

Cardinal Paul Poupard Foundation Chair of Inter-religious & Inter-cultural Dialogue



Ethics and Society: An International Journal Religions and Cultures for Peace and Harmony

Vol. 1 No. 1 (Inaugural Edition)

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Edited by:

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19th September 2009

ETHICS AND SOCIETY: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Religions and Cultures for Peace and Harmony

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THE CARDINAL PAUL POUPARD FOUNDATION

The Cardinal Paul Poupard Foundation has been constituted under Italian law and recognised by the Republic of Italy. It has legal base at Crema, Via Dante, 24.

In a world oscillating between indifference and fanaticism, His Eminence Cardinal Poupard, collaborator of the sovereign Pontiffs John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI is one of the most qualified representatives for the way of dialogue, identified by Popes as being able to establish peaceful and long-lasting co-existence between nations and different civilisations.

The Cardinal Paul Poupard Foundation intends to conserve and make use of the considerable patrimony of culture and relations that the Cardinal created over many years, in seeking to create and encourage cultural initiatives that can foster the coming together and understanding between traditions and religions of all the world.

It seeks to promote congress, conferences, publications, create Chairs in universities throughout the world, help students with grants and promote the Prize "The Dialogue of Cultures".

In order to do this it is composed, under the direction of His Eminence Cardinal Paul Poupard, of a President, who will have responsibility for all the activity of the Foundation, assisted by a scientific Committee made up of men and women from the field of culture and the world of business and finance, and will be a place of contact able to erect solid bridges between countries and cultural institutions. The members of this Committee witness, by their adherence, to the richness of different cultures across the world: France, Italy, Russia, United States, Latin America, India and Middle East.

CARDINAL PAUL POUPARD FOUNDATION: INSPIRED BY AN OPEN HUMANISM

One can synthesize the specific character of Cardinal Paul Poupard Foundation, saying that it is inspired by an open Humanism and it is committed to its spread.

It is *Humanism*, because at the core of its concerns there is the human being, that means the one who has to defend himself from all the ideological, political and economic forces which tend to enslave him.

It is *Open*, because it recognizes within each human being the spiritual openness, that means the religious dimension which constitutes man's nature.

Therefore, it works through the initiatives that I am going to illustrate [or: that I have illustrated]: valorising man in his spiritual dimension, hoping that the different expressions of it do not become an occasion for violent conflicts, but rather a loyal and constructive comparison, for reciprocal enrichment and a common search of truth.

Adv. Giuseppe Musumeci

**St. Andrew's College
Management Committee for the Cardinal Paul Poupard
Foundation:
Chair of Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue**

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(Ex-Officio, Card. Paul Poupard Foundation)
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6. Sr. Theresa Joseph (Secretary)

Cardinal Paul Poupard Foundation

Chair of Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue St. Andrew's College, Bandra

Vision

To promote peace and harmony for a holistic development of society.

Mission

The Chair of Inter-Religious and Inter-national Dialogue at St. Andrew's College aims at promoting:

- the exchange of knowledge concerning religions and cultures in dialogue with one another,
- advanced studies and research in Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue
- a space for dialogue so as to foster social harmony and national integration
- the transformation of society by training people to live in peace and harmony.

Programmes offered

Seminars: To promote study and research among the students into the major religious and cultural traditions.

Certificate/Diploma Courses: Short courses in the areas of inter-religious dialogue, religious pluralism and cultures so as to enable the participants to get to know various religions and cultures.

Local, national and international workshops: Workshops on Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue and Education as well as sensitizing teachers/students on the significance of the same.

Lectures: Lectures by distinguished persons of various religious traditions and cultures. The lectures will aim at creating better understanding among the students and participants, and at promoting peace and harmony.

Research: Offers the possibility for scholars to work on research papers and publications.

Inter-Collegiate Programmes: Essay and Quiz competitions, Seminars, Debates and Exhibitions.

Themes

A team of Educators who would offer inter-religious and inter-cultural perspectives.

A team of Professors who would offer reflections and approaches to promote peace and harmony for a holistic development of society.

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About the Authors

Paul Cardinal Poupard was born in August 1930 in Anjou (France). He was ordained in 1954 and nominated Cardinal on 25 May 1985. He completed 2 doctoral theses at the Sorbonne in theology (on the links between faith and reason) and history (on Church-State relations). He is currently a member of the Congregations for Divine Worship, Evangelisation of Peoples, Catholic Education, and of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Besides having been awarded various civic, political and religious honours and decorations, he is a doctor 'honoris causa' of several universities including: Aix-en-Provence, Fu Jen, Louvain, Quito, Santiago de Chile, Puebla de los Angeles. He has made numerous contributions to collections and articles in periodicals and encyclopaediae. He was principal editor of the Dictionnaire des Religions, now in its 3rd. edition in its French and Italian versions, its 5th. in Spanish.

His own works have been translated into Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Croatian, English, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and other languages. Cardinal Poupard became President of the Pontifical Council for Culture in 1988. In 2006 he was also the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

Oswald Cardinal Gracias completed his Doctorate in Canon Law, from the Urban University, Rome. He also has a Diploma in Jurisprudence from the Gregorian University, Rome. From 1971-1976, he was Secretary and Chancellor for the Diocese of Jamshedpur. From 1982 to 1986, he was the Secretary to the Archbishop of Bombay. From 1982 to 1997, he was the Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Bombay. From 1988 to 1998, he was the Judicial Vicar of the Archdiocese of Bombay. On 28 June 1997 he was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Bombay. From 1987 to 1991 and from 1993 to 1997, he was the President, Canon Law Society of India. On 07 September 2000, he was appointed Archbishop of Agra. From 1998 to 2002, he was the Secretary General, Catholic Bishop's Conference of India. From 2005 to 2009, he was the President, Conference of Catholic Bishops of India. In 2009, he was re-elected as President, Conference of Catholic Bishops of India. On 14 October 2006, he was appointed Archbishop of Bombay and on 24 November 2007, he was created Cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI.

From 2008, he is the First Vice-President, Catholic Bishop's Conference of India. From 2001 till date he is the Vice Chairman, Vox Clara Committee, Congregation for Sacraments, Rome. From 2002, he is the Chairman, C.B.C.I. Commission for Social Communications and Chairman, NISCORT. From 2002, he is the Chairman, C.B.C.I. Commission for Law and Public Litigation. From 06 May 2008, he is a Member of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts.

Dr. Marie Fernandes. Principal, St. Andrew's College, Mumbai. She has a Ph.D in English Literature from the University of Mumbai (1991). She is a recognized Research Guide and a Member of the Board of Studies in English, of the University of Mumbai. Several of her research articles have been published in reputed journals both in India and abroad. She completed two courses in Theology for the Laity (1988) organized by St. Pius College, Goregaon.

Rev. Dr. S.M. Michael SVD, is Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai. He is the Chairman of the Bombay Archdiocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. He is also a Consulter to the Pontifical Council for Cultures, Vatican City. Among his several books, *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* was the best seller of Sage for the year 2000 and has seen three editions and has been translated into several Indian languages.

Roberto Catalano, a member of the Focolare Movement was part of the team which opened the first Centre in India. It was in Mumbai in 1980. He was responsible for the Focolare in India from 1984 to 2004, and was later actively involved in inter-religious activities especially with Hindus, Sikhs and Zoroastrians. Since September 2008, he is the Director of the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue and a member of the General Council of the Movement at the International Centre of the Focolare Movement in Rome.

Rev. Dr. Jacob Parappally, MSFS holds a doctorate in Theology from the University of Freiburg, Germany and awarded Professorship by the Vatican in 2000. He was teaching systematic theology at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV) Pune where he served as the Dean of the Faculty of Theology. At present he is the Rector of Tejas Vidya Peetha, Institute of Mission-Oriented and Contextual Theology, Bangalore. He is the President of the Indian Theological Association and the author of *Emerging Trends in Indian Christology* and the editor or co-editor of *Theologizing in the Indian Context*, *The Church in India in Search of a New Identity*, *The World as Sacrament* and *Hope at the Dawn of a New Century*. He is the chief-editor of the *Journal of Indian Theology*.

Rev. Dr. Soosai Arokiasamy SJ (1937-) is Professor Emeritus of Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi. He has a doctorate in moral theology from Università Gregoriana, Rome. He has served for 13 years as Secretary of the Commission for Clergy and Religious and Doctrinal Commission of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI). He has been a resource person at three Plenary Assemblies of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and has served for seven years as a member of the Office for Theological Concerns (OTC) of FABC. He has been editor of Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Concern for the

last twenty five years. He has edited half a dozen books dealing with moral and contextual theologies and has contributed close to hundred articles in the area of moral, pastoral and contextual theologies to journals in India and abroad. His doctoral dissertation: *Dharma, Hindu and Christian According to Roberto de Nobili* was published by Gregorian University in 1986.

Rev. Dr Paulachan P. Kochappilly, CMI, completed his Doctorate in Moral Theology (1998) from the Accademia Alfonsiana, Rome. His dissertation was on *Celebrative Ethics: Ecological Issues in the Light of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*. Currently, he is the Dean, Faculty of Theology, Pontifical Athenaeum of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. He is a visiting professor at the St. Joseph Major Seminary, Khammam, AP, Good Shepherd Major Seminary, Kunnoth, Kerala and Samanvaya Theological College, Bhopal. He is the Editor-in-Chief, Asian Horizons. Dharmaram Journal of Theology. He is also the Spiritual Director at Dharmaram College, Bangalore.

Sr. Dr. Teresa Joseph, fma belongs to the Bombay Province of the Salesian Sisters. She holds a Master's in Science of Education with specialization in Catechetics from Auxilium Rome and a PhD in Missiology with specialization in Inter-religious Studies from the Gregorian University Rome. Besides being a visiting professor to a few Faculties she conducts seminars, orientation programs and retreats for teachers and young people.

She is a freelance writer and contributes articles for various journals in India and abroad. Her published works include *Dream Big Dream True* (BYB Mumbai 2004), *Family of Truth: The Liminal Context of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Rome 2005), *Teachers are Like Stars* (BYB Mumbai 2009) and *Family of Truth: The Liminal Context of Inter-Religious Dialogue an Anthropological and Pedagogical Enquiry* (ISPCK Delhi 2009). She has launched and co-edited an animation book for the family titled *Stay Connected in the Circle of Love* (Media House, 2007) and another one titled: *Teen Q'S* (Media House, 2009).

Sr. Dr. Virginia Rajakumari Sandiyagu, Sisters of St. Anne, Bangalore (SAB), has a B. Th from Dharmaram, Bangalore (1995), an M. Th from St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore (1997), a Master of Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium (2004), and a Ph. D in Biblical Theology from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium (2008). Her doctoral thesis was on *The Galilean Women in the Redaction of Luke: An Exegetical Study of Luke 8:1-3*. She is a visiting professor at St. Peter's Pontifical Seminary, Bangalore, Kristu Jyothi College, Bangalore and a few other places. She has a number of publications to her credit.

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Our Editors

Archbishop Felix Machado: He has a Licentiate in Catholic Theology from the Catholic Theological Faculty, Lyon, France (1974-76). He has an M.A. in Theology (with specialization in Catholic Missiology) from the Maryknoll School of Theology, New York, USA (1980). He holds a Doctorate (Ph. D) in Catholic Dogmatic Theology from the Fordham University, New York, USA. He has been Professor of Catholic dogmatic theology, Missiology and formator of future priests at St Pius X College, Mumbai from 1984 to 1993.

From April 1993, he had been called to Rome in order to work in the Roman Curia (Holy See, Vatican) at the Asia Desk of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. On 1 October 1999, nominated Under-Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican, by Pope John Paul II. This appointment was confirmed by Pope Benedict XVI.

He has been a visiting professor of Catholic dogmatic theology and missiology at: Pontifical Institute, 'Regina Mundi' in Rome; Pontifical Institute of the Sciences of Education, 'Auxilium' in Rome; Rome Centre of the Loyola University in Chicago, USA., and at the Pontifical Urban University, Rome.

He has published three books: *Jñaneshvari*, Path to Liberation; *Journeying Together* (in English, French and Italian), a Marathi translation and short commentary on the Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*. He has also published over a hundred articles in various international academic journals of theology.

On 16 Jan. 2008, Pope Benedict XVI has appointed as Bishop of Nasik with personal title Archbishop.

Rev. Dr. Gilbert de Lima is a resident Professor of Systematic Theology and Formator at St Pius X College, Goregaon, Mumbai and is at present the Dean of Studies. He has also completed his Doctorate in Systematic Theology from the Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome. He has authored some books and several articles in theological journals. He is also a visiting professor at some theological Institutes. He is the Director of the Permanent Diaconate Programme in the Archdiocese of Bombay. He was the Secretary of the Archdiocesan Biblical Committee for several years and is at present a member of the Archdiocesan Ecumenical Commission and Interreligious Dialogue Commission.

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Religions and Cultures for Peace and Harmony

Paul Cardinal Poupard

Samuel P. Huntington in his monumental classic, 'The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order' opined that the type of conflicts we would witness in the twenty first century would be a clash of civilizations. He argued that Western Christian cultures are threatened by Islamic and Confucian ones and saw culture as an independent variable with potential to stir conflicts. According to him the most important determinant of world politics in the twenty first century is the rootedness in civilizations, with religion or cosmology on which it is based being the pivotal characteristic of each civilization.¹

Consequently, according to a general consensus emerging, a long-term strategy to achieve peace should be undertaken at the level of culture and religion.

Culture may be defined² as the particular way in which persons and peoples cultivate their relationship with nature, themselves, their brothers and sisters and with God, so as to attain a fully human existence.³ It must also certainly be admitted that while man always exists in a particular culture, man is not exhaustively defined by that same culture. Moreover, the very progress of cultures demonstrates that there is something in man which transcends those cultures. This 'something' is precisely human nature.⁴ Nature itself is the measure of culture and the condition of ensuring that the person does not become prisoner of any culture, but asserts his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being.

Now cultures, as well as our religious beliefs and practices are learned through a process of socialization. Consequently, for a "culture of peace" to take shape peace values need to be embedded in the very organizational structures of society. Furthermore, for a "culture of peace" to exist at the level of the world,⁵ peace-related meanings and values need to be widely shared by the world's diverse cultures.

In all known historical cultures, religion is the essential element of culture, indeed it is its determining core.⁶ It is religion which determines the structure of values and thereby forms its inner logic.⁷ Now although the scriptures of most world religions speak of peace, a lot of violence is still committed in the name of religion.⁸

However, at the same time it is also widely recognized that the diffusion of religious values can positively transform society, polity and culture is also widely recognized. The European Council of Religious Leaders, one of four regional Inter- Religious Councils (IRCs) within the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) network,

in its final declaration at Lille, France, on 27 May, 2009, emphasized the role of Religions in the Promotion of a Culture of Peace.⁹ It highlighted four dimensions of religions that would help foster a culture of peace.

- i) The spiritual dimension of religions: Religions cultivate the human spirit through spiritual practices that aim at the realization of genuine peace both within each believer and in the wider human family. Its power can show itself in the ability to bear the unbearable, find hope where there appear to be no grounds for hope and in forgiving the unforgivable. It is also manifest in celebration of beauty and cultivation of virtue.
- ii) The ethical dimension of religions: From the spiritual depths of religions spring ethical systems which guide the lives of millions. Religious leaders at all levels can speak with moral authority on values that are deeply held and widely shared by most religious traditions and which correspond to the values in a culture of peace. Among these are respect for the inviolable dignity of each person, striving for justice, compassion for the afflicted, care for the earth and its creatures, and commitment to non-violence.
- iii) The social dimension of religions: Religious traditions have vertical and horizontal structures that give them unique channels for influence and exchange of ideas and insights. In every town and village there is a place where people gather for worship: a church, a mosque, a synagogue, a temple or a gurudwara. Through varying types of networks these are linked to similar places in other locations, and to national and international bodies, thus allowing the interests of men and women everywhere to be heard by national and international leaders, and national and international insights to be disseminated to the local level. All religious traditions emphasize the importance of education, instruction and formation of children and young people. This social dimension of religions provides great potential for communication and thereby furthering a culture of peace.
- iv) The cultural dimension of religions: All religions relate to culture and can contribute to building traditions that support peace by interpreting sacred texts and traditions and applying them under changing circumstances. Thus they bind together the lives of past, present and future generations. Explicitly and implicitly religions tell and retell stories which form the identity of the faithful and define their relationships to others. Religious narratives have the power to confirm and to challenge the present order of things.

Emphasizing that faith is always lived within a culture, Pope Benedict XVI in his address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue in Jerusalem, May 11, 2009¹⁰ declared the history of religion also shows that a community of believers proceeds by degrees of faithfulness to God, drawing from and shaping

the culture it meets. Today the encounter of religions with culture occurs not simply on a geographical plane. Certain aspects of globalization and, in particular, the world of the internet have created a vast virtual culture, the worth of which is as varied as its countless manifestations. Undoubtedly much has been achieved to create a sense of closeness and unity within the world-wide human family. Yet, at the same time, the boundless array of portals through which people so readily access undifferentiated sources of information can easily become an instrument of increasing fragmentation: the unity of knowledge is shattered and the complex skills of critique, discernment and discrimination learned through academic and ethical traditions are at times bypassed or neglected.

The question naturally arises then as to what contribution religion makes to the cultures of the world against the backdrop of rapid globalization. Since many are quick to point out the readily apparent differences between religions, as believers or religious persons we are presented with the challenge to proclaim with clarity what we share in common.

Now every culture with its inner capacity to give and receive gives expression to the one human nature. Yet, the individual is never fully expressed through his or her own culture, but transcends it in the constant search for something beyond. From this perspective, we see the possibility of a unity which is not dependent upon uniformity. While the differences we explore in inter-religious dialogue may at times appear as barriers, they need not overshadow the common sense of awe and respect for the universal, for the absolute and for truth, which impel religious peoples to converse with one another in the first place. Indeed it is the shared conviction that these transcendent realities have their source in – and bear traces of – the Almighty that believers uphold before each other, as well as our organizations, our society, and our world. In this way not only do we enrich culture but we shape it. Consequently, our lives of religious fidelity echo God's irruptive presence and so form a culture not defined by boundaries of time or place but fundamentally shaped by the principles and actions that stem from belief.

Indeed, religious belief presupposes truth and the one who believes is the one who seeks truth and lives by it. Although the medium by which we understand the discovery and communication of truth differs in part from religion to religion, we should not be deterred in our efforts to bear witness to truth's power. Together we can proclaim that God exists and can be known, that the earth is his creation, that we are his creatures, and that he calls every man and woman to a way of life that respects his design for the world. If we believe we have a criterion of judgment and discernment which is divine in origin and intended for all humanity, then we cannot tire of bringing that knowledge to bear on civic life. Truth should be offered to all; it serves all members of society. It sheds light on the foundation of morality and ethics, and suffuses reason with the strength to reach beyond its own

limitations in order to give expression to our deepest common aspirations.¹¹ Far from threatening the tolerance of differences or cultural plurality, truth makes consensus possible and keeps public debate rational, honest and accountable, and opens the gateway to peace. Fostering the will to be obedient to the truth, in fact, makes possible the genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today.

It is in this perspective that we realize that religion is closely linked to culture and is a vital source for fostering a culture of peace. The concept of a holistic culture of peace represents a shift from the secular towards the spiritual peace paradigms, a realization that inner peace and outer peace - spiritual and material - are interconnected and interdependent. It is here that the contributions of the world's religious and spiritual traditions can contribute to our understanding.

For instance, "if one tries to achieve outer peace in the world only, but does not deal with inner peace, then one's inner conflicts can be projected out onto the world, making it difficult to achieve outer peace – the supposed goal. Likewise, if one tries to achieve inner peace only, but does not pay attention to creating outer peace in the world, then the social injustices and structural violence in the world will make it more difficult for most people experiencing those conditions to be able to find inner peace – the supposed goal. Thus the achievement of either inner or outer peace helps create the conditions necessary for the creation of the other type of peace."¹²

Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi's greatness lies in bringing together and harmonizing the two apparently incongruous ideas of non-violence which preaches world peace and brotherhood and political movements which revel in the polemics of difference and antagonism.¹³

As a consequence in the world political scene he retrieved non-violence as a powerful political tool, and promulgated the theory that political goal is ultimately a manifestation of a higher spiritual and humanitarian goal, which eventually culminates in world peace!

Being a deeply religious person he saw the different religions as paths to the same goal. His philosophy was rooted in the Indian religions of Jainism and Buddhism. Both of these advocate ahimsa (non-violence), which is "absence of the desire to kill or harm". From Hinduism, in particular from the Bhagwad Gita, he took the importance of action in one's life without concern for success. He was inspired by the teachings of Jesus, specially the emphasis on love for everyone, even one's enemies, and the need to strive for justice. Gandhi harmonized these theological perspectives as he searched for a meaningful life. It was this outlook that Gandhi employed as an instrument to guide India's freedom struggle, which eventually succeeded to unite the length and breadth of the country like never before.

Given the cultural and religious diversity of the world, unless we recognize pluralism and respect diversity, peace may be beyond reach. Religions should help cultures uncover their more fundamental and humane aspects. Often the secularist humane project finds itself lacking due to its inability to go deeper and touch the inner depths of a person's life. It is this gap that religion should fill. This calls for a strategy of religious social engagement, a redefinition of the role of religion and a deployment of its spiritual and material resources for the cause of peace.¹⁴ The Meeting of 'The Contribution by Religions to the Culture of Peace', organized by UNESCO in Barcelona from 12 to 18 December 1994, declared: "Grounded in our faith, we will build a culture of peace based on non-violence, tolerance, dialogue, mutual understanding, and justice. We call upon the institutions of our civil society, the United Nations system, governments, governmental and non-governmental organizations, corporations, and the mass media, to strengthen their commitments to peace and to listen to the cries of the victims and the dispossessed. We call upon the different religious and cultural traditions to join hands together in this effort, and to cooperate with us in spreading the message of peace."

"Our duty before God", as Pope Benedict XVI declared, "is expressed not only in our worship but also in our love and concern for society, for culture, for our world and for all who live in this land. Some would have us believe that our differences are necessarily a cause of division and thus at most to be tolerated. A few even maintain that our voices should simply be silenced. But we know that our differences need never be misrepresented as an inevitable source of friction or tension either between ourselves or in society at large. Rather, they provide a wonderful opportunity for people of different religions to live together in profound respect, esteem and appreciation, encouraging one another in the ways of God".¹⁵

All over the world there are spiritually based groups belonging to the world's religious traditions who are working for peace. Groups like Pax Christi or the Buddhist Peace Fellowship draw their inspiration for peace work from the Christian and Buddhist religious traditions respectively.¹⁶

However, there are also interdenominational and interreligious peace organizations like the International Fellowship of Reconciliation which works across religious traditions. In both cases, non-violent religious groups base their work for peace on spiritual principles. Religion served as a major force in the struggle against totalitarianism and injustice as evidenced from the experience of countries like Iran, Poland, Philippines and East Timor. Much attention is given in peace research to the role of religions and religious groups in conflict, particularly ethnic conflict where leaders from different religious backgrounds often use religion as a basis for war. However, far less attention has been given to the moderating influence of religions and religious peace groups in controlling war.

Now the Bible understands peace not merely as the absence of war or strife, but positively as a state of harmony and well-being that comes as a blessing from God, which we receive when our relationships with God, our neighbour, ourselves and creation are in order.¹⁷ It is also conceived as a goal we need to strive for together. At the heart of Jesus' revelation, was that God is 'Abba', 'loving Father'.¹⁸ It follows, consequently, that as children of a loving Father, we are all brothers and sisters. Hence, it follows that we need to live in peace and harmony and share the fruits of the earth with one another. The central proclamation made by Jesus concerned the arrival of the Reign of God,¹⁹ which was not identified with any place or territory, but, in the light of the Gospel, is presented as a concrete experience of living by the values of the Gospel, viz. forgiveness, humility, service, love, selflessness, and so on.²⁰

The United Nations has declared January 1 as the World Day of Peace every year. Way back in 1972, Pope Paul VI, in the course of his message for the World Day of Peace declared, "If you want peace, work for justice."²¹ In 2003, on the occasion of his message for the World Day of Peace, Pope John Paul II reiterated the same message in the context of the new threat of terrorism.²² He pointed out that the scourge of terrorism has grown more virulent in recent years, producing brutal massacres, as well as putting obstacles in the way of dialogue and negotiations. While acknowledging the use of punitive measures to redress the situation, the Holy Father was quick to add that these efforts need to be accompanied by a courageous and lucid analysis of the reason behind the terrorist attacks. Consequently, at both the educational as well as at the political levels, we need to recognize and eliminate the underlying causes and situations of injustice which drive people to more desperate and violent acts. This also implies that we seek to inculcate in people a deep respect for human life.

In his message for the World Day of Peace this year, 2009,²³ Pope Benedict XVI quoted Pope John Paul II who had declared in 1993, "Our world shows increasing evidence of another grave threat to peace with many individuals and indeed whole peoples are living today in conditions of extreme poverty. The gap between rich and poor has become more marked, even in the most economically developed nations. This is a problem which the conscience of humanity cannot ignore, since the conditions in which a great number of people are living are an insult to their innate dignity and as a result are a threat to the authentic and harmonious progress of the world community."

In this context, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that fighting poverty requires attentive consideration of the complex phenomenon of globalization.²⁴ However, given the fact that globalization is ambivalent, it therefore needs to be managed with great prudence. This will include giving priority to the needs of the world's

poor, and overcoming the scandal of the imbalance, which lies in the social, cultural, political and economic orders.

Pope John Paul II, in this context, with reference to the Asian nations declared, that, "they are unable to hold their own in a global market economy. And perhaps more significantly, there is also the aspect of a cultural globalization, made possible by the modern communications media, which is quickly drawing Asian societies into a global consumer culture that is both secularist and materialistic. The result is an eroding of traditional family and social values which until now had sustained peoples and societies. All of this makes it clear that *the ethical and moral aspects of globalization* need to be more directly addressed by the leaders of nations and by organizations concerned with human promotion. The Church insists upon the need for "globalization without marginalization".²⁵

The root causes for this situation declares Pope Benedict XVI lie not only in the unjust structures of society, but in the structures in the heart.²⁶ He points out that while we often tend to highlight the superficial and instrumental causes of poverty, we need to attend to those harboured within the human heart, for instance, the reality of greed and a narrow vision. Also the problems of development, aid and international cooperation are sometimes addressed without any real attention to the human element, but as merely technical questions – and so limited to establishing structures, setting up trade agreements, and allocating funding impersonally. In fact, the fight against poverty really needs men and women who live in a profoundly fraternal way and are able to accompany individuals, families and communities on journeys to authentic human development.

Consequently, a "common code of ethics" declared Pope Benedict XVI²⁷, consequently is the need of the hour. This would consist of norms based not upon mere consensus, but rooted in the natural law inscribed by the Creator on the conscience of every human being.²⁸ The Holy Father pertinently asks, "Does not every one of us sense deep within his or her conscience a call to make a personal contribution to the common good and to peace in society?" Indeed, effective means to redress the marginalization of the world's poor through globalization will only be found if people everywhere feel personally outraged by the injustices in the world and by the concomitant violations of human rights. And so the Church, which is the "sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race"²⁹ needs in the first place to put into practice what she stands for, while at the same time strive to make her concrete contribution to eliminate injustice and establish, instead, a world of greater peace and solidarity.

Indeed, we cannot live insulated or isolated lives precisely because we are 'part of the mainland.' We need to live in solidarity because "God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone. This is the foundation of the universal destination of the earth's

goods." We are living in a fast shrinking world, a world that has already become a global village. Indeed, the Church desires "...a globalization which will be at the service of the whole person and of all people." At the mere touch of a keyboard we can see for ourselves the event that is taking place hundreds of miles away. Information technology spans all distance and bridges every gap. Solidarity is thus easily within our reach!³⁰

And finally, for the establishment of a lasting peace in the world, justice must find its fulfillment in love. Justice must be complemented and completed by love. For this reason, forgiveness is needed to resolve the problems of both individuals and nations. There can be no true peace and harmony without forgiveness. Pope John Paul II in his message for the celebration of the world day of Peace on January 1, 2004³¹ consequently declared, "for the establishment of true peace in the world, *justice must find its fulfilment in charity*. Certainly law is the first road leading to peace, and people need to be taught to respect that law. Yet one does not arrive at the end of this road unless justice is complemented by love. Justice and love sometimes appear to be *opposing forces*. In fact they are but *two faces of a single reality*, two dimensions of human life needing to be mutually integrated. Historical experience shows this to be true. It shows how justice is frequently unable to free itself from rancour, hatred and even cruelty. *By itself, justice is not enough*. Indeed, it can even betray itself, unless it is open to that deeper power which is love."

Our prayer for peace and harmony will thus be a prayer for justice, i.e. a right-ordering of relations within and among peoples and nations. Our prayer for peace will also imply seeking God's forgiveness, and imploring him to bless us with the courage to forgive those who have trespassed against us. For in the ultimate analysis, God, who we believe, entered human history in Christ Jesus awaits our loving response. For only where a 'civilization of love' reigns³² can an authentic and a lasting peace and harmony will prevail.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, London, 1997 as quoted by M. S. John, "Religion and the Culture of Peace", in *Jeevadhara*, Vol XXXI, July-September, 2001, p. 366
- 2 Pontifical Council for Culture, *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, No. 2 at www.catholicculture.org/library/, accessed 12/09/2009
- 3 GS, 53
- 4 *Veritatis splendor*, 53
- 5 "Lille Declaration on a Culture of Peace", of the European Council of Religious Leaders - Religions for Peace (27 May, 2009), at www.rfp-europe.eu/index.cfm?id=241887, accessed 12/09/2009. *The European Council of Religious Leaders is one of four regional Inter- Religious Councils (IRCs) within the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) network.* The European Council of Religious Leaders brings together senior religious leaders from Europe's historical religions: Judaism,

Christianity and Islam, with Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Zoroastrians as active participants. The Council, which has 30 members, was founded in Oslo in 2002. The Council is funded by its members and has received project support from The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Religions for Peace (WCRP)* is a network of national and regional Inter-Religious Councils (IRC) connected through an international World Council and Secretariat, based opposite the UN Headquarters in New York. The global organisation brings together 51 national and 4 regional *IRCs*. Through these *IRCs* Mosques, Synagogues, Churches, Temples and Gudwaras form a network that enables them to mobilise and use their shared potential as religious communities for Reconciliation and Peace.

- 6 *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 45: "Culture is broader than religion. Religion can be said to represent the transcendent dimension of culture and in a certain way its soul."
- 7 (Cardinal) J. Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures", in www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZHONG.HTM, accessed 12/09/2009
- 8 Mark Jurgensmeyer (2000), *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Berkley, Ca: University of California Press, p. 95, quoted by M. S. John, "Religion and the Culture of Peace", in *Jeevadharma*, Vol XXXI, July-September, 2001, p. 369
- 9 "Lille Declaration on a Culture of Peace, of the European Council of Religious Leaders - Religions for Peace" (27 May, 2009), at www.rfp-europe.eu/index.cfm?id=241887, accessed 12/09/2009.
- 10 Cf. Benedict XVI, "Address at Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue in Jerusalem", May 11, 2009, Copyright 2009 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana at www.catholicculture.org/library/ - Cached, accessed 12/09/2009
- 11 In fact, Pope Benedict XVI pertinently points out that, "The greatest service to development, then, is a Christian humanism that enkindles charity and takes its lead from truth, accepting both as a lasting gift from God. Openness to God makes us open towards our brothers and sisters and towards an understanding of life as a joyful task to be accomplished in a spirit of solidarity." (*Caritas in Veritate*, 78)
- 12 Linda Groff and Paul Smoker, "Creating Global-Local Cultures of Peace", in <http://www.gmu.edu/academics/pcs/smoker.htm>, quoted by M. S. John, "Religion and the Culture of Peace", in *Jeevadharma*, Vol XXXI, July-September, 2001, p. 375. www.mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/gandhi_and_non.htm, accessed 12/09/2009
- 13 Sheth, N., 'The Non-violence of Mahatma Gandhi', in *Jnanadeepa*, Vol 4 (2001), 59-78. Anon, "Gandhi's Non-Violence" in socialchangenow.ca/mypages/gandhi.htm; (Dr.) C. Sheela Reddy, "Gandhi and Satyagraha - Validity and Relevance", in www.satyagraha.org.za/.../index.php?...satyagraha...relevance, accessed 12/09/2009; Gandhi Smriti, "Gandhi and Non-Violence" in www.mapsofindia.com/personalities/gandhi/non-violence.html; Joseph, F. B., "The Much Misunderstood Gandhian Concepts of Satyagraha and Ahimsa", in *Word and Worship*, Vol 30 (1997) 212-218; Nanda, B. R., "Gandhi and Non-Violence - Gandhi".
- 14 Cf. M. S. John, "Religion and the Culture of Peace", in *Jeevadharma*, p. 377
- 15 Benedict XVI, "Address at Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue in Jerusalem", May 11, 2009, Copyright 2009 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana at www.catholicculture.org/library/ - Cached, accessed 12/09/2009; Pope Benedict XVI pertinently reminds us in *Deus Caritas est*, 33 that, "the personnel who carry out the Church's charitable activity on the practical level,...they must not be moved by

Christ's love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within them a love of neighbour."

- 16 Cf. M. S. John, "Religion and the Culture of Peace", in *Jeevadhara*, p. 371
- 17 Cf. C. Stuhlmueeller, C. P., (Ed.) "Peace", in *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. P. I., Bangalore, 2005, pp. 709-714
- 18 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York, 2007, pp. 135-141
- 19 Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 46-63
- 20 Benedict XVI, *Spes salvi*, 31
- 21 Paul VI, *Message of His Holiness Pope Paul VI for the Celebration of the [World] Day of Peace, January 1, 1972*, at www.usccb.org/laity/bonds.shtml, accessed 12/09/2009
- 22 John Paul II, *Message on the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2003*, at www.vatican.va/.../john_paul_ii/messages/peace/.../hf_jp-ii_mes_20021217_xxxvi-world-day-for-peace_en.html, accessed 12/09/2009
- 23 Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2009*, No. 1 at www.vatican.va/.../benedict_xvi/messages/peace/.../hf_ben-xvi_mes_20081208_xlii-world-day-peace_en.html, accessed 12/09/2009
- 24 Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 2009*, No. 13
- 25 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 39
- 26 Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 2009*, No. 13
- 27 Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 2009*, No. 14
- 28 Cf. Rom 2, 14-15
- 29 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 775 at www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p123a9p1.htm, accessed on 12/09/2009
- 30 Cardinal Paul Poupard, "The Foundational Moral Imperatives of Our Times" (This is part of a series of essays published by the Caux Round Table, an organization of business leaders dedicated to shaping a moral capitalism) at www.helleniccomserve.com/poupard.html, accessed 12/09/2009
- 31 John Paul II, *Message World Day of Peace, 2004*, No. 3, at www.vatican.va/.../john_paul_ii/messages/peace/.../hf_jp-ii_mes_20031216_xxxvii-world-day-for-peace_en.html, accessed 12/09/2009
- 32 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, No 582, at www.vatican.va/.../rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AG = "Ad Gentes Divinitus", Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, Vatican II, 1965.
 CV = "Caritate in Veritate", Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI on Integral Human Development in charity and truth, 2009
 DCE= "Deus caritas est", Encyclical Letter of Benedict XVI on Christian Love, 2005
 EA = "Ecclesia in Asia", Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II on Jesus Christ the Saviour and his Mission of Love and Service in Asia, 1999
 EN = "Evangelii Nuntiandi", Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI on the Evangelization in the Modern World, 1975

- GS = "Gaudium et spes", Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II 1965
- LG = "Lumen Gentium", Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II 1965
- NA = "Nostra Aetate", Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions, Vatican II, 1965
- RM = "Redemptoris Missio", Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, 1990
- SS = "Spes salvi", Encyclical Letter of Benedict XVI on Christian Hope, 2007
- TMA= "Tertio Millennio Adveniente"(Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II on the preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000), 1994

Religions and Cultures for Peace and Harmony

His Eminence, Oswald Cardinal Gracias

The Present World and National Scenario that affects peace and harmony:

We are living in challenging times. Our epoch is characterized by amazing advances in technology on the one hand and conditions of extreme socio-economic retrogression and distress on the other.¹ The widening gap between the rich and the poor is causing instability in the economy and hence having a host of negative repercussions on the poor people in our country.

