

The Crucial Role Of Women In Fostering Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue In The Asian Context

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In the recent decades, there have been a number of examples of fruitful interreligious and intercultural dialogues. Women do play a significant role in all spheres of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, despite the fact that often their contribution is not recognised, acknowledged and authorised. The involvement of the Asian women in dialogue, however, is less than satisfactory. This is mainly due to the under representation of Asian women in the sphere of dialogue and their lack of social exposure. This paper is a petite effort to provide a bird's eye view of the development of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the Church in general and the Asian Church in particular, along with some of the characteristics of 'interreligious and intercultural dialogue' from women's perspective. In order to highlight the contributions that women can make this reflection will dwell on certain qualities manifested by some of the charismatic biblical women in their dialogue with Yahweh/Jesus/others. We deem these qualities to be of great importance for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Finally, we draw the attention of both women and society towards their respective responsibilities in empowering women to make their contribution to dialogue.

1) The Emerging Scene of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue During the Second Half of the 20th Century and Now During the 21st Century.

Even before one speaks of the 20th or 21st century's efforts toward interreligious dialogue, one needs to realise that dialogue is not an invention of modern times. It was present right from the beginning of humanity itself, although the term 'dialogue' gained popularity only in the recent decades. Dialogue started when cultures met and mingled. Even the history of the Israelites bears ample witness to the fact that there was an intermingling of the Israelite and the Canaanite cultures. An example of this is the borrowing of the feast of the Unleavened Bread. In asking Christians to appreciate whatever is good wherever it is found St. Paul seems to be, at least indirectly, exhorting us to respect what is good in cultures and religions. He says, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil 4:8).

The Second Vatican Council accepted Paul's exhortation and went beyond it by asking us not merely to *think* but also to "recognise, preserve, and promote" all such values (*Nostra Aetate* 2). This exhortation implies that for the first time the Catholic Church officially and publicly affirmed the presence of good in other religions. In fact, we could say that a new landmark in the relations of the church to the followers of other religions commenced with the Second Vatican Council, especially, the declaration *Nostra Aetate*.¹ The encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 6, 1964) of Pope Paul VI invited the faithful strongly to participate actively in dialogue. Since then, this encyclical has been frequently used by the Council and other documents of the church which insist on dialogue.² In 1984, the Secretariat for Non-Christians published a document entitled "Dialogue and Mission," which dealt with the difficulties that arise from the duty of Christians both to evangelize as well as to dialogue with adherents of other religions. This document showed Christians how dialogue is part of the Church's evangelizing mission and it helped the members of other religions to understand better, how the church views them and behaves with them.³ The encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) of Pope John Paul II and the document entitled "Dialogue and Proclamation," (1991) by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples carried these reflections further.

Though the Church has been involved in interreligious and intercultural dialogue for quite some time, the involvement of women in this project up to now has not been very substantial. Despite the fact that some statements of Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* and others in *Gaudium et Spes*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and *Justitia in Mundo* from the Synod of Bishops in 1971, invited all to consider women with respect and urged that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the life of the church and society, they are often not represented in the official dialogues. Without exaggeration, the dialogues are strongly marked by a gross absence of women. Since this absence is felt in a particular way in Asia, both the Church and the women in Asia ought to examine the reasons for this and find ways and means to make women give their rightful contribution in this field.

2) The Asian Context as the Best Context for Dialogue with its Religious and Cultural Pluralism.

Religions, today, are no more geographically limited. Asia is a continent of religious, linguistic and ethnic diversities. Because of these diversities, interreligious and intercultural dialogue becomes increasingly important. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the publication of *Ad Gentes*, His Eminence Cardinal Oswald Gracias, the then Archbishop, presented an address at the University of Urbanianum, in which he observed that Asia is a "vast mosaic" where great disparities are present. He drew attention to two interesting

facts: First, what makes Asia special is the multiplicity of cultures existing in the same country and that these are highly developed cultures. Secondly, Asia is a land of great religious pluralism with the existence of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, Sikkism, Jainism and Christianity. What stands out here is not only the fact that there is a big number of religions, but also the fact that they have survived for hundreds and thousands of years.⁴ However, sometimes religions are seen as a hindrance to peaceful coexistence and social stability. Hence, there is a need for interreligious dialogue in order to promote respect and appreciation for the good in other religions.

