). The story itself is indicative of Jesus' efforts to remove those boundaries that predetermine acceptable human interaction and social intercourse.²³ Jesus

appreciates even the human sentiment of gratitude from a Samaritan in contrast to the nine lepers who did not return to give praise to God for the healing received (Lk 17:11-19). In other words, Jesus is saying that the Samaritan has been capable of recognizing the works of God, thus putting him in a positive light.

Jesus' appreciation of what is good and noble in the other, even though the other does not belong to his own religious upbringing, is further demonstrated in his positive amazement at the faith of the centurion in Capernaum (Mt 8:10). Consequently he envisages the kingdom of heaven, not as an exclusive club of a single religious group, but as a coming together of many from east and west (Mt 8:11). This openness of Jesus leads him to express his admiration for the great faith of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:28).

6. The Early Church in Dialogue

The early Church continues the dialogical mission of Jesus. The disciples are entrusted with the task of being witnesses of Jesus "in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." The impetus for such a witness that transcends all frontiers of Geography, nationality, ethnicity, language, ritual and culture, is given by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.²⁴ In imitation of the openness of Jesus towards the Samaritans, we see Philip crossing the ethnical boundary, going down to the city of Samaria and proclaiming the good news. Those who believed and are baptized are also accepted by the Jerusalem Church (Acts 8:4-17). Philip is also presented as entering into dialogue with the Ethiopian eunuch, court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians (Acts 8:26-39).

The vision of Peter at Joppa about the animals he is told to kill and eat, and the words he heard, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:9-16) is indeed an invitation to the early Church to break free from all cultural and ethnic barriers and enter into dialogue with others. The reason is that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (Acts 10:34-35). In other words, no one can claim a religious or cultural superiority over the other. The result is that Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and his household are welcomed into the Church.

However, the temptation to remain a mono-cultural entity was strong in the early Church. This is clearly seen in the events that led up to the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15). But the temptation was overcome that day and the early Church takes a decisive step towards openness towards and dialogue with the Gentiles and their cultural characteristics.

Paul is a giant of dialogue in the early Church. He "represents a typical case of cross-cultural interaction in the New Testament."²⁵ He is a Jew, a Pharisee, son of Pharisees (Acts 23:6) and trained as a Jewish rabbi at the feet of one of the best known Jewish teachers of the time, Gamaliel (Acts 22:5). But he was also a Roman

citizen, educated in the Hellenistic culture with the capacity to write and speak using the rhetorical resources of Greek literature. Paul's openness to other cultures is seen in his Athenian speech (Acts 17:22-31), which can be taken as a model of Paul's dialogical approach to educated pagan Greeks.²⁶ He presents a positive appreciation of Greek religious longings, exemplified by the altar to the "Unknown God." In highly laudatory terms he also quotes their poets.²⁷ It is this openness to others that makes Paul an indefatigable traveller from city to city and nation to nation, sharing with them the treasure of his faith in Jesus. Such openness to the cultural traditions and religious aspirations of any people is the basis for a meaningful dialogue with cultures and religions. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* expresses it beautifully when it says:

Interreligious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences. For all this, love of others is indispensable. This should in collaboration, harmony and mutual enrichment. (EA.31)

7. The Way Forward for the Church in Asia Today

We have looked into some of the evidence that we find in the Scriptures for dialogue with cultures and religions. This has been by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless the message of the Scriptures has been that authenticity of Christian life as followers of Jesus calls for openness to other cultures and religions. The Church would be "un-Christian if it were to be closed upon itself, unmindful of the multicultural richness in which it develops."²⁸ Vatican II expressed this most aptly in the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra aetate*:

We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God's image. Man's relation to God the Father and man's relation to his fellow-men are so dependent on each other that the Scripture says "he who does not love, does not know God" (1 Jn 4:8). (NA.5)

Therefore, the way forward for the Church in Asia today in its multi-religious and multi-cultural context is the way of dialogue, as evidenced in the Sacred Scriptures and reiterated in *Ecclesia in Asia*:

The Synod therefore renewed the commitment of the Church in Asia to the task of improving both ecumenical relations and interreligious dialogue, recognizing that building unity, working for reconciliation, forging bonds of solidarity, promoting dialogue among religions and cultures, eradicating prejudices and engendering trust among peoples are all essential to the Church's evangelizing mission on the continent. (EA.24)

(Endnotes)

- 1 Cf. Peter Turkson, "Inculturation: A Biblical Perspective," in ID & Frans Wijsen, eds., *Inculturation: Abide by the Otherness of Africa and the Africans*, Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1994, 3-9.
- 2 Cf. D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, Analecta Biblica 21A, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1978.
- 3 Cf. John Day, "Canaan, Religion of," in D.N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, Vol.I, 834-836.
- 4 For this more examples of the Old Testament use of Baal motifs, cf. John Day, "Canaan, Religion of," in *ABD*, Vol.I, 835.
- 5 Cf. Peter Turkson, 5.
- 6 Cf. Roland DeVaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh, London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1974, 484; John Day, "Canaan, Religion of," in *ABD*, Vol.I, 836.
- 7 Cf. Carol Meyers, "Temple, Jerusalem," in D.N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, Vol.VI, 355.
- 8 Lucien Legrand, *The Bible on Culture: Belonging or Dissenting?* Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001, 15.
- 9 Cf. Joseph Pathrapankal, "Bible and World Religions: Perspectives on Biblical-Pastoral Ministry in a Pluralist World," in Jacob Theckanath, ed., *Journeying with the Word in Pluralist Asia*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 2000, 39.
- 10 Recent scholarship puts the date of composition of the book of Ruth any time from the monarchical period to the post-exilic times. Cf. Ofosu Adutwum, "Ruth," in William R. Farmer, ed., *The International Bible Commentary: An Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2004, 619.
- 11 Cf. Joseph Pathrapankal, 40.
- 12 Lucien Legrand, 59.
- 13 For details of the discussion see R.E. Murphy, "Introduction to Wisdom Literature," in Raymond E. Brown & others, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994, 448-449.
- 14 Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the OT," in D.N. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, Vol.VI, 928-930.
- 15 Cf. Antoon Schoors, "Ecclesiastes," in William R. Farmer, ed., *The International Bible Commentary: An Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2004, 945.
- 16 Cf. Lucien Legrand, 48-50.
- 17 Cf. Lucien Legrand, 51-52.

- 18 Cf. David Winston, "Solomon, Wisdom of," in D.N. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, Vol. VI, 126.
- 19 Cf. Lucien Legrand, 58-59.
- 20 The majority of Palestinian Jewish literature understand the kingdom of God in nationalistic terms as the vindication of the "elect". The Dead Sea Scrolls contain references to God as king and Israel as the eschatological kingdom. Cf. Dennis C. Duling, "Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven," in D.N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, Vol.IV, 49-56.
- 21 Cf. W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988, Vol. I, 552.
- 22 Cf. Joseph Pathrapankal, 41.
- 23 Cf. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, 426-427.
- 24 Cf. A. Mariaselvam, "The Word and the Spirit Carry us beyond Frontiers," in Jacob Theckanath, ed., *Journeying with the Word in Pluralist Asia*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 2000, 16-23.
- 25 Lucien Legrand, 113.
- 26 Cf. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, 533.
- 27 Lucien Legrand, 147.
- 28 Lucien Legrand, 172.