The recently concluded 2009 G8 Summit held in July 2009 in L'Aquila, Italy had as its main challenges - a response to the global economic and financial crisis, food security and safety, access to drinking water, the struggle against climate changes and the world leaders' commitment to combating the causes of poverty and of underdevelopment.² In this regard, international cooperation must contribute to progress in the overall development of the person and of society, that is, to a development that concerns not only the economic aspect but involves every dimension of human life. Only such type of cooperation will promote *stability and peace*. When a people's deepest aspirations are unfulfilled, the consequences can be disastrous.³

In the recent Union Budget for India 2009-10, the Finance Minister, aware of the great challenges to the Indian economy caused by the economic slowdown, was nevertheless determined to do his best for the nation. He has allocated sizeable funds to Brihan Mumbai Storm Water Drainage Project (BRIMSTOWA), agricultural development, debt relief for farmers, empowerment of the weaker sections of society and a loan scheme to enable students from economically weaker sections to access higher education. A noteworthy feature of the Budget is the National Food Security Act which would ensure that every family living below the poverty line in rural or urban areas will be entitled by law to 25 kilos of rice or wheat per month at Rs.3 a kilo.

It is obvious that it is not the task of *religious leaders* to find technical solutions to the problems of the modern economy and international cooperation. Nonetheless, they have a great responsibility in social life. Pope John Paul II urged religious leaders to be society's conscience, recalling the ethical principles to be considered when making concrete choices, by appealing to respect for true human values, such as respect for life, human dignity and honesty. The Pope pointed out that it is also the duty of religious leaders to speak on behalf

of those who are the weakest, the most deprived, who cannot make their voice heard. Concern for the most underprivileged is not the responsibility of the public authorities alone; it must also be everyone's concern.⁴ The advancement of the poor constitutes a great opportunity for the moral, cultural and even economic growth of all humanity.⁵

India is a pluralistic country comprising of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural features. India's cradle of religions includes Hinduism (80.5%), Islam (13.4%), Christianity (2.3%), and Judaism (0.6%). It has also many spiritual traditions such as Sikhism (1.9%), Buddhism (0.8%), Jainism (0.4%) and Zoroastrianism⁶ The simultaneous presence of these great religions and traditions are a source of enrichment for Indian society. The Church has the deepest respect for these traditions and seeks to engage in sincere dialogue with their followers.⁷ It was the strong conviction of Pope John Paul II that the various religions will have a permanent role in the preserving of peace and in building a society worthy of man.⁸ This is especially true for India, where on the one hand the religious spirit is so strong and on the other hand there is so much of communal violence.

The world's great religions, need to work together to eliminate the social and cultural causes of terrorism. One crucial issue that has been gripping the attention of the world and has also left a deep scar on the face of our country, and on our city of Mumbai, is the upsurge in terrorism. Terrorism is a major challenge to civilized society today, and in the words of the *Compendium* on the Social Doctrine of the Church, it is "traumatizing the international community."⁹ It has a wide range of social, economic and political causes, and its consequences are terrible, as we have all witnessed in recent months. We must now take the lead in publicly condemning terrorism and in denying terrorists any form of religious or moral legitimacy.¹⁰ Religious leaders of all religions have a grave responsibility today – to teach the dignity of every person and the clear sense of the oneness of the human family.

Religious fundamentalism poses a threat to the secular fabric and stability of the country. It knows no borders and is a common enemy of humanity. Many years ago, India's First Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru remarked: While on the one hand, we the people of India are bound together by strong bonds of culture, common objectives, friendship and affection, on the other hand, unfortunately, there are inherent in India, separatist and disruptive tendencies ... which made India suffer in the past. In preserving its unity, India needs to ... fight communalism, provincialism, separatism, stateism and casteism.¹¹ Unfortunately today there has been an increase in communal riots, communal violence and ethnic conflicts due to fundamentalism and ethnic nationalism.¹² Such fundamentalism which

is based on religious and political motivations allows fundamentalism to exert a tremendous influence on the public policies of India.¹³

The anti-Christian violence in Orissa and other parts of the country is one of the saddest moments in the history of India. About sixty thousand Christians had to flee their own villages after the fundamentalist groups attacked their houses and places of worship in August 2008. The Christian community has lost many of its personnel and its one of the consecrated women has been publicly humiliated during the anti-Christian violence. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) welcomed the judgment of the Supreme Court to protect minorities of the country, particularly these Christians who have been targeted by some anti-social elements.¹⁴ The country needs to restore its glorious multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic tradition.¹⁵ "Inter religious meetings between peoples of different religions will be one of the ways of seeking harmony, dialogue at all levels, in communities, societies, in schools and institutes of higher learning. India has to regain its pristine glory of being a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual nation with values of peace and harmony, understanding and tolerance."¹⁶

Urgent need for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue in a world that is becoming increasingly multicultural and multireligious.

In order to establish peace and harmony, it is important to understand religions and cultures. Study, reflection and constant interaction with believers of different cultures and religions can facilitate initiatives that promote peace and harmony. In India, there is an intricate mosaic of cultures, depicting our unity in diversity. India's cultural diversity has evolved over centuries, through a process of assimilation and amalgamation of the diverse cultural influences.

In India, various cultural groups and communities are influencing each others ways of life, customs, practices and beliefs. If one culture seeks to dominate or impose itself on others, it will lead to conflict and violence in that society. Further, cultures and religions can collide.¹⁷ Following the Second Vatican Council, the Church has been inviting all Catholics to a dialogue in an attempt to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral values found in other religions, in society and in culture.¹⁸

The Church makes the Gospel incarnate and alive in different cultures. The Church encounters different cultures and becomes involved in the process of inculturation.¹⁹ "It brings a prophetic challenge to every culture to remove negative features and all such elements that oppose justice and make life less meaningful. This process of inculturation

has been a characteristic feature of the tribals in India. The Church has helped the tribals especially in Chotanagpur and Northeast India to find a new identity and to get adjusted to modern life, confronted with fast social changes”.²⁰

Thus, through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community.²¹ She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within.²² Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission. In the dialogue with cultures we have to be sensitive to the differences between cultures and need to have a greater understanding of the different cultures. Recognising the difference in language, we should speak to each other with a universal language, the language of love.

Hence, it is imperative to promote strong bonds of solidarity, based on dialogue, between people of different cultures and religions. At the closure of the Great Jubilee celebrations, Pope John Paul II stated: “In the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that *interreligious* dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread spectre of those wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history”.²³ Hence, Pope Benedict XVI has made dialogue between the Catholic Church and other religions in Asia one of the priorities of his pontificate.²⁴

Church’s Commitment to Dialogue:

The Catholic Church is fully committed in pursuing the path of dialogue and cooperation with people of other religions. Interreligious dialogue is an important means by which the followers of the various religions discover shared points of contact in the spiritual life, while acknowledging the differences which exist between them. At the inauguration of his Pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI clearly affirmed that “the Church wants to continue building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions, in order to seek the true good of every person and of society as a whole”.²⁵

Deep Esteem of Vatican II for Other Religions:

In *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II spoke of the deep esteem the Second Vatican Council had shown for the great spiritual values enshrined in other religions, “which in the life of mankind finds expression... in morality, with direct effects on the whole of culture. The Fathers of the Church rightly saw in the various religions as it were so many reflections

of the one truth, “seeds of the Word”²⁶, attesting that, though the routes taken may be different, there is but a single goal to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit as expressed in its quest for God and ... for the full meaning of human life”.²⁷

For John Paul II the Second Vatican Council was a providential preparation for the Third Millennium. In his letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, inviting the Church to prepare for the Great Jubilee which was to usher in this millennium, Pope John Paul II reflected on the Church’s rediscovery of her own identity and on the call to renewal which this entailed. “On the basis of this profound renewal, he stated, the Council opened itself to Christians of other denominations, to the followers of other religions, and to all the people of our time.”

A Continuing Dialogue of Life:

Pope John Paul II spoke eloquently of the *dialogue of life* on his historic visit to the Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus on May 6, 2001: Interreligious dialogue is effective when it springs from the experience of “living with each other” from day to day within the same community and culture. In Syria, Christians and Muslims have lived side by side for centuries, and *a rich dialogue of life* has gone on unceasingly... The positive experiences must strengthen our communities in the hope of peace; and the negative experiences should not be allowed to undermine that hope.²⁸

It is our hope that through a continuing “*dialogue of life*” all believers will cooperate willingly in order to defend and promote moral values, social justice, liberty and peace.²⁹ “*Caritas Christi urget nos*” (2 Cor 5:14). It is the love of Christ which impels the Church to reach out to every human being without distinction, beyond the borders of the visible Church. These were the recent words of Pope Benedict XVI to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the conclusion of its Tenth Plenary Assembly.³⁰ The source of the Church’s mission is Divine Love, revealed in Christ and made present through the action of the Holy Spirit. All the Church’s activities are to be imbued with love.³¹ Thus, it is love that urges every believer to listen to others and seek areas of collaboration. Helping the sick, bringing relief to the victims of natural disasters or violence and caring for the aged and the poor are some of the areas in which people of different religions can collaborate with one another for *a dialogue of life*.

In 1986 in New Delhi, during his first visit to India, Pope John Paul II walked as a pilgrim to Raj Ghat, a civil and religious shrine to Mahatma Gandhi.³² For long moments he knelt down in silent prayer and then rose to speak in praise of the “apostle of non-violence”. And while

speaking to Hindu leaders in Madras on February 5, 1986, Pope John Paul II noted that what makes “true dialogue possible” is the truth of Hinduism. Christians must hold Hinduism, not only Hindu people, in genuine respect because of “the action of the Spirit in man.”³³

On 13 April 1986 the Pope made a historic visit to the Synagogue of Rome. On 27 October of the same year he welcomed in Assisi religious leaders, both Christians and people of other religions, whom he had invited to come together to pray for peace in the world. This Day of Prayer in Assisi was a turning point in the history of humanity. After Assisi, the situation of dialogue is completely new: a type of interreligious encounter has been officially inaugurated. As people become conscious of the growing religious plurality of today’s world, so the necessity is recognized of engaging in relations which cross religious boundaries. Pope John Paul linked this extraordinary day of prayer especially to *Nostra Aetate* and the commitment of the Catholic Church to interreligious dialogue. He repeated the invitation to Assisi, in January 1993 to pray for peace in Europe and particularly in the Balkans, and again in 2002 as a response to the events of 11 September 2001.

In an inspiring speech made by Pope John Paul II at an Inter-religious Meeting at the Pontifical Institute, Notre Dame, Jerusalem in the year 2000, he said that religion must be genuinely centered on God, and that our first religious duty is adorations, praise and thanksgiving. This is seen in the opening sura of the Koran: “Praise be to God, the Lord of the Universe” (Koran 1:1). In various Biblical verses and especially in the psalms, we hear the universal song of praise: “Let everything that breathes give praise to the Lord! Alleluia!” (Psalms 150:6). In Hinduism, the Vishnu Sloka is:

*Kaayena Vaachaa Manasendriyairvaa
Buddhyaatmanaa Vaa Prakriteh Svabhaavaatah
Karomi Yadhyadh Sakalam Parasmai
Naaraayanaayeti Samarpayaami*

The literal meaning of the mantra is: “I offer everything to Lord Vishnu (Narayana); whatever I do with my body, words, mind, limbs, intellect or my inner self whether intentionally or unintentionally. I bow to the great lord, Vishnu”.³⁴

The call to acknowledge the Creator of the universe is essential in ensuring the well-being of individuals and the proper development of society. This authentic devotion to God also involves love of our brothers and sisters, which involves an attitude of respect and compassion, gestures of solidarity, cooperation in service to the common good.³⁵ Thus,

the promotion of justice and peace does not lie outside the field of religion, but is actually one of its essential elements.

“The Church encourages and fosters interreligious dialogue not only between herself and other religious traditions, but even among these religious traditions themselves. This is one way in which she fulfills her role as “sacrament, that is, sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people” (LG 1). She is invited by the Spirit to encourage all institutions and movements to meet, to enter into collaboration and to purify themselves in order to promote truth, and to live in holiness, justice, love and peace – dimensions of that kingdom which, at the end of time, Christ will hand over to his Father (cf. 1 Co 15:24).³⁶

“Interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission”.³⁷ The encyclical *Redemptor Missio* beautifully explains that “dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills.³⁸ Through dialogue, the Church seeks to uncover the ‘seeds of the Word,’³⁹ a ‘ray of that truth which enlightens all men’;⁴⁰ these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind. Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit”.⁴¹

A Further step in Dialogue: Work together in the service of all

In examining the question of dialogue between religions, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that “as we grow in understanding of one another, we see that we share an esteem for ethical values, discernible to human reason, which are revered by all peoples of goodwill. The world begs for a common witness to these values. The Pope urged all religious people to view dialogue not only as a means of enhancing mutual understanding, but also as a way of serving society at large”. He praised the “growing interest among governments to sponsor programmes intended to promote inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue”, but appealed to people to find practical ways to implement strategies for advancing peace”.⁴²

The Purpose of Dialogue is to discover the Truth⁴³

Pope Benedict XVI clearly outlines the broader purpose of dialogue. He said that religious belief presupposes truth. “The one who believes is the one who seeks truth and lives by it. Although the medium by which we understand the discovery and communication of truth differs in part from religion to religion, we should not be deterred in our efforts to bear witness to truth’s power. The Pope was convinced that together all religions can proclaim

that God exists and can be known, that the earth is his creation, that we are his creatures, and that he calls every man and woman to a way of life that respects his design for the world... Fostering the will to be obedient to the truth in fact broadens our concept of reason and its scope of application, and makes possible the genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today”.⁴⁴

The main aim of dialogue: Helping people of different religions to live together in Peace and Harmony. By choosing to bear witness to the moral truths and ethical values that are held in common by everyone, religious groups will certainly exert a positive influence on the wider culture, and inspire people to strengthen the ties of solidarity.⁴⁵ Working for dialogue is no easy task. It means educating oneself about the other religions, overcoming prejudices, creating trust. It means strengthening bonds of friendship and collaboration. It means to forget the past, to make a sincere effort to achieve mutual understanding, and to work together to “preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values”.⁴⁶ Not everything is black and white. There can be harm and injuries done to both the parties. The acknowledgement of wrongs done, of injustices, of atrocities, is an important step to reconciliation. This is essential if peace is to be established among peoples.⁴⁷ There can be no peace without justice, and no justice without forgiveness. In the words of Pope Paul VI: “We must meet as pilgrims who have set out to find God in human hearts. Person must meet person, nation must meet nation, as brothers and sisters, as children of God. In this mutual understanding and friendship, in this sacred communion, we must also begin to work together to build the common future of the human race. It must be built on a common love that embraces all and has its roots in God who is love”.

Conclusion: Humanity needs Peace

It is my hope and conviction that we are indeed entering a new era of inter-religious dialogue. We need to form closer ties among all believers to create a more just and peaceful world.

I would like to repeat the words Pope John Paul II chanted at Assisi⁴⁸:

Violence never again! War never again! Terrorism never again! In God's name, may all religions bring upon earth justice and peace, forgiveness, life and love!

Peace (Shanti in the Indian Scriptures) is fundamental to the Hindu way and view of life. The Hindus invoke peace that envelops the whole universe. They pray, “May peace be unto the Heavens! May peace be unto the Space! May peace be unto the Earth! Peace be unto the Waters! Peace be unto the Plants! Peace be unto the trees! Peace be to all the

Gods! Peace be to Brahman! May peace envelop all! Peace verily peace! May peace embrace me!”.⁴⁹

The Holy Qur’an also speaks highly of peace that comes from faith. “He it is who sent down peace of reassurance into the hearts of the believers, that they might add faith to their faith”.⁵⁰ In Islam, beneficence and mercy (Rahman and Rahim in the Qur’an) are the main attributes of God.⁵¹

For Christians, peace is that “magnificent gift of God: as St. Augustine says, ‘even understood as one of the fleeting things of earth, no sweeter word is heard, no more desirable wish is longed for, and no better discovery can be made than this gift’”.⁵² With such profound similarities seen in our great religious traditions, let us unite ourselves and work together for peace in our country and city.

Representatives of many religions went on pilgrimage to Assisi to ask God in prayer for the gift of peace. May I conclude with a prayer for peace, to open our human hearts to the inroads of God’s power to renew all things⁵³:

Let us pray for justice, for a right-ordering of relations within and among nations and peoples.

Let us pray for freedom, especially for the religious freedom that is a basic human and civil right of every individual.

Let us pray God’s forgiveness, and to implore the courage to forgive those who have trespassed against us.

Let us ask Almighty God - in the beautiful phrase attributed to Saint Francis himself - *to make each of us a channel of his peace.*

(Footnotes)

- 1 Krishna Kumar, “Religious Fundamentalism in India and Beyond” in *Parameters*, Autumn 2002, p. 17.
- 2 G8 Summit 2009. Official Website: <http://www.g8italia2009.it/G8>. It is estimated that half the world population will be living in areas with a water shortage by 2030. The FAO’s latest estimates indicate that the food price crisis has increased the number of people lacking food security to over 75 million.
- 3 Pope John Paul II, “Monastic Interreligious Dialogue” at the Presidential Palace in Carthage on 14 April 1996. Bulletin 55, May 1996.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Pope John Paul II, *Message on World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2000.
- 6 Census of India, 2001.

- 7 Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 6.
- 8 Pope John Paul II, *Centisimus Annus*, no. 60.
- 9 *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 513.
- 10 See John Paul II, Message for World Day of Peace, 1 January 2002, no. 12.
- 11 India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches September 1953 to August 1957*, vol. 3 (Delhi, 1950), pp. 36-7.
- 12 S.D. Muni, "Ethnic conflict, federalism, and democracy in India" in *Ethnicity and power in the contemporary world*, eds. Kumar Rupesinghe and Valery A. Tishkov. *United Nations University Press*, 1996.
- 13 Santosh Saha and Thomas Carr, eds. *Religious Fundamentalism in Developing Countries*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 2001.
- 14 CBCI Statement, New Delhi, January 07, 2009.
- 15 <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=16129>
- 16 <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=16129>
- 17 Cardinal Francis Arinze, Reflections on the Day of Prayer at Assisi, 24 January 2002.
- 18 *Nostra Aetate* 2; *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 53; *Redemptor Missio* 55; *Ecclesia in Asia* 31
- 19 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Missio*, No. 52.
- 20 Cardinal Ivan Dias, *A Dialogue of Cultures - Cultural Issues in Mission*. Consultation of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Mumbai, March 7-9, 2000.
- 21 John Paul II, *Redemptor Missio*, no. 52. See Footnote no. 86. Cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (October 16, 1979), 53: AAS 71 (1979), 1320; Encyclical Epistle *Slavorum Apostoli* (June 2, 1985), 21: AAS 77 (1985), 802f.
- 22 John Paul II, *Redemptor Missio*, no. 52. See Footnote no. 87. Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20: *loc. cit.*, 18f. 23 Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 55. We understand that the phrase the Pope used for 'this dialogue' is interreligious dialogue'.
- 24 See UCAN news: Gerard O'Connell, "Cardinal Tauran applauds Japan Church for interreligious dialogue": August 14 2009.
- 25 Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Delegates of Other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of Other Religious Traditions, 25 April 2005.
- 26 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, Footnote 67: Cf. St. Justin, *I Apologia*, 46, 1-4; *II Apologia*, 7 (8), 1-4; 10, 1-3; 13, 3-4; *Florilegium Patristicum*, II, Bonn 1911 2, pp. 81, 125, 129, 133; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, I, 19, 91 and 94: *Sources Chrétiennes*, 30, pp. 117-118; 119-120; Vatican Council II, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*, 11: AAS 58 (1966) 960; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 17: AAS 57 (1965) 21.
- 27 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 11.
- 28 *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)*, edited by Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), p. 842.
- 29 Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3.
- 30 Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 7 June 2008.
- 31 cf. *Ad Gentes*, 2-5; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 26, and Dialogue and Mission, 9.
- 32 "Today as a pilgrim of peace, I have come here to pay homage to Mahatma Gandhi, hero of humanity." Pope John Paul II said in praise of the Hindu leader. "Pope John Paul II had to be virtually shaken up and told by his secretary that he was praying too long," said the then **Archbishop Oswald Gracías** (now **Cardinal Gracías**). "He was lost in prayer. It showed how much he gelled with the Mahatma's thoughts".
- 33 Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963– 1995), ed. Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline, 1994) no. 507. See also James Fredericks, "The Catholic Church and other Religious Paths: Rejecting nothing that is True and Holy" in *Theological Studies* 64 (2003), p. 234.

- 34 Lord Vishnu is considered as the chief god in Hindu religion and Indian mythology. Vishnu, the preserver, forms the part of trinity gods. Vishnu Slokas form the part of prayers offered to the lord.
- 35 Pope John Paul II, Interreligious Meeting at the Pontifical Institute, Notre Dame, Jerusalem, 23 March 2000.
- 36 Dialogue and Proclamation, no. 80.
- 37 *Redemptor Missio*, no. 55.
- 38 Cf. Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, 12: *loc. cit.*, 279.
- 39 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, 11, 15.
- 40 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, 2.
- 41 Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor Missio*, no. 56.
- 42 Pope Benedict XVI, "Discovering Truth: Purpose of Inter-religious Dialogue", 18 April 2008, Vatican Information Service.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI during his meeting with organizations for inter-religious dialogue, Holy Land, 11 May 2009.
- 45 See Pope Benedict XVI's address at his meeting with representatives of other religions at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, Washington D.C. on 17 April 2008.
- 46 Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3.
- 47 Abp. M. Fitzgerald, The Promise of Interreligious Dialogue for a World in Conflict. 16 March 2006. Address delivered at Boston College as part of the conference, "In Our Time: Interreligious Relations in a Divided World".
- 48 Day of Prayer for Peace in the World, Assisi, 24 January 2002.
- 49 *Shukla Yajurveda* XXXVI.17
- 50 Qur'an 48:4
- 51 Krishna Kumar, "Religious Fundamentalism in India and Beyond" in *Parameters*, Autumn 2002.
- 52 Peace as a magnificent gift of God was used by Pope Benedict XV. See Encyclical *Pacem Dei Munus*: AAS 12 [1920], p. 209. And for St. Augustine, see *De Civitate Dei*, lib. XIX, c. x.1.
- 53 See John Paul II, Message for World Day of Peace, 1 January 2002, no. 15.

Promoting Harmony in Society and Peace in the World

Archbishop Felix A. Machado

The need for a Chair for Inter-cultural and Inter-religious dialogue in Mumbai:

While in Mumbai, we were able to witness personally the vitality of the Church in India, and we were consoled to see the rich contribution which Christians have made to India. All this was possible because India, faithful to its religious heritage and in keeping with its native respect for religion, has granted to the Church freedom of activity and initiative. The educational system of the Catholic Church is indeed widespread, and it has for its purpose to prepare God-fearing, exemplary, and loyal citizens for India; citizens who will make their generous contribution to the general development of their motherland. We are confident that Catholics will do their share in helping India take its rightful place among the family of nations, and we are happy that they have been such devoted sons and daughters of India.

At the beginning of the XXIst century the world is still threatened by forces which generate conflicts and wars, and India is certainly not exempt from these. Among these forces are intolerance and marginalization of all kinds: social, cultural, political, and even religious. Day by day fresh violence is inflicted upon individuals and entire peoples, and the culture of death takes hold in the unjustifiable recourse to violence to resolve tensions. Given the appalling situation of conflict in so many parts of the world, the Church is called to be deeply involved in international and interreligious efforts to bring about peace, justice and reconciliation. She continues to insist on the negotiated and non--military resolution of conflicts, and she looks to the day when nations will abandon war as a way of vindicating claims or a means of resolving differences. She is convinced that war creates more problems than it ever solves, that dialogue is the only just and noble path to agreement and reconciliation, and that the patient and wise art of peacemaking is especially blessed by God.

Dialogue between religions must be put at the service of peace between peoples. The different religious traditions possess the resource needed to overcome divisions and to build reciprocal friendship and respect.

The mission of Christianity is a mission of friendship in the midst of humanity, a mission of understanding, of encouragement, of promotion, of elevation, indeed of salvation. Dialogue is founded in the very plan of God. Religion of its very nature, is a relationship between God and man. Prayer expresses such a relationship in dialogue.

There is no one who is a stranger to the Church's heart, no one in whom her ministry has no interest. She has no enemies, except those who wish to be such. Her name of Catholic is not an idle title. Not in vain has she received the commission to foster in the world unity, love and peace.

Dialogue is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills. Through dialogue the Church seeks to uncover the "seeds of the Word", a "ray of that truth which enlightens all men"; these are found in the individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind. Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit. Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church; they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.

Because the Church is interested in the problems and the spiritual needs of all people, the decision of the Archdiocese to set up a chair of intercultural and interreligious dialogue is praiseworthy. Hopefully it will become a means by which the Church will arrive at a sincere and respectful dialogue with those who still believe in God and worship him as well as with all those who profess to be agnostics and atheists.

It is a journey of peace and love which longs to unite all peoples in the tightest bonds of mutual understanding and of friendship, rendering them more and more aware of the irremovable obligation of getting to know one another reciprocally, of loving one another sincerely, of aiding one another effectively according to the gifts received from God in various measure, gifts not destined to a few nations but created for the entire human family. In the end ours is a journey of friendship and of fraternity, which offers the Church cherished opportunity to become acquainted at a close range with great people in India whom the Church highly esteems for their intimate religiosity, for their innate nobility, for their artistic and cultural civilization which reaches the peaks of the human spirit and to whom the evangelical truth can offer unexpected and universal fullness and validity.

The human race is undergoing profound changes and is groping for the guiding principles and the new forces which will lead it into the world of the future. India also has entered into a new phase of her history, and in this period of transition we too feel the insecurity of our age, when traditional orders and values are changed, and all efforts must be concentrated on building the future of the nation not only on a stable material basis, but on firm spiritual foundations.

We must come closer together, not only through the modern means of communication, through press and radio, through steamships and jet planes - we must come together with our hearts, in mutual understanding, esteem, and love.

We must meet not merely as tourists, but as pilgrims who set out to find God - not in buildings of stone but in human hearts. Man must meet man, nation must meet nation, as brothers and sisters, as children of God.

Is religion a cause of division among people? The answer is no. It is not in the nature of Christianity, for example, to struggle against the human person. On the contrary, the Church struggles on behalf of the human person and in defense of what is sacred in the human person: his fundamental aspiring to God, and the right to express such aspiration outwardly in the forms required by worship.

A vast field lies open to dialogue, which can assume many forms and expressions: the so-called dialogue of life, through which believers of different religions bear witness before each other in daily life to their own human and spiritual values and helping each other to live according to those values, in order to build a more just and fraternal society; exchange between experts in religious traditions or official representatives of those traditions; cooperation for integral development and safe guarding religious values; a sharing of spiritual experiences. Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way. The contribution of the laity is indispensable in this area, for they can favour the relations which ought to be established with the followers of various religions through their example in the situations in which they live and in their activities. Some of them also will be able to make a contribution through research and study.

Prejudice is the result of lack of dialogue. Prejudice breeds suspicion and hatred, which in turn produces violence and finally ends in war which causes destruction and y death. We believers of all religions must unequivocally declare to the world that we will continue to work to build a reconciled world, a world able to look with serenity to its own future. Without being discouraged by the bad news which is often highlighted and even exaggerated by the media we will do everything to multiply our efforts to promote peace and harmony. Because the name of God is peace, religions must always stand for peace.

The Theme of Peace in World Religions

The theme of peace is central to all religions. All humanity must increasingly become God's family, living in harmony and peace. The theme of peace must be seen in the wider context of the problems of our world: the dehumanizing poverty, exploitation of children and women, especially those who are victims of war, of broken families and of abuse, ecological disaster, discrimination on the basis of religious affinity, oppression of minorities, problems of disillusioned youth, unequal distribution of world's resources, etc.

It is important to emphasise, above all from the Christian point of view, that peace is first and foremost the gift of God. Almighty God has entrusted this gift to

man. Peace is not so much a superficial balance between diverse material interests; rather, it is the essential a good man must search for. It is the fruit of morality and virtues. Since God is the primary Fountain, the essential Truth and the supreme Good of all beings, man's search for peace cannot but begin with God. In this sense peace comes from God; God is its foundation. God, not only gives creation to humanity for its use and for its development, but God also writes on the human conscience the laws which oblige man to respect, in various ways, the life of every person which is created, like his own life, in the image of God, and of whom God himself is guarantee of all fundamental human rights.

God himself helps man in his interior being to find peace and to realize it in his life and in the world. In fact, man, limited and subject to errors and to evil during his existence, is always confronted with many difficulties; he is attracted by false goods and deviated by irrational and egoistic instincts. Therefore it is necessary for him to open to the transcendence of God who purifies him of all errors and liberates him from aggressive passions. God is not somewhere far away from the heart of man; rather, He can be found in prayer and in the practice of justice. Peace then, is the fruit of one's communion with God and neighbours.

Search for Truth is the Foundation for Lasting peace

Peace is threatened when believers choose to live in isolation, closed in upon themselves and in self-sufficiency which leads to a lack of openness to others. If one party declares that it has the truth, and that all others are in error and are therefore not worthy of consideration, no relationship can be possible. It is important to make a distinction between error as such and the person who falls into error. Even if we are convinced that truth is on our side, and that others "err regarding the truth or are led astray as a result of their inadequate knowledge, in matters either of religion or of the highest ethical standards", these others never forfeit their personal dignity. All are therefore always to be treated with respect. Interreligious dialogue can help us on the way to Truth which always surpasses our understanding.

One of the urgent tasks of dialogue is to overcome prejudice. An accurate introductory information is a first step for overcoming false ideas and negative views of one another and for breaking down barriers of understanding. Partners in dialogue across religious boundaries need to, first of all, accept one another as endowed with equal dignity. This does not mean that we value all ideas about the ultimate truth identically. There are, of course, fundamental differences between believers of different religions. However, standing honestly before Truth, believers of all religions need to be open to the other, as a form of openness to God, allowing oneself to be challenged and changed.

Another aspect of truth is sincerity, something essential for mutual confidence and fruitful dialogue. Where there is no real trust, because of a suspicion of lack

of sincerity, dialogue becomes impossible. A climate of trust has to be created, not only among the partners but also among the people they represent, so that solutions, which nearly always entail compromises, may become acceptable.

Cultivation of Inner Peace: Indispensable to Building Peace in the World

One can hardly hope to bring peace in the world if there is no peace within oneself. The religious traditions of Asia, in particular, emphasise the cultivation of inner peace; various religious traditions of Asia, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, but also the Christian tradition, in the course of their long history, have given importance, through the institution of monastic life, to the cultivation of inner peace. Peace is born in the heart of a person and then, as a fruit of it, planted in the world. The cultivation of inner peace is indispensable to building peace in the world. By their quiet and discreet but effective witnesses of life the monks promote peace which our world today needs so urgently. To achieve this goal they use the means of prayer, meditation and contemplation and search for interior peace. St. Benedict says to his monks in the Prologue to his rule: "Seek peace – pursue it". If prayer and meditation is neglected, the whole edifice of peace is liable to crumble. Prayer and silent contemplation on the divine mysteries give birth and bring growth and maturity to peace, which then, becomes an influential, enduring and limitless source of peace in the world.

The late Pope John Paul II explained the importance of prayer and meditation in the life of a believer, especially for building peace. In his address to the participants on the occasion of the world day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986, he said: "Prayer gives courage and support to all who love this good and desire to promote it in accordance with their own possibilities and in the various situations in which they live. Prayer not only opens us up to a meeting with the Most High but also disposes us to a meeting with our neighbour, helping us to establish with everyone, without discrimination, relationships of respect, understanding, esteem and love. He further continues, "Religious sentiment and a prayerful spirit not only help us to grow inwardly; they also enlighten us about the true meaning of our presence in the world. It can also be said that the religious dimension encourages us to make an event more committed contribution to the building of a well-ordered society in which peace reigns. Prayer is the bond which most effectively unites us: it is through prayer that believers meet one another at a level where inequalities, misunderstandings, bitterness and hostility are overcome, namely before God, the Lord and Father of all. Prayer, as the authentic expression of a right relationship with God and with others, is already a positive contribution to peace."

Peace and Development Are Matters of Religion

Believers must explore the theme of peace in the context of integral development of each person and all peoples. Unless you seek the good of one and all peace is placed in jeopardy. Respect for rights of every human person is the foundation of peace. Of course, there are always rights and duties, flowing directly and

simultaneously from human person's very nature. It is upon correct anthropological foundation of these rights and duties, and upon their intrinsic correlation, that the true bulwark of peace rests.

The phenomenon of globalization which is being imposed without respect to solidarity among all peoples must become a serious concern for all believers. Every believer must ask, "What will be the effect of the changes taking place? Will everyone be able to take advantage of a global market? Will everyone at least have a chance to enjoy peace? Will relations between States become more equitable, or will economic competition and rivalries between peoples and nations lead humanity towards a situation of even greater instability? The late Pope John Paul II suggests that "for a more equitable society and a more stable peace in a world on the way to globalization, it is an urgent task of International Organization to help promote a sense of responsibility for the common good. But to achieve this we must never lose sight of the human person, who must be the centre of every social project... This is the path of building a world community based on 'mutual trust, mutual support and sincere respect'. The challenge is to ensure a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalization. This is a clear duty in justice, with serious moral implications in the organizations of the economic, social, cultural and political life of nations"

Believers across religious boundaries, need to identify, through interreligious dialogue, obstacles of peace, such as xenophobia that closes nations in on themselves or, which leads governments to enact discriminatory laws against people in their own countries, closing of borders in an arbitrary and unjustifiable way so that people are effectively deprived of the ability to move and to better their lot, ideologies that preach hatred or distrust, systems that set up artificial barriers like race, religion, class divisions, etc. Are not all people subject of true development and are they not also the aim of true development? The integral development of people is the goal and measure of all development projects. All together need to promote values that truly benefit individuals and society. It is not enough to reach out and help those in need. We must help them to discover the values which enable them to build a new life and to take their rightful place in society with dignity and justice. "Development is no longer a question merely of improving certain situations or economic conditions. Development ultimately becomes a question of Peace, because it helps to achieve what is good for others and for the human community as a whole."