In 1981, addressing the Asians, Pope John Paul II said, "Ways must be developed to make this dialogue become a reality everywhere, but especially in Asia, the continent that is the cradle of ancient cultures and religions."⁵ This focus on Asia could be the result of the awareness that even though the Church has been in existence in Asia for almost two thousand years, Christianity continues to be perceived as a foreign religion. Christian religion was and is regarded as the religion associated with the colonial expansion of Western supremacy. In addition, the missionaries transplanted the Western model of Christianity without allowing it to take root in the Asian soil.⁶ Given this situation, rightly, "interreligious [and intercultural] dialogue is not a luxury, but a vital necessity."⁷

When one examines the effort towards making interreligious and intercultural dialogue a reality in Asia, one becomes aware of the dearth of the role of women in this venture. Western countries are many a step ahead in making space for women in dialogue. Like the Western countries, Asia too needs to become conscious of the fact that women can contribute very effectively to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The pressure must be on to identify the obstacles that prevent the participation of Asian women in both intercultural and interreligious dialogue. There is an equal need to discover mechanisms to reduce and/or to eliminate these obstacles.

3) Significance and Importance of Women in the Process of Dialogue Because of their At-Home-ness in the Realm of Religion and Culture.

One of the reasons for the absence of women at the interreligious and intercultural dialogue is that the role of women is often poorly or incompletely understood. If we could identify the characteristics that are specific to the nature of women, then we could spell out clearly the types of contributions that they could offer. When we speak of characteristics proper to women we are not implying that these are found only in women, but that these are found in a significant way in women. Discussion of women's nature is required while dealing with the theme of interreligious and intercultural dialogue because dialogue requires women's qualities creating colours and textures of a new horizon.

Dialogue needs incredible patience, openness, kindness, forgiveness, forbearing, trust, determination, courage, and respect. These characteristics are associated in a special way with the nature of women. Women are, indeed, preservers of traditional religion and culture. In what follows we will highlight some important contributions which women can make to different dimensions of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, using examples from the Bible.

Defender of Tradition: Women, by nature, protect and preserve religion and culture. A good example of this is the Samaritan woman at the well in the Gospel of John (Jn 4:1-42). The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman unfolds around the well of Jacob. Their conversation reveals the resentments between the Jews and the Samaritans. Jesus' initiative to approach the woman asking for water surprises her for she is aware of centuries of enmity between her people and the Jews. In Jn 4:12 she asks a very significant question related to their traditional ancestor worship, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" In Jn 4:20 making another attempt to defend her ancestral heritage, the woman even makes a reference to the place of worship mentioning again the names of their ancestors, Jacob and Joseph.⁸ Calling the Samaritan woman "an apostle of the ancestorhood," P.O. Kemdirim, analyses her story from the perspective of ancestor veneration. In his opinion, the ancestors are those 'who lived their lives responsibly, died in socially approved ways, were given correct burial rites and are now living in the world of the dead which mirrors the world of the living.'⁹ This is the reason why, the Samaritan woman minced no words in presenting the Samaritan's belief in their ancestors whose deeds and benevolence were exceedingly worthy of remembrance. The words which the woman voiced in defence of the ancestral well and worship, namely, "Are you greater than ...?" and "our fathers worshipped..." particularly express her firm belief in the ancestor veneration.¹⁰ She shows an awareness of the ancestors and their influence on her life and her community. The woman's reference to Jacob as an ancestor and to the well, indicate sufficiently that she is a defender of tradition and culture.¹¹

Preservers of Faith: Faith is the basis of every religion. Women are strong in faith. Taking again the example of the Samaritan women we see that her answers to the questions of Jesus and her questions to him indicate that she is well versed in her faith. She is able to dialogue based on her belief in the traditions concerning Jacob and also from the viewpoint of the worship of her ancestors on Mt. Gerezim.¹²

While the Samaritan woman is a good example of one who is passionately attached to her faith, many other biblical women also can be cited as models of faith especially on account of what they come to believe.

Outstanding among them is the Canaanite/Syro-phoenician woman. She is designated as Syro-phoenician in the gospel of Mark, to indicate that she is a gentile by birth and a pagan by Jewish standards. Matthew calls this woman a Canaanite. The Old Testament uses the term Canaanite to refer to those inhabitants of Palestine, whom the people of Israel found already occupying the land, and about whom they also speak with scorn. According to the gospel of Matthew, the woman won the acceptance of Jesus not because of his messiahship, but because of her strong faith.¹³ Her need outweighs the social and historical barriers between the Canaanites and the Israelites. She knows only that Jesus the healer has come her way and she believes that he alone can heal her daughter. This, perhaps, is the reason why the woman beats the healer in the challenge prompting Jesus to state, "Woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" (Mt 15:28).¹⁴ To cite other examples, we have the fearless and spontaneous emotions expressed by the sinful woman who wept at the feet of Jesus (Lk 7:36-50) and the woman with Haemorrhage, who touched the hem of the garment of Jesus (Lk 8:43-48). They are not bothered about the possible remarks of the society. What leads them to the courageous action in public is their faith in the person of Jesus. In the Old Testament too we see Sarah and Hagar as models of faith in their respective roles. Sarah accompanies Abraham and Lot to a strange country in simple faith to the promise of God. It is women's nature to cling to family and home affections, but enduring all hazards she journey's with her husband. Although, the promise was not given to her, she believed in the fulfilment of it. Hagar, on the other hand, is only an Egyptian slave, not a follower of the Israelite religion. Yet, in the course of her dialogue with the angel, she is asked to return to the house of her mistress, for the baby to be born is to be in the house of Abraham. Her faith in this 'unknown/less known God' is exhibited when she returns to the house of her mistress and stays there for a good number of years. To top it all, we have Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is the embodiment of faith. In complete faith she surrenders to the annunciation by the angel saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Her faith in Jesus is even more evident when she asks the servants at the wedding at Cana, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5).

Sense of Determination and Perseverance: It is said "Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try." The Canaanite woman was not sure that Jesus would extend his healing hand to her daughter who was ill. Her daughter's suffering outweighs the social kinship boundaries that separate her and Jesus. With the persistent determination she approaches Jesus with her supplication on behalf of her daughter. When she was hopefully waiting for a positive response, then comes the

shocking words from Jesus, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mt 15:26). This comparison between the children and the dogs amounts to a refusal. Despite the insensitivity of Jesus which is seen in the reference he makes to "the dogs" (which is contemptuous and abusive), the woman is neither shaken nor stops her efforts.¹⁵ She is put down and is humiliated, yet she keeps her hopes alive. She is quick to remark, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Mt 15:17). Here the thrust is on a continued appeal for mercy until her expectations were met. She seeks one crumb from this Israelite healer holding on to the core value of God's mercy. By doing so, she also challenges Jesus' exclusive approach only to Israel.¹⁶ Her attitude to his refusal might have really captured Jesus; for, he was amazed at her faith. The woman perseveres till her supplication is answered with an affirmative 'yes.'

The other women with determination are, Deborah, Jael, Judith and Esther. Deborah from her very first appearance in the book of Judges is an extremely impressive figure. She was determined to fulfil the mission of saving the Israelites from the Canaanites. When Baruk, the commander refuses to go to the battlefield without her, Deborah dares to go along with him and fights against the Canaanites. When her mission was successful, she along with Baruk sang a hymn of glory to God. Jael, however, is the real heroine in the defeat of the Canaanites. She takes the life of Sisera into her hands. She was determined that Sisera will not be protected in her house and therefore, finds a crafty means to kill him. The story of Judith exemplify her as a pious, patriotic, courageous widow, who with a sense of determination delivered Jerusalem and her countrymen from the assault of Holofernes, the general of Nebuchadnezzar who had arranged the expedition which aimed at making Nebuchadnezzar the object of universal human worship.