To Build Peace in the World needs Cooperation of all Religions

The Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world because the Church sees dialogue as an act of love which has its roots in God himself. Despite the fundamental differences believers must make efforts to understand positively the role of religions in promoting peace in the world. Differences certainly need to be respected but instead of becoming

obstacles in the way of peace differences should be overcome by building bridges of friendship. Yes, we need to cultivate mutual relationships of trust and confidence. Our commitment to interreligious dialogue obviously does not diminish the rightful practice of their respective religious tradition.

The meeting in Assisi on 27 October 1986, for example, was a concrete witness to the universal dimension of peace, and confirmed that peace is not only the result of skilful political and diplomatic negotiations or a compromise between economic interests, but depends in a fundamental way upon the One who knows the human heart and guides and directs the steps of all mankind.

Thanks to the increasing number of encounters and exchanges between religious believers around the world. Many of us have been able to attain a clearer awareness of our responsibilities with regard to the true good of humanity as a whole. As a result of interreligious dialogue believers have become an active force in the process of development and thus to offer a sure hope to humanity. In a number of instances, it has become evident that our activity would have proved more effective had it been carried out jointly and in a coordinated manner. There is a long way to go for believers of different religions to reach the goal of active cooperation in the cause of peace. Interreligious contacts is an obligatory path, in order to ensure that the many painful wounds inflicted over the course of centuries will not be repeated, and indeed that any such wounds still remaining will soon be healed.

Religious Freedom: A Condition for Peace in a Pluri-Religious Society

Freedom is essential to peace for it allows people to act responsibly. A solution that is imposed from above, and not accepted willingly, will not last this is why it is important that peace processes not be confined only to select negotiations; the process needs to be shared with the population involved in the conflict.

Freedom is the most noble prerogative of the human person. And demand for freedom regards, in the first place, the free exercise of religion in society. Religious quest is inseparably linked to the quest for truth and "truth is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue."

Freedom of conscience and of religion does not mean relativisation of the objective truth which every human being is morally obliged to seek. It must be clearly stated that no State has any competence, direct or indirect, over a person's religious convictions. It cannot arrogate to itself the right to impose or to impede the profession or public practice of religion by a person or a community.

The religious dimension, rooted in the human conscience, has a specific impact on the subject of peace, and every attempt to impede or to coerce its free expression inevitably has grave negative effects upon the possibility of a peaceful society.

Religious freedom also contributes decisively to producing citizens who are genuinely free; it also makes them to take up their duties with greater responsibility. An essential condition for peace is people's strong moral integrity and religious freedom.

In certain countries legislation has been introduced, or proposed, forbidding "unethical conversions." If what is banned is proselytism, that is the use of undue means to bring about conversion to a particular religion, then such legislation may be considered justified. If, however, any passage from one religion to another is forbidden, then there is a radical contradiction of a fundamental aspect of the principle of religious freedom.

Religious freedom constitutes the very heart of human rights. "Its inviolability is such that individuals must be recognized as having the right even to change their religion, if their conscience so demands. People are obliged to follow their conscience in all circumstances and cannot be forced to act against it (Cf. Article 18 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Conclusion

"The world needs peace, the world ardently desires peace." Believers across religious boundaries have an indispensable role to play in promoting, building, educating and living in peace. Believers in their respective communities, as well as in wider society, must become a concrete example of peaceful and harmonious living. This new initiative for the spread of peace must be taken, so that overcoming problems and obstacles in the way of peace, they may meet challenges. "Given the increased number of conflict situations, it is necessary to develop new energies of peace, for which religions are a valuable resource." I would like to conclude by quoting a part of the appeal which was signed by religious leaders. It declared: "May no hatred, no conflict, no war be kindled by religions! War can never be justified by religion. May the words spoken by religions always be words of peace! May the way of faith lead to dialogue and understanding! May religions guide hearts to bring peace on earth! May religions help all men and women to love the earth and its peoples both great and small."

The Need to Foster Inter-Religious Tolerance among Youth

Dr. Marie Fernandes

Multicultural concerns have long informed India's history and traditions, constitution and political arrangements. Different parts of India have different histories and legends. Indian history has a past of over thousands of years. The first known invaders of India were Aryans. It is believed that the Aryans arrived in north India somewhere from Iran and southern Russia at around 1500 B. C. They fought and pushed the local people called Dravidians southwards. The Aryans are referred to as fair skinned people who pushed the dark skinned Dravidians southwards.

After the Aryans many others invaded India. Alexander the Great and other Greeks arrived in India. The ancient Persian Empire expanded its boundaries up to India. Others to arrive in ancient India were Scythians, Kushans and Huns. These invaders also established some kingdoms in India. At a much later period there were Muslim invaders - Turks, Arabs, Afghans and others. Later of course were the Europeans - Portuguese, Danish, Dutch, French and English. Many Indians also established their own kingdoms and empires. These different kingdoms fought among themselves to expand their kingdom boundaries and these created different aspects of Indian history for different regions of India.¹ During India's independence in 1947 there were 562 Princely States and 11 Provinces. India now has 28 states and 7 union territories and it would not be very wrong to say that each is very distinct from the other, with regard to language, dress and religion.

Indian history right from the time of Independence has been chequered by large scale clashes between different religious groups, fundamentally of course between the Hindus and Muslims. The world over too, religious wars have caused loss of precious human lives. The worst killing however, according to Prof. Pat Johnson, was done in the name of secular ideologies. The worst offender being Mao who starts with an estimated 40 million killed, next is Stalin with an estimate of 20 million killed and the third is Hitler. The top two were Communists and Hitler was a radical proponent of Social Darwinism. All of these ideologies are based on atheistic systems.²

In no period of recorded history have human beings known about different religions and cultures as much as we do today. There are about fourteen major religions. These include: Bahai, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, Wicca, Zoroastrianism, and Druidism. Our global public space is so powerful yet so elusive that it leads many to believe that more information brings more understanding.

Getting to know others from close up, however, is not always a smooth and easy experience. It may result in some pleasant surprises and enriching experiences. Yet it may also result in disappointment, frustration and mistrust. We also face tremendous difficulties when we show the courage and honesty of getting to know each other closely, for there is too long a history of doubt, mistrust and a refusal to accept the other.

Intercultural dialogue is one of the key missions of the Council of Europe, along with fostering democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Young people are crucial actors in that process as the main stakeholders of societies who are freer from the prejudice, discrimination and segregation that have characterized most of Europe for the past decades.

In today's increasingly globalised world, we cannot remain indifferent to the concerns of young people and the threats posed to our societies by extremism, racism, Islam phobia, social exclusion or anti-Semitism, to name but a few of the many evils we ought to address. All different — all equal, but not indifferent! We need to address the causes of polarized perceptions of each other, collective phobias and frustrations, and put into practice, activities that help re-affirm the fundamental equality in dignity of every human being and the respect among peoples of different cultural and religious traditions.

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”

This fundamental human right, proclaimed and protected by the Universal Declaration and by the European Convention on Human Rights, provides, together with the other human rights, the framework under which interreligious and intercultural dialogue can be held. Human rights, however, require the commitment of all, young people included, to uphold them.

Intercultural dialogue appears as an essential approach to counter and overcome mutual prejudices and the self-fulfilling prophecy of the ‘war of civilisations’. If the purpose of intercultural dialogue is ‘to learn to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging’, it is clear that it can only work if it involves everyone, young people included, and that it is not reduced to ‘culture’ but encompasses all the social manifestations and expressions of ‘culture’ including religion.

We know that diversity is not always accompanied by social cohesion and cooperation. Situations of discrimination remain problematic to many societies, sometimes being expressed in violent forms, from hate speech to armed conflict.

Young people, especially those from minority groups and those living in highly multicultural environments, can be found among the victims and among the perpetrators; they are, in any case, important actors in promoting social change.³

The teachings and messages of the founders of world religions were primarily aimed at alleviating sufferings and bringing peace and happiness to mankind through the application of moral and ethical conduct and righteous living. However, world religions today have developed into massive organised impersonal institutions with the result that the original teachings of their respective founders have been so eroded or neglected that hardly any influence is left over their followers particularly in the field of simplicity, restraint, truthfulness and selflessness.

The moral content of religion and its peace-promoting spiritual values are clouded by the more attractive materialistic values. Many followers of world religions have ignored or slighted the injunctions of their religious teachers in order to seek power, fame and other material gains for their personal aggrandisement. That tends to pollute the minds of modern religionists and cause unhealthy competitions and barriers amongst different religious groups as well as within the same religious community.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

To co-exist in peace and harmony in a multi-religious society, one should have a sound religious education with strong emphasis on moral and ethical values as the first positive step towards better understanding and mutual co-operation among people of all religions. All religionists should unite and co-operate with one another to promote and institute a proper and systematic religious education, not only of a particular religion, but on the essentials of all religious teachings that would enlighten as well as give an insight into the nature of higher spiritual values of life, particularly its moral and ethical values. Such a step would be of definite assistance in reducing if not wiping off hard-core religious fanaticisms and traditional prejudices, which have been the bane of inter-religious strife.

WELFARE ACTIVITIES

The holding of fellowship meetings, the institution of community service programmes and other social and welfare activities where members of all religions work hand-in-hand for a common humanitarian cause, to uplift the lot of the more unfortunate ones in society would serve as a mean for a common bond of friendship leading to inter-religious peace and harmony.

YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

Another important area where religionists should seriously address themselves is in the field of youth organisations and related activities. The youth of today are the adults of tomorrow. They should not be allowed to stray into pitfalls of the present age. All the youthful energies and resources should be properly harnessed

and directed towards constructive purposes. They should be apprised of all the fundamental teachings of religion in promoting a peaceful and harmonious society and not fed with venom decrying one faith against another. If properly guided through religious principles such as patience, tolerance and understanding, the youth of today would be the greatest promoters of religious tolerance in the days to come.

TOLERANCE AND RESPECT

Tolerance and respect are two vital words that should be borne in mind in a multi-religious society. One should not only preach tolerance but try, on every possible occasion, to put into practice the benign spirit of tolerance as this spirit would go a long way in creating an atmosphere leading to peace and harmony. We may not understand or appreciate the intrinsic values of certain religious rituals or practices carried out by certain co-religionists. Similarly, others may not be in a position to understand or appreciate our own rituals or practices. If we do not want others to ridicule our actions, we should not ridicule others. We should try to fathom or understand the practices which are foreign to us as it will help to create a better understanding, thus enhancing the spirit of tolerance amongst the followers of the multi-religious denominations.

SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF LIFE

Life in this world is a short span in the space of time. We crave for material gain but we should not neglect the spiritual aspects of life as taught to us by our religious forbears. We should enrich our lives by putting into practice the pristine and noble teachings of our religious teachers to lead a respectable and useful life shunning evil at all times. The common denomination propounded by religious teachers of all world religions is for all humanity to lead a humane existence and to uphold the spiritual aspects of their respective teachings, thus contributing to peace and harmony.

PROPAGANDA OF RELIGION

In order to propagate a particular religion it is necessary that the best or the most important aspects of the religion be propounded to gain attention. To put the best foot forward is a fair enough proposition as all religionists, in trying to sell their religious wares, would invariably do so. However, in a multi-religious society where there is keen competition to solicit devotees and or converts, there should be a mutual understanding amongst the religious leaders to refrain from belittling, criticizing or speaking ill on the beliefs and practices of another religion.

BE CONSIDERATE

Whilst appreciating the fact that in this country we are privileged to carry out our respective religious rites and practices without any hindrance, we must realize that we are living in a multi-religious society and as such, try to be considerate at all times in whatever we do. We may feel that because of a certain special occasion

or happening in our home, sad or otherwise, we must perform certain religious rites and rituals in accordance with our tradition and cultural background; even so we must be fair and considerate in that we do not overdo things causing hardship and annoyance to our neighbours. Whatever religious practices performed by us must be done within reasonable limits and within the confines of our homes without causing undue disturbances to the peace and serenity of our neighbourhood.

POLITICS AND RELIGION

Another aspect to be considered in the search for peace and tranquillity in a multi-religious society is that political and racial issues should not be introduced into a religious forum. It is appreciated that in present day politics and even those of yesteryears, politicians would like to influence all institutions including religious institutions to further their political ends. All means are fair game for politicians, but religion should fight shy of politics and politicians. Spiritual platforms cater for the spiritual needs of religious-minded people, but such platforms should not be opened for politicians who might wreck the religious peace and serenity of a place of worship through their political affiliations. Religion is all-embracing – hence there should be no racial barriers whatsoever.⁴⁴

Each one of us, whilst respecting and upholding our respective religions, must not, under any circumstances, decry or look down upon the teachings of other religionists. We should try to study and understand the basics of all religions, picking up what is good and common in practice and discarding those which are controversial in character. In short, uphold your religion but respect the beliefs of others. This will definitely help in the maintenance of peace and harmony in a multi-religious society.

It is against this background the Chair for Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue was established, at St. Andrew's College, Mumbai, by his Eminence Cardinal Paul Poupard from Rome to promote a culture of peace and harmony. The college will conduct several short and long term certificate courses for students and other interested people to arrive at a better understanding of the different faiths and work hand in hand for humanitarian projects to improve the lot of the downtrodden and marginalized.

(Endnotes)

1. Nicki Grihault, *Culture Smart: India: A Quick Guide to Custom* (Portland: Kuperard, 2005)23.
2. Grantley Morris, *Issues That Make Christians Squirm* ([net.burst.net / hot / index.htm](http://net.burst.net/hot/index.htm))
3. Ibrahim Kahn, "Turkey and Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue from Indifferent Tolerance to Critical Engagement", *Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Youth Work - Symposium Report*. (Hungary: Council of Europe, 2007)
4. K. Sri Dhammananda, *Religion in a Multi-Religious Society* (<http://www.what-buddha-taught.net>)

Dialogue and Culture for Mission and Proclamation in Asia

Rev. Dr. Gilbert de Lima

Asian Context

Asia is a vast mosaic comprising over forty countries where two thirds of the world's population live. Two countries alone, China and India, together make up half of the world's population. Many would say that it is impossible to characterize the Asian situation in general. In fact great disparities are present.¹

Nevertheless there are some general characteristics of Asia that we could identify if we were to study Asia closely.

Asia has a plurality of cultures:

The most striking feature of the continent is the variety of its peoples who are "heirs to ancient cultures, religions and traditions". We cannot but be amazed at the sheer size of Asia's population and at the intricate mosaic of its many cultures, languages, beliefs and traditions, which comprise such a substantial part of the history and patrimony of the human family.²

In the realm of culture there are two factors relating to it that make Asia special.³ First, the multiplicity of cultures existing in the same country. One would be amazed for example, if one moved from South India to North India that the language, the modes of dress, the food habits, the mentality and even ethnic origin are totally different. Secondly, these cultures are highly developed cultures. Some of the most ancient civilizations in the world have their roots in Asia.

Now the people of Asia take pride in their religious and cultural values⁴, such as love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, the spirit of hard work, discipline, frugal living, the thirst for learning and philosophical enquiry.¹⁰ They hold dear the values of respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety towards parents, elders and ancestors, and a highly developed sense of community. In particular, they hold the family to be a vital source of strength, a closely knit community with a powerful sense of solidarity. Asian peoples are known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Without denying the existence of bitter tensions and violent conflicts, it can still be said that Asia has often demonstrated a remarkable capacity for accommodation and a natural openness to the mutual enrichment of peoples in the midst of a plurality of religions and cultures. Moreover, despite the

influence of modernization and secularization, Asian religions are showing signs of great vitality and a capacity for renewal, as seen in reform movements within the various religious groups. Many people, especially the young, experience a deep thirst for spiritual values, as the rise of new religious movements clearly demonstrates.

All of this indicates an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul, and it is the core around which a growing sense of “being Asian” is built. This “being Asian” is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul.

Asia is a land of a great plurality of religions:

Eighty-five percent of all the world's followers of other living faiths (besides Christianity) are Asians. Many of the world's major religions were born in Asia: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, Sikhism, Jainism and Shintoism.⁵ Christians in Asia are less than three percent of the total population. In short, except for the Philippines and East Timor, Christians are a small minority. There are seven times more Muslims in Asia than there are Christians; the four largest Islamic countries in the world (2007) are in Asia: Indonesia (216 million), Pakistan (161 million), India (147 million), Bangladesh (122 million). These brief Islamic statistics do not include world religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. Besides, of course, there are any number of tribal religions in Asia. What stands out here is not only that there is a big number of religions, but also the fact that they have survived for hundreds and thousands of years.⁶ The Church has the deepest respect for these traditions and seeks to engage in sincere dialogue with their followers. Religion is the essential element of culture, indeed it is its determining core. It is religion which determines the structure of values and thereby forms its inner logic.⁷ The Church has also used in her preaching the discoveries of different cultures to spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations, to probe it and more deeply understand it, and to give it better expression in the liturgy and in the life of the community of the faithful.⁸

Asia is a land where much poverty can be found.⁹ A majority of the world's poorest people today are in Asia - partly because it holds a majority of the world's population. Of course some Asian countries like Japan and South Korea are not as poor as others like India and Cambodia, with Asian poverty being concentrated in South Asia. Poverty in some Asian countries is largely due to the pressure of population growth on scarce resources and inadequate governments allowing strongly negative caste discrimination. Education, medicine, clean water and sanitation are often inadequate also. In some Asian

countries land ownership being problematic also encourages poverty. Asia till recently attracted less foreign investment than Latin America, but more of it has been stable longer-term European investment. Some of Asia has shown good progress on poverty in recent years, like China and South Korea. (in China notably helped partly by controls on population growth) But Asia, holding the largest populations, still has many extreme poor.¹⁰

There are economic giants, it is true, but there are also some of the countries with the lowest per capita income in the world. The same would be true within a country itself. To give an example of India: in big cities like Mumbai and Delhi, some of the world's richest families live side by side with slums where people lack adequate food, clothing or shelter. While many urban areas show signs of progress and great hope, many rural areas remain deprived of the benefits of progress and sink into ever deeper poverty.

Against this backdrop one can also notice a growing political maturity in Asia. Colonization has practically disappeared. Even though there exist different forms of Government, the sovereignty of the people is being recognized more and more. People dissatisfied with their rulers are able to change Governments peacefully - though besides the Communist countries, there still remain pockets where oppressive or semi-oppressive Government rule.

Asian countries are no longer insular. Globalization has had its inevitable impact on Asia. Development in the field of communication coupled with globalization has resulted in the media flooding Asian homes and offices with consequent influences on the value systems of our people. Barriers that governments attempted to put up have gradually been crumbling and it is inevitable that this will happen all over. A resultant factor is also becoming more visible, the secularization of society. The media is largely responsible for this and family life is affected and a materialistic mentality is infecting particularly urban Asia.

Dialogue

Given the multiracial, multi-linguistic, multi-religious, and multicultural reality of Asia, the earth's largest continent and home to nearly two-thirds of the world's population, a dialogical approach is the only possible avenue. Such a dialogical approach is not a mere external methodology that the Church in Asia will adapt; the Church herself is called to be "a community of dialogue. This dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church".¹¹

Now the FABC from the very outset pointed out the significance of dialogue to realize the Church's mission in the Asian context. It declared in its seminal document, "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia" (1974). that the a truly local

Church, which is indigenous and inculturated is built up through the local faith community engaged in a continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the local cultures, religions and the poor, in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own."¹² This "triple dialogue" paradigm has been verified in subsequent FABC assemblies. In fact, the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly in 2000 noted that the "triple dialogue" that the FABC developed "over the past thirty years ... is still valid today".¹³

Vatican II and Culture¹⁴

Very significantly the question of culture was placed by Vatican II as among the, "more urgent problems deeply affecting the human race at the present day in the light of the Gospel and of human experience".¹⁵

Now culture almost defies definition because it is an all embracing climate rather than an articulated system. It is a social force that encompasses individuals and welds them into communities. It shapes their prejudices, ideas, values, habits, attitudes, tastes and priorities. In his Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, Pope John Paul II points out that culture is more comprehensive than either economics or politics because it deals with the deepest questions of life. Whereas politics and economics are concerned with proximate and limited goods, culture has to do with the meaning of human existence as a whole. It inquires into what we are as human beings, and what reality is in its most comprehensive dimensions.¹⁶

Hence very significantly the opening passages of *Gaudium et spes*¹⁷ that propose a cultural analysis of the contemporary world. Consequently, it was as a result of historical and social analyses of culture, understood as a source of sociological and ethnological meanings and identity, that the Church began acknowledging the richness and value of plurality of cultures.¹⁸ Thus the Council affirmed, the right of each to one's own culture and at the same time, conscious of its universal mission, encouraged the Church to "enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves."¹⁹

However, while identifying positive elements of culture, there is also warning about potential dangers that modern culture can be exposed to phenomenalism and agnosticism, self-sufficiency, and rejection of the divine by human sciences which "no longer seek higher values".²⁰ Hence the challenge for the Gospel, to constantly readdress the life and culture of fallen humanity.

In a pastoral approach to culture²¹, what is at stake is for human beings to be restored in fullness to having been created "in the image and likeness of God"²², tearing them away from the anthropocentric temptation of considering

themselves independent from the Creator. Therefore, and this observation is crucial to a pastoral approach to culture, "it must certainly be admitted that man always exists in a particular culture, but it must also be admitted that man is not exhaustively defined by that same culture. Moreover, the very progress of cultures demonstrates that there is something in man which transcends those cultures. This 'something' is precisely human nature: this nature is itself the measure of culture and the condition of ensuring that man does not become prisoner of any of his cultures, but asserts his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being".²³

4. Dialogue between Gospel and Culture

i) The Gospel is incarnate into the local Culture

Indeed, "the rift between the Gospel and culture is undoubtedly an unhappy circumstance of our times just as it has been in other just as it has been in other times."²⁴

(Cardinal) Ratzinger notes very pertinently, "the elements Christianity has in common with the ancient cultures of mankind are greater than those it has in common with the relativistic-rationalistic world. The latter has severed itself from the common sustaining basic insights of mankind and led man into an existential vacuum threatening his ruin if no answer is forthcoming. For the knowledge of man's dependence on God and eternity, the knowledge of sin, repentance and forgiveness, the knowledge of communion with God and eternal life, and finally the knowledge of basic moral precepts as they have taken shape in the Decalogue, all this knowledge permeates the cultures. It is not relativism which is confirmed. On the contrary, it is the unity of the human condition, the unity of man who has been touched by a truth greater than himself."²⁵

Therefore cultures today need to be evangelized and regenerated through an encounter with the Gospel. Hence, the imperative need for the Gospel to be incarnate in the local cultures with a critical discernment.²⁶ Consequently, current cultural analysis, and a comprehensive description of culture in its historical, anthropological, sociological and ethnological aspects,²⁷ provides a serviceable framework for incarnating the Christian message in actual real-life situations.

In the light of the above, the interaction between the Gospel and the world (cultures) can be compared to what happens to a seed when it is sown in the field.²⁸ The Word of God, the Gospel, is like a seed that falls into the furrows and folds of every new historical situation, a new culture, a new age, a new society and new religious conceptions and sensitivities. There it dies and rises to a new existence; and the sapling draws

sustenance from the milieu, builds itself up with the human and the religious resources that are there, and grows strong in God's light.

For instance, a true encounter happened in the early Church. The disciples had to allow their particular Jewish-Christian experience die to its local cultural and racial concreteness in order to rise to other particularities. Within a generation the Gospel, originally born in the rural, northern Palestinian culture of Galilee, flowered in the urban culture of the Greeks. The dawning of this awareness and the crisis it endured are reflected in several New Testament passages such as Acts 15; Gal 2; Acts 10; Jn 4. This is the true meaning of announcing Christ to the world. Through this process the Gospel becomes universalized. Hence, as the world hears the Word according to this methodology of the germinating seed; hidden riches of the Gospel become manifest through the symbol systems of various cultures. The almost infinite variety of structures and forms which the Gospel message can assume truly reveals the universal character of the Good News.

ii) Inculturation and Inter-culturation

It is also very important to understand that inculturation is a process of interculturalization. The Gospel itself comes to a culture with previously acquired particular cultural expressions. Hence, inculturation is a process of mutual fecundation between Gospel and cultures, i.e., the dynamic relationship between the Christian faith and cultures is a meeting of two cultures, or inter-culturation. "This phenomenon of interculturalization draws attention to the enriching as well as dehumanizing factors that are operative in the values and meaning-systems of all cultures.²⁹ In this intercultural process of enrichment and critique the inculturating community discerns the chaff of false hopes and false values from the wheat of genuine growth. Accordingly, inculturation is not a project that is planned and executed by humans but a process wherein the community allows itself to be led by the Spirit. In such a case inculturation just happens in much the same way that the first Christians became Jewish Christians and the Gentiles became Gentile Christians (cf. Gal 2 & 3; Acts 10, 11 & 15)."³⁰

In the light of this, inculturation becomes a need both for the true fulfillment of the mission of the Word of God in the world and for the very manifestation of the vitality of the Word itself.

iii) Hence, the Gospel purifies, elevates and renews cultural values and ways of the people.³¹

Indeed, the evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of the Gospel go hand in hand, in a reciprocal relationship which presupposes constant

discernment in the light of the Gospel, to facilitate the identification of values and counter-values in a given culture, so as to build on the former and vigorously combat the latter. "Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within."³² As a consequence, through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission"

Consequently, inculturation consists not only in experiencing, understanding and appropriating the Gospel and the Christian faith but also expressing the same through the cultural medium as well as the cultural resources of the people. "Thus, inculturation plays a prophetic role to cultures. Cultures need to be open to the gospel and converted to Christ, and the gospel also needs to be opened to the local culture so that it may attain fullness of meaning among the local populace. ...In this way, inculturation brings about mutual enrichment, which usually occurs when the gospel engages the culture"³³

iv) This dialogue between Gospel and culture would eventually result in the creation of genuine local Churches in Asia which seek to identify with the hopes, joys, griefs and aspirations of the Asian people.³⁴ Such local Churches would also speak a language that is understood and credible in their respective contexts. Indeed, only if the Churches become authentically Asian, will they possess a prophetic voice and work for a cultural transformation from within.³⁵

5. Cultural diversity and religious plurality

Religions are an expression of man's search for God, and evidence of the spiritual dimension of the human being.³⁶ In a world at the mercy of secularization, they are a reminder of the divine presence and the importance of spirituality as the living core of cultures. The countries of the immense continent of Asia have ancient cultures, which are profoundly influenced by non-Christian religions and traditions of wisdom, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Confucianism and Islam, which need to be considered very carefully.

The FABC adopts a positive approach to religions³⁷, promoting constructive collaboration, dialogue, and critical interaction among them. The presence of the "seeds of the Word" and the action of the Holy Spirit in these religions is affirmed. Thus, they have insights, values, and virtues that can inform the Church's inculturation process. Over many centuries they have been the

treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations.

And it is only in dialogue with these religions that we will be able to discover in them the seeds of the Word of God (cf. AG, 9)³⁸ This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples' deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among His sons.

For instance, many elements of spirituality and mysticism, like holiness, self-denial, chastity, universal love, a love for peace, prayer and contemplation, bliss in God and compassion, which are very much alive in these cultures, can lead on to faith in the God of Jesus Christ.³⁹ Pope John Paul II recalls this, "In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought."⁴⁰

Dialogue with Asia's religious traditions is also an occasion to give witness to Christian faith: "On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus His Son, the ways to grace Christ gives us in His Gospel and His sacraments, and fellowship [in] the community which seeks to live in Him; an understanding too of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of human salvation."⁴¹

6. Dialogue with the Poor and the Marginalized

In the context of Poverty the Synod of Bishops (1971) was quite clear that action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world is "a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel".⁴² In fact, Paul VI, in "Evangelii Nuntiandi" had asked: "How in fact can one proclaim the new commandment of love without promoting, in justice and in peace, the true and authentic advancement of man?"⁴³ (EN 31). In particular, the pastoral priorities of the Church in Asia would concern the displaced (refugees and migrants), women and the girl-child, youth, workers, families, the indigenous peoples, etc.⁴⁴ Consequently the Christian message of love and justice needs to be incarnate in society and manifested in concrete action it can never gain credibility with the people of our times. Hence the Churches in Asia would need to address these areas of special

concern through a theology and a consequent praxis which will be at the "service of life."⁴⁵

The need therefore for the development of "appropriate" ministries, inculturated ministries. As the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church noted: "The servant Church accomplishes her mission "by creating new forms of ministries, alongside the existing ones.... The exact form of these ministries will depend to a great extent on the local situations in our countries."⁴⁶

8. Proclamation

Now dialogue goes hand in hand with proclamation, since both are part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Indeed, there is a great need to rediscover the close connection between proclamation and dialogue as elements of the evangelizing mission of the Church⁴⁷ It will be seen that these elements are not interchangeable, nor are they to be confused, yet they are indeed related.⁴⁸ Proclamation aims at conversion in the sense of free acceptance of the Good News of Christ and becoming a member of the Church. Dialogue, on the other hand, presupposes conversion in the sense of a return of the heart to God in love and obedience to His will, in other words, openness of the heart to the action of God. It is God who attracts people to himself, sending His Spirit who is at work in the depths of their hearts.⁴⁹ The post-Synodal document *Ecclesia in Asia* pertinently points out that interreligious dialogue and the Church's mandate to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth are not mutually exclusive, since they complement one another. While on the one hand, the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ must always be made with deep respect for the conscience of those who hear it and with respect for all that is good and holy in the culture and religious tradition to which they belong (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 2); on the other hand, freedom of conscience and the free practice of religion in society are basic human rights, rooted in the value and dignity inherent in every person and recognized in many international documents and agreements, including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.⁵⁰ Hence as John Paul II declared, 'Our proclamation of Christ and our bearing witness to him must be done in a way we respect consciences and do not violate freedoms.'⁵¹

Furthermore, for proclamation to be effective in any context, it must necessarily be inculturated. The post-Synodal document, *Ecclesia in Asia* spells this process very well it says, "In the process of encountering the world's different cultures, the Church not only transmits her truths and values and renews cultures from within, but she also takes from the various cultures the positive elements already found in them..... (and)... the various cultures, when refined and renewed in the light of the Gospel, can become true

expressions of the one Christian faith."⁵² Authentic dialogue thus implies proclamation and proclamation must always be done in a spirit of dialogue.

In this context, Archbishop Thomas Menampampil in his presentation at the Symposium organized by the FABC Office of Evangelisation, 2002 entitled 'Towards an Asian Way of Sharing the Faith', made an appropriate intervention! He pointed out that of late, a lurking fear has arisen in the hearts of many a believer that, while Christian teaching is welcome in Asia, the unique person of Christ is a stumbling block. However, on a deeper reflection of the question, one realizes that there is no aversion to Christ himself and what he stands for. When Christ comes unto his own, his own people will not refuse to receive him. As AG, 4 declared "without doubt, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified". And so we bear in mind that the Spirit of Jesus has already preceded him. Indeed there are abundant "seeds of the Word"⁵³ in the local religious traditions and cultures. Consequently, it becomes necessary, as 'Nostra Aetate', 2 points out, to "preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these people, as well as the values in their society and culture."⁵⁴

Indeed, it is "in Christ, that the authentic values of all religious and cultural traditions, such as mercy and submission to the will of God, compassion and rectitude, non-violence and righteousness, filial piety and harmony with creation find their fullness and realization."⁵⁵

(Cardinal) J. Ratzinger made a very significant point in this context, "In his letters from prison, Paul develops the cosmic significance of Christ and thereby opens up for us an "inclusive" Christology in the sense of what we said earlier about conversion. Faith in Jesus Christ becomes a new principle of life and opens up a new space for living. The old is not destroyed but finds its definitive form and full meaning.

This transforming conservation as the fathers splendidly practiced it in the encounter between biblical faith and its cultures is the real content of "inculturation," of encounter and cross-fertilization of cultures and religions under the mediating power of faith.

It is here that the great tasks of the present historical moment lie. Without a doubt, Christian mission must understand and receive the religions in a much deeper way than it has until now. On the other hand, the religions, in order to live authentically, need to recognize their own adventistic character propelling them forward to Christ. If we proceed in this sense toward an intercultural search for clues to the one common truth, we will find something unexpected."⁵⁶

And so it is Christ himself who responds to the persistent longings of the peoples of Asia and contemplating Jesus in his human nature, they have found their deepest questions answered, their hopes fulfilled, their dignity uplifted and their despair conquered.⁵⁷ For example, Mahatma Gandhi, coming across the Sermon on the Mount for the first time, felt all his childhood learning was affirmed. He did not perceive it as an alien message. He felt that the Gospel message was more intimate and native to him than many other teachings he had made his own over the years. In recent times when certain Hindu fundamentalist groups met with Church leaders in India recently, they exclaimed, "Christians cannot pretend as though they own Christ." Indeed, Christ belongs to all!

Unfortunately the adherents of some religions have seen proclamation of the Gospel as a threat to them. Fundamentalist groups have therefore sought to stop the preaching and even the socio-economic activities by Christian missionaries.⁵⁸ Influenced by these powerful groups some Governments have imposed restrictions on the activities of clergy and religious, e.g., restricting the numbers of priests and in controlling their activity and accessibility to funds, enacting a conversion legislation, etc. This however, has not in any way, dampened the fervour of missionaries ready to preach the Gospel and to live and die for it. The last decade has produced many martyrs for the faith Asia, but the blood of martyrs continues to be the seed of Christia even today, as it was from the very beginnings of the Church.

Concretely to lead people to a deeper appreciation and experience of the mystery of Christ, Pope John Paul II in 'Ecclesia in Asia' appealed for a Pedagogy of Evangelization "which will introduce people step-by-step to the full appropriation of the mystery" through "a progressive preaching", and one which would also follow "an evocative pedagogy."⁵⁹ Hence people are gradually introduced to the person of Christ. Indeed 'Ecclesia in Asia' invites the Asian Churches to legitimately devise a "variety of approaches in their proclamation of Jesus."⁶⁰

9. The 'Anubhav' (Experience) of Jesus Christ:

In the ultimate analysis, in order to respond generously to the call to proclaim Jesus Christ in mission, we need to recognize the primacy of the experience of the Risen Christ. It is precisely from this personal encounter with the Risen Lord that a fresh impetus to mission will surely emerge today. The litmus test therefore of our missionary identity in this country of mysticism, is the quality of our witness (Jn 13,13-16). We recall the challenging invitation of Pope Paul VI, "our generation listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers!"⁶¹

Truly the evangelizer who lives a life of service and is prepared to give up his/her life for the Gospel, is the most powerful witness! That is the calibre of persons that are needed today and only these persons can awaken an apathetic society to a new life.

It is also important to remember that since Baptism makes everyone participate in the mission of Christ, today, more than ever before, there is the need to awaken the entire Catholic community to the missionary vocation of each and everyone. Without the active involvement of the laity, the Church cannot adequately fulfill her mission in the world. Facing the new challenges of the Asian Continent and of a world in travail, we find inspiration and strength in the Words of the Risen Lord; "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (Jn. 20:21), for indeed, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Conclusion:⁶²

The proclamation of the Gospel urges us to build living communities of faith, hope and love, to bring about and nurture in Asia a civilization of truth and love and a culture of life, in which each human person will be able to respond both as an individual and as part of a community to his or her vocation as one of God's children in "the fullness of Christ."⁶³

In fact, the pastoral approach to culture in its many forms has no other aim than to help the Church to fulfill its mission of proclaiming the Gospel. On the threshold of the new millennium, with the full force of the Word of God, "the inspiration of the whole of Christian living"⁶⁴, it is helping man to overcome the drama of atheistic humanism and to create a "new humanism"⁶⁵ capable of giving birth, throughout the world, to cultures transformed by the prodigious newness of Christ who "became man so that man might become God", renew himself in the image of his Creator⁶⁶ and "put on a new nature".⁶⁷ Christ renews all cultures through the creative power of the Holy Spirit, the infinite source of beauty, love and truth.