Dare to Question, to Confront and to Change: Positive confrontations are possible and they can be a learning experience. Often women are viewed as reserved in nature, weak and fearful. This is not always the case. Women don other aspects of human nature too. We can find examples for this also among the biblical characters. It was not surprising that Jesus asked for water from a woman, as women generally drew water. But asking for water of a *Samaritan* was something unconventional. The Samaritan woman does not hide her surprise or curiosity. She openly asks, "How is that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jn 4:9). By this question, she draws his attention to his ethnicity as a Jew.¹⁷ When Jesus presents an invitation that tends to bring her out of complacency, "Go, call your husband and come here" (4:16), she is touched to the core. She did not feel

rebuked or disheartened by his knowledge of her irregular marital life (Jn 4:17-18). Instead she discovered him as a prophet through his extraordinary knowledge of her personal life (Jn 4:19) and proceeds with the dialogue.¹⁸ Jesus appreciated her frank answer, "I have no husband" (Jn 4:17) and recognised in her the openness and growing willingness to seek more meaning and understanding of what he was expressing.¹⁹ She comes to encounter new life in Christ in her meeting and dialoguing with Jesus. Her gradual openness in this encounter with Jesus enabled her to move from her recognising him first as a Jew, then as Sir and then as prophet and Messiah.²⁰

In the case of the Canaanite woman, one would have expected the woman to feel the blood boiling in her body when she was confronted by Jesus rather harshly. On the contrary, we see that she confronts the situation by retorting gracefully saying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Mt 15:27). Since she knew the difference between the Israelites and the Canaanites, it was perhaps easier for her not to be impulsive, face the challenge and find an amicable solution. Even Hagar, while in conversation with the angel of God, does not shy away from the reality. To the question of the angel, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" (Gen 16:8a), she answers sincerely, neither about her past nor about her future, but about her present. She confesses, "I am running away from my mistress Sarah" (Gen 16:8b). Because of her sincerity, the angel promises that her nation will also be made great. The case of Martha, the sister of Mary, who asks Jesus to command Mary to help her out and statement of Mary Magdalene at the tomb, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (Jn 20:15) are also examples to show that women do dare to ask. These questions or inquiries indicate that women do not shy away from getting clarifications on certain issues. Once they were convinced with the responses they received, they did not attempt to convince the confronter further. They accepted the confrontation positively. This means, they kept their emotions in check and were ready to listen and learn.

Ability to Recognise the Good and Acknowledge It: Dialogue, besides beginning a process of mutual recognition, also leads to better self-understanding, increased relations and fruitful interactions with others. Above all, dialogue offers a profound intuition about God working in various ways and various circumstances.²¹ The Second Vatican Council emphasised that the good in other religions should be perceived. The biblical women in general demonstrate that they have this sense of perception. In the case of the Samaritan woman, although she remains on a sensual level in the

beginning, she transcends that level to recognise the divinity in Jesus. Initially she was sceptical of ethnicity (Jn 4:9), cynical about his ability to give living water (Jn 4:11), and sure of the superiority of the Jacob tradition (Jn 4:12). Later in the course of the dialogue, she began to recognise his prophetic ability (Jn 4:19) and his messiahship. Her gradual and progressive recognition of Jesus' revelations would have definitely enabled her finally to acknowledge along with her townspeople that Jesus was truly the saviour of the world (Jn 4:42).²² She not only perceives Jesus as the one who had the ability to provide the living water but also recognises Jesus' identity as the one who could resolve her religious and moral dilemmas.²³ Thus, from the periphery of recognition, there is an onward movement culminating in acknowledgment.

The Canaanite woman recognised the power of healing in Jesus. Her recognition and her acknowledgment of Jesus go simultaneously. She addresses Jesus as "Lord, Son of David" (Mt 15:22). In the story thrice she calls him 'Lord' (Mt 15:22,25,27), She kneels before him (Mt 15:25). It seems unlikely that a Canaanite woman would address Jesus in this manner unless she understood what it meant for her.²⁴ Mary Magdalene at the tomb in the gospel of John fails to recognise Jesus in the beginning. During the course of her dialogue with him, she not only recognises him but also instantly acknowledges him as "Rabboni" (Jn 20:16). In the story of Genesis, we see that Hagar, the Egyptian slave first recognises the divine voice in the desert while she was running away from her mistress. She dialogues with the angel of God. She opens up her heart's pain by telling him about her flight. She goes beyond her recognition and acknowledges that the one who appeared to her is indeed a God who saw her sufferings. Therefore, in true spirit of reverence to him, she names the divinity, *El Roi*, meaning, 'the God of seeing.'

Great Evangelisers: Pope Paul VI in his exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* said, "The presentation of the Gospel message is not optional for the church. It is her duty, by command of the Lord Jesus, so that men may believe and be saved. This message is indeed a necessary one... It allows of neither indifference, syncretism, nor compromise, for it concerns the salvation of mankind" (Art. 5). Some of the reasons for failing to fulfil this commandment are listed in the document called 'Dialogue and Proclamation'. It states, "Christians may fail to proclaim the gospel through negligence, human respect, or shame."²⁵ However, the stories of biblical women teach that true dialogue does not exclude mission but is completed in mission and profession of faith, whereby others are brought to faith.²⁶ The Samaritan woman, who is now in possession of the source of living water, with the enthusiasm of her encounter with Jesus, sets off to witness to Jesus in the village of Sychar. She makes haste to communicate her experience to her

fellow habitants inviting them, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" (Jn 4:29). So powerful is her witness that they too are not only compelled to go and see for themselves this prophet who had led this woman to such an experience but also confess, "we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (Jn 4:42).²⁷ Thus, the Samaritan woman becomes a missionary in communicating her initial or ongoing Christ experience and in bringing her people to that experience. "Come and see" is a favourite Johannine expression signifying an invitation to personal Christ experience. Though the people say at the end that, "it is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that he is truly the saviour of the world" (Jn 4:42), yet her role in leading them to Christ cannot be downplayed.²⁸ For, the village folks took her seriously and started moving to the well of Jacob to encounter Jesus. She was not sent, yet she took the initiative to go and bring her people. Thus, the Samaritan woman showed herself to be a brave and self-confident deep thinker and someone who showed solidarity with the people; through her the Samaritans were brought face to face with Christ which led to their transformation.²⁹ This dialogue transformed her into a missionary apostle in the city.

In John's gospel we have also the story of Mary Magdalene who becomes the messenger of Christ's ascension, "go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (Jn 20:17). She went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her" (Jn 20:18). In the tomb story of Luke, the women take initiative to go and tell the disciples all about Jesus' resurrection from the dead. In Luke's own words, "returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest" (Lk 24:9).

4) The Crucial Role of Asian Women in the Process of Interreligious and Intercultural dialogue.

We begin with the premise that women possess incentives for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The examples of the biblical women show that women have the qualities necessary for bringing about change in society. They influence behaviours by their own everyday experiences that exemplify compassion, balance, knowledge, harmony, power and spiritual strength. They are defenders of cultures and religions. Since they possess an indomitable spirit, they are capable of building again what has been destroyed. They complete the circle of life in all aspects: mental, physical and spiritual. Thus, they are looked upon as culture bearers, mission agents and indeed apostles in the field of evangelism. In his most recent book Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald affirms the positive role that women play in dialogue. He emphasizes the importance of their involvement; their natural ability to deal with delicate questions and their daily life that makes them sensitive to the demands of our

increasingly multicultural and interreligious societies. Their contribution is especially to be noted in three areas: their approach to reality, their willingness to share their experiences, and their readiness to call attention to what is actually happening.³⁰ Despite these characteristics, if women are not recognised and acknowledged, the defect lies in society as well as in the women. Therefore, we enumerate some of the core responsibilities of the society/Church and women in Asia.

From the Part of the Society and Church: Society is a cradle which must nurture women's empowerment. Therefore, the society should encourage not just the participation of women in dialogue and interactions, but also make sure that there is no dearth of women's issues as subject of dialogue. To have this outlook, society/Church also needs to engage in the dialogue after the example of Jesus in his encounter with the Samaritan woman and the Canaanite woman.³¹ First of all, knowing that women are reserved in nature, the initiative must be taken by the society/Church. Secondly, it should feel the need of the contribution of women in interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Thirdly, it should be prepared to break certain traditional barriers, despite the fact that it is easier said than done. Fourthly, it should be free of prejudice and preconceived ideas and develop respect for women. Fifthly, it should remain open and focussed on what it wishes to communicate.