(Endnotes)

- 1 On one side there would be a vast population which is a-religious, if one takes into account, for example, the situation of people officially under Communis regimes, On the other hand there is deep religiosity in a vast number of people. There are vaste areas of peace and co-existence; but in some parts the bitterest of conflicts are being fought for decades. Some parts of Asia are the most developed and very affluent; in other parts the people are among the most deprived in the world [Cf. (Archbishop) O. Gracias, "Mission in Asia Today – Relations with Other Religions Existing in Asia", in Vidyajyothi 71(2007) p. 87].
- 2 EA, 6
- 3 (Archbishop) O. Gracias, p. 87

- 4 EA, 6
- 5 EA, 6
- 6 (Archbishop) O. Gracias, p. 87
- 7 (Cardinal) J. Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures", in www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZHONG.HTM, accessed on 13/09/2009
- 8 GS, 58
- 9 (Archbishop) O. Gracias, pp. 88-89
- 10 Poverty in Asia, at <http://world-poverty.org/povertyinasia.aspx>
- 11 FAPA I, p. 332 (quoted by J. H. Kroeger, in "The Faith-Culture Dialogue in Asia", in www.cca.org.hk/resources/ctc/ctc08-03/10_J.H.Kroeger,M.M.93.pdf, accessed on 13/09/2009
- 12 FAPA I, pp. 14-15
- 13 FAPA III, p. 4 (quoted by J. H. Kroeger, in "The Faith-Culture Dialogue in Asia")
- 14 E. Monteiro, SC, Church and Culture, ISPCK: Delhi, 2004, pp. 153-157.
- 15 GS, 46.
- 16 (Archbishop) Renato Martino, Address to the Third Committee of the 55th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on the Moral-Cultural Dimensions of Development, in L'Osservatore Romano, 11 October 2000, page 4
- 17 GS, 4-10
- 18 LG, 13.
- 19 GS, 58
- 20 GS, 57
- 21 Pontifical Council for Culture, "Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture", Vatican City, 23 May 1999, No. 2, at www.vatican.va/.../rc_pc_pc-cultr_doc_03061999_pastoral_en.html, accessed on 13/09/2009
- 22 Gen 1, 26
- 23 "Veritatis splendor", Encyclical Letter of John Paul II, Rome, 6 August, 1993, No. 53 at www.vatican.va/.../hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor_en.html, accessed on 13/09/2009
- 24 Evangelii nuntiandi, 20
- 25 (Cardinal) J. Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures", in www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZHONG.HTM, accessed on 13/09/2009
- 26 AG, 10.
- 27 GS, 53.
- 28 P. Puthanangady, SDB, "Clarifying the Notions of Culture and Inculturation", in *Rooting Faith in Asia*, ed., M. S. Dias, Claretian Publications, Bangalore, 2005, pp. 248-249.
- 29 Despite the rich cultural heritage Asia possesses, we also recognize the dominating power structures, the discrimination against and oppression of women, the cultural and religious communalisms and conflicts, the pervading corruption in public life, the abuse of children, the lack of a true participative democracy, etc. etc. To these traditional problems we could add the more modern ones of individualism and competition, the growing dichotomy between the secular and the sacred, the alienations of the modern media and the wanton destruction of ecological resources.
- 30 FAPA III, p. 218
- 31 GS, 58
- 32 RM, 52

- 33 Oborji, F. A., *Concepts of Mission (The Evolution of Contemporary Missiology)*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2006, pp. 110-111
- 34 GS, 1.
- 35 S. M. Michael, "Cultural Diversity and Inculturation", in India, in *Vidyajyothi* 73(2009) pp. 49-50: Michael points out that, "Through the process of inculturation, the Church inserts itself in the culture of a people. It integrates the Christian life and its message into a given culture. It involves itself in the life-realities of the people by participating in their historical struggle for meaning and emancipation. This process of inculturation is very important for the local Church to play a creative role in the midst of constant change."
- 36 Cf. NA, 2
- 37 Cf. J. H. Kroeger, in "The Faith-Culture Dialogue in Asia"
- 38 Cf. J. H. Kroeger, in "The Faith-Culture Dialogue in Asia".
- 39 Pontifical Council for Culture, "Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture", 22-23
- 40 Fides et ratio, 72
- 41 FABC I, p. 15
- 42 Synod of Bishops (1971), Introduction at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1971_Synod_of_Bishops, accessed on 13/09/2009
- 43 EN, 31
- 44 cf. FAPA III, pp. 9-11
- 45 Cf. FAPA II, pp. 226-227
- 46 FAPA I, p. 78 as quoted by J. H. Kroeger, in "The Faith-Culture Dialogue in Asia"
- 47 *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 77-85
- 48 Cf. Redemptoris Missio, 55
- 49 (Cardinal) F. Arinze, "Letter to Presidents of Bishops' Conferences on the Spirituality of Dialogue", Vatican City (1999), No. 6, at www.adoremus.org/1002-ArinzeLetter.html, accessed on 13/09/2009
- 50 John Paul II, "Evangelization and Interreligious Dialogue", in *Osservatore Romano*, Nov. 24, 1999, in
- 51 RM, 7
- 52 EA, 21
- 53 AG 11, 15
- 54 Cf. (Archbishop) T. Menampampil, "Towards an Asian Way of Sharing the Faith", in *Evangelization in the Light of Ecclesia in Asia*, M. S. Dias, ed., Claretian Publications, Bangalore, 2003, p. 132.
- 55 EA, 14
- 56 (Cardinal) J. Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures", in www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZHONG.HTM, accessed on 13/09/2009
- 57 Cf. EA, 14
- 58 Cf. (Archbishop) O. Gracias, p. 93
- 59 EA, 20
- 60 Cf. EA 23; Cf. (Bishop) J. Rodrigues, "Response to Evangelization as Proclamation as seen in Ecclesia in Asia", in *Evangelization in the Light of Ecclesia in Asia*, M. S. Dias, ed., Claretian Publications, 2003, p. 172
- 61 EN, 41
- 62 Cf. Pontifical Council for Culture, "Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture", Conclusion
- 63 Eph 4, 13

64 Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 36, in www.vatican.va/.../hf_jp-ii_apl_10111994_tertio-millennio-adveniente_en.html -, accessed on 13/09/2009

65 GS, 55

66 Col 3, 10

67 Cf. Eph 4, 24

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AG = "Ad Gentes Divinitus", Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, 1965.
- CV = "Caritate in Veritatis", Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI on Integral Human Development in charity and truth (2009)
- EA = "Ecclesia in Asia", Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II on Jesus Christ the Saviour and his Mission of Love and Service in Asia (1999).
- EN = "Evangelii Nuntiandi", Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI on the Evangelization in the Modern World, 1975.
- FR = "Fides et ratio", Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II (1998) on Faith and Reason
- GS = "Gaudium et Spes", Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II (1965).
- LG = "Lumen Gentium", Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II (1965).
- NA = "Nostra Aetate", Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions, Vatican II (1965).
- RM = "Redemptoris Missio", Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate (1990).
- SS = "Spes et salvi", Encyclical Letter of Benedict XVI on Christian Hope (2007)
- TMA = "Tertio Millennio Adveniente", Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II on the preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000 (1994)
- VR = "Veritatis splendor" Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II (1993) on the Church's moral teaching

Implications of Karma and Rebirth for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue in India¹

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The current Indian theological scene is characterized by innovative efforts at finding its authenticity with respect to the radical Christian message and the Indian religio-cultural heritage. This requires a deep understanding of the relationship between religion and culture in the actual living situations of the people. Hence, this article examines the important Hindu religious notions of *karma* and rebirth in the lives of Indian people and points out the positive and negative implications for a renewed humanity all over the world.

Karma and Rebirth as Causal Factors in Ultimate Destinies of Life

The notion of transmigration and reincarnation is a pivotal aspect of the general socio-religious belief system in India. In the Hindu religious tradition, the concept of transmigration is a vital aspect of the cultural milieu and has played a dominant role in shaping the actions, ethics, and ideologies of the people. Thus, the Indian subcontinent and the culture influenced by it are dominated by the notion of *samsara*, "what turns around forever," the wheel of birth and death. In India rebirth is an accepted presupposition of life and it functions at various levels of understanding and interpretation both in ordinary life and in theory, in popular mythology as well as in philosophical thought.

In its various contexts and applications, the notion of karma has at least three basically different functions and dimensions: karma is (1) a principle of causal explanation (of factual occurrences); (2) a guideline of ethical orientations; (3) the counterpart and steppingstone of final liberation. These three functions are balanced, reconciled, and integrated in various manners; they do not form a simple and unquestioned unity (cf. O'Flaherty 1973; 1976; 1977; 1983).

Indian sages and mythographers recognize a number of different causal factors at work in arranging both immediate results and ultimate destinies of life. Among them the most important ones are *karma*, *kala*, and *vidhi*. All the above factors work under the direction of the Supreme Being – Brahma, the totality of reality.

Karma: The classical formulation of the principle of karma is expressed as follows: "Even as one acts, even as he behaves, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good, the doer of evil becomes evil ... whatever deed he performs, that he becomes (or attains)." In great many myths, legends, and didactic passages in the

Mahabharatha, the idea is profounded that a person reaps the results of his acts performed in previous lifetimes and comes to good – or ill-fortune as a result of his acts alone. According to one account provided by Vyasa himself: “The acts done in former births never abandon any creature ... (And) since man lives under the control of karma, he must always be alert to ways of maintaining his equilibrium and of avoiding evil consequences.”

Kala: Death has been decreed for all created beings. When their hour (*vidhi*) comes around, all beings are removed by law (*dharmena*). Time is inevitable. The fruits of karma, whether good or evil, are said to be nullified by the iron rule of time (*kala*).

Vidhi: Fate can be divine providence, human acts in past time, circumstantial conditions, time, and so forth. Whatever the specific meaning attributed to the idea in any given context, the term *vidhi* consistently indicates certain external forces over which the individual exercises no control, either in actualizing or deactualizing any particular state of affairs. Fate is irresistible.

Lila: God as the Arranger: It is god alone who establishes everything for the creatures, both happiness (*sukha*) and unhappiness (*dukha*), pleasure (*priya*) as well as pain (*apriya*). God's creation, destruction and causing of other events are his different pleasurable plays to which man has very little to say. (Compare *Bhagavad Gita* 2.18-61)

Most of the Hindus believe that karma is transferred from one life to the next. The sages asked Vyasa (the originator of *Mahabharatha*): “Who is the companion of a dying man, his father or mother or son or teacher, his crowd of friends and relations? When he leaves the body that has been his house as if it were a house of wood or mud, and goes into the world beyond, who follows him?” The sage Vyasa replied: “Alone he is born, and alone he dies; alone he crosses the dangerous thresholds, without the companionship of father, mother, brother, son or teacher, without his crowd of friends and relations. When he leaves the body, *dharma* alone follows him. The body is burnt by fire, but the karma he has done goes with him” (Garuda Purana, Uttara Khanda 2.22-25 as quoted by O’Flaherty 1983:16). Skin, bone, flesh, semen and blood leave the body when it is lifeless; but the *jiva* that has *dharma* prospers happily in this world and the world beyond (Brahma Purana 217.1-16 as quoted by O’Flaherty 1983:16). The *jiva* is the carrier of the karmic deposit.

The early thinkers and sages were preoccupied with the question: “Every dead person consumes both his good and bad deeds; then how do they bear fruit for him?” This is by being born. Hence birth is a reward or a punishment of one's own karma. Unless one is particularly talented yogi, he forgets his former lives. At birth the *jiva* is deluded by the force of *maya*.

Although the newborn child is thus unaware of his accumulated karma, it is there nevertheless, together with other predetermined factors: "A creature in the mortal world is born because of his own karmas; his life-span, karma, wealth, learning, and death are born with the embodied creature in the womb. Head down and feet up, the embryo gives forth a breath, and from the birth the illusion of Visnu deludes the creature" (Garuda Purana, Uttara Kanda 22.70-72). Another ancient text adds: "By his own karmas a creature becomes a god, man, animal, bird, or immovable thing" (Padma Purana 2.94.12.). The categories into which one can be born may be determined by a number of influences more complex than the mere preponderance of good or bad karma: "By good deeds one becomes a god; by bad deeds a creature is born among animals; and by mixed deeds, a mortal. The Veda (*śruti*) is the authority for the distinction between *dharma* and *adharma*" (Bhavisya Purana 4.4.6-8). Here the place of *kala* and *vidhi* and *lila* are also very important for the nature of one's birth.

Thus it is said: "By karma impelled by fate a creature is born in the body." Yet karma and fate are often said to work together, or even to be the same (Matsya Purana 3.31.1-2 as quoted by O'Flaherty 1983:23). Certain things are bound to happen because of one's *vidhi* fate; but the *vidhi* itself is influenced by one's own karma. Karma is the things that a man does; in contrast fate are the things that are done to him.

Prajapathi is the creator of happiness and sorrow for his creatures. All the same, since Prajapathi wishes for the welfare of his creatures, he could have burdened them with miseries as if he were a bad person. To this "time" *kala* is the solution. Time (*kala*) is the source of a person and of his diseases. Thus time combines with fate and karma. Thus fate *vidhi* and karma work together with the third factor, i.e. the power of time as the causalities of an individual's present position in life.

Karma and Rebirth in the Lives of the People

Karma is a key concept in ordering the events of life. Karma plays an important role in the numerous myths that form the heart of popular village Hinduism. These stories are reenacted in temple rituals, celebrated in village festivals, dramatized in street dramas, sung by bards in the street performances and by mothers to their children, and retold in the summer evenings. Here the meaning of karma is learned, not by philosophical discourse, but by illustration from the lives of gods and demons, saints and sinners. Karma is deeply rooted in the world-view of people.

Karma is also a common theme in the village myths that are the cosmic charter for popular Hinduism in the village. Here the central question is not how karma is accrued and transmitted, but how it works itself out in the lives of people. The answers are given in the form of stories drawn from Puranic sources and from local histories.

Villagers in Tamil Nadu believe that in the beginning Siva (*Katavul*) created the vast array of living beings out of his own bodily substance. He molded each creature and determined its nature, be it good or evil, strong or weak. He then wrote upon the forehead of each entity its “headwriting” (*talai euzthu- vidhî*), which was an exact and very detailed specification of every act it would perform, of all the thoughts it would have in its life, and of every event, good or bad, that would befall it. After creation the activities of the world began with each order of creation impelled to act in accordance with its own headwriting (*vidhî*) as specified by *Katavul* (Shiva). As each entity began to act it began to generate good and bad karma according to the nature of its actions (*karmans*). At the end of each entity's life, *Katavul* reviewed that entity's karma, and on this record, caused it to be reincarnated in a new form with a new headwriting (*vidhî*)². The entity then acted according to its new headwriting, generated more karma upon which its headwriting in the next birth was determined, and so on through the cycle of births and rebirths.³

While it is believed that the headwriting in all except the “first” Incarnation is based on a person's past deeds (*karma*), it is also believed that the headwriting is based as well on the past deeds of relatives or even chance acquaintances from whom the person acquired karmic substance. Almost any Tamil villager will tell you that karma is inevitably transmitted from one generation to the next in the blood (*rattam*). (for examples look Daniel 1983:27-62).

The individual does not have complete control over the karma that he accumulates and for which he must reap the benefits and punishments. Although it is believed that he has no voluntary control over his acts, a person will be punished and rewarded for the acts of his ancestors, living kinsmen, and chance acquaintances.

The headwriting functions to determine all the events, thoughts, desires, and actions of a person with a particular life-span. It does this by coordinating the life circumstances and events of a person with the desires and willed actions on his part that fulfill what is foreordained in the headwriting. To make a hypothetical example, if it is in Rangaswamy's headwriting that on such and such a day he is destined to murder his Kavunta (a goat-herding *jati*) neighbor, his headwriting will coordinate his inner nature (*kunams*, psycho-biological qualities) and the particular emotions and decisions of that day with the appropriate environmental setting which provokes and accommodates the act. Thus, Rangaswamy will be filled with a murderous rage that overrides his reason and results in his passionate decision to murder Kandan, the goat-herd, who on this occasion is caught in bed with Rangaswamy's wife. Kandan's headwriting in turn will orchestrate the events of his life and his inner nature and desires so that he commits adultery and is caught by Rangaswamy and killed.

The headwriting is said to determine when, where, and how a certain strand of karmic substance is activated. “As to how, when and where a certain *karman* will come to fruition is written in one's headwriting ... the peculiarities of the *kunams*

(human qualities), and the dependent whims of the *manam* (mind), the maladies of the brain, and all such things are none other than the products and results of this *karman*" (Daniel 1983:35). It is the karmic substance then, under the control of the headwriting, that determines the nature of a person's *kunams* (human qualities) and hence of the general functioning of the *manam* (mind) and *mulai* (brain). In addition, *karman* acts simultaneously both upon the external environment and upon the desires of the *manam* (mind) and the decisions of the *mulai* (*putti*) (brain) to coordinate a sequence of motivations and actions with the appropriate environmental setting.

An act (*karman*) performed under normal circumstances – that is, with purposive intent and passion – creates (*kr*) a karmic residue (*karmasaya*) either meritorious (*dharma*) or unmeritorious (*adharma*) depending on the quality of the act. This karmic residue has or is accompanied by dispositional tendencies (*samskara*) of more than one sort, including at least two kinds of traces (*vasana*), one kind which, if and when it is activated, produces a memory of the originating act, the other which, if and when it is activated, produces certain afflictions (*klesas*). These *klesas* are erroneous conceptions which characterize the thinking of those engaged in purposive activity, and it is they which are primarily responsible for the agent being in bondage, that is, continually creating karmic residues.

Unique Contribution to Human Civilization

Among the presuppositions of this doctrine is the notion that space and time are endless. The identity of the self depends on (moral) karmic determinants. Life is an unending, eternal, weary round of suffering, governed by an automatic causality of reward and punishment (*karman*) that takes the soul from one existence to another through all six spheres of being, from that of the gods to that of "hungry spirits" and demons.

In Hindu religious sensibility the emphasis is not on the duality "life and death" as on "birth and dying." The problem about rebirth is that of necessity, it also implies "re-dying," that is, death recurring *ad infinitum*, unless man succeeds in escaping from the vicious circle of *samsara* into ultimate liberation *moksha* or *nirvana*. It should be emphasized that the ultimate goal (*artha*) is release and escape; the heavens (*svarga*) are still part of the *samsaric* (rebirth) world. Doctrinal differences of opinion relate to the method of liberation as well as to the precise definition of the liberated state (cf. O'Flaherty 1983; Panikkar 1983:361-385).

Max Weber in his study *The Religion in India* says that "Hinduism is usually tolerant of doctrine (*matta*) while placing greatest emphasis on ritual duties (*dharma*). Nevertheless, Hinduism has certain dogmas ... if by dogma one means creedal truths whose denial is considered heretical and places the group if not the individual outside the Hindu community" (1958: 117-118). He then goes on to specify the dogmas of Hinduism: "the *samsara* belief in the transmigration of

souls and the related *karman* doctrine of compensation" (Weber 1958:118). Commenting on these principles Weber says: "*Karma* doctrine transformed the world into a strictly rational, ethically-determined cosmos; it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history" (1958:121).

The Conquest of Karma and Rebirth

Hinduism offers three ways (*margas*) by which an individual may be able to surpass the results of karma. They are *Jnana-marga*, *karma-marga*, and *Bhakti-marga*.

Yoga is one of the means by which an individual can attain deliverance from his karma. Practice of yoga releases people from karma (Markandeya Purana 1.86.15-21). Ignorance (*avidya*) is the root-cause of our karmic involvement. Hence *jnana* "knowledge" is a means by which an individual may be able to overcome the evils of karmic causalities. Hence, *Jnana-marga* is one of the valid ways for salvation.⁴

To be in the world, to accept its reality as well as one's own worldly reality, means to *act* in the world, to accept it as a network of causal relations, of desires and results, as a context of practical, pragmatic truth and confirmation. Causality is in its very essence karmic causality; it constitutes the "reality" of the world, a reality which can be defined only in terms of means and ends, of practical consequences, of "reward" and "punishment," and which becomes transparent as soon as the practical involvement in the network of means and ends is transmitted. Hence *Karma-marga* emphasizes the importance of "good action" (*dharmic-action*). It provides a person with the courage to make a firm and enduring commitment to a life of action (*karma-yoga*) and to behave in the manner commensurate with the injunctions of the sacred texts. By doing so, one may expect to have maximized his chance of coming to a good death and a good rebirth (or to a final suspension of rebirth). Meditation and renunciation are equally effective as karmic antidotes. Pilgrimage and bathing at the pilgrim centres guarantee to wipe out all one's past bad karma. Thus when Parvati asks Shiva how evil that has been accumulated in a thousand former births can be worn away, Shiva replies that this evil is worn away when one enters the avimukta shrine at Benares (Matsya Purana 181.10, -17-18 as quoted by O'Flaherty 1983:23).

Another way of overcoming the evil fruits of karma is by *bhakti*, i.e. devotion to the Lord. When *bhakti* is in full flower, devotion to the god is a safe-conduct through the ranks of the soldiers of Yama, the Lord of death. The Puranas abound in stories in which the rependent sinner, about to be dragged away by the minions of Yama, is saved at the last minute by the arrival of the chariot of the servants of the sectarian god, landing like the marines at the eleventh hour. By the worship of Vishnu, one can "dispense" with karma; karma is conquered by those whom Krishna loves (Devibhagavata Purana 9.29-30; Varaha Purana 5; Brahmavaivarta Purana 2.29-33; 4.74 as quoted by O'Flaherty 1983:24-25). Thus, rebirth or *samsara* is a limiting phenomenon in man. The ultimate goal of man is to attain *nirvana*.

Nirvana is a state of statelessness. It is an attainment of full realization of the totality of reality. This can be achieved either by *jnana* (True Knowledge) or *karma* (Good Actions) or *bhakti* (Devotion).

The Impact of Karma and Rebirth on Indian Culture

To a great extent, the concept of karma and rebirth breeds fatalistic tendencies among the Indian population.⁵ The present conditions of life have been accepted passively as the result of one's past (*karma*) actions. The caste system of inequality is justified by these principles of karma and rebirth. The Brahmins are said to be born as high caste because of their past karma (meritorious acts) and the Untouchables (Harijans/Dalits) are said to be born as low caste due to their past karma. To attain emancipation from this low status of life, the duty (*dharma*) of the low caste man is to accept his caste position without revolt and act according to the prescribed rules of the caste (*jati*). Then the low caste men may be born as a high caste or attain his liberation. Thus caste inequality is justified by the principles of *karma*, *dharma*, and *moksha*.

In this position poverty and richness of different *jatis* are accepted as natural, i.e. the *vaisya jati* (traders) are born to be rich and the Untouchable *jatis* are born to be poor. This is clearly seen in India. While the first five richest people in the world are from Hindu background and most of the wealth in India is in the hands of the Vaisyas, thousands and millions of people mainly from the lower and untouchable castes live in poverty. While people are generally kind and feel with one another (*karuna*), a disciplined way of life, apart from nepotistic motives, is very much lacking in the lives of the people. Caste degradation and injustice become part of the life-style of the people without much questioning. Thousands and millions of people in India do not have even the minimum resources for their survival. At the same time there are people who enjoy all the privileges and comforts of life.

According to Weber the world image and concept of salvation provided by a religious system has casual effect throughout history. The religious view of life and the resultant economic behavior in the West have been one of the causes in the economic, scientific development of the people. In contrast, Weber argues that the Hindu ethic reflected in such concepts as *karma*, *dharma*, *varna*, *ashrama* and *samsara* had become an obstacle to material development especially of the lower and *dalit* (untouchable) castes. For he found that the Hindu ethic adhered to the idea of an immutable world order consisting of eternal cycles of rebirths. Further as Hinduism considers the present world as transitory and illusory, Weber feels that it depreciated the mundane (Weber 1958).

As Weber examined in minute details the consequences of developments in the major religions of the world, he noted the importance of prophets in transforming society. He distinguishes between two types of prophets: the ethical and the

exemplary prophets. The ethical prophets feel themselves as the instrument of the transcendent God. It is in the nature of the ethical prophet, that the divine will for which he speaks is displeased with some aspects of the world, and wants to change the world through him. "A part of his mission is to give men ethical norms with which they are expected to conform. And by definition these norms are different from the existing traditional state of affairs" (Parsons 1937:568). The prophets of the Judeo-Christian tradition challenged the existing social order and worked for change. But the exemplary prophets of India persuaded the people to turn away from the mundane world rather than to change the given order determined by *dharma*.

The central governing ethical principle of Christianity is the belief that every human being is created in the "image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1:27; Luke 4:18-21; Mathew 25: 32-46). All social teachings of the Church springs from this doctrine that since human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, no one on earth can take away this God given dignity. It is the moral duty of every human being to live and give this dignity in love. In Hinduism, on the other hand, preservation of "*Dharma*" is the central concern. Hence, the worldview of Hinduism (at least the Advaitic) and the world view of Christianity are very different leading to two different ways of understanding the world, man and the Supreme Reality leading to two different civilizations.

There had been various attempts to reexamine Weberian conclusions about Hinduism and economic development. An Indian economist, Vikas Mishra, supports the Weberian approach with the following comment: "Hinduism influences economic growth (1) in its attitudinal aspect mainly through the interrelated beliefs in the doctrine of transmigration, the law of *karma*, and the objective of release from rebirth, the stress on other-worldliness and mysticism and certain religious prejudices such as the attitudes towards the cow and inhibitions regarding certain items of diet; and (2) in its institutional aspect, mainly through caste system and joint family ... The institutional aspect is partly related to the attitudinal aspect" (1962:201). Similarly, Kapp also agreeing with Weber argued that "...non-secular and pre-technological institutions and values of (Hinduism) ... act as brakes on economic growth" (1963:64). Gunnar Myrdal's (1986) ideas about Asian cultures too seem to support those of Weber.

Weber's thesis is not without drawbacks or severe critics (cf. Green 1973). Timberg's analysis of the Marwaris of North India (1978), and Narayanaswami's study of the Nattukottai Chettiars of South India (1981), however, remain a standing challenge to the Weberian theory of Hindu unsuitability of entrepreneurship. For as Narayanaswamy observes: "The supposed 'other-worldliness' of the Hindus has not stood in the way of these communities (i.e., the Marwaris and the Nattukottai Chettiars), who are deeply religious, and who

all pursue wealth vigorously" (1981:2). Studies of Loomis and Loomis (1964), Balwant Nevaskar (1971), Bipan Chandra (1968) and others too run counter to the Weberian observation that the cultural values reflected in Indian religions are barriers to economic development in India (cf. Rao 1969).

In my studies about the Tamil and Kerala cultures I find that even though there are variations in the economic achievement of different caste groups in India the general cultural norms enshrined in the Indian way of life curtails individualism, rationality and social mobility. This tendency is particularly strong among the villagers who heavily depend on rain for all social and economic activities. In many parts of India people depend on the monsoon rain even for their domestic needs. Very often the drought is so severe that even water for drinking is scarce in towns and villages. From time immemorial the farmers have to live with the vagaries of the monsoons, which fail at times, causing drought and other times are so heavy as to cause ravaging floods. In both instances the net result is famine and death. Such helpless dependence upon nature for generations has deepened and reinforced their belief in fatalistic attitudes of *karma* and these have been reinforced in religion and values (Michael 1989).

Today, however, Hinduism has been very much pressurized by the new stirring of revolutionary humanism. Political movements and religious reform organizations give a new interpretation to the traditional understanding of *karma* and rebirth (cf. Smith 1966; Naicker 1959). Much of the neo-Hindu renaissance has occupied itself with attempts at assimilating humanistic values and finding in traditional Hinduism a religious basis for social change (Thomas 1975: 63-80). In this it has not proved altogether unsuccessful. Hinduism as other-worldly makes little sense today. The reflection of Radhakrishnan on the significance of the 'goals' of Hindu life (*artha, kama, moksha, dharma*), the reading of the Bhagavad Gita as a call to disinterested action (*niskama karma*) in this world by Vivekananda and Tilak, and the enormous political momentum generated by a movement like Gandhi's *satyagraha*, show that Hinduism is adapting itself to the changing situations in India.

All the same, poverty is a reality in India most specially among the lower and untouchable castes. The philosophical ideas of karma and rebirth are still very strong. Poverty and inequality enshrined in religion and values continue to strengthen the attitude of resignation to fate.

Dialogue between Christian and Hindu Traditions

Christian tradition makes man the supreme of God's creation. Man is the master and steward of the universe. He gives names to things and bring order and understanding of the universe through science and technology. He controls to profit from it and to subdue it. History is considered linear – there is a beginning and an end to the world. There is definite destiny for man. All men and women are children of God. Hence equality of persons is an important Christian value.

All the same, the Western tradition which is very much influenced by Christianity today turned man into God. Human beings think that they can control and exploit nature according to their whims and fancies. Rationality is considered important in comparison to feelings, emotions and sentiments. Western cultural assumptions, especially the Protestant ethic enshrined in the capitalistic system tend to view emotions as immature, primitive, or even pathological. The role of culture in the experience of emotion is seen as secondary, even minimal (cf. Lutz 1988:4). The Darwinian proposition of Natural Selection and Survival of the Fittest has given rise to materialistic interpretation of the universe by some scientists. Influenced by this thought the Western experiments with life and nature and the social Darwinism towards superman by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud and others undermines the dignity of human person. As a consequence, man becomes an impostor and a machine. A number of observers (e.g., Heller 1979; Ollman 1976) have linked the alienation of people from the products of their labor under modern industrial capitalism to the separation of the person into a public, rational, market self and a private, expressive, intimate self. Thus, while the Western tradition "thinks", the Indian tradition "feels". It is so obvious that there is no need of elaborating the evils of materialistic understanding of the universe on the breakdown of families, communities and social relationships.

For the Hindus in India, West implies Christian. Thus, all the evils in the West is attributed to Christianity. The credibility of Christianity as developed by the West is under suspicion by Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists and others (e.g., Radhakrishnan 1939; 1933; Gandhi 1941; 1964). The West has lost the sense of mystery in its preoccupation with science.

Hinduism and its related religions, in their quest to understand the mystery of man, have developed various techniques of understanding the mind. The East, in Jung's estimation, had long been aware of the reality of the unconscious and the necessity of penetrating its depths (1933). On the other hand, this interiority of the East seems to be the important factor for its poverty and its underdevelopment of certain sections of people. The West with its preoccupation with science has developed wonderful ways to control nature and make use of this knowledge for the good of man. All the same, today there is more and more awareness that the very systems and strategies that have created vast technological power, have set off a spiral they cannot control. Throughout the world, peoples emerging from tribalism to development are seeking and demanding the material fruits of Western technology. Is it possible for our global system to provide all these demands? In this context, both the West and the East must rediscover their true religious meaning in their lives. The values of renunciation and self-responsibility embodied in religions can be the common ground for the future of man. Here, both Hinduism and Christianity could play a major role in the betterment of man. In this process

we may understand the uniqueness of Christ as well the real contribution of Hinduism to mankind.

In this context the Encyclical Letter ***Caritas in Veritate*** by Pope Benedict XVI's invitation for a dialogue between Faith and Reason is very relevant (Pope Benedict, 2009). Today's development in science and technology especially bio-technology is taking the world towards one direction. True development is an integral development. This requires both Faith and Reason. The Pope points out that the mysteries of human life unfold through reason. All the same, the mystery is so deep that reason alone will not be able to give a direction to human life. We also require Faith. Both Faith and Reason are required to seek the Truth. One without the other will lead to partial development. The Pope insists that for an Integral Human Development we require both Faith and Reason. In the words of the Pope "It is no coincidence that closing the door to transcendence brings one up short against a difficulty: how could being emerge from nothing, how could intelligence be born from chance? Faced with these dramatic questions, reason and faith can come to each other's assistance. Only together will they save man. ... reason without faith is doomed to flounder in an illusion of its own omnipotence. Faith without reason risks being cut off from everyday life" (Caritas in Veritate, 2009: No.74).

Hence both Indian and Western traditions need to understand the Truth both with faith and reason. Then, there is a possibility of mutual search towards the Divine.

Conclusion

The cultural tradition of India goes back over four thousand years. It is true that the impact of Western civilization has in the last few decades almost shattered this culture, yet its roots remain and in India there has been a conscious revival of the ancient tradition. Modern Hinduism is conscious of being the inheritor of one of the great spiritual traditions of mankind and even as having a mission to spread its teaching in the West. In this context, an understanding of both these religious traditions is very important.

Both Hinduism and Christianity state that man is endowed with a craving – literally a thirst – to understand the causes of his unhappiness (*dukha*). The two religions will elaborate this as an ignorance or a fall, so that enlightenment or redemption is required to overcome the human predicament (Panikkar 1978). The Hindu sages say that to transcend his present condition, i.e. disentangled from the wheel of *samsara* – rebirth one must perform responsible actions – *karma* directed by *dharma*. Christ also stresses the importance of love in action for the redemption of man. Thus both Hinduism and Christianity stand for human liberation. Both are convinced that man is a being not yet finished, a reality unachieved, growing, becoming, on the way, a pilgrim. In this dehumanizing technocratic world it is important for people to understand the deeper dimensions of both Christian principles of creation and human destiny; and the Hindu view

of eternity and man's responsibility towards his karma and rebirth. The aspect of *nirvana*, a state beyond rebirth, and the Christian aspect of salvation as the destiny of man still have to be explored for the better understanding of both Christianity and Hinduism. The religious traditions of Hinduism on the mystery of God's presence in the world and the Christian emphasis on the personal aspect of God in Jesus Christ could help the present materialistic world to rediscover the religious roots of mankind.

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Radhakris

(Endnotes)

- 1 This is a modified and updated version of my previous article published in Verbum SVD, No.1, Vol.31, 1990, pp.27-42.
- 2 The term samsara is derived from the Sanskrit root meaning "to flow together," "wander about," or "pass through."
- 3 This way of thinking originates from the fact that an individual, in spite of all his efforts, is not able to control his destiny. From the impossibility of choosing or directing his own life, people begin to get the notion that there is something beyond his present life's control. That means, he must have done something wrong in his past life – karma and rebirth. In Christianity, the feeling of helplessness is explained in terms of original sin. In believing in the Paschal mystery of Christ and repenting for his wrong doings, an individual attains salvation. If he does not repent and believe in God's mercy he is damned to hell. Hence, in Christianity fatalism is overcome by God's mercy and love. But in Hinduism, an individual has to repay his deed by another birth till the full compensation to his acts are met.
- 4 In this kind of concept, the salvation consists in coming to awareness that my salvation is by performing my dharma or duty. Knowledge is very important for salvation – *Jnana Jnana* is the realization of the truth that you are part of God.
- 5 This statement is truer in the past when the Hindu culture was in isolation from other differing cultures and religions. Today, due to various influences, people are becoming aware of other religious ideas and they redefine and modify the concept to suite the new situation of cultural and religious influences from non Indic sources.

Is There a Specifically Christian Morality?*

Dr. Soosai Arokiasamy S.J.

The title of the paper as a query raises a number of related questions:

Is religion necessary for being moral? Can there be religion without morality? Can morality be totally independent of religion? Is religion a matter of morality? Do Christians accept morality as revealed? If religion and morality are related, what is the contribution of religion to morality, at what level and in what sense the contribution of religion to morality and in what sense not? This latter question can be differently stated: If religion is related to morality and if it makes contribution to morality and moral living, how does one describe the specificity of this contribution? In this essay, we focus mainly on this question.

To answer the question: Is there is a specifically Christian morality, I first follow the argument and reasoning of Joseph Fuchs. 1

Following Fuchs, one could make a distinction between morality at the level of particular categorical imperatives based on right reason (*recta ratio*) and the nature of human person and morality at the transcendental level of fundamental motivations, intentionality which could include basic attitudes, dispositions, relationships, virtues and principles that inform and shape human life as a whole. One can see here the influence of transcendental anthropology of Karl Rahner. Fuchs maintains and most moral theologians hold that morality at the first level is human, not specifically Christian but basically human. At this level one cannot strictly speak of Christian morality, and for that matter Hindu morality or Buddhist morality, etc. This would mean that morality at the first level is neither specifically Christian, nor specifically Buddhist, Hindu nor Sikh nor Islamic but human. Hence distinctiveness of Christian ethics cannot be situated here. Though the distinction of morality between categorical and transcendental harks back to Emmanuel Kant, in our reflection, we go by the ethically intelligibility of these two terms for our discussion.

The specifically Christian morality can be understood at the second level of transcendental principles, virtues and intentionality 2 The Christian specificity or distinctiveness of Christian morality admitted in a particular sense means also that others can have a distinctive or specific morality from their own traditions. We understand the specificity or distinctiveness of Christian morality as open to and grounded in the universal character of morality based on the nature of human person and our shared common and relational humanity lest it becomes sectarian.

Morality at the first level of particular categorical imperatives springs from nature of human person, *recta ratio* (right reason) and hence from natural moral law.

This is what we find in the so-called second tablet of the Decalogue that deals with interhuman obligations. This is linked to the fundamental moral law summed up as the ethical obligations: "One ought to avoid evil and ought to do good" or evil ought to be avoided and good ought to be done (*malum vitandum et bonum faciendum*). Some examples of particular categorical imperatives are: Be chaste, be truthful in speech, be just in your dealings your neighbour e.g. in the area of wages, contracts and agreements, do not utter lie, do not steal, etc.

According to Joseph Fuchs, we locate the specifically Christian morality or the distinctiveness of Christian ethics at the transcendental level. Morality at the transcendental level in the sense of fundamental motivations and intentionality, basic attitudes, dispositions, virtues and principles going beyond particular categorical imperatives embraces the whole human person and touches all areas of human life in the manner of integration, that is, it informs and shapes the whole human person, the totality of human behaviour and brings wholeness to one's lifestyle. For examples, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity enter all aspects of the life of a believer and are not confined to particular areas or aspects one's life and brings an intentionality to the whole life. We situate the specific contribution of faith at this level. In this connection we can say that religion for that matter any religion can make a specific contribution to morality at this level.

We can now draw some of the important inferences and implications of this approach. First, there is recognition of a relative autonomy of morality at the level of particular categorical imperatives as basically human based on right reason and the nature of human person. At the same time, the deepest foundations and inspirations for the first level lie in morality at the transcendental level. Hence autonomy of morality that is human is also relative.

The transcendental vision of faith impacts on morality at the first level. We get the enlightening knowledge from faith as to who human persons are, that is, the nature of human person. Faith provides knowledge of humanity's destiny. The essential constituents of the nature of human person, namely rational, embodied and relational with call to responsibility are deeply and positively affirmed by Christian revelation without which one cannot understand and speak of the distinctive intentionality of morality that faith provides. We can say revelation or the Word of God provides an anthropology that illumines moral imperatives based on right reason and the nature of human person at the first level. We have a saying about this relationship between the two levels morality with recognition of relative autonomy of the first level: reason informed by faith.

Without this foundation, morality at the first level is disconnected and hangs in the air. This means that there is a close relationship between the two levels of morality. One cannot exist without the other. There is a dialectical relationship between these two levels of morality. The distinction between two levels of morality

is not separation. Moreover, morality that is basically human contains within itself the foundation and vision of who human beings are and what their destiny is. Integration of both the levels of morality constitutes its wholeness.

What we have said so far explains the contribution of Christian faith to morality that is basically human. Morality at the transcendental level that embodies transcendental vision of faith needs concrete historical expression without which it will remain abstract and utopian. The concretization of morality at the transcendental level embodying Christian vision of things becomes a reality in the concrete historical moral imperatives and gives the latter its foundation and dynamism through specific Christian intentionality and style of life. It nourishes sustainability of morality and makes it worthy of the human beings and their vocation. Both the levels of morality need and complement each other. Some indicate the contribution of faith and therefore of religion in the following way; faith and religion in relation to morality are much more a value raiser than an answer-giver. Another way of describing the contribution of Christian faith (and for that matter religion) with its transcendental vision and liberative message to morality is that faith becomes an enlightener and enabler for transformed life rather than a prescriber of precepts and duties though this task of religion and for us the Church through its Magisterium is not excluded provided it is understood at a secondary level but the latter in the church is exercised in an evangelical, pastoral and prophetic sense.

Speaking of concretization of morality at the transcendental level in history in terms of basic morality that is human, we can say that for Christians, its paradigmatic realisation is embodied in the Word made flesh, that is, in the mystery of Jesus Christ the new Adam who is the sacrament of God and new humanity. This perspective is powerfully expressed in *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II. ³ It is through Christ, His Gospel and the Reign of God he proclaimed, the enrichment of morality becomes possible.

As we examine further the relationship between the two levels of morality in the light of Christian faith, especially in relation to the mystery of Christ, we need to make some important preliminary observations.

The first observation concerns the question widely debated, especially in a secular context: the relation between morality and religion. Could there be religion without morality? Can you reduce religion to morality? Is morality religion? Can there be morality without religion? This has been partly covered in the above discussion on the relation between the two levels of morality. As far as our knowledge goes, there seems to be no religion without reference to dimension of morality, be it Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism or Islam apart from Judaism and Christianity. In this connection, we refer to the book of Rudolf Otto: *Idea of the Holy*. ⁴ He describes the divine noumenon or *numinosum* characterised by three

traits: *tremendum, mysteriosum et fascinans*. There is one trait missing in Otto's account of the divine or the holy. In Judaeo-Christian tradition, the holy mystery of the divine includes also the trait of righteousness. Von Rad the great scripture scholar of the Old Testament says that the one trait that eminently characterises the divine in the revelation of the Old Testament is righteousness.⁵ H.H Schrey, in a study prepared for the World Council of Churches states: "It can be said without exaggeration that the Bible, taken as a whole, has one theme: The history of the revelation of God's righteousness."⁶ All this means that moral dimension of religion cannot be ignored.

The second observation concerns the position of some protestant theologians including Karl Barth at least in his early career: Theologians of this position distrust human morality based on right reason and the nature of human person because of the totally corrupt nature of human beings after the fall. Hence they affirm the need for "revealed morality" via biblical revelation.⁷ Catholic moral tradition does not accept this position. Though human nature is wounded or weakened by sin is not totally corrupt. Through reason (*recta ratio*) moral law and its precepts can be known by humans.

Here I would like to explain the specific contribution of Christian faith to moral life in the following way: First and foremost Christian faith liberatively affirms the truth and wholeness of the human and of our humanity because God in Christ is the creator and redeemer of humankind. Here we can refer to the theology of creation in the first three chapters of Genesis.

Second, the Word of God, the Gospel and the Spirit that the believers receive and experience purify the human from all(sinful) alienations and liberate it from all sinful structures, that is, from the world in the Johanne sense as the realm and sphere of hostility and opposition to God and therefore to our humanity, its dignity and vocation.

Third Christian faith in and through the central mystery of the Triune God and the mystery of Christ as given to us the whole biblical story of faith reveals the primordial dignity of the human and the pristine greatness of its vocation(the radical identity of the human) and thus deepens and enriches the human. It also protects the human as willed by the Creator. The latter is expressed in the recognition of the relative autonomy of morality as basically human by the Catholic moral tradition and affirmed by its natural law tradition with its theological underpinnings. Moreover, Catholic moral tradition does not follow the approach of some of the Protestants opting only for the "revealed morality."⁸ Lucien Richard sums up the position of Barth in the following way: "To gain insight into what God's will is, and therefore what is morally right and good, one needs to turn to Scripture. Ethics grounds itself in God's word; it does not need grounding from us"⁹

Fourth Christian tradition in its hope-filled eschatological tradition characterised by “the already” and “not yet” dynamism calls us in our moral commitment towards greater integration and wholeness and fuller humanity until the eschaton and future of God for humankind. All moral striving would reflect this dynamism of growth and fulfilment.

I would like offer in a summary way some more explanations and illustrations of the concretization of the transcendental vision of Christian faith, above all the mystery of Christ and the sacramental and ecclesial embodiment of the same in relation to moral life.

Before we deal with this question according the paradigm of Christ, we have to mention this kind of integration of the two levels of morality already in the First Testament, namely the covenant morality of Decalogue with its two versions in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21. Behind the Ten Commandments , stands the experience of liberation of Israel by Yahweh from Egypt the house of slavery and the covenant Yahweh makes with Israel to reveal to them that He is their God and that they are His people(cf Exodus 19: 3b-6). It is this liberational and relational event that brings about the new reality of covenantal people and covenantal fellowship or family. It generates an intentionality specific and proper to the living of the commandments and brings a new quality and depth to the way Israel live the precepts of the Decalogue of which the second tablet of interhuman obligations in their material content are expressions of morality that is human (natural moral law). The covenantal relationship does not destroy the basic human morality of the second tablet. It does not replace it with a “revealed morality”. Instead it affirms and protects it. If it were to replace it, it would amount to emptying humanity of its precious moral dimension, a gift of God to humanity He created in His image and likeness.

In the Second Testament, first and foremost the basic paradigm of new humanity is Jesus Christ for the Christian believers. It is the incarnate mystery of Christ brings an intentionality to morality lived by Christians. In Jesu Christ we see the finest exemplar of authentic humanity, its greatness and vocation. In him and from him we learn a humanism which we could call as Christian humanism that is challenging and inviting for Christians but also for others. The finest humanity embodied in Jesu s Christ is also universalisable with openness to insights and enrichment coming from other religious traditions. As concrete historical person Jesus is the embodied model and norm for transformed moral life.

We shall point out and delineate the specifically unique features of Jesus as the incarnate or historically concretised and embodied paradigm and exemplar of humanity as accessible to all and thus embodied model and norm for moral life. Here I follow the Hans Kueng 10 As concrete, historical person Jesus possesses the following features, namely impressiveness, audibility and realizability. Jesus

as concrete person and model is not an abstract principle. People in his ministry encountered him, were impressed by his person and authority. In his healing, in his relation to people and his table-fellowship with outcasts and sinners, he recognised the faith of the people and restored their dignity and worth in the very act of healing or forgiving by saying your faith has saved you (Lk 7:50). We see the impressibility of the concrete person that Jesus is and that Jesus was for his contemporaries. As Kueng says: "Only a living figure and not a principle draw people, can be "attractive" in the most profound and comprehensive sense of the term: *verba docent, exempla trahunt*, words teach, examples carry us with them" 11 The next feature of Jesus, the concrete paradigm and norm is he "possesses audibility" 12 His words are the Gospel and word of life. People listen to the powerful words in their encounter and touch with the person of Jesus, words that embody the authority of the person. These embodied words are a call, an invitation, a challenge and a proclamation of the Gospel of the Reign of God for all people. Audibility of words as accessible to all is an inseparable feature of the concrete model and norm that Jesus is.

Only a concrete historical person has a name and a face. The very name of Jesus stands not only for his being our redeemer and redeemer of humankind, but also stands for grace, peace, compassion, healing power, offer of forgiving love of God, for life. By this name know as Kueng says that Jesus "is opposed to inhumanity, oppression, untruthfulness and injustice, and stands for humanity, freedom justice, truth and love" 13. A concrete person who has words and a voice can call and make appeal. "Only a living figure and not a principle can make sweeping demands". 14 Jesus is the Word of God that pitched his tent among us.

Realizability of the Paradigm of Christ as the Model and Norm of Moral Life.

In Jesus again as a historical person we encounter the model and norm that is realizable. Jesus by all that he was, did, spoke with call and appeal to his followers and to us today in the Church displays a grace-enabling realizability of the model that he is for renewed and fuller humanity which God wills. His life is the indicative for the imperative for transformed humanity now and is always the Word, the Son and the light and life for all. As historical person and as the Word made flesh is ever encouraging, enabling and engendering new life and renewed and transformed humanity in the Spirit and in the Church. In the Spirit this model and norm is accessible to all. The incarnate paradigm of Jesus in its impressiveness, audibility and realizability for moral life challenges and invites in a normative way to the goal of what sort of persons Christians become. It provides a vision or viewpoint and standpoint to look at whole of life for formation and transformation of persons and community for mission of service and witness.

I would add here in a summary way the argument and explanation of the specific contribution of faith to moral life according to Richard A. McCormick 15

McCormick states that there is only one destiny possible to humankind, and therefore stipulates that "there is existentially one morality common to all people regardless of their being Christian or non-Christian." According to him, that which is distinctive about Christian ethic "is found essentially in the style of life, the manner of accomplishing the moral tasks common to all persons, not in the tasks themselves." 16 Thus for him Christian morality in its historical concreteness and materiality is human morality. It is the humanum and morality that is basically human are "illuminated by the person, teaching and achievement of Jesus Christ." Christian tradition believes that Jesus embodied authentic humanity in the deepest and the fullest sense. Hence Jesus becomes the normative paradigm for the authentic humanum and morality. This explanation shows that the distinctive contribution of the Christian faith to morality does not replace the human morality but affirms it, liberates and redeems it, enriches and deepens it and integrates it with a call to greater and fuller humanity towards the eschaton and the future of God as we have explained above. What the Second Vatican Council says will confirm this understanding when it asserts that "faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human." 17 The same document says further: "But only God, who created man to His own image and ransomed him from sin, provides a fully adequate answer to these questions. This he does through what he has revealed in Christ, His Son, who became man. Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, *becomes himself more of a man.*" 18 By way of application of the faith perspectives to the human and morality, one could illustrate as McCormick does with regard to old people. In a technologically advanced society one tends or is tempted to view the humanity of old people or senior citizens in a functional way and thus devalue their intrinsic dignity and their humanity. Technological mindset can take over our way of viewing human persons in this way. But our love and faithfulness to Jesus Christ, the perfect man has by incarnation revealed and guaranteed the divine affirmation of the meaning and dignity of human persons in all stages of life. Faith anchored in the decisive meaning of the saving deeds and events of Jesus provides a decisive way of viewing and understanding humanity and the world and a new way of interpreting them in the light of the saving incarnation and eschatological reign of God Jesus proclaimed. The whole Christian story with its affectively charged symbols nourish this way of living life and viewing the world redeemed by Christ. In this light we hierarchise values, discern moral priorities and give a quality focus and orientation to moral life and commitment.

Gospel and Morality of Power.

One more illustration to show the contribution of faith morality in the N.T, especially the Gospel in relation to power and its morality. We distinguish power in two senses: Power of dominance and power of service. Power in the first sense named as power of dominance shows itself in the use of power to dominate others,

exercise control over others, to exploit, to oppress and thus it becomes power of vested interests, privilege and prestige all of which will go with exclusion of the powerless poor and promote elitism. In the political realm, it can degenerate into tyranny and dictatorship. It becomes power politics with its imperiously selfish use of naked power reducing people to its slaves and its victims in contrast to politics of power for freedom, liberation, and empowerment of the powerless and service of the wellbeing of all people. The whole mystery of Christ's servanthood is a rejection of and protest against the power of dominance described above. The historical paradigm and norm of Jesus for the power for freedom, and for the service of the wellbeing of people is embodied and unambiguously attested in Jesus' act of washing of the feet of his disciples (John 13:3-16). This deed of Christ becomes the sacrament of humble loving service, the purpose of all authority. He eternally changes the meaning of authority as we read in Mark 10: 35-45, especially 41-45): " So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them , and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." According the normative paradigm of Christ, the ultimate and the only valid meaning of authority is service. Ethics of authority is deepened, enriched and transformed by the model of Jesus Christ, the Servant. Christ's kenosis is a basic expression of the way of salvation (see Philippians 2:6-11).

Ecclesiological Specificity of Christian Faith and its Specific Contribution to Morality.

For Catholic Christians, the contribution of faith to morality includes the sacramental reality of the Church that continues the mission of Christ. Being Church and being in the church belongs to specificity of Christian faith and its lifestyle, and hence the way and the quality of moral life and commitment common to all humankind. The community of the church is a fellowship of the people of God and a communion of the disciples of Jesus. The Church is the sacrament of Christ just as Christ is the sacrament of God and continues the mission of Christ in a visibly sacramental way. Hierarchy and magisterium as service leadership and charism of the Church given by Christ authoritatively clarify, enlighten and teach the soundness of moral positions compatible with the Gospel of Christ.

The Church as the Bearer of the Memory of the Mystery of Christ.

One of the most significant dimensions of being Church is that it is the bearer of the memory of the total mystery of Christ. It is a sacramental bearer of the memory of Christ in all that the Church is, all that church does and speaks. " Do this in memory of me" at the Last Supper has made the whole being of the Church and its ecclesialness to be an anamnesis of Christ. The Church in all its being is eminently living anamnesis of the whole life and mission of Christ and of the Gospel Jesus proclaimed. The Church being eminently the bearer of the memory of Christ is the

sacrament of salvation “at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God’s love for men”¹⁹ It is this living *anamnesis* of the mystery of Christ, crucified and risen by the Church that informs and influences in a uniquely specific way the lifestyle of Christians and the moral life and commitments they have to live and thus bear witness to the Gospel. The being of the Church as the bearer of the memory of Jesus Christ brings a distinctiveness to the morality that Christians live by way of a specific intentionality and lifestyle. This “distinctiveness of Christian ethics can only be the consequence of an ongoing incarnation.”²⁰ Moreover the specificity that marks the Christian ethic is open-ended. In this sense it can enter into dialogue with specificities that other religions can bring to the task of living morality common to all humankind without in any way diluting and compromising its own unique Christian specificity of which it is the faithful bearer.

Dialogue with Specificity of Ethic in Other Religions.

In this paper we have examined and reflected on the specific contribution of Christian faith to moral life common to all humans. As Christians living in a religiously plural world, especially in India and Asia, we have to briefly reflect on what we have seen about Christian faith in relation to other religions. The project of interreligious dialogue launched by the Church must embrace the realm of morality in which right answer to many contemporary ethical issues urgent and crucial to the future of humankind is integral to the mission of the Church.

First such a dialogue calls Christians and the Church to recognise that other religions can also through their specifically positive religious traditions make contribution to morality. Morality considered at the transcendental level of basic vision and goal of life derived from their own religious texts and traditions can impact on morality common to all in a positive and liberative way. Through dialogical experience we recognise that different religions can and do offer from their own religious resources an intentionality that can add a qualitative depth to moral living and light on moral issues and thus enrich and enhance moral living of believers. Second because of this followers of different religions can come together and cooperate on common moral issues that afflict society and humankind. This will also promote interreligious harmony and peace between religious communities and the same in the larger society. This means that all peoples can come together to build a civilisation of love and promote a culture of peace and life. Before concluding this essay, I would like to point out two areas regarding which for example Indic religions can come together in dialogue with Christianity because we believe that these religious traditions can make a valuable contribution through their worldviews and transcendental vision and goal of life to our world in crisis for moral renewal.

First I would mention the dharma of ahimsa-non-violence which stands out as supreme dharma in Indic religions. This value is of tremendous importance for interreligious cooperation. Christianity with its Gospel of non-violence and peace-making can come together with all religions with their own commitment to non-

violence can work for peace and reconciliation. Second the value for which Indic religions can contribute is respect for life, especially human life. These two values are quite important in the contemporary situation of a global moral crisis for which engagement in interreligious dialogue can be fruitful. In this way, we can engage in interreligious dialogue in many other issues of morality in relation to our life in common.

End Notes:

* The topic has of late been studied by a number of authors from various angles. Most of the significant articles in this area have been collected together under the title: "Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics" in *Readings in Moral Theology*, vol. 2 edited by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, New York, Paulist Press, 1980. Cf also Lucien Richard: *Is There A Christian Ethics?* New York, Paulist Press, 1988.

1. Cf "Is There a Specifically Christian Morality?" in *The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick. N.Y, Paulist Press, 1980, pp.3- 19).
2. Fuchs, *ibid.* p.6.
3. Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, 32, 41 and 45.
4. Rudolf Otto: *The Idea of the Holy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1959.
5. John R. Donahue: "Biblical Perspectives on Justice" in *The Faith that Does Justice*, ed. John C. Haughey, S.J., New York, Paulist Press, p. 68.
6. Quoted by Donahue, *ibid.* p. 68.
7. Cf Lucien Richard: *Is There A Christian Ethics?* New York, Paulist Press, 1988 pp. 35-35.
8. Cf on Karl Barth's position on Christian ethics, Lucien Richard, pp. 30-35).
9. *Ibid.* p.30.
10. Hans Kueng: "The Criterion for Deciding What is Christian" in *Introduction to Christian Ethics* ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes,, New York, Paulist Press, 1989, pp. 120-132, esp. 125-127.
11. Kueng, p. 125.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* p.126.
14. *Ibid.*
15. cf Richard A. McCormick: "Does Religious Faith Add to Ethical Perception?" in ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes,, New York, Paulist Press, pp.140-150.
16. McCormick, p.143.
17. The Documents of Vatican II, New York, America Press, 1966, p.209.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Gaudium et Spes*, 45.
20. Lucien Richard, p.122.

The Focolare Movement experience of Interreligious Dialogue in Asia

Roberto Catalano

1. Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is one of the most debated subjects in the Christian world today, especially in the Catholic Church. Christianity is called to meet the challenge represented by a general situation, where the world has shrunk into a *global village* and migratory fluxes have redesigned the socio-geographical image of the planet. Once again, the great challenge today is the '*other*', the '*different*', a chapter, which, less than a century ago, as many times in the past, was considered to be closed.¹

Nevertheless it is a challenge that had been lingering for so long over the Asian² continent where Christianity had remained, as it appears today, almost as an unwanted guest. *Ecclesia in Asia* clearly affirms it: "*it is truly a mystery why the Saviour of the world, born in Asia, has, so far, remained largely unknown to the peoples of Asia.*" (EA 2) In this present context '*dialogue*' has become a key-word, at times controversial, but it cannot be disregarded.

2. Dialogue in the Church: Magisterium, theological reflection and charisms

The Church grasped the happenings of the last half century ahead of time, before the landslide of events which led to the present situation. The Second Vatican Council played a prophetic role in opening wide the Catholic world towards other cultures and religions. *Nostra Aetate* is a clear evidence of this prophecy, but all other leading documents³ confirmed the same line. Subsequent encyclicals or exhortation letters by the Popes⁴ have further developed the idea of dialogue, trying to find the right balance between dialogue and evangelising mission. The subject provoked much discussion and complex discernment processes and it is far from being over.

What is striking is the fact that the Church's position, as far as *dialogue* goes, has matured along with two dimensions which cannot be downplayed: a theological reflection and a charismatic experience.⁵

It is well known that the first one started before the Council with theologians like De Lubac and Rahner, whose perspectives on ecclesiology and Christology led to a different approach to people of other faiths. It continued after the Council, creating a wide-spread and, at times, controversial debate. This called for necessary clarifications, but in the end it contributed to start a process of opening the horizons towards a more inclusive approach. The stressing is no longer on the impossibility of finding salvation outside the Church, but rather in proposing

with a '*respectful announcement*', as Paul VI and John Paul II often reminded, the way God announced in and through Christ to men of all races, cultures and religions.

Magisterium and theology have been progressively enriched and enhanced by what we can call the *charismatic dimension* of the Church⁶. In fact, several new charisms born in the last half a century, carry a strong capacity for an interreligious approach.⁷ This study deals with the approach and the experience of dialogue the Focolare had in Asia in the last thirty years.

2.1 The Focolare Movement and dialogue with other religions

When the Focolare was born, Chiara Lubich, its foundress, little knew that she would be called one day to meet faithful of other religions. She had only one great desire, which was twofold: to love God and to have Him loved by as many people as possible. In a nutshell, this simple dream encapsulated a different perspective of humanity, which she expressed effectively way back in the late '40's.

"We must always fix our gaze on the one Father of many children. Then look at all persons as children of our one Father. With our thoughts and the affections of our heart we must always go beyond every limit imposed by a merely human life and tend constantly, and because of an acquired habit, to universal brotherhood in one Father: God."

We need to draw our attention to three elements in this text: the same one Father for the whole of humanity, the fact that, as a consequence, we are all brothers and sisters and, finally, that we have to tend to universal brotherhood. Here is the summary of the dialogical approach of the charism of communion, as Chiara liked to call the spirituality of the Focolare. To confirm the strong mutual reference between the magisterial voice and the charismatic dimension of the Church on this point, it may be significant to underline that these three elements are key points of *Nostra Aetate*.

"One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth.(1) One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men,(2) until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, (...)" (NA 1)

It may be striking to note that Chiara, a young unknown school teacher, wrote these few lines in 1947, while *NA* was written by the Council fathers in 1964. In both, alike, we can see the powerful hand of the same Spirit at work. The approach of the Focolare to interreligious dialogue since the beginning has been an experiential one, but it did not remain restricted to the so-called dialogue of life. It went on to deal with collaboration with other religions at the social level, common

commitment to peace building and includes the effort to extend dialogue to the intellectual and theological sphere.

2.2 Historical unfolding.

In examining how interreligious dialogue originated in the experience of the Focolare Movement,⁸ two events emerge as instrumental to initiate the process.

2.2.1 A prophetic intuition

In 1966, Chiara was in Cameroun, where since a couple of years a few doctors of the Movement had started working⁹. While paying a visit to them, she was warmly welcomed by the Bangwa tribe who organised a full reception in an open space in the forest not far from the local king's (Fon) palace¹⁰. Later she related.

"There was a great red sun which broke through the clouds at sunset. It was illuminating everybody in a marvellous unity. (...) the sun of the ideal of unity embraced the whole tribe. It came to my mind that God brought us to life so that we could care for those the Church cannot reach out to."

2.2.2 London 1977: the Templeton Award, a founding event

A second event, which represented the foundation of the interreligious dialogue in the Focolare, took place some ten years later. The occasion was the *Templeton Award*, which was bestowed on Chiara in 1977, at the time when she was not yet a world figure¹¹.

In the Guildhall in London she found herself in front of an audience which was amazingly varied as far as races, religions and cultures were concerned. After completing her acceptance speech, she had the profound impression that all differences disappeared and had the feeling that Jesus' dream - *"That all may be one"* - was a reality. Probably - this was the answer she found - all those who were present, though followers of different religions, had faith in Him and, as a consequence, His presence enveloped everyone.¹² On the way out of the hall the first ones who came forward to greet her were Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. It was clear that the Focolare had to open up to followers of all faiths.

2.2.3 The first contacts with Mahayana Buddhism

The London event represented a turning point for the whole movement and its members, wherever they were in the world, started meeting with faithful of different religious traditions. The youth of the *Rissho Kosei-kai*, a lay Buddhist organisation from Japan, came in contact with the youth of the Focolare. The echo of their meeting reached the founder Nikkyo Niwano¹³. Between Niwano and Lubich a great mutual understanding flourished. He invited her to Tokyo to address thousand of Buddhists in the large Sacred Hall of the *Rissho Kosei-kai*. It was 28th December 1981. On that occasion she noted down in her diary:

"I never spoke in that way. It was as if God were present. The audience was a well prepared ground and the seed went deep down. I announced Jesus and the Holy Trinity! Everything was welcomed as if those people were just waiting to hear all those things. It was a unique experience to repeat to those people Jesus' words, which they never heard before: "All your hair are counted"¹⁴, "Give and you will receive"¹⁵, "Ask and you will get back in return"¹⁶!"¹⁷.

Relationship with the Buddhists of *Rissho Kosei-kai* grew in Japan, where members of the two Movements started meeting regularly, and in other parts of the world, whenever they met for conferences and peace building initiatives. Thanks to this, a fruitful collaboration started also with the *World Conference for Religions and Peace*¹⁸ (WCRP). Through this cooperation, as years went by, many other rapports with *Mahayana* Buddhists were built.

Sharing common ethical and religious principles, lived with commitment and coherence, led teenagers from several religions and different parts of the world to start working together, thanks to the initiative of the *Myochikai*, another Buddhist organisation committed to youth formation to peace. A significant rapport was also established with *Tendai Shu*, the most ancient Japanese Buddhist tradition, with the blessing and the encouragement of his leader, the Ven. Etai Yamada.¹⁹

2.2.4 Developments with Therawada Buddhism

Relationship with Buddhism could not be limited to *Mahayana* tradition, it had to also involve the *Therawada* stream present in South-East Asia. In Thailand several monks came in contact with the Focolare Movement during the 80's and 90's. A decisive role was the one played by Phra Thonrattana Thavorn, a Thai monk.²⁰ After a short visit to Rome where he could meet Chiara and have an audience with Pope John Paul II, the Thai monk returned to Italy the following year to spend some months in the small town of Loppiano²¹. He was deeply impressed by communion and harmony among the inhabitants of the small town and, once he returned to Thailand, he became the mouthpiece of the Focolare among monks and Buddhist students. He finally worked to have Chiara Lubich invited to his country by the Great Master, Ajan Thong.

In January 1997, Chiara travelled to Thailand where she spoke to 800 students of the *Buddhist Mahajularacha University* and to 100 monks e 70 nuns of the *Wat Rampoeng Temple*, a famous centre for *Vipassana* meditation. In the course of the last ten years the relationship with *Therawada* Buddhist monks developed and deepened and several social and welfare projects have been undertaken in Thailand as a collaboration between Christians and Buddhists.

2.2.5 Meeting the Hindus: a dialogue of hearts

In India, after several years of very fruitful dialogue at the personal level, Chiara Lubich's visit in January 2001 proved a turning point. *Sarvodaya Movement* for

Tamil Nadu, *Shanti Ashram* and *Bharatya Vidhya Bhavan* decided to honour her with the *Defender of Peace 2000 Award*. On that occasion she addressed 700 people (mainly Hindus) in Coimbatore. While delivering the thanksgiving address, Dr. Markandan, former Vice-Chancellor of *Gandhigram Rural University*, publicly asked the Movement to initiate a dialogue between Hindus and Catholics in India. His invitation was powerfully backed by Mr. Krishnaraj Vanavarayar, Chairman of the local centre of *Bharatya Vidhya Bhavan*, by Dr. Minoti Aram and Dr. Vinu Aram of the Shanti Ashram.

A few days later Chiara Lubich was invited to address a similar crowd at the *Somaiya College* in Mumbai. Here she came into close contact with Dr. Kala Acharya and Dr. K.A. Somaiya, respectively the head and the sponsor of the *Somaya Sanskriti Peetam*, an Institute which fosters dialogue between Hindus and Christians. As immediate results, fruitful cooperation started both with Gandhian organisations in the south and the academic world in Mumbai.

Dialogue between the Focolare Movement and Gandhians took off on exploring respective spiritual foundations, in order to then launch together joint actions and projects. More than ten Round Tables were organized by Focolare and Sarvodaya. They offered the opportunity of going right to the roots of the spiritualities lived by Christians and Gandhian Hindus. Starting from God as our Father and passing through the commandment of love, unity, the mystery of suffering, and the commitment in doing God's will, there was a great effort in going to one's respective roots at the spiritual level. Common riches were discovered with a sense of gratitude to God for such gifts to mankind.

Other aspects progressively came to the fore.

Joint actions and projects were launched: a *Balashanti*²² for village children, an initiative for village sanitation, but also *Hiroshima Day* for peace awareness among the youth, a week for *Artists in Unity* and we cannot forget the youth exchange programme which is contributing in a small but significant way to peace building and national integration between youth of different backgrounds (Christian and Hindu, urban and rural, rich and poor, English and Tamil speaking).

Soon this experience of dialogue and harmony building extended to other Gandhian organisations. What came into evidence, among the Hindu Gandhians, has been the common commitment to peace building and conflict resolutions at different levels, the constant effort in applying Gandhi's idea to every day life and the desire to make it relevant to younger generation. At the same time, the Gandhian spirit has been powerfully inspirational for the Catholic partners in dialogue and both side gained tremendously from these past ten years of mutual collaboration.

On the other hand, the contacts with Hindu scholars took a more intellectual dimension, but the experience of theological and academic encounters was rooted into a deep spiritual experience, as Prof. Kala Acharya confirmed:

"We didn't aim at having an academic exercise. It was all together a spiritual experience. (...) For any other seminar, people will speak about the topic, they discuss and debate. We together underwent a common experience."

In this spirit several symposia and conferences were held in India and in Rome with the participation of scholars from *Bharatya Vidhya Bhavan*, *Somaiya Sanskriti Peetham*, *Mumbai University*, *Goa University*, *Delhi University* and *Jawaharlal Nehru University* (JNU) and from the *Focolare Abba School*²³. Different were the topics which led to a mutual acquaintance.²⁴

2.3 A methodology of dialogue

As mentioned earlier, the experience of dialogue in the perspective of the spirituality of communion has a strong, though not exclusive, experiential basis. The members of the Movement are committed, with all human limitations and failures, to live the Gospel in the daily life with a special attention to the commandment of love. We can pinpoint these two as basic elements of the methodology of dialogue: the life of scripture and the commitment to love.

2.3.1 Living the Scriptures

Every month members of the Focolare select a sentence²⁵ from one of the Sundays liturgy and try to put it into practice during the whole month. Meetings of the different groups, then, revolve around sharing the attempts, with successes and failures, in the venture of living the scripture. This effort had a two-fold consequence: a re-evangelizing effect at the personal level, as far as Christian life is concerned, and attracts the attention of other people, especially faithful of other religions (whenever lived in countries where Christians are a minority).

At times they showed interest in trying to do the same, taking inspiration from their respective Holy Books. This was the way members of the Movement came in contact with Muslims in Algeria and in the Maghreb region²⁶. But also in Asia the same experience carries a significant value.

A Hindu homeopathic doctor from Mumbai relates her own experience of dialogue with Christians, based on the effort of living the respective Holy texts.

"This experience has helped me to become a better Hindu and to discover my own religion. In the Gita it is written that we have to do our duties "without expecting anything in return", it teaches "selfless love". Nobody thinks that we have to put into practice these beautiful words. The Focolare underlines the necessity of not only reading the Scripture but put it into practice."

2.3.2 The commandment of love and the *Golden Rule*

Moreover, what came progressively into evidence is the great relevance of the element of 'love' for all religious traditions. It may be called differently²⁷, but the fact remains that it represents the real '*golden rule*', which all faiths recognize at least as a universal ethical principle. Though every religion has its own formulation, it can be universally recognized in the following words: "*Do to the others what you would like them do unto you*".^{28,29}

In the effort to live the dimension of love, a way of living emerged, which can be very well called a *methodology for dialogue*. It is a sort of an art, an *art of loving*. It consists of some points, which are strongly scripture based, not only in the Christian Bible but also in the sacred texts of other faiths²⁹.

We have to start from the preliminary consideration, which we have seen in one of Chiara's early writings as well in *Nostra Aetate*: *we all have only one Father*. The commandment of love that we find in all Holy Texts is strongly rooted in a basic truth: God is the Father of us all, irrespective of sex, religion, social statues, age, etc. In the Judaic and Christian tradition it is expressed in the famous sentence: "*God makes the rain fall on the bad and on the good alike*".^{30 31}

From this consideration of the fatherhood of God follows, as a consequence, the fact that we are all brothers and sisters and therefore we have to treat each other accordingly. That is why the *command of love is directed towards everyone*. Every brother or sister we meet is a child of God and therefore a potential candidate for our love. People cannot be discriminated against on any ground: social, political, physical and religious. All religious Holy Scriptures help us to go beyond discriminations. Jesus said: "*Each time you did these things to the least of my brothers, you did it to me*".^{32 33}

This kind of love has a requirement: *it takes the initiative*.

Love, in fact, is ready to make the first move without waiting to be loved in return, as God does with us. He did not wait for us to love him. Rather, he showed us always and in a thousand ways that he loves us first, regardless of our response. This is what all the great founders of religions teach us with their lives. Jesus exemplified this. It was he who said: "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*".^{34 35} And he indeed gave his life.

Moreover this *love wants us to love the other person as we love ourselves*.

It is not easy to see the other as another self and to do for the other what we would do for ourselves. But this is what emerges clearly from Jesus' preaching "*Love your neighbour as yourself*".³⁶ From this principle flows a norm which, if applied, could by itself provide the greatest impetus towards bringing harmony among individuals and groups, within families as well as states and religions.

What the world would be like if not only individuals, but also peoples, ethnic groups, and states were to practice the Golden Rule! For example, "*Love the other's country as your own.*" "*Love the other religion as you love your own*"!

In practice, *love knows how to make itself one with the person loved*. This means to suffer with whoever is suffering, to rejoice with whoever is rejoicing, to carry the burdens of the others. Therefore, it is a love which is not only words, but concrete facts. The great Christian Apostle, Paul, wrote: "*For the weak I made myself weak. I made myself all things to all in order to save some at any cost*"^{37, 38}

Finally, *true love is directed not only to friends, but also to enemies*.³⁹

As we can see, Scriptures and the Golden Rule are powerful tools for dialogue as all religions offer powerful inspiration in this regard. The experience of Chiara Lubich and of her followers helped to bring to light many points which can be defined, without any confusion or syncretism, source of common inspiration for a commitment to dialogue and harmony. As a confirmation we can quote an Iranian dentist, mother of a family, who affirms:

"I often ask myself how I can live a spirit based on the Christian faith if I am a Muslim. The answer is evident. It was proposed to us as a simple, concrete way of loving, which can be lived by any human being, no matter what their religion is, whether they are believers or not. (...) The fact that my family has remained together is thanks to this movement that urges us to forgive always, to love always, to be the first to love without expecting anything in return."

Finally, there is another aspect of Christian spirituality which has been a strong element of dialogue, especially with Buddhism.

2.3.3 Jesus Crucified and Abandoned: key to dialogue

The deepest motivation of dialogue finds its roots in the *kenotic* dimension of Christ, which represents a key point in the spirituality of communion and it is referred to as the *mystery of Jesus Forsaken and Abandoned*⁴⁰, the annihilation of Jesus on the cross to reconcile man to God. Chiara never felt restrained from sharing this aspect of her faith and her experience with faithful of other religions. Much to her surprise they showed a special interest and understanding of it.

She herself comments:

«That typical suffering of Christ which led Him to total annihilation seems to be particularly fascinating for the faithful of oriental religions. They know how to distinguish that light and that peace which stems from someone who dies to him/herself in order to be one with them. In doing so, he or she allows Christ to be alive in him or in her. The same happens when followers of other religious traditions come into contact with the Risen Christ present in the midst of Christians who are united in His name. Also this is a fruit of loving the cross. They know how to distinguish that light and that peace,

effects of the spirit, which irradiate from their faces. They feel attracted and ask for explanations.»⁴¹.

This experience seems to suggest that Jesus on the cross mysteriously draws to Himself all men and women of all religions and cultures. This confirms the theological approach of Waldenfels, who affirms that *"Today all religions find themselves, each with its own history, in front of Christ's cross."*⁴²

Jesus' *kenosis*, as presented in Lubich's understanding, struck several Buddhist philosophers of the *Kyoto Zen School*. Significant exchange meetings have taken place between Donald W. Mitchell and Keiji Nishitani⁴³. Nishitani draws a stimulating parallel between Christian concept of *kenosis* and the concept of *sunnyata*, of the Mahayana Buddhism. He finds in the description of *Fil. 2, 6-8* almost the personification of *sunnyata*, which means not only annihilation of attachments, but also liberation and redemption. Moreover, the Japanese scholar underlines that in order to find unity and harmony among men is necessary *«to pass through a self-emptying process, from an ego-centered to a 'other-centered life'»*.⁴⁴

2.4 Formation to dialogue

For centuries and, at times, for millennia, people had fought with each other on religious ground, communication among different religious group was poor and everyone lived closed up in his or her own religious circle, as a strong element of identity. It is necessary, therefore, to engage in forming people to a new mentality which may help to shift from rejection and hate to appreciation and love, from ignorance to mutual acquaintance, from biased or stereo-typed idea of the *other* to what he or she really is and thinks of himself or herself.

As the experience of dialogue progressively developed, the need was felt for an appropriate formation of Christians to this dimension. John Paul II used to refer to the Focolare members as *apostles of dialogue*⁴⁵, but the commitment to open up to other faiths calls, first of all, for a better understanding and a deeper knowledge of the Catholic tradition and of the Magisterium of the Church on this specific topic. This has been in line with the recommendation of several magisterial documents. *Ecclesia in Asia* effectively affirms:

"Only those with a mature and convinced Christian faith are qualified to engage in genuine interreligious dialogue. (...) It is therefore important for the Church in Asia to provide suitable models of interreligious dialogue (...) and suitable training for those involved." (EA 32)

Formation has, then, to be completed with necessary elements of other traditions, which have to be known in order to establish right relations with their followers.

In order to answer these challenges, especially in Asia, where Christians remain a tiny minority and at times are dangerously closed in a sort of a ghetto mentality or tempted by dangerous short-cuts landing into a syncretistic approach, a *School for Oriental Religions* (SOR) was established in the Philippines. Chiara herself conceived and proposed it during her first visit to Asia in 1981.⁴⁶

2.5 Fruits of this experience of dialogue.

Attempting an evaluation of these 30 years of experience in dialogue with faithful of other religions it is not easy, but we can try, at least, to sum up some of the fruits.

The first impression is *a growing conviction that universal brotherhood is not only a dream but can be a reality*. It has been experienced notwithstanding differences. Feeling fraternity, as a consequence, has pulled down barriers giving a strong feeling of integration at different levels: religious, social and geographical.

Secondly, *mutual openness and trust* have arisen, becoming an attitude in life. The starting point is sharing problems, personal experiences, family difficulties and later, but progressively, opening up on bigger and larger issues, involving communities, religious leaders, stereo-type understanding of the other faith and its followers. This has led to trust the other person along with his or her faith and tradition. Prof. Ananathan Rambachan, at the end of a conference, a few years ago stated:

"My experiences of dialogue with Christian friends have enabled me to see how such encounters, when sought with humility and openness, can be spiritually enriching.

My own life as a Hindu has been greatly influenced by the gifts that I continue to receive from Christian friends.."

A third effect has been the *falling of all possible misconceptions*. Moments of dialogue and sharing have enhanced the possibility of understanding certain behaviours, ideas, traditions and ways of worshipping from the other's view-point and not from the biased or stereo-typed idea which commonly circulate in society.

All this does not mean to ignore or to deny differences. On the contrary, it led to their *appreciation*. It soon came to evidence that dialogue, if based on life experience and on respect and trust of the other, should not lead to confusion of beliefs and dangerous attempts of finding common basis for all religions. Differences among religions emerged, progressively and steadily. Still, thanks to trust and openness, which have been built up, far from being an obstacle they were, rather, a way to be enriched by the other and carried along with their discovery an invitation to respect his or her faith and tradition for what it is.

Respecting differences and avoiding dangerous confusion towards a pseudo-universal religion, offered the chance to deepen one's own beliefs and tradition in order to share it in ways which can be understood by others. This exercise represented a blessing in disguise as everyone had to go back to his or her own roots. The result has been a *confirmation of one's own faith and tradition*.

Dialogue did not stop at the spiritual or intellectual level. It had given life to a true *partnership in action*. Years of mutual friendship and growing brotherhood paved the way to co-operation at social level, as Pope John Paul II envisaged.

*"Dialogue which proceeds from the "internal drive of charity" is a powerful means of collaboration between people in eradicating evil from human life and from the life of the community, in establishing right order in human society and thus contributing to the common good of all men in every walk of life."*⁴⁷

But probably the most important and significant point has been, for us Christians, the one of experiencing the possibility of *harmonizing evangelization with dialogue* and, more specifically, an *evangelization which is Christ-centered*. Often Christians have been asked to speak of their own experience. Those were unique occasions to share openly about the Gospel, the life of the Church and the person of Jesus Christ. These presentations are followed by the one of brothers or sisters of other religions and enriched by a long series of questions. This offers an further opportunity of speaking even more in depth about Christianity, in general, and Christ, in particular.

The Christological dimension that Hindus and Buddhists seem to be sensitive to is not so much the historical or theological ones. Rather, they seem to be open to the presence of Christ in a community of brothers and sisters who try to live the commandment of love among them on the model of the early Christian communities. The challenge of dialogue and the possibility of harmonizing it with announcing Christ, is therefore rooted in the commitment to live as a united community which may bear witness to the promise of Christ: *"Where two or more are united in my name I am present in their midst"*.

(Endnotes)

1 It happened within the Roman Empire, which had already become Christian, at the time of the invasion of peoples which led to its collapsing. Evangelizing those populations was the answer.

The appearance of Islam in the second half of the first millennium marked another phase of the *encounter* with the 'other'. It developed into a millennium long history made up of clashes, crusades, wars, conquests, with some signs of hope for a peaceful meeting among religions. St. Francis meeting the Great Sultan remains the most shining example that dialogue is possible.

The third, and more controversial phase, came with the great discoveries of the 15th and 16th century. It was widely thought at that time that Christianity had already been announced

to the whole world. To discover people in America and in Asia who did not know Christ, was a shocking experience for the whole western world, identified with Christendom. The consequences of the meeting with the traditional religions of the Americas and the millennia old religions of Asia were a twofold one.

- 2 The situation is totally different in Central and South America, where the indigenous religions were erased by the wave of evangelisation. In Asia, oriental traditions were almost untouched by Christianity which apparently did not appeal to them. Above all, they were not ready to follow a new religion, which appeared exclusivistic and asked for renouncing one's culture and tradition.
- 3 I refer to *Gaudium et Spes, Lumen Gentium, Ad Gentes*
- 4 The reference is above all to *Ecclesiam Suam*, which represents the foundation of the dialogical approach of the Church, and, later, *Evangelii Nuntiandi, Redemptoris Missio, Ecclesia in Asia*
- 5 The converging of these three dimensions of the Church (magisterial, theological and charismatic) has been particularly relevant in other key moments along the centuries, especially on issues which marked an epoch with consequences into following centuries.
- 6 Von Balthasar used to define *Magisterium* and the *charisms* in the Church, respectively, as the *petrine* and *marian* profiles. Pope John Paul II had defined these two aspects as co-essential to the very nature of the Church. *"The institutional and charismatic aspects are co-essential as it were to the Church's constitution. They contribute, although differently, to the life, renewal and sanctification of God's People. It is from this providential rediscovery of the Church's charismatic dimension that, before and after the Council, a remarkable pattern of growth has been established for ecclesial movements and new communities."* (Speech of Pope John Paul II – Meeting with Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, St. Peter's Square – 30th May 1998)
- 7 Cfr. DE FIORES, *La nuova spiritualità*,
The *Focolare Movement* and *S. Egidio Community* had been particularly effective in this context.
- 8 In this article special attention will be given to the Asian religious traditions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. The Focolare has a positive experience of dialogue with Judaism and Islam too. Keeping into account the type of volume this paper is meant for, it is felt that it is advisable to deepen only the relationship with the first two religions.
- 9 The local tribe that had asked for help, was severely threatened by the sleeping sickness to the point of risking extinction. Those doctors, without much speaking, had started working hard to eradicate malaria and other sicknesses. Today the small village where they started working is a township with a College, a hospital, a power station, a parish church and a thousand people have decided to follow the way of Christ.
- 10 It may be worth noticing that we were still in the mid-sixties and tribals were referred to as *"pagans"* This terminology is used by Lubich herself, but does not prevent her from having a different approach which is a clear sign of a new perspective in dealing with people of other religious faiths.
- 11 The award came as a surprise for her and for the Movement. Chiara could not reconcile with the idea of receiving a prize for living the Gospel. She had thought that *'eternal life'* would have been the reward. Still she accepted it.
- 12 Quoted in E.M.FONDIE M.ZANZUCCHI, *Un popolo nato dal Vangelo*, 382-383
- 13 Niwano was invited to the mass for the opening session of the Second Vatican Council and was received in a special audience by the Pope. It was from Paul VI that he had gained the

conviction of the necessity of working for harmony among religions. In 1970, Niwano, along with other world religions leaders, established the World Conference for Religions and Peace (WCRP), which held her first World Assembly in Kyoto. Today the organisation is known as *Religions for Peace*, and it is still a very active promoter of harmony and peace among different religious communities. Niwano, himself a recipient of the *Templeton Prize* in 1979, died in... . His son, Nichiko Niwano, took over as the President of his Movement.

- 14 *Mt* 10, 30
- 15 *Lc* 6, 38
- 16 *Cf. Mt* 7, 7
- 17 Chiara Lubich, *Incontri con l'Oriente*, *op. cit.*, p. 69
- 18 *World Conference for Religions and Peace* has changed its name into *Religions for Peace*
- 19 ***Etai Yamada was a world figure, acknowledged for his moral and religious stature. He met the Focolare on the occasion of the Assisi Prayer Meeting, called by Pope John Paul II, in 1986. A year later, Etai Yamada himself organised a similar event at Mount Hiei, close to Kyoto. He wanted a large group of teenagers to be present. They were the bearers of a message addressed to the United Nations and signed by thousand of people asking world leaders for a greater commitment to peace.***
- 20 He was invited to represent his tradition on the occasion of the *X World Youth Day*, held in 1995 in Manila. On that occasion he met Focolare members, while visiting the small town of Tagaytai, and expressed the desire to have an encounter with Chiara Lubich whom he saw in a photograph.
- 21 Loppiano, a few miles a way from Florence, is the first model town of the Focolare Movement. It was started in 1964 and today has around thousand inhabitants from many different countries in the world. They are members of the Focolare – families, priests, youth, nuns, consecrated members of the Movement – who spend some time for formation or permanently living in Loppiano. They are all committed to live the spirituality of communion to offer a model of convivence according to the Gospel law.
- 22 The name means literally children (*bala*) of peace (*shanti*) and gives the meaning to the educational experience which wants to be imparted to the village children who attend the pre-elementary courses in the 12 centres.
- 23 The *Abba School* is an original interdisciplinary experience lived by a group of scholars of different specializations (from theology to medicine, from philosophy to mathematics, from sociology to art, from psychology to economics) who worked in close connection with Chiara Lubich to explore the contribution the spirituality of communion can give to their respective disciplines.
- 24 The title of the conferences held so far had been: "*Bhakti – the way of love, Union with God and Universal Brotherhood in Hinduism and Christianity*", "*Streams of Spirituality in Christianity and Hinduism*", "*Society and Spirituality, a communitarian perspective*", "*God, man and nature in the Hindu and Christian perspective*".
- 25 This practice, which has been typical of the Movement since the beginning, is called *Word of Life*. The sentence had been commented in a simple and profound way by Chiara herself and sent across the five continents to be translated and lived in the different contexts.
- 26 The first place that the dialogue with Muslims developed was in Algeria where Focolare centers opened since 1966. Since 1985 an annual meeting of five days, called the "*Mariapolis*", was organized. It is meant especially for Muslims. Of the 120/150 participants, there are

only about 15 Christians, most of whom are the Focolare members living there. All others are Muslims who try to live the words of the Koran to build harmony and peace.

- 27 For instance, '*compassion*' by the Buddhists
- 28 Judaism says: "*Do to no one what you yourself dislike*" (Tobit 4:15), In Hinduism the Mahabharata says: "*This is the summary of all duties: do not do to others what would hurt you*" Mahabharata 5: 1517. Gandhi, whom we can surely consider a prophet who helped millions of people rediscover the universal values of their religions, underlines the concept of Mahabharata by saying: "*You and I are but one thing. I cannot harm you without hurting myself.*" Lord Buddha invited his followers with these words: "*Do not hurt the others with what has hurt you*". The Koran specifies to the faithful of Islam: "*None among you is a believer till when he desires for his brother what he wishes for himself*" (Hadith 13, Al Bukhari).

Also religions with a smaller number of followers, but with an ancient or a very recent tradition, have a clear reference to the Golden Rule. In Sikhism, for instance, it is expressed with the following thought: "*Judge the others the way you judge yourself and you will be their partners in heaven*". "*Ascetism does not lie in ascetic robes; nor in the walking staff, nor in the ashes, (...) in the earring, the shaven head, or in the blowing of a conch (...) in mere words. He an ascetic is who treats everyone alike*".

In Zoroastrianism we find something very close to all this: "*He is good who, among human beings, does not do to others whatever is not good for him self*".

Jainism, the religion of *ahimsa*, can not renounce to love and compassion, and therefore states: "*In happiness and in suffering, in joy and in sorrow, we should look at every creature the way we look at ourselves. Therefore we should avoid inflicting to others what offence we feel unbearable for ourselves.*"

The Confucian tradition handed over the same value by saying: "Is there an idea which should be put into practice all life long? Certainly this is the one: 'Do not do to the others what you would not like the others do onto you'.

- 29 Relevant quotations from some of the Holy Books will be mentioned in the endnotes.
- 30 Gospel, Mt. 5:45
- 31 It is striking to note that Guru Nanak echoed it, when coming back, after being taken to the presence of God, he announced: "*There is no Hindu, no Muslim.*"
- 32 Gospel Mt 25:40
- 33 The Prophet stated: "*Such is God's promise to His servants who believe and do good works. Say: 'For this I demand of you no recompense. I ask you only to love your kindred'*" (Qur'an 42:23. Translated by Bausani). The first meaning of the term "kindred" (*qurba*) indicates a relative, a member of the tribe, but it can acquire a broader meaning: "Love for the tribe can be extended to love for all humanity, because all human beings are brothers and sisters as descendants of Adam. ABDULLAH YUSUF ALI, *The meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, Amana Publications, Beltsville, Maryland, 1989, p.1253, note 4560. Moreover, a Muslim maxim affirms: "*God forgives a hundred times, but he reserves his greatest mercy for those whose piety has spared the smallest of his creatures.*" (cfr. G. M. GUZZETTI, *Islam in preghiera*, Rome, 1991, p. 136) Outside the monotheistic religions, we find a wonderful example in Buddha, who said to his first disciples: "*Oh Monks, you should work for the wellbeing of many, for the happiness of many, moved by compassion for the world, for the wellbeing of men and women.*" Mahagga, 19.
- 34 Jn 15:13

- 35 But we can not forget other beautiful examples. Buddha, for instance, has been described by the one who, "*not only taught non-violence and peace. He stood on the battlefield and personally intervened to prevent war between peoples and religions.*" W. RAHULA, *The Teaching of Lord Buddha*, Rome, 1996, p. 102). Also the Qur'an says: "*Let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish God to forgive you? God is forgiving and merciful.*" (Qur'an 24:22Ibid, p.254)
- 36 Islam suggests: "*God helps a man in the measure that he helps his neighbor.*" (W. MUHS, *Parole del cuore*, Milan 1996, p. 82). Also Gandhi affirmed: "*You and I are one and the same thing. I cannot hurt you without harming myself.*" (W. MUHS, *Parole del cuore*, Milan 1996, p. 82)
- 37 1 Cor. 9:22
- 38 But also in the Qur'an we read a similar idea: "*The righteous man is he who, out of love for God, gives away his wealth - not words, not empty chatter - gives away his wealth to kinsfolk, to orphans, to the helpless, to the traveller in need, and to beggars, and for the redemption of captives.* (Qur'an S.2 A.177).
- 39 The Koran very beautifully expresses this invitation: "*Good and evil deeds are not alike. Requite evil with good, and he who is your enemy will become your dearest friend.*" (Ibid, p.354). A very beautiful image is used in the Hindu tradition for describing love for enemies: "*While the axe chops the sandalwood, it in turn offers its virtue by scenting the axe with its fragrance.*" (*Ramacaritamansa, Uttara-kanda*, 36,4.) In Christianity, we should not forget it, apart from the invitation to love our enemies we also have the challenge of "*offering the other cheek to the one striking us on the right one.*" Mt. 5.39
- 40 For an exhaustive presentation of the mystery of Jesus Abandoned and Forsaken in the experience of Chiara Lubich and in the spirituality of the Focolare Movement see CHIARA LUBICH, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, New City Press, New York, 1985 and CHIARA LUBICH, *The Cry*, New City Press, New York, 2001
- 41 CHIARA LUBICH, *L'unità e Gesù Abbandonato*, op. cit., pp. 117-118
- 42 H. WALDENFELS, *Der Gekreuzigte und die Weltreligionen*, trad. In italiano, *Gesù Crocifisso e le grandi religioni*, Napoli 1987, p. 60. The present text has been translated into English by the author of the present article.
- 43 Both scholars are closely connected with the spirituality of the Focolare Movement. Donald W. Mitchell is an American scholar of Buddhism of international standard. He teaches *Asian and Comparative Philosophy*, apart from being Director of the *Program of Religious Studies* at the Purdue University, USA. Keiji Nishitani (1900 - 1990) was a Japanese philosopher, probably the most representative of the *Kyoto School*.
- 44 DONALD W. MITCHELL, *La mia esperienza di dialogo*. Paper presented at the School for Interreligious Dialogue, Castelgandolfo, 12-13 May 1987
- 45 In the Focolare Movement there are several types of dialogue: within the Catholic Church with different charisms, within the Christian world among different Churches (the Movement is in touch with members of around 300 churches or ecclesial communities, with the larger portion of humanity which includes agnostics and atheists. The Statutes of the Focolare, approved by the Church in 1990 refer to this last form of dialogue as '*Dialogue with contemporary culture.*'
- 46 In the last 25 years SOR held courses on all main Asian traditions and, later, started a fresh series of presentations of the Church teaching and latest documents from *Nostra Aetate* to *Dominus Jesus*. Classes are held in Tagaytay, Philippines, for a limited number of people (max. 250) and repeated with due and necessary adaptation at the local level in several Asian countries. Most of the lessons are delivered by experts and especially by bishops who know the spirituality of communion. This allows an enriching mutual support from the spirituality of the Focolare and the tradition of the catholic Church.

The Way of Integration through Dialogue of Faith and Culture in Asia:

The Case of the Syro-Malabar Church of the Saint Thomas Christians of India

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O. PROLOGUE

The Church of the Saint Thomas Christians of India is believed to be founded by apostle Saint Thomas in the early years of the Christian era. The lived and living traditions of the Saint Thomas Christians eloquently express the consciousness of their apostolic origin.¹ "For centuries the Christian communities of southwest India have proudly called themselves 'Thomas Christians.'² The Saint Thomas Christians had a healthy and happy relationship with the East Syrian Church from very ancient times and they were celebrating the East Syrian liturgy till the time of the Synod of Diamper in 1599, which was a calculated move of Archbishop Alexis Menezes of Goa to bring the Church of Saint Thomas Christians under the yoke of Latin Church. As a result, there were a number of revolts against the forced Latinisation process and the severing of their revered and age-old relationship with the East Syrian Church. This revolt culminated in the division of the Saint Thomas Christians in 1653 with the Coonan Cross oath. Since then the Church of the Saint Thomas Christians is divided into different churches, of course with the upheavals of history. In spite of adverse circumstances and developments in the political and ecclesiastical scenario of India, there was a section of the Saint Thomas Christians who did not break up its relationship with Rome. Taking their pressing and deserving demand, Rome established the Catholic hierarchy in Malabar in 1886. This Catholics of the Saint Thomas Christians were christened as the Syro-Malabar Church and the Syro-Malabar hierarchy was erected in 1923. The visit of Eugene Cardinal Tisserant to Kerala was a turning point in the history of the apostolic church of the Saint Thomas Christians. Cardinal Tisserant observes, "I came to admire greatly the Syro-Malabar Christians, who remained constantly faithful to their religion despite centuries of adversity. My visit to them in November-December 1953 immeasurably increased this admiration."³

Another essential and fundamental feature of the Saint Thomas Christians of India is their identity and community consciousness in the appellation of *Mar Thoma Margam*,, meaning the way of Saint Thomas, or the "Law of Thomas." *Mar Thoma margam* symbolizes the way of life of the Saint Thomas Christians. It

stands for the sum total of their apostolic faith experience, liturgy, theology, spirituality, and discipline in the socio-political scenario of India. The Law of Thomas is the “icon of the Indo-Oriental identity of the Thomas Christians of India.”⁴ In addition, “While all the Christian communities have been named after the place of their origin, the Thomas Christians are the only community known after the name of their Apostle and of Jesus of Nazareth, the core of their faith.”⁵ Above all, “The ancient Thomas Christians were very much attached to their faith tradition centred on the very Person of Christ. There were known in history as *Nazranis*, meaning the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.”⁶ All these characteristics are at the heart of the rich heritage of the apostolic Church of Saint Thomas and they give shape to their identity consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, beautifully introduces the topic of our discussion, “The Church in Asia sings the praises of the «God of salvation» (Ps 68:20) for choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil, through men and women of the continent. It was in fact in Asia that God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning.”⁷ And “In «the fullness of time» (Gal 4:4), he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Saviour, who took flesh as an Asian!”⁸ It admits unequivocally the importance of Asia and the culture of Asia played in the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. In the opening paragraph, it is clearly stated “Because Jesus was born, lived, died and rose from the dead in the Holy Land, that small portion of Western Asia became a land of promise and hope for all mankind. Jesus knew and loved this land. He made his own the history, the sufferings and the hopes of its people.”⁹

It is certain that the above lines of official acknowledgements could be considered as the point of departure as far as the subject at our hand is concerned. Asia is the cradle of Christianity, so also it is the cradle of all world religions. Jesus was an Asian in every way. Jesus followed the way of Asian ethos in revealing the loving kindness of God the Father. Jesus invited the disciples of John the Baptist to “come and see” (John 1:39), which is the hallmark of the oriental ethos as far as religious experience and life is concerned. Jesus was a man of dialogue. It is in and through the method of dialogue Jesus challenged the mindset of the people, inspired them to interiorize and radicalize ethical perspectives, and instructed about the will of God to the people of His time. Gospel narrations recount Jesus as one who was mostly walking the way. In the context of enquiry, Jesus declared Himself as “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Jesus taught the mysteries of God and the Kingdom of God in parables and stories, which is highly Asian in style. Though Jesus criticized some of the customs and practices of the people of His time, He had great esteem for the covenantal community. The life of Jesus was in close communion with God, fellow beings, and creation. Jesus had a preference for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the outcast, etc., of His

culture. Jesus welcomed all people, also the people of other religions. He praised the belief of the people of other faiths. Indeed, Jesus is the way par excellence towards integrity of faith and dialogue in Asia.

In the early centuries of Christianity, Churches, assemblies of the faithful in the Lord, following the footsteps of the Master, presented themselves as a spiritual movement in the socio-cultural context of their existence and mission. In the recent past, there have been official attempts to recognize and to rediscover the reality of plurality, identity, and autonomy of ancient Churches of apostolic origin, which is the bedrock for the theology of ecclesial communion. In this connection, in the preamble of the *Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches*, Vatican II lays down the important considerations concerning Oriental Churches:

The Catholic Church holds in high esteem the institutions, liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and the established standards of the Christian life of the Eastern Churches, for in them, distinguished as they are for their venerable antiquity, there remains conspicuous the tradition that has been handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers and that forms part of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church.¹⁰

At this juncture, it is interesting to note that the Catholic Church is the communion of twenty-three Churches, one of which is the Latin Church; all others are Oriental Churches. The Council goes on to assert the equal dignity of each of these Churches, "They are consequently of equal dignity, so that none of them is superior to the others as regards rite and they enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligations, also in respect of preaching the Gospel to the whole world (cf. Mark 16:15) under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff."¹¹ Furthermore, the document declares the right and duty of the Oriental Churches "to govern themselves according to their own special disciplines. For these are guaranteed by ancient tradition, and seem to be better suited to the customs of their faithful and to the good of their souls."¹² This is an acknowledgement of the contribution of the Oriental Churches. The Oriental Churches, in general, and the Saint Thomas Christians of India, in particular, illustrate the ability to dialogue with cultures and to continue the pilgrimage of faith in Christ. The cultural engagement of the Saint Thomas Catholic Christians, the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the Oriental Churches, is widely acknowledged.

A fundamental principle of Oriental theology is to be borne in mind as we undertake a survey of the Saint Thomas Christians. The axiom, *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi*, explains the structure and texture of Oriental theology. "A Church experiences and manifests her faith traditions in her prayer (*lex Orandi*) faith (*lex Credendi*) and in her particular life style (*lex Vivendi*). These expressions together constitute her faith traditions. They are interrelated and they complement each other."¹³ This approach gives utmost importance to worship, encounter, tradition, and mission in the doing of theology. It is an invitation to do a theology of

anubhavam (experience), *avataranam* (expression), and *anugamanam* (following), which is congenial to the Asian ethos. In this sense we can speak of theology as worship, theology as tradition, theology as encounter, and theology as mission. This is significant in tracing the way of the integrity of faith and dialogue of the Saint Thomas Christians.

As far as the Syro-Malabar Church is concerned, there is an identity and integrity which is in matters of social, religious, the cultural milieu. According to Placid Podipara, it consists in an organic blending of different components, "Hindu in culture, Christian in Religion, and Oriental in worship."¹⁴ This could be presented as a summary statement of the integration the Saint Thomas Christians of India. It speaks about the way of integrity of faith and dialogue in India. Therefore, it is fitting, at the very outset, to discuss the threefold integrity and integration. K. S. Sudarshan observes about the Saint Thomas Christians, "This is an excellent example of integrating themselves into the mainstream while at the same time preserving their own religious identity."¹⁵

In order to understand the way of integrity of faith and dialogue in Asia of an Oriental Church, especially in the context of the Syro-Malabar Church of Saint Thomas Christians, we may illustrate i) the Cultural Path, ii) the Christian Faith, iii) the Oriental Depth, and iv) the Administrative Worth of the Pre-Diamper Saint Thomas Christians. In the discussion of these aspects, there is the need to overcome the tendency of watertight compartmentalization; they are an organically integrated single whole. At the end of this paper, a few remarks will be made on inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and a genuine theology.

2. THE CULTURAL PATH OF THE SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS

In understanding inculturation, certainly, there is the need of surveying the cultural ethos of the faithful in which they find themselves. It is a matter to be examined whether the Saint Thomas Christians were uprooted from their cultural context or did they retain their rich cultural heritage of India.

In a response to the loud cry to "Indianise the Indian Christians," Placid J. Podipara wrote an article referring to the Saint Thomas Christians of India. In this article, the author convincingly argues that they are "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, and Oriental in Worship."¹⁶ In a similar vein, Mathias Mundadan also invites the attention of the proponents of Indianisation to the cultural adaptability of the Saint Thomas Christians of India, "In India a movement is in progress to adapt Christianity to the cultural and social set-up of the country. Perhaps in this movement attention has been drawn to the community of the St. Thomas Christians as an example of a community which had adjusted itself to the environment in which it had to live and function for centuries."¹⁷ These authors are of the opinion that there is a long lived historical case for the study of cultural integration among the Christians of Saint Thomas in tune with the ethos of India. Historians unanimously agree on the pre-Portuguese era of the Saint Thomas

Christians of India, "In any case, at the time the Portuguese arrived in the sixteenth century the Saint Thomas Christians were leading a life fully consonant with their past; they enjoyed a privileged position in society and a large measure of social and ecclesiastical autonomy."¹⁸

Among the Saint Thomas Christians of India, there is "the wonderful mingling of Hindu culture, Christian faith, and Syro-Oriental mode of worship."¹⁹ Obviously, the author analyses three large areas of life of the Thomas Christians, namely, culture, faith, and worship, which are not watertight compartments, but constitutive components of Christian life. Felix Wilfred makes a comparison between the theological heritage of Thomas Christians and the era of Portuguese missionaries, "This is in striking contrast to what happened from the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries. The newly converted were forced to renounce their cultural heritage and traditions to take up Western customs and ways of life, then thought to be a necessary sequel to the faith received."²⁰ E. R. Hambye succinctly portrays the rootedness of the Saint Thomas Christians in the native soil and their religious identity in the cultural context of India:

The Syro-Malabar Church has the distinction of being the most ancient Christian community of India and the Far East. For more than fifteen centuries its members have occupied the south-western shores of India. They have played – and still do – a vital role in the expansion of Christianity in Asia. They have been so rooted in the native soil that their customs have developed in conformity with the social atmosphere of Ancient India, and, except for their faith and morals, they have been – and are still – hardly distinguishable from their compatriots of other creeds. Their spontaneous adaptation stands as a perpetual and concrete manifestation of the natural universality of Christianity.²¹

In discovering the way of integrity of faith and dialogue with culture, we shall take up a brief survey of the socio-cultural ethos of the Saint Thomas Christians. The cultural ethos of the Saint Thomas Christians of India could be summarized in the following observation, "In their day-to-day life the Christians differed very little from the noble castes."²² Podipara narrates certain features of their social ethos, "In the social scale the Thomas Christians stood next to the Brahmins who were by birth priests of the non-Christian rulers. They kept several customs common to them and to the Brahmins alone."²³ Since Saint Thomas Christians were considered to be of high caste, they also distanced themselves from the untouchables. "Like the high caste Hindus of the country, the Thomas Christians would not touch or go near those of lower castes."²⁴ Though untouchability was challenged by the prophets of modern times, like, Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Blessed Kunjachan, etc., it was a practice in the land and Saint Thomas Christians

were not free from the clutches of caste mentality, which is no more acceptable to Christianity of our times.

In connection with the practice of untouchability, it is interesting to note the customs of the high caste Hindus. It is reported, "For the high caste Hindus the touch of a Thomas Christian was sufficient to purify articles defiled by the touch or near approach of the low caste people. Hence the non-Christian kings often made Thomas Christian families live near their royal residence in order to profit by their service to purify defiled articles."²⁵ This is a clear indication of the high regard and respect Saint Thomas Christians enjoyed in the society at large.

As far as the profession of Saint Thomas Christians is concerned, "They distinguished themselves in such profession as agriculture, trade, and military service."²⁶ The community of the faithful was loyal to the kings and joined the military in protecting the territory and people of the kingdom. "As loyal subjects of the kings in whose territory they lived, they took up arms in time of war. The success in war of a king often depended on the number of his Thomas Christian subjects. This made non-Christian kings build churches and endow them with tax-free lands."²⁷ There is every reason to believe that "all able-bodied adults were meant to be soldiers and hence all males were trained for military service."²⁸ As responsible citizens of state, Thomas Christians contributed their share to the welfare of the society by engaging themselves in agriculture, trade and military service. This is to conclude that they were socially and politically conscious and committed people; they were engaged in the welfare of the society and in the security of the state, which is a duty of every citizen. On account of their great service, Thomas Christians were given different privileges by their kings, "By virtue of these privileges they could ride elephants, could use palanquins, could have roofed gates, could sit before kings on carpets, could use day-lamps etc., all of which gave them a social status next only to that of the Brahmins, the priests of the non-Christian kings."²⁹

As far as their food habits are concerned, the Saint Thomas Christians followed almost all the customs of the people of the land: "Their food was frugal consisting of rice boiled in water and "curries," mostly vegetable. They rarely ate meat and always shunned beef. Alcoholic drinks were considered unbecoming to their high social status. During national feasts they would eat with their fingers squatting on long mattresses, their plates being plantain leaves folded into two which signified their privilege to use two leaves in imitation of the Brahmins."³⁰

The Saint Thomas Christians looked almost similar in their outfit and congenial to the climatic conditions. Here is a concise description of how they dressed up and appeared in the public:

The men went out naked from their waist upwards except on solemn occasions when some would put on a loose ornamented chemis. They bore the lobes of the ears for ornaments to pass through. Except those who kept celibacy and those who had gone on a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore, all kept long hairs tied up in a bundle into which was inserted a small metal cross. In fact this cross distinguished them from their non-Christian brethren. Bridegrooms had the privilege to wear a flower of gold attached to the tuft of hair.³¹

Women were very modest in their dress and comportment. Their dress consisted of a jacket that covered the hands and the body till the waist, while a long piece of cloth reaching down to the ankles was tied round the waist in a manner peculiar to them alone. When going to the church or visiting priests they would cover themselves with a big veil that left only their faces open.³²

In fact, the Christian women "however were much more modestly dressed than the *nayar* women."³³ In the matter of hygiene and cleanliness "the Christians were as good as the caste Hindus. . . . all men and women, smeared themselves with oil and went to the river to wash themselves. This they did twice a week: Wednesdays and Saturdays. On such occasions they were very scantily dressed."³⁴

In the society, the Saint Thomas Christians were considered "*mapilas* or nobles."³⁵ It may be noted that "All their civil cases were decided by the intervention of the Archdeacon; only in criminal cases they used to have recourse to the kings."³⁶ Cardinal Tisserant attests great importance to this fact, "St. Thomas Christians, who were highly esteemed by their Hindu fellow-countrymen, and who therefore obtained social privileges which they still enjoy."³⁷ Indeed, Saint Thomas Christians enjoyed a number of privileges and they were considered of high caste in the society:

The historical folk songs that describe the apostle's mission put great emphasis on the conversion of Brahmins. The literature of Thomas Christians came to emphasise the customs and rituals they share with Brahmins: for example, bestowal of a sacred thread (with cross added) on infants, adornment of children with gilded mongoose teeth and panther toes, similar marriage rites, descent of property through a patriarchal line (unlike Nairs, who have a matriarchal system), wearing a long tuft of hair on the head. In marriage processions a Christian bridegroom, like a prince of the land, could ride an elephant, the bridal party could be sheltered by a canopy, and members of the procession could carry silk umbrellas.³⁸

Mathias Mundan points out that the enlightened self-interest of the monarchs might have been the historical reason to the coexistence and cooperation of people of different faiths in Malabar:

The monarchs who did so much for the revival and progress of Hindu religion were enlightened and benevolent enough to keep intact and even foster the age-long tradition of tolerance towards other religions and their followers. It is commercial interests which attracted people of various creeds, races and nations to the Kerala coast; it is the same interests which induced the rulers and people of Kerala to show such hospitality to the 'alien' people professing 'alien' creeds and practicing 'alien' customs. It is again this kind of enlightened self-interest which must have been responsible for the harmony and the cultural 'symbiosis' that came to prevail in Kerala from very early times in up to the advent of the Portuguese.³⁹

Identifying the ethos of Kerala, the author makes an important observation on how the confluence of different religious traditions and cultural elements enriched the life of the people:

The multi-coloured fabric of Kerala society has been woven through centuries with Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic elements coexisting without losing their identity or even their contrast in character. It must be remembered that each religion brought to it not only a creed but also its own specific way of life.⁴⁰

Having surveyed the major features of the symbiotic life of the Thomas Christians in Malabar, James Aerthayil raises a pertinent question: Whether this could be called adaptation or was it a patrimony or legacy of Hinduism for the newly formed Thomas Christian community? His learned opinion is that it is a patrimony or legacy. "Since they were converts from Hinduism, they were not actually confirming or adapting to the Hindu way of life but, accepting faith in Christ and Gospel morality, they were really continuing to live in the same way as they did before. The truth of the Gospel, however, enlightened them to ennoble what was imperfect earlier and to correct what was wrong."⁴¹ He goes on to state, "What we had in this community, therefore, was not a clear case of adaptation, but preservation of a culture, entrusted to them as a legacy, vitalizing it with Christian principles."⁴²

From the above discussion on the cultural path of Saint Thomas Christians, we can say that all the scholars are of the same opinion that they were at home with the cultural ethos of India and they were well-woven into the cultural fabric of the society. They did not find themselves as strangers on their own soil, rather they were very well rooted in the ethos of the land. They were the heirs and heralds of their cultural heritage.

3. THE CHRISTIAN FAITH OF THE SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS

As regards their faith, the Saint Thomas Christians were fully Christian. As they revealed their path with cultural identity, so they expressed their faith in Christ and the cross of Christ as it was handed down by the apostolic faith experience. While having a cultural similarity with the people of other faiths,

the Saint Thomas Christians were distinguished by their faith in Christ, which conferred on them an identity and a sense of community.

Praising the steadfastness of Saint Thomas Christians in their faith, Nunes Barreto wrote in 1561, which is a clear testimony to their Christian faith:

I cannot tell you, most dear brethren, how much I was consoled in the Lord by seeing and dealing with those Christians who, from the time of St. Thomas till today, as it is believed, are kept in the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ; and without having had the preaching or the administration of Sacraments or the other means of Divine Providence conserved among us, nay, living in the midst of infinite infidels, not only molested by the gentiles but also persecuted by the Moors and Jews who live among them, they have always kept up the veneration, the obedience and the faith in the most holy Cross and also the remembrance of the mysteries of the Catholic faith. . . . It pleased me much to be in the midst of these Christians and to learn through questions and conversations, that they understood the mysteries of our holy faith: and I found them firm in the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity and in that of the Incarnation as well as in that of the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar – this is much for a people taught by bishops who come from Syria, who are not theologians and some of whom were of the heresy of Nestorius”⁴³

Placid J. Podipara recounts the salient features of the faith of the Saint Thomas Christians:

One may say that the Thomas Christians as a whole were leading a fairly good Christian life according to their knowledge in the circumstances in which they were. They frequented churches and sacraments as far as it was possible to do so, exhibited a special devotion towards the Madonna and St. Thomas, venerated the Cross, made pilgrimages, fed the poor, scrupulously observed the fasts prescribed by their Rite, etc.⁴⁴

While the Saint Thomas Christians had almost everything in common with social customs and cultural practices, certainly, they succeeded to maintain their identity through small but significant ways. There are authors who call this phenomenon as “a life in two worlds.”⁴⁵ It need not necessarily be the case. This does not lead people to a state of confusion and division, provided they have taken it wholeheartedly. Rather, it should be seen as a source of assimilation and integration, of course, combining existential situation and essential faith experience. It is a way of life. It is a path to *samanvaya*, integration. These differences weave a fabric of coexistence and cooperation, which we find among the Saint Thomas Christians.

For example, it is recorded that the calendars Saint Thomas Christians used were "the local ones."⁴⁶ And for ecclesiastical purposes "the Greek year, in accordance with the East-Syrian Church calendar, seems to have been in use."⁴⁷ This is also a telling example of their sense of social integration and Christian identity. The Oriental churches, in general, and the Syro-Malabar Church, in particular, present a way of integrating faith and culture in Asia.

Malpanate, the training and formation house for the priestly candidates, was congenial to the Indian ethos. It was something similar to a *gurukula*, the school of the master where disciples come and stay with him and learn the lessons of Sacred Scripture and tradition. *Malpan*, in Syriac means master. "The assembly of the parishioners presented the candidates to the bishop through a letter patent called *desakkuri*. This letter gave the candidates the title to be maintained by the parish."⁴⁸ The role of the parishioners in promoting a candidate to priesthood was decisive. Parishioners had a good knowledge of the candidate, for he was taken from among them and he was inducted to the community of priests of the parish. In the present scenario of seminary training, where there is an anonymity due to the training of candidates in a large group, where personal attention is wanting, it may be good to reconsider the *malpanate* system of training.

The life of Saint Thomas Christians was centred around the church. Placid J. Podipara gives an account:

The priests recited the Divine Office in choir, and their assembly governed the parish, headed by the senior most at whose direction the others performed the parochial functions by turn. . . . There were two classes of priests, ordinary and more retired; the latter never ate meat or drank wine and led an austere life. . . . Students to priesthood were taught by senior priests. The assembly of parishioners presented the candidate for ordination. Priests were ordained for parishes, not for diocese. They were maintained by the parish and by the generous offerings of the faithful.⁴⁹

There is a noticeable difference that Saint Thomas Christians maintained in their decisive celebrations and practices. There is a certain degree of continuity with the cultural ethos and yet there is striking discontinuity in matters of their faith. These things reveal that they were simultaneously Hindu in culture and Christian in faith. Take the case of the celebration of *Namakarana*, naming ceremony, which is a special ceremony for Brahmins. But the Christians name their children only at the time of Baptism. Infants were given biblical names, of course with a taste of the vernacular, adding prefixes or suffixes.⁵⁰ This is also visible in the case of *Vidyarambha*, initiation into learning, which was an important moment in the life of a child according to the culture. Initiation takes place by drawing the letters by the fingers of the child on rice spread out on the floor. We notice a difference in the initial verse a student is instructed on the basis of one's faith.⁵¹ *Hari Sri Ganapataya namah* was the mantra taught to a

Hindu child, whereas taking into account the belief of a Christian, it was modified as *Sri Yesupataya namah* (I adore the feet of Jesus) or *tamburan tunaka, guruve saranam* (Let God help, I depend on my teacher).⁵² The ceremony of *Vivaha*, marriage, was a very solemn and elaborate celebration for both Hindus and Christians. Tying *Tali* or *minnu*, the marriage symbol, round the neck of the bride by the bridegroom was the characteristic feature of marriage among the people. Christians adopted this practice, but with certain modifications. The distinguishing feature of Christian *tali* was the cross made of twenty-one small gold balls.⁵³ It is fitting to recall the prayer of the priest at the time of the blessing of the *tali*:

O Lord, You, by Your death on the cross, have earned the Church as Your bride; bless this thali that unites the bride and the groom in mutual trust and love. May this thali, the very symbol of unity, bind them to indivisible love and fullness of fidelity. May the cross, embossed on it, give them strength to bear cheerfully the sorrows of life, and to lead a life pleasing to You. May this also be a symbol of their fidelity.⁵⁴

Another important thing that is blessed in the marriage is the *mantrakodi*, special colourful and costly sari for the occasion of marriage. The blessing formula discloses the faith of the community:

O, merciful Lord, who adorns the human soul with the enduring mantle of grace, bless this manthrakodi. Help this bride and groom put You on through their mutual love and self-giving. O Lord, who clothed the holy Church, Your bride, in the mantle of glory, make this couple worthy to put on the robe of glory in heaven after a life of sanctity on earth.⁵⁵

It is also verifiable in the ceremony of *Antyeshti*, funeral, where the memory of the dead were elaborate. Saint Thomas Christians followed the East Syrian Ritual for the burial of the dead. "All the subsequent feasts celebrated in memory of the dead were in name and nature Hindu, but Christianised by the prayer and blessings of priests."⁵⁶ Although externally they looked almost the same, "the meaning and symbolic signification of these customs had nothing in common or similar. For example, fire is the symbolic representation of Christ (Lux) among Christians, while it is the symbolic representation of god (Agni) among the Hindus."⁵⁷ Comparative practices and their specific symbolization are given below:

The Hindus give importance to purification with 'Sacred Water'. The Christians use holy water for purification. In place of the sacred thread of the Brahmins, the Christians use of a chord round the neck with a cross or a medal, which is never removed. Now the scapular is also used, together with the chord or alone around the neck. . . . The 'Nercha' in the Church of the Christians is similar to the 'Prasada' of the Hindu temples⁵⁸

The flagstaff in front of the church is something similar to that found on the temple campus. But the cross on the flagstaff was a typical sign of their faith in Christ. So also the flag-hoisting in connection with the celebration was common to the religious ethos of Kerala. Saint Thomas Christians also had the practice of flag-hoisting which signalled the beginning of the festivities. Obviously the flag bore the image of the cross. The ancient church building looked like a pagoda structure, but the cross on the top of it and the interior of the construction was a manifestation of their Christian faith. Another important practice in connection with the temple worship was the *parikrama*, walking in reverence around the temple in veneration of the Lord, which was, of course, on individual piety for the Hindus. The Saint Thomas Christians also had a similar practice in connection with the solemn festivities. The whole assembly of the faithful took out processions around the church proclaiming their faith in the Lord as a pilgrim community.

The faith of the Saint Thomas Christians in Christ and their veneration of the Cross were outstanding. *Mar Tomma Margam*, the Law of Thomas, is the quintessential of their faith and life. It was their faith in Christ which earned a name and fame for them in the society. They devised means and ways to disclose their faith in Christ in a simple but significant manner. It was their faith which gave them an identity and a sense of community.

4. THE ORIENTAL DEPTH OF THE SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS

Saint Thomas Christians lived their faith in Christ on the path of the cultural milieu of India which was nurtured and fostered by the depth of the East Syrian Liturgy. It was in the loving providence of God that the Saint Thomas Christians could maintain the liturgical and ecclesial traditions of the East Syrian Church. In addition, the ethos of the East Syrian Liturgy was in tune with the melody of the Indian music of prayer, fasting, asceticism, etc.

An essential constitutive element of Saint Thomas Christians is their worship, which is oriental in essence. From the sources available, it is evident that Saint Thomas Christians celebrated the East Syriac or Chaldean liturgy. It is the general opinion that "the Malabar church accepted the Rite and the sacraments of the Chaldean Church as her own at an early date. Aramaic, which in its north-east dialectical is called East-Syriac, is substantially the same as the Aramaic spoken by our Lord and the Apostles."⁵⁹ But it is important to note that "In the theoretical understanding and administration of the sacraments they followed, as in other things, the East-Syrian or Chaldean Church, but with necessary local adaptations and modifications."⁶⁰

From Vatican Syriac Codex 22, it is clear that the Thomas Christians had the liturgical rite and language (East Syriac called also Chaldean) of the Seleucian Church at least in 1301, the year in which the Codex in question was written in Cranganore by a Thomas Christian. The Synod of Seleucia

of 410 had decreed that all Churches under Seleucia had to follow the rite of that Church. Among the Thomas Christians there is not to be seen any vestige of any other liturgical rite or language that existed among them previous to 1301. Owing to the frequent relations of Malabar with Mesopotamia and Persia it may be supposed that the East Syrian liturgical rite (the rite of the Seleucian Church) was from early times known to the Thomas Christians.⁶¹

The appellation *Mar Thoma margam* or *the Law of Thomas* was an endearing title and it represents the ethos and the path of the Saint Thomas Christians. The St. Thomas Christians used the term *Law of Thomas* to mean the sum total of their faith in Christ celebrated in liturgy and life. "By this heritage, they meant the sum total of their ecclesial life comprising their liturgy, theology, spirituality and discipline. Mar Thoma Christians esteemed their East Syrian Liturgy as the most precious part of the *Law of Thomas*, though they adopted or christianised many of their local social customs so as to suit the externals of their Christian life."⁶² They treasured very much in heart the *Law of Thomas*. They considered the *Law of Thomas* a great patrimony and it was the warp and woof of their spiritual life. "The remarkable feature of this *Law of Thomas* was that it was thoroughly Christian, Oriental and Malabarian at the same time, being well adapted to the socio-cultural life of Malabar."⁶³ It may be of historical importance to note that "One of the major concerns of the synod of Diamper was that the St. Thomas Christians should give up their belief that the Law of St. Thomas was unique and it was different from the Law of St. Peter."⁶⁴ In connection with the *Law of Thomas*, it is important to note that "The St. Thomas Christians esteemed their East Syrian liturgical heritage as an integral part of their apostolic heritage. Their attachment to this language and liturgy was very deep rooted."⁶⁵

According to some authors, "Baptism and Confirmation were administered together according to the East Syrian Rite."⁶⁶ During the baptism they were given Christian biblical or Christian names. "Christian names received modifications so as to suit Malabar tastes. Thus Jacob became Chacko, Chakkappan, etc., Thomas Thommi, Thomman, etc., Anne Annama, Annakutty, etc. In all these no Mesopotamian touch could be discerned at all."⁶⁷ The Thomas Christians had the greatest respect towards the Most Holy Eucharist.⁶⁸ It is said that "Bread (as a rule leavened) freshly baked was brought to the priest on a fresh leaf just before the Offertory. The Eucharistic wine was prepared from dry grapes. Chalices used to be adorned with small bells suspended around the brim."⁶⁹ There was the practice of priests blessing "the sick, to read the Gospel over them and to attach to their bodies pieces of palm leaf or paper on which were written versicles from the Sacred Scripture."⁷⁰ It is recorded that young men used to be ordained priests.⁷¹ Children used to be married before puberty. The parents chose the partners for their sons and daughters.⁷² It is observed, "Instead of the wedding-

ring prescribed in the East Syrian Rite the Thomas Christians had a small gold ornament *tali* which the boy tied to the neck of the girl."⁷³

The East Syrian Ritual was followed for the burial of the dead.⁷⁴ All the fasts and abstinences prescribed by the East Syrian Rite were scrupulously being observed by the Thomas Christians.⁷⁵ The chief fasts of the Thomas Christians were: "24 days before Christmas, 3 days a fortnight and more before the great lent, 49 days before the feast of the Assumption of our Lady, 12 Fridays after Christmas, the eve of the feast of the Transfiguration. . . . In addition to the fasts mentioned above, they kept another one of 7 days in honour of our Lady, and it began on the 1st of September. This fast was special to women."⁷⁶ For the observance of fasts and abstinences, as well as of feast, the day was computed from sunset to sunset.⁷⁷

The Holy Week was observed in a special way by keeping vigils in churches, by giving alms lavishly and by long prayers.⁷⁸ Among the important feasts was Epiphany, called *rakkuli* (night bath) in some places. On that feast day, tradition says, the Thomas Christians bathed at night in rivers or canals in memory of our Lord's baptism. In some other places for the same feast torches are lighted during the night and people cry out *el paiya* (God is bright) referring to the manifestation of our Lord.⁷⁹ In this manner the feast of Epiphany was a celebration of the Baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan and it commemorated Jesus as the sun of the world. The feast of *dukrana*, the memorial day of Mar Thoma Sliha, is celebrated most solemnly on 3 July; the solemn form of the liturgy, *Raze* is celebrated on this day.⁸⁰

It is important to recognize the contribution of the East Syrian connection with the Saint Thomas Christians as far as the latter's survival is concerned. Had the East Syrian Church not been in relationship with the Saint Thomas Christians, Christian faith and tradition in India might have been absorbed into the cultural matrix of India. Historians attach importance to the dependence of Saint Thomas Christians on the East Syrian Church, "Perhaps the community of the Thomas Christians was able to maintain a strong Christian tradition on account of this dependence."⁸¹

It is the depth of the Oriental liturgy which was instrumental in keeping the faithful informed about and confirmed in, their walk of faith along the path of Saint Thomas in the Indian peninsula. The experiential depth of the East Syrian Liturgy sustained the Saint Thomas Christians on their path of following the faith in Christ.

5. THE ADMINISTRATIVE WORTH OF THE SAINT THOMAS CHRISTIANS

While the Saint Thomas Christians were ecclesiastically dependent on the East Syrian Church, it is to be noted that some of the local practices also influenced in the administration of the Church. Hence it has contributed to the development of a peculiar administrative system in the Church.

The Thomas Christians “had hierarchical dependence on the Seleucian Church till the end of XVI century.”⁸² Practically the bishops had to be “content with the exercise of “the power of order” in which, not seldom, was also included the faculty to confer baptism. The regulation of worship according to the rite, and a general vigilance in matters canonical, were also reserved to the bishops.”⁸³ “Though the Oriental Institute of the Archdiaconate headed the central administration of the Malabar Church, the functioning of the local churches was in tune with the social and religious customs of Malabar.”⁸⁴

The word *yogam* has different meanings. The meaning that suits our context is “assembly” or “meeting” or “gathering.” *Yogam* was an assembly of the community, not simply of the laity.⁸⁵ *Yogam* was a three tier structure being placed at the parish level, at the regional level, and at the level of the whole Thomas Christian community.⁸⁶ There were three types of *yogam* – *Edavaka yogam* or ‘parish assembly’, *Pradesika yogam* or ‘regional assembly’, *Potuyogam* or *Sabhayogam*, which is the general assembly representing the whole community.⁸⁷

The administration of local churches was carried out by the assembly of the parishioners consisting of adult males and local priests. The senior priest was president, so to say, of the local priests (*desathupattakar*), and he arranged the services in the church. The system is still continued among the non-catholic Thomas Christians. The assembly spoken of above looked after the temporalities of the church, and also after the whole Christian life of the local community. This assembly decided cases of public scandal, inflicting punishments which sometimes amounted to excommunication.⁸⁸

Yogam, or assembly, was the most important organ in the administration of the Saint Thomas Christian community. “As there was no system of *Yogam* in the East Syrian church or in the western churches, this could be described as the most significant element of Thomas Christians’ identity,”⁸⁹ as far as administration is concerned. The Thomas Christians had an organisation and constitution distinct from those of the Seleucian Church with which they had hierarchical and liturgical relations.⁹⁰ According to historians, “the Malabar Church adopted the Canon Law of the Chaldean Church for its use, but with necessary modification, giving due importance to local customs and traditions.”⁹¹

6. TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF THE WAY

Inculturation is not a finished product, but it is an ongoing process. Therefore, there is the need for a constant and consistent dialogue with the culture of the people. For St Anselm theology is “faith seeks understanding.” According to Jonas Thaliath, theology is “faith seeking harmony of life.”⁹² In this search, Christ is the key to theology. Going a step further, to my mind, theology is faith seeking celebration of life in Christ. In all these attempts to articulate theology, it is

evident that faith is fundamental to theological investigation. So too, in inculturation faith is basic to the dynamics. Since no culture is perfect or ideal, the interaction of faith with culture should promote the transformation of culture. It is to say that faith in Christ must inspire the process of inculturation, integration, and integrity with a sense of identity. Saint Thomas Christians succeeded in taking roots in the culture of India; it has also contributed to the development of culture. There is an area where faith has not really touched the life of the people, namely, to challenge and change the caste system prevalent in the society. It is highly important to proclaim and practise that in faith we are one in Christ.

The followers of Christ were initially called that "who belong to the Way" (Acts 9:2). Jesus revealed himself as "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). He is the way to God, the Father. He is the true way to life and His way is the way to life through death; it is the way of the cross. To walk the Way is the privilege and challenge of every disciple of Christ, wherever one may be. It is a pilgrimage to the fullness of life. It is a *marga*, path or way. India is a land of *marga*, path and *yatra*, pilgrimage. In India, there are many *margas* recommended for God-realisation, *jnana marga* (path of knowledge), *karma marga* (path of action), *bhakti marga* (path of devotion), to name only a few most popular ones. It is important to note that Saint Thomas Christians described their "religion as *Marthommayude margavum vazhipadum* 'the way and lineage of St. Thoma's.'⁹³ One of the traditional songs is *Margam Kali Pattu*,⁹⁴ the sport-song of the way. The new convert was called *margavasi*, the wayfarer. All these appellations and attributes attached to the Saint Thomas Christians are a candid testimony to the Christian identity in the context of cultural plurality. The theology of the way is ever new and ever old to the Christian theology and spirituality, which could be considered the hallmark of the Saint Thomas Christians of India, congenial to their cultural ethos.

In the past, the Saint Thomas Christians were having a lived-theology than an articulated one. They were living a theology of dialogue, dialogue with other faiths, when it was unheard of in the West. It was a theology of co-existence and co-operation. "They had, however, developed a theological vision and a lifestyle of their own which somehow or other were congenial to the ground realities of their social-cultural and religious milieu. It was a vision and life of coexistence and of respect for other faiths."⁹⁵ The Saint Thomas Christians were living in harmony with the people of other faiths. While they retained their Christian faith and identity, they were part and parcel of the society and culture. There are scholars who argue that Eastern theological approaches and attitudes are congenial to that of Indian religions and spirituality.⁹⁶ The theology of Saint Thomas Christians was "the theology built-into tradition and way of life."⁹⁷ Felix Wilfred admits the importance of liturgy in the life of Saint Thomas Christians, "If anywhere liturgy has been *locus theologicus*, it was most certainly among the Thomas Christians. It was almost exclusively by liturgy that this Christian community was nourished

in faith. The theology in-built into its liturgy was christocentric."⁹⁸ Emphasizing the socio-cultural identification of Saint Thomas Christians, Antony Mukkenthottam observes as follows, "Oneness with their socio-cultural milieu implies an implicit incarnational theology lived, an awareness that Christ in becoming man assumed everything human and redeemed all social and cultural values."⁹⁹ In the context of an emerging theology of religions, Mathias Mundadan opines, "Today in the light of modern theological approaches to world religions one must admit that the vision of the Indian Christians was a more enlightened one than that of their European contemporaries."¹⁰⁰ In addition, he remarks, "This communal harmony and spirit of tolerance should be considered a typical Indian contribution to the Christian vision."¹⁰¹ The author gives a critical overview of the theology of pre-seventeenth century Saint Thomas Christians. He classifies the salient features under four categories, namely, an implicit Incarnational theology, a lived theology of other faiths, a practiced theology of a particular or individual church, and theological training of clergy.¹⁰² All these characteristic traits of the theology of the Saint Thomas Christians are solid and significant directions to develop a theology in an age of globalization.

Besides the above features of theology of Saint Thomas Christians, it is of paramount importance to investigate into liturgical resourcefulness and richness that contribute to a genuine theology of the church. Varghese Pathikulangara convincingly argues that "Worship is a communal act of the Church, by which she reveals, actualizes, lives and proclaims her authentic nature."¹⁰³ James Aerthayil has attempted to articulate a spirituality and theology of the Saint Thomas Christians founded on the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Liturgy, for the oriental churches, is *fontes theologiae* and *magistra dogmatis*. The correlation of '*lex orandi*' and '*lex credendi*' is evident in the public worship of the church. This truth is highlighted in the teaching of Vatican II. In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the Council emphasizes, "The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows."¹⁰⁴ If this is true, it is enough to examine the Divine Liturgy to trace the theological, moral, spiritual, and ecclesial understanding of a Christian community, for it houses the sublime articulation of the theology and praxis. "Hence the rule of faith is developed and taught in and through the rule of worship."¹⁰⁵ Further, J. Aerthayil observes, "In the Chaldean Liturgy, especially in the Divine Office, all the mysteries of our faith are explained in a simple manner but with a profound theological understanding and through an original formulation."¹⁰⁶ The pioneering work of Varghese Pathikulangara, *Resurrection, Life and Renewal*¹⁰⁷ is an excellent example of elucidating a theology of the Saint Thomas Christians. If theology is 'faith seeking understanding,' or 'harmony of life,' or 'celebration of life in Christ,' a concise and comprehensive treatise on it is found in the content and structure of the liturgy. "As far as the mystery of Christ is concerned, every Eucharistic celebration portrays a live picture of it, concise though. A more elaborate and

programmatic presentation of the mystery of Christ is found in the arrangement of the liturgical year of the Church, which gradually and seasonally unfolds the mystery of Christ with more detail and depth."¹⁰⁸ Theology is for life. Theological investigations are for the transformation of life, culminating in the transfiguration of life in Christ. Liturgy supports and promotes this process of programmatic progression. The thanksgiving prayer of the faithful in the Eucharistic liturgy unveils the dynamics of this transformation:

This prayer echoes the transformation that has already taken place in the participants by virtue of the active participation in the *Qurbana*, and especially through the communion of the holy mysteries and the complete transformation they desire earnestly, which would not be limited to the four walls of the church, where they have assembled and worshipped, but spontaneously permeates and pervades every arena of everyday life, which finds its final fulfillment in the presence of the Lord in the eschaton.¹⁰⁹

Therefore, there is no mistake in understanding that the liturgy of Saint Thomas Christians provides a solid and candid theology. This does not mean that it is an elaborated articulated theology. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it is a theology congenial to the Indian ethos, which has the following characteristics: *anubhava* (experience or contemplation), *avatarana* (expression or communication), and *anugamana* (following or commitment). All these characteristics of theology are found and expounded in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy of the Saint Thomas Christians. These features are typically Indian, Eastern, and Christian, a manifestation of a genuine and authentic Asian ethos. Liturgy is "the authentic participation and involvement of the man of today in the mystery of Christ and in the history of salvation."¹¹⁰ Divine Liturgy is a means to enter into and experience the mystery of Christ, which is the foundation of all theology. So also it is an efficient means to express or communicate the faith of the community, for celebration of the liturgy is an unfolding of the faith-deposit of the community. The Liturgy requires and enables the people to follow the path of the Lord. The Liturgy of the Saint Thomas Christians is an invitation to "Come and see" (John 1:39). This is a response to the quest for contemplation, which is fundamentally Christian, Indian, and Oriental in essence as far as religious experience is concerned; it also directs people to action and commitment, "Let all the people on earth know that You alone are the true God, the Father, and that You sent Your beloved Son Jesus Christ."¹¹¹ The *Mar Thoma Marga*, the way of Saint Thomas, presents a pattern for doing theology as well. Taking a lead from the biblical accounts of Saint Thomas the apostle, it is possible to delineate certain features for doing theology in the pluralistic context of India, namely, courage and conviction, the humility to admit our ignorance and the nobility to be open, and genuine comments and total commitment.¹¹²

7. CONCLUSION

In the light of what we have seen, it is legitimate to state that the Saint Thomas Christians were *margavasis*, people who belonged to the Way, walking the Way of the Lord Jesus Christ in the promised land and at the same time the people of India. They were in dialogue with social, religious, cultural, economic, and political context of their milieu. In this connection, the description of theology as “faith seeking harmony of life,” is most fitting and right. They lived a theology of the Way – the *marga* of the Master – following the example of Saint Thomas the apostle, who encouraged his companions, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). The Church of Saint Thomas Christians was committed to the Lord and did not hesitate to declare Jesus Christ as “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

The Church of Saint Thomas Christians was Indian in culture, Christian in faith, and Oriental in worship. All these appellations are different aspects of a single reality, meaning, Saint Thomas Christians were rooted in the land of India, supported by Christian faith, and promoted by East Syrian Liturgy. Taking all the three characteristics of Saint Thomas Christians together, we may note that all of them are Asian in origin and sing in unison. It is a question of all in one and one in all. There is a perfect cohesion, and no reason for confusion and conflict as a few might speculate.¹¹³ This will pave the way for the theological principle of interreligious dialogue, to be oneself and to be growing and going beyond the boundaries.

In all sincerity and humility, one has to admit that there is no much written theology that the Saint Thomas Christians can claim till the beginning of the nineteenth century, there is no dearth of a lived theology. Theology is for *theosis* and to have fullness of life in Christ. A. Mookenthottam comments, “All that we have seen so far points to an incarnational theology lived though not committed to writing in theological form. A theology lived strikes deeper roots than the exercise of mere speculation.”¹¹⁴ Beyond doubt, the faith in Christ was the core of Saint Thomas Christians as an Oriental Church in Asia. The East Syriac Liturgy of the Saint Thomas Christians served them in experiencing and entering into the mystery of Christ and expressing it through their life.

Christ is the foundation, force, and focus of the Saint Thomas Christians. The cross or the name of Christ marked the distinctive feature of their life. The Saint Thomas Cross is a beautiful symbol of their integrity of faith and integration of the ethos, for “Mar Thoma Sliba (St. Thomas Cross) is the dynamic symbol of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Indian context. It proclaims the Theological, Christological, Pneumatological and Ecclesial specifications of Christian faith.”¹¹⁵ At the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration, there is the solemn singing of *Puqdankon* (Your commandment) by the celebrant and the community replies, *puqdaneh da-Msiha* (The commandment of Christ). “This points to the

Christianisation of one of the social customs of the Thomas Christians."¹¹⁶ All these things tell volumes on the way of integrity of faith and dialogue of the Saint Thomas Christians of India, an oriental Church – the Syro-Malabar Church – of apostolic origin and in communion with the Catholic Church.

To conclude this reflection it will be fitting to quote from *Unitatis Redintegratio* of Vatican II:

With regard to the authentic theological tradition of the Orientals, we must recognize that they are admirably rooted in Holy Scriptures, fostered and given expression in liturgical life, and nourished by the living tradition of the apostles and by the writings of the Fathers and spiritual authors of the East. They are directed toward a right ordering of life, indeed toward a full contemplation of Christian truth.¹¹⁷

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The Uniqueness of Christ in the Asian Context of Religious Pluralism: Challenges and Pastoral Solutions

Jacob Parappally, MSFS

The Mystery of Christ has been made into a problem in theological discourses, inter-religious dialogues and even for a harmonious living among the people of different cultures and ideologies. Often what does not occur to some believers in Jesus Christ is that God's dwelling among humans as a human in space and time does not make God an object of even theological investigation. Certainly, we can speak about God's revelation about himself in the cosmos and in history and above all, his self-revelation in history by being with us as a human. It is even possible to speculate about it. Therefore, Christological reflections are legitimate. However, the mystery of Christ is beyond all speculations. For some even the question of 'uniqueness of Christ' itself is an affront to the mystery of Christ which cannot fall into the category of any individuation or comparison. One can only grow in faith in the realization that he or she belongs to mystery of Christ which surpasses all human understanding and categories of expression. No explanation about Christ can exhaust the mystery of Christ. One can only surrender to this sublime and ineffable Mystery and realize in the course of one's journey of life that he or she is a unique dimension of the Reality of Christ rather than speculating about the uniqueness of Christ. Only possible response to this grace of realizing that one belongs to mystery of Christ is worship in its true sense. However, a believer in Christ cannot escape the questions about him raised by those who have not encountered Jesus Christ.

In the context of Asia where there are so many religions as well as so many poor people, questions are often raised about the person and mission of Jesus Christ. On the one hand the Christological reflection cannot be separated from the actual life-situation of the people but on the other hand one must overcome the tendency of a crypto-nestorianism that separates humanity and divinity in Christ and makes him only a liberator of the people from socio-political, cultural and religious oppression and discrimination. The understanding of uniqueness of Christ in the Western world which is predominantly Christian is different from the understanding of the uniqueness of Christ in the Asian context. In Asia, any discussion about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the context of a plurality of religions would reduce the Person of Christ into any one of founders of a religion or a great religious teacher of moral precepts. How does it happen? We are articulating our Christic experience in a category of thought which may be meaningful in the Western world-view, but does not convey the same meaning in another world-view. A typical

example of such a difference in the understanding of a truth due to the difference of the world-views is the expression 'the uniqueness of Christ'. A Christian believer experiences Christ as the absolute meaning or the beginning and the end of his or her life. However, if this experience is expressed in the category of *uniqueness*, it not only obscures the content of this experience but also conveys the opposite of what is intended by this confessional statement. In fact, there is nothing that can be compared or contrasted with the reality of Christ. But when this faith-experience is translated into a world-view different from its original articulation it distorts the content and meaning of the originary experience. No argument or explanation can change a world-view. Only genuine dialogue with openness to the Spirit of Truth can lead the partners in dialogue to have some insights that go beyond the understanding. Therefore, in sharing the Christian experience of Christ, what theology understands by the expression *uniqueness of Christ* needs to be communicated with a pastoral concern and commitment to Truth.

What a Christian believer understands by the so called uniqueness of Christ may be communicated to those who do not share the Christian world-view as the experience of Jesus as the absolute meaning of one's life. The quest for meaning is universal. In this context the question often raised is 'What is the absolute significance or meaning of human existence?' Someone or something cannot give absolute meaning and significance to human existence if it is not of infinite and absolute value. It cannot be anything other than the infinite Other, God himself. Humans can discover themselves, the meaning or significance of their lives only by referring to the source and destiny of their lives. In their discovery of themselves they discover who God is. In this process humans can discover, though they may not always, that they belong to the mystery of God. Though distinct from themselves they are not separate from God. He is not then the absolute Other, the God of the philosophers but the God of relationship because "in him we move, live and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

1. Identifying and Recognizing Christ in Asia

How is Jesus Christ recognized and known in the Asian context of religious pluralism? How would one distinguish him from other gods, goddesses and founders of religions? Here, the question is about his identification in the Asian context. In the past the Western missionaries dismissed the worship of different gods and goddesses by Hindus and others as a pernicious superstition, a horrendous worship of devils, a blatant idolatry or the affirmation of an untenable pantheistic belief system. They hoped that it would slowly fade away with the advent of Western education and eventual secularization of the society. They affirmed that all these mythological divine figures would disappear with the passage of time when the believers realize that a god with an elephant-head or a monkey-head and thousands of such manifestations could not have existed in reality but only in the fertile imagination of those who have created them. But they are all there with a wider acceptance and a stronger appeal even among the educated classes. They are

worshipped with festive celebrations, pilgrimages, special prayers, fasting and other religious observances. Do such practices and the belief behind such practices tell us something about religious attitude of the people? Doesn't it indicate that there is a different type of spirituality, not based on spatio-temporal symbols and representations however bizarre they may appear to be. Due to its irrational and superstitious external expressions this popular religiosity may be dismissed by others who do not share the world-view of this people. It would indicate that for a large majority of the people of Asia, whatever is externally seen in the sphere of religion whether mythical or historical would not make much difference as long as it is a medium of entering into communion with the Absolute or God who is beyond such forms or names and is affirmed by using their own genius by those who are real seekers of the Truth.

People have the innate need to be connected to everything that transcends them especially with the absolute reality which they acknowledge as the One beyond name and form. Therefore, whatever be the form through which one establishes this relationship is unimportant, but they realize the need to be related to this reality is important. Where is the place of Jesus Christ in the pluralistic religious context of Asia? Is he like Rama or Krishna, the incarnated appearances or *avatars* of Vishnu in Hinduism? Or is he like those historical founders of religions like the ascetic Mahavira or the Buddha, the enlightened one with a prophetic mission? Or a prophet who revealed God's will like Mohammed? The Christian answer would be an emphatic, "No."

The Christian proclamation claims that Jesus Christ cannot be compared with any of the gods of the Hindus or with the Buddha, the enlightened or with Mohammed, the prophet. Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God. He is the Lord. He lived and died at a particular time and place. He was the expected Messiah. He saved humans from sin and meaningless death by his own death on the cross and by his resurrection. He is the only mediator and saviour. All these faith affirmations and historical facts are absolutely clear to a Christian believer. But all these identifications of Jesus Christ and faith affirmations would not be meaningful to those who do not share the Judeo-Christian view of God, humans and the world. Some would respect this view of the Christians; sometimes they may even be sympathetic to the Christian claims. But some have real theological, epistemological or ideological problems with the Christian claim.

For people who are convinced of such an understanding of mystery of God, even a historical reality, however unique it is, as the self-revelation of God in history as in the case of Jesus Christ, would be one among many revelations of God. The Western theology's obsession with the historicity of God's self-revelation or oft repeated affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ would not be intelligible to the Asian religious mind. The content of the faith-affirmation in the uniqueness of Christ needs to be expressed in another language and idiom.

It is a serious theological problem, for example, for the Hindu mind when Jesus Christ who is a particular historical person is proclaimed to be the only Saviour and God. For the Hindu view of reality it is not a "folly" to proclaim a historical person as Lord and God or Son of God. They would affirm that there were many such persons and each one of them had a particular and unique message to give. It is the exclusive claim that Jesus is the only Saviour and Lord that would not find an echo in the Hindu mind. Moreover, the over emphasis on the historical existence of Jesus Christ as if the historical dimension were to be the only important dimension of reality is not acceptable to those who hold that the spatio-temporal existence, perhaps, is the least aspect of the whole of Reality. In other words, whatever is real need not necessarily be historical. Such a notion is not alien to the Christian world-view as certain fundamental Christian faith-affirmations are based on the real but not on historical facts. Further, the belief in a God, who can relate to humans only after the historical reality of Jesus on earth and only with those who believe in him, seem to be partisan, exclusive and unconcerned about millions and millions of humans who may never come to believe in him.

There are both epistemological and ideological problems connected with the understanding and proclamation of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Asian context of religious pluralism. The epistemological problem consists in attributing universality to something particular and historically limited. Jesus Christ, as presented by the traditional Christian proclamation, cannot claim any universality because he is presented as a tribal God or sectarian God, who seems to exclude all who have other names for the Ultimate reality whom he claims to reveal. The ideological problem connected with the understanding the person and mission of Jesus Christ is that he is brought by the colonial powers that oppressed the people, destroyed their national identity and violated their sovereignty and robbed them of their wealth. The image of Christ as the Lord and God of the ruthless colonizers naturally would not appeal to those who seek liberation not only the liberation of their own selves but also from socio-economic and political oppression.

The believers in Christ insist on his particularity and uniqueness that distinguishes him from other saviours and mediators. But in the process they have made him one of the incarnations who is to be approached by cult and rituals and other religious observances similar to those followed by people who believe in the gods and the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Therefore, Jesus Christ of the Christian proclamation does not challenge the listeners to make a radical decision to encounter him and experience their own liberation and the transformation their society. For them he is the Christian God, one among many.

An identification of Jesus is necessary but it should not be the repetition of those symbols and images of identification emerged in a particular cultural context which would not be meaningful in the Asian context. The creative commitment to Jesus' tradition is to discover in the Asian context those symbols and thought patterns

that would reveal the real identity of Jesus Christ that they can encounter him and discover the mystery of their own being in relation with him and in solidarity with others and with the world.

III Christic Identity in the Asian Context

A meaningful faith-affirmation and proclamation of Christ in the Asian context must be the one that articulates the Christic identity in a way that is intelligible, challenging and decisive for the seekers of Truth. Then they encounter Jesus Christ as the beginning and of their lives. When the mystery of Christ is thus encountered as the meaning of their lives they would find the meaning of human existence in the world offering them a transforming and joyful insight into the mystery of their own being in relation to other humans, God and the world.

The NT witness gives a deep insight into the fact that the proclamation of Jesus cannot be and should not be limited to his historical identification but an identity that transcends historical limitations. Yet it should not exclude the historical dimension of Christ's existence. This mode of existence which connects the historical and transhistorical is not something unfamiliar to the Christian tradition. The traditional Christian world-view and Christian anthropology speak of a continued existence of humans that transcends historical existence but determined by it. Human existence begins in history but goes beyond it. This mode of existence includes a transformed historical existence beyond the ordinary existence in history. For this, I have no other term that expresses it other than an apparently contradictory term *inclusive transcendence*. The Christian faith-affirmation of the Christic identity includes the pre-existence of the Word, its historical existence and its trans-historical existence. There are various instances of such a Christic identity in the New Testament as *inclusive transcendence*, for example, the apostolic encounter with Jesus in his historical existence as well as with Jesus' trans-historical mode of being as the Risen Lord, Paul's encounter with the resurrected and yet suffering Christ, the cosmic Christology of Paul and the Logos Christology of John. They all refer to the whole reality of Christ, namely, his pre-existence, historical existence and trans-historical continued existence articulated in the Christian confession, "Jesus Christ is same, yesterday, today and for ever" (Heb 13:8).

While the reality of Christ transcends space and time it includes the historical dimension of Jesus Christ which was limited by space and time. The question of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ may be discussed with regard to the identification of Jesus Christ because he was also a historical existence but it cannot be applied to his entire reality that includes but transcends space and time. Therefore his true identity brought into the question of his uniqueness.

R. Panikkar has convincingly shown that a mere identification of Jesus would make him only one of the founders of religion, a "remarkable Jewish teacher, who had the fortune or misfortune of being put to death rather young".¹ The identity of

Jesus Christ is the living Christ who is encountered and the Mystery in which one is involved, the Mystery that is encountered as the bond of everything Divine, Human and Cosmic, without separation, division or confusion but distinct and different from one another. But this Jesus Christ is not an a-personal principle. "The Christ that 'sits at the right hand of the Father', is the first-born of the universe, born of Mary: he is Bread as well as the hungry, naked, or imprisoned." ²

To recognize this identity of Christ is both a grace and a task. When he is encountered as the only mediator of everything human, divine and material, each human being is given a insight into the mystery of his or her own being. In this mystery of Christ one is called to become what he or she really is. Then everything and everyone is recognized as a *Christophany*, a manifestation of the reality of Christ. In this insight lies, perhaps, the deepest meaning of the Eucharist, the greatest Sacrament of communion where God, human and the world, the Absolute and the relative, the Infinite and finite historical and trans-historical, material and spiritual unite without losing the distinction and difference of each but inextricably united to one another. Such an understanding of the Christic identity challenges the one who is committed to Christ to be responsible for one's own unfolding as a person in radical relationship to others, struggling with others to create situations where humans can authentically become humans, to be responsible for the entire creation, to be open to celebrate plurality and embrace everything that 'God has cleansed' (Acts 10:1.5).

Therefore it is imperative for Christology to re-capture the NT witness to the whole Christ, the insights of the Patristic theology of Trinity and Christology and the *advaitic* intuition to articulate the universal significance of Jesus Christ challenging to encounter into the mystery of his identity. This can meaningfully explain his presence in everyone who is searching for meaning of the mystery of their being and in everything that is eagerly waits for liberation.

3. Pastoral Solutions to the Challenges of the Meaning of Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism.

In the context of many religions in Asia that claim to be ways of liberation from the misery of human existence, the Christian claim of the uniqueness of Christ as saviour from a phenomenological perspective would be considered by the people of other religions as an untenable, exclusivistic, arrogant and triumphalistic position. A theological approach to the question of uniqueness stating that Christ is *the only saviour* and an implicit affirmation that the membership of the Church is necessary for salvation would create enormous problems for dialogue with other religions which would consider Christ one among many saviours and mediators as well as the Church as a sociological entity. Therefore, it is important to for a Christian disciple to communicate the mystery of Christ from his or her experience of the Christic identity which transcends the question about the

uniqueness of Christ whether it is approached from a phenomenological, historical or theological perspective.

The gift of faith in Christ is a transforming experience that radically changes one's understanding of God, humans and the world. Paul's encounter with the risen and yet suffering Christ on the road to Damascus was such a transforming experience that changed his world-view radically. His understanding of God, religion, human beings, world and his own existence was changed in such a way that nothing mattered to him except Christ, the pre-existent, the crucified, the risen, the cosmic and the eschatological. He experienced every dimension of the reality in its newness hitherto unknown to him. He saw himself and those who encountered Christ and was transformed a new creation in Christ (II Cor 5:17) What he proclaimed in his ministry was the reality of Christ he encountered and continued to experience and what was handed over to him about Jesus Christ by those who encountered both the historical Jesus and the same as the risen Christ. Paul preached this Christ as 'the power of God and wisdom of God' though if objectively seen the crucified one would be, as he said, 'a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles' (1 Cor 1: 18-22).

A pastoral approach in communicating the Mystery of Christ in the context of the plurality of religions in Asia is to share about the *newness* of God's revelation in and through Jesus Christ rather than his uniqueness which does not convey the meaning of the reality of Christ. Therefore, it is important to proclaim what is *new* about the person and message of Jesus Christ. This *newness* must be communicated through meaningful words, actions and life-style rather than repeating terms which are unintelligible, exclusive and offensive to the people of other religions. The whole of apostolic witness and praxis was about the newness of God's action in history in the person of Jesus Christ that it became the *New Testament*. The covenantal relationship God established through him was interpreted and proclaimed as the *New Covenant*. Till the establishment of the *new heaven* and *new earth* this new message has to be proclaimed. Unlike the exclusive and univocal terms that we prefer to use to explain who Jesus Christ is, the challenging newness of Jesus Christ, if properly communicated, can bring many to encounter him.

Can we identify some of the elements that can communicate the *newness* of God's revelation in Jesus Christ that can adequately respond to the soteriological concerns of the people of other religions, their quest for integral liberation and their longing for harmony among humans, God and cosmos? I believe that it is possible and necessary in order to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the people of other religions and to invite them to experience Jesus Christ. Some of the elements of this *newness of Christic revelation* can be outlined as follows³:

1. In Jesus Christ one can encounter a self-emptying God, hitherto unknown in the history of revelation. In him the Absolute became relative, Infinite became

finite, God became human, Word became flesh (Jn 1:14). In him God came to serve and not to be served (Mk 10:45). Thus the self-emptying figure of Christ (Phil 2:7) can be encountered as the servant of everything perfect, good, true, beautiful and authentically liberative in all religious traditions whether Great or Little, Meta-cosmic or cosmic, unitive or messianic. He is not only the liberative potential of Asian religious traditions but has the power to actualise it in reality.

2. It must be a pastoral imperative to reveal to the people of other religions that the community of the disciples of Christ, the Church is a community that experienced the self-emptying Christ by its commitment to true ministry to the people of all religions and ideologies transcending the borders of the Christian community. If Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human as the Council of Chalcedon confesses and proclaims, he cannot but be what he revealed himself to be in history, the servant of God, humanity and the cosmos. In him is the self-disclosure of God that God is not only the Lord but also the servant of all and everything. This is the radical *kenosis*, the paradox of Christic revelation. "There is no other name" (Acts 4:12) that reveals this mystery of the God as a self-emptying God who becomes the servant of his own creation. The *newness* of Jesus Christ consists in his servanthood of everything authentically human, be it culture, religion, systems or structures. This self-emptying servanthood is expressed in the foot-washing of the disciples at the Last Supper (Jn 13:3-15). This revelation subverts all human categories of discrimination: superiority and inferiority, higher class and lower class, high caste, low caste and untouchable, patriarchalism and matriarchalism, male and female, Christian and Pagan, believers and non-believers, civilized and uncivilized etc. It challenges the religious and secular structures that perpetuate the systems of discrimination and dehumanisation and energizes the forces of liberation whether religious or secular.
3. The Christian community needs to live the self-emptying image of Jesus Christ. It should become really a Church of the poor which believes in the transforming power of Christ through his Spirit and lives it by empowering the powerless, entering into solidarity with them and energizing them to struggle for a fuller human life. The disciples of Christ need to share their experience of Christ who can liberate all people, whatever their religious beliefs may be, from the forces of alienation within themselves as well as within the structures and the systems which enslave them.
4. It is in the self-emptying community of the believers in Christ a new insight into mystery of God as a suffering God is revealed. God suffers when human suffer as he is absolute love itself. Love involves suffering. This new revelation

God in Jesus Christ has a tremendous influence on the people who suffer from oppressive images of God.

5. The Church through its committed and exemplary pastors, the faithful and through its institutions manifest the self-emptying Christ who can fulfill the longing of the Asian people for liberation from greed, acquisitiveness, egoism and the fragmentation of reality. He can reveal the necessity of an ethical religiosity for an integral liberation of the people transcending the exclusively cultic religiosity. Jesus Christ encountered by the community of the believers reveals a God who is not self-centered but human-centered. Therefore, the Church that is the sacrament of Christ, needs to fulfill Christ's prophetic function in the Asian context by challenging all the religious traditions including Christianity to be authentically anthropocentric and care for the whole creation.
6. The love of Christ must impel the Christian community to recognize and respond to the kenotic dimension of Christ in all that is authentically human wherever it is found. This Christ of their experience need to be shared as the one who can energize all those who encounter him to promote everything authentically human and liberative in the various religious traditions, cultures, and socio-political and economic systems. This faith-conviction is to be manifested by the community of the disciples of Christ or the Church by an attitude of respect, love and a kenotic loving service to all people, especially the poor and the marginalized. Thus, a possibility is opened to the people of other religions to encounter the kenotic Christ. The kenotic Christ of Christian experience would also empower the disciples to identify themselves with those who are committed to fight against the forces of unfreedom in order to build God's own Kingdom where the self-emptying of God is the source and model for communion and communities of justice, love, compassion, fellowship, peace, reconciliation and, indeed, wholeness. Thus, the mystery of Christ can be lived in the history of the struggles of the people of different religions and ideologies and a possibility is offered to all to encounter Christ and be transformed.

Conclusion:

The Christian faith-affirmation in the uniqueness of Christ for the salvation of humankind cannot be meaningfully and easily communicated in the Asian context of a multiplicity of religions which claim to be ways of salvation. The underlying faith-experience that is expressed in the confessional statement about the uniqueness of Christ needs to be articulated through a meaningful approach of the disciples of Christ to the people of various religions and cultures of Asia. Where a phenomenological and a theological approach may not only fail to communicate the truth about the Mystery of Christ but also may evoke negative attitudes and even a rejection of Christ by the people of other religions, a pastoral approach in communicating the mystery of Christ may be meaningful and effective.

The core of this pastoral approach in communicating what is meant by the expression 'uniqueness of Christ' is to live and share the experience of self-emptying God in and through Jesus Christ who reveals a God who becomes the servant of his own creation leading humans to unfold themselves as humans in freedom. The challenge to every disciple of Christ and the Church as a community is to witness to the kenotic Christ through its pastoral concern for the people of all religions by becoming truly the servant of the people as Christ did and through a radical commitment to integral liberation.

(Endnotes)

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- 2 R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Bangalore: ATC Publ. 1982), p. 27
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- 3 See J. Parappally, "The Challenging Newness of Jesus Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism," in *Christologia e Missione oggi*, eds. G.Colzani, P.Gioglioni, S.Karotemprel (Vatican City: Urbaniana University Press, 20010, pp.117-127

The Necessity of Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue to Promote the Common Good in Asia

Sr. Dr. Teresa Joseph fma

The Asian Continent is the continent of religions and cultures. This provides a concrete platform for the people of Asia to meet together as believers and to work together to promote peace and harmony. Asians develop their identity in a unique way: rooted in one's own religion and culture yet open to others.

*"The 'seeds of the Word' present in other religious experiences and traditions are touches of the Spirit of God, 'a sort of secret divine presence' (AG 9); this in the last analysis is why members of the Church are exhorted by her to 'acknowledge, preserve, and promote' (NA 2) through dialogue the spiritual values found among them."*¹

Inter-religious Dialogue

Far from competing with each other, the different paths proposed by the different religious traditions can become a powerful source to discern and recognize Christ's presence and the working of the Spirit, to become conscious of one's own identity and to promote the common good in Asia.

*"Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all."*²

This is made possible through joint collaboration and conscious efforts to pool resources together.

*"As an operative life-force within a people, religion offers new perceptions, new commitments, new patterns of social relations, as well as a series of new freedoms – from fear, from external pressures, even from certain civic laws. Thus early Christian communities were able to question, though not perhaps as radically as we today would have wished, slavery, marriage customs, military service, the place of women and children in society, and the like".*³

In the Asian Continent, dialogue between believers of various religions is carried out with the clear awareness that each one has his/her religious identity which needs to be strengthened and developed.

*"For today to be a person I must be inter-personal, to be religious I must be inter-religious. In other words, to be human and religious, besides tolerance, even more necessary is dialogue. Only thus can we genuinely be our authentic selves, true believers and truly human."*⁴

Inter-religious dialogue is considered as one of the powerful means to get to know other's religion and to deepen one's own.

*"I am convinced that the increased interest in dialogue between religions is one of the signs of hope present in the last part of this century (cf. Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 46). Yet there is a need to go further. Greater mutual esteem and growing trust must lead to still more effective and coordinated common action on behalf of the human family."*⁵

Inter-religious dialogue calls for standing in one's own religious world. Standing within and moving with believers of other religions. It is necessary that in the depth of any effort for interreligious dialogue there ought to be great openness and profound respect for the God of the other. Only when believers learn to dialogue with the language of their encounter with the Other, we can speak of genuine dialogue. The religious vision of a person can colour highly one's whole perspective.

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*"This is the central data of revelation which the Church brings to interreligious dialogue. It is the unending task of the Church to draw out the full significance and implication of this Jesus Christ-event for man's life and future and for the world. For this, the Church needs the religions and cultures. Through such dialogue the Church will learn 'what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in their religious books, in a marvellous variety of ways, different perhaps from our own, but through which we too, may hear His voice calling us to lift our hearts to the Father' (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 2nd Plenary Assembly, 1978)."*⁷

Today, the phenomenon of inter-religious encounters has sharpened, obscured and subsequently changed how believers understand themselves, even when they continue to insist on their uniqueness and incomparability. The fact of a plurality of living religious traditions now influence believers of all traditions and strongly affects how those believers think about themselves, their most basic beliefs, their cultural and theological reflections. Obviously intelligent and open dialogue with people of other religions calls for significant changes in every field of knowledge. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, John Paul II emphasised that: "Ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue constitute a veritable vocation for the Church".⁸ Much has been accomplished in the field of interreligious dialogue⁹ at various levels. The FABC¹⁰ documents¹¹ offer us a glimpse into the Asian Church's journey. In interreligious dialogue, Christians "are continually

evangelising the others and being evangelised by the others.”¹² It is worth mentioning The *Hong Kong experience of interreligious dialogue*¹³ which has two decades of experience of relations between the believers of six religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Taoism and Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

Understanding religions in the light of experience

*“A religion fades out of history when its symbols and institutions lose their capacity to evoke among its followers the distinctive salvific experience [including its behavioural consequences] that defines its essence. Did not this happen to the great religions of ancient Egypt, Rome, Greece, and Mesopotamia”.*¹⁴

Experience is made up of theory and practice. In order to initiate and sustain meaningful dialogue religions ought to be understood in the light of experience. Our focus here is on real experience of love, joy and suffering shared with others. From personal subjective experience is born a community. We can transfer this very same logic to a religious experience and why not remember here the first group of disciples of Jesus, the 12 of them who have shared and believed in the experience of Jesus the Lord and the five disciples who followed Buddha who shared and believed in the experience of Siddharta’s illumination? In both the above-mentioned cases, **experience** is at the basis and remains as the starting point. It is from experience narrated that the community of believers and followers is formed. Experience urges toward expression, or communication with others. As social beings we want to narrate what we have learned from experience. The hard-won meanings have to be said, painted, danced, dramatized, put into circulation.

*“I began to point out to students that no religion could be adequately conveyed via a text book. They were not hard to convince, since few of them could relate the textbook’s rather academic portrayal of Christianity to their own faith experience. Concluding that in all likelihood devotees of other faiths would have similar difficulty identifying their personal faith experience with the textbook’s abstract renderings of faith, I restructured the course, dousing less on learning about the religions (academic content) and more on learning from those who actually believed and tried to practice them.”*¹⁵

Apostle Paul the great missionary of the Church even today stands out as the champion of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. In him we meet one who was able to take his experience with Jesus to different cultures and religions. Marvellous results are brought to light when one is able to share the fruits of one’s religious experience with people of different religions and cultures. In this regard the figure of Paul shines out even today for his ability to cross barriers of every kind to encounter people of different cultures and religious backgrounds.

*"It seems clear that for Paul effective or power-laden preaching about Christ is possible when the preachers reflect in their personality the quality of authentic humanity about which they speak and it could hardly be otherwise once we recall that the sending of Jesus Christ inaugurates a new era in the Creator-creature relationship."*¹⁶

Human development takes place through cultural innovations. Religion, ritual and its symbolism play a significant role in helping the human person to become what he/she is called to be. The challenge is to place ourselves in some way inside religious processes in order to understand them. As a result the conversion experience can take place. A quote from Victor Turner may help to make this point clear.

*"After many years as an agnostic and monistic materialist, I learned from the Ndembu that ritual and its symbolism are not merely epiphenomena or disguises of deeper social and psychological processes but have ontological value, in same way related to man's condition as an evolving species, whose evolution takes place principally through its cultural innovations. I became convinced that religion is not merely a toy of the race's childhood, to be discarded at a modal point of scientific and technological development but it is really at the heart of the matter. Deciphering ritual actions may be more germane to our cultural growth than we have supposed. But we have to put ourselves in some way inside religious processes to obtain knowledge of them. There must be a conversion experience."*¹⁷

Inter-cultural Dialogue

The term inter-cultural dialogue is used specifically to denote the dialogue that takes place between people of different cultures. This dialogue is not only expressed and shared in elements of various traditions but also becomes a force that animates, orients and allow the culture to grow. In this way it contributes to the renewal of the cultures in question and enriches the lives of many.

Seen in this perspective, the kind of interaction that takes place between people of different cultures becomes one of mutual enrichment, of constant returning to the sources. As a consequence radical questions that touch the very existence of each person and the life of each community are addressed on a regular basis. While the local culture is enthusiastically engaged in making present the experience in the context of the people, the flow, acceptance and active insertion of people of other cultures and migrants into the worshipping and serving community forces her to open wide her doors and hearts.

"When we bear witness to our religious faith, we make an offer of friendship; we expose what is most intimate and vulnerable in ourselves, most subject to ridicule and rejection. Trustingly we invite others to enter into a personal

communion of shared faith, a communion constituted by a network of interpersonal relations. Whoever accepts such religious testimony becomes a member of a new community and is changed as a person by that very fact"¹⁸

The socio-cultural realities of Asia urge the Asians to get to know other peoples and cultures. The urgent need to search for better jobs, the strong desire to come up in life, search for higher and specialized education are all factors that favour inter-cultural exchanges. The growing phenomenon of migration and the rapid growth of globalization indeed hasten the process of such dialogues.

Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue in an Era of Migration

Migration challenges us to set hearts on fire, to be open to learn and above all to pay attention to an interreligious and inter-cultural anthropology. The secret is the art of learning to make room in our hearts by a constant process of conversion. The affirmation of Buber *"Man no more has a home"*, is becoming a growing reality also in the world of migration. According to the International Organisation for Migration¹⁹ there are about 150 million international migrants worldwide.

*"The global, nature of migration in our age is what gives it a particular prominence. More people today choose or are forced to migrate than ever before, and they are travelling to an increasing number of countries. International migrants come from all over the world and travel to all parts of the world"*²⁰

A new identity has to be formed in the modern world: an identity that is fashioned by dialogue between religions and cultures in respectful listening to the cries of migrants.

*"I teach Hindus from Bengal and Confucians from the Chinese mainland. Muslims from Turkey meet and discuss issues with Jews from Israel and Buddhists from Vietnam. [...] Even more significant is the fact that increasingly my Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu and Muslim students are Americans, born and raised in places like Sacramento and Pittsburgh. The contributions these Americans are making in my classroom are part of the legacy of the 1965 Immigration Act, which began to undo the racism institutionalized in immigration laws such as the first Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and the Johnson Reed Act (1924), which effectively stopped immigration from Asia. In barring Asians, these laws also barred their religions."*²¹

Already in 1990 John Paul II had offered the new horizon on which we need to look at the phenomenon of Migration:

"Among the great changes taking place in the contemporary world, migration has produced a new phenomenon: non-Christians are becoming very

*numerous in traditionally Christian countries, creating fresh opportunities for contacts and cultural exchanges, and calling the church to hospitality, dialogue, assistance and, in a word, fraternity"*²².

This new phenomenon produced by migration is truly one full of opportunities. It provides possibilities for contacts and cultural exchanges. Anyone who had the privilege of living in an International or Intercultural community would not hesitate to highlight the tremendous learning process that is being activated in such settings. The cultural exchanges are often so rich that one is able to learn much more than one could ever dream of. The human heart has an incredible ability to expand and explode. Expansion and explosion of hearts takes place when hospitality is given and accepted, when one is welcomed as he or she is, when the other is ready to take an extra step to stoop down and understand. "The participants are convinced that clearly and consciously defined communication policies form an effective method to realize and improve the promotion of the rights of migrant workers."²³ Programs that respond to the needs of the migrants ought to be designed. Migrant workers should not be seen only as receivers of information or objects of cultural adaptation but also as subjects of communication and cultural creation.

*"In our contemporary world, we are all involved with one another. In this sense, our frontier crossing can be a moment of grace when we encounter one another. Such encounters need to make us listen to one another, learn and un-learn from one another and even correct one another. For no one, not even a religion is an independent, self-sufficient island. God uses each of us to speak to one another, especially in and through our frontier crossings and the ensuing encounters."*²⁴

In an atmosphere of fraternity cultural exchanges thrive. Ethnic boundaries do play a significant role.

*"There is a twofold way these ethnic boundaries function: as a demarcation line between, between 'us' and 'them' inside and outside the familiar and the different; and also as an enclosure in which forms a basis of trust and solidarity, and a forum of communal expression which can transform strangers into members of the group."*²⁵

Already a variety of initiatives are carried out in this direction. Inter-cultural forums are at work in some countries with well defined objectives.

*"Objective of the 'Forum' is that of favouring a positive reading of migration in view of a society, called to live together with new cultures, and of a Union, not only more integrated within it's inside but also solicited to be more open to nations from where the migrants come from"*²⁶.

It is joint collaboration and networking that helps to discover new areas of collaborative intervention. A research by the International Labour Organization of Geneva, highlights the role of migrant as “mediator for development”.²⁷ The presence of migrants in the families is very often a healthy and positive one. Communities today are becoming more and more pluralist and inter-cultural.

“The ‘cosmopolitan’ make-up of the People of God is visible [...] because migration has transformed even small and formerly isolated communities into pluralist and inter-cultural realities.[...], a mark of the Church expressing her essential openness to all that is the work of the Spirit in every people”²⁸

The new scenario that is created through inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue requires that efforts are made to create new ministries within the Asian Continent and in the human community that can respond to the modern situations and individual needs drawing abundantly from the professional competence and personal holiness of the people. Any reflection on inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good today needs to be contemplated as part of a new way of being brothers and sisters in humble dialogue and sincere openness.

In Asia, the thrust is on offering a more abundant life²⁹, and to “Use the mobility and migration of the faithful as an opportunity to spread the Gospel of Christ. We should inspire, educate, and organise our migrants to be witnesses of Christ wherever they may go”.³⁰ America is reflecting on “Many faces in God’s house’ and theologians are focussing on “a new way of doing theology called cross-cultural, inter-cultural, or contextual theology”.³¹

Adequate discernment is needed to ensure that the cultures and religions of different people contribute to development.

“Discernment is needed regarding the contribution of cultures, and religions, especially on the part of those who wield political power, if the social community is to be built up in a spirit of respect for the common good. Such discernment has to be based on the criterion of charity and truth.”³²

A new human family

The field of migration and more specially the dynamic interaction among migrants belonging to different religions and cultures open a challenging and fascinating frame of reference to live daily the dialogical nature of the human being. The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) in the past years has put stress on Dialogue for a new human family

“We wish to facilitate a further dialogue with the great religions about the meaning of faith and service in daily life. All mankind is rooted in the Christ-event. This anthropology is operative even in those who do not know Christ.

Our main point of contact is the search for a new humanity and a new human family".³³

The further dialogue with the great religions that the FABC wish to facilitate is about the meaning of faith and service in daily life. Making the search for a new humanity and a new human family as the main point of contact, this dialogue is focused on the significance of faith and service in daily life. Great things happen when personal faith of each believer interacts with the faith of his/her partner in dialogue. All great religions uphold the role of service in daily life.

Today, family life is going through tough times, yet in Asia family still remains the sanctuary of life. There is no option for staying connected in the family circle of love. Research has proved that every opportunity for gathering together is exploited to the full and fresh possibilities for such encounters are multiplied.

The family and the common good is indeed a beautiful theme to reflect up on. "By exercising its mission to educate, the family contributes to the common good and constitutes the first school of social virtue, which all societies need"³⁴. In the Asian Continent the task of education is oriented towards the integral formation of the human person and it is heart-warming to see that even the poorest of the poor takes utmost care to educate their children communicating to them lasting values.

The option for the poor of the Asian Church united with the respect for life that all religions and cultures aim to promote permit that conscious efforts are made to make life in abundance possible for all even in the midst of enormous difficulties.

Researches that focus on the experiences of people who spend large amounts of time in cultures other than their own have proved that there is a great amount of similarities in people's experiences despite the wide range of roles they had and the many different countries in which they lived.³⁵

Despite such diverse roles as business person, doctors, diplomat, Peace Corps, professors, people go through similar experiences when adjusting to life in countries other than their own and/or to extensive interaction with people from other cultures. Among these experiences the common ones are a sense of uprootedness, feeling that one has been singled out for special attention, difficulties in developing, relationships, and the realization that one's previous knowledge may be inadequate.³⁶

Inter-religious and inter-cultural friendship among people of various religions and cultures are being strengthened today. These 'inter-religious friendship' are a good way for those involved to practice their faith. We are in dialogue with persons who practice various religions and our dialogues are never with Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. We dialogue with actual Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims etc .

with all their personal strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, aspirations and ideals. In the genuine spirit of inter-religious and inter-cultural friendship, sharing of spiritual experiences is carried out.

*"I celebrate these quite new possibilities of sharing spiritual practices and experiences across our different faith traditions as one of the golden opportunities for discovering new horizons and new spiritual meaning for human life, not only for particular individuals, but for all humanity."*³⁷

Common Good from an interdisciplinary perspective

In every continent and also in Asia there are those who are called upon to make public policy. It is a decision for "others" who are not at the decision making table. Looking at common good from an interdisciplinary perspective means illuminated by the light that human sciences and theological disciplines are capable of shedding on the human person, to see how plans and policies could be made and implemented keeping the common good in mind. While respecting diversity every policy must find enough values to make a decision for the common good.

*"The principle of the common good, to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