In fact, denial of opportunities is unjust and cruel. There is no doubt that when women are given opportunities they contribute adequately to the development of both theological and sociological reflection in their context. In Asia, culture undeniably has an important effect on the attitude of the society/Church. When the texts are read people are affected in different ways. For example, they are inspired, nurtured, challenged, comforted, invited and empowered for action. The Samaritan woman's tolerance, sensitivity and patience encourage dialogue with those who belong to other Churches or denominations and other faiths.³² It follows therefore, that cultural concepts such as hospitality, solidarity, womanhood/motherhood are seen as gateways. What is seriously required of the society/Church is the need to understand that men and women have different access to resources, power and decision making and that women are involved in the interreligious and inter cultural dialogue in different capacities and possibilities for action. In the words of the popular author Joan Chittister, "women see things differently, do things differently, and are affected by things differently than men. This is a crucial factor to consider."³³ Therefore, women should have distinct voices in interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Responsibilities of Today's Women: Often, women consider themselves as weak beings and therefore, do not make self-effort in any field. This attitude does not help either the society or women themselves. In order to prove the contrary, we need to draw up certain guidelines to direct women especially in Asia.

1. As transmitters of history, tradition, wisdom and culture, women must begin to see themselves as having the potential to influence their society in diverse ways. 2. It is necessary to realise the importance of education and women must pursue studies in different fields. If a woman is not educated, her worldview is limited. This simultaneously leads her to live a cocooned life. 3. It is unfair on the part of women to wait for men to solve their problems. The time of waiting is over. It is a question of conscience for the women to come forward with their agenda. Activating themselves as dynamic and socially conscious women, they have to take part in the struggle for social transformation and progress. In Lk 13:10-17 Jesus cures the bent woman and she straightens up and glorifies God. But this change for the better and for development of her personality is not welcomed by the Pharisees. It looks as though they prefer to see her bent rather than see her healthy and cured. 4. Becoming aware of their innate nature, women have to bestir themselves to shed the wrong belief that their problems are not part of the social problems and strive to solve the problems of society. We need to 'break the silence and become visible.'³⁴ 5. It is recommended that women should strongly disbelieve the dictum that their problems can be solved by hatred towards men. Loving one does not mean hating another. We need to compliment each other's existence in love and charity. 6. Unless women realise that they are in bonds, they cannot aspire for freedom. Hence, consciousness of her condition is a sine qua non for her liberation. 7. Given their natural biological sensitivity, women need not always rely on formal or official invitation to dialogue with people of other cultures and religions. For this, they make the best use of their perception of peace and transcend the exclusivist attitude. 8. From the perspective of deeper sensitivity to life and capacity to be present where life is most threatened, women can be powerfully instrumental in facilitating the dialogue of life, like Mother Theresa, bringing about wholeness and liberation to human beings.³⁵ 9. The need of waiting for the approval of society is also not there. It is all a question of gathering their energy and taking a stand. This is particularly so because Asian women are emotionally, spiritually and psychologically attuned to understanding both religions and cultures. It is a question of a united effort and action. Self confidence, necessary courage and presence of mind are absolutely necessary for women. This could be instilled with the support of women organisations. Scattered meetings of a few religious, or educated women are insufficient. A large global interfaith gathering is the need of the time. Hence, women should

develop a spirit of solidarity among themselves by forging unity, which helps in eliminating the inequalities in society.³⁶

Conclusion

Today, when Bible in general is read and interpreted with socio-cultural values in mind, women, especially in Asia need to get acquainted with the realities of life around them. Although religious traditions have formed different social rules and moulds which sometimes contradict each other, women are invited to strive to reduce false perceptions of differences and culture gaps through interreligious dialogue. This is possible because biblical women have shown through their example, how they have overcome their weaknesses and proved that they embody all the characteristics necessary for a genuine dialogue. There is also a realisation that interreligious dialogue does not seek to win over the other. Instead it takes the initiative to break down the walls of prejudice. Woman does have a special role to play in dialogue because she has a heart to bear and a compassionate womb to accept, protect and transmit the good found in the other. From this perspective, we can say that in interreligious and intercultural dialogue the Asian woman has a potential for bringing about transformation.

(Endnotes)

- 1 The other Church documents that deal with interreligious and intercultural dialogue are: *Lumen Gentium* (16,17), *Dignitatis Humanae* (2,3,4), *Ad Gentes* (7,9,10,11,13,16,34,38,40,41) and *Gaudium et Spes* (42,58,73,76,92).
- 2 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975; *Redemptor Hominis*, 1979; *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981; *Redemptoris Mission*, 1990; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 1994; *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995 and *Ecclesia in Asia*, 1999.
- 3 Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Mission: The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions* (Rome, 1984). Art. 7.
- 4 See H.E. Cardinal Oswald Gracias "Mission in Asia Today: Relation with Other Religions Existing in Asia," *VidyaJyothi* 71 (2007), 86-87.
- 5 Taken from Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2001), 361.
- 6 See Edmund Chia, "Towards an Asian Church," in *Dialogue Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia: Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs*, Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, ed. Edmund Chia (Bangkok, Thailand: FABC-OEIA, 2001), 153. See also FAPA II, 195-196; James H. Kroeger, "The Faith-Culture Dialogue in Asia: Ten FABC Insights on Inculturation," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 45 (2008), 244.
- 7 Bishop Agnello Gracias, "Dialogue of Theological Exchange," *Awakening Faith* 22 (2009), 139.

- 8 See Protus O. Kemdirim, "The Samaritan Woman: An Apostle of Ancestorhood," *Voices from the Third World* 28 (2005), 170.
- 9 Ibid., p. 171.
- 10 Ibid., p. 171.
- 11 Ibid, p. 170.
- 12 See Raj Irudaya, "Significance of Jesus Mission with the Marginalized Samaritan Woman: A Feminist Reading of John 4, 1-42," *Bible Bhashyam* 32 (2006), 169.
- 13 See Nlenanya Onwu, "Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (Mt 15:21-28)," *Bible Bhashyam* 11(1985), 134
- 14 See Stuart L. Love, "Jesus, Healer of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter in Matthew's Gospel: A Social- Scientific Inquiry," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002), 17.
- 15 Cf. Onwu, "Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," 132-133.
- 16 See Love, "Canaanite Woman's Daughter,"
17. 17 Cf. R.G. Maccini, "Women (and Men) in the Gospel and in the Community of John," in G.J. Brook, ed. *Women and the Biblical Tradition*, Studies in Women and Religion 31 (Lewiston, 1992), 224.
- 18 See Raj, "Significance of Jesus' Mission," 170.
- 19 See Aloysius A. Xavier, "The Samaritan Woman and Martha of Bethany: A Comparative Study of John 4 and 11," *ITS* 35 (1998), 297.
- 20 See Raj, "Significance of Jesus' Mission," 173.
- 21 Cf. Vincent Sekhar, *Practice of Interreligious Dialogue: A Formation Manual of Education and Training of Clergy and Religious* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2006), 78-79.
- 22 See Raj, "Significance of Jesus' Mission," 170.
- 23 Cf. John Matthews, "Pluralism and Mission Implications in St. John's Gospel: An Investigation into the Encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4,1-42)," *Bible Bhashyam* 33 (2007), 79.
- 24 See Love, "Canaanite Woman's Daughter," 17.
- 25 In *Bulletin* 77 (1991-XXVI/2), 242.
- 26 Cf. Eugene Goussikindey, "Jesus and the Samaritans: Paradigm for Dialogue" *Theology Digest* 41 (1994), 38.
- 27 Cf. Matthews, "Pluralism and Mission," 82.
- 28 See Raj, "Significance of Jesus' Mission," 172.
- 29 Kemdirim, "Samaritan Woman", 174.

- 30 See Michael Fitzgerald, *Dieu rêve d'unité. Les Catholiques et les religions : les leçons du dialogue*, Entretiens avec Annie Laurent (Paris: Bayard, 2005), 34.
- 31 The following five points are the 'dialogue gleanings' which highlight the characteristics of a dialogue from the perspective of Jesus as the initiator of the dialogue. These are taken from, Jose Kuttianimattathil, "Jesus the Eminent Dialogue Partner," *Vidyajyothi* 66 (2002), 506-523.
- 32 See Kemdirim, "Samaritan Woman," 175.
- 33 Taken from, Maura O'Neill, *Mending a Torn World: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Book, 2007), 5-6.
- 34 cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women Invisible in Church and Theology", *Concilium* 182 (6/1985), 3.
- 35 See Kochurani Abraham, "Women and Interreligious Dialogue," *Kristu Jyoti* 18 (2002), 367.
- 36 These thoughts are drawn upon from the book by Malladi Subbamma, *Women, Tradition and Culture* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishing Pvt Ltd, 1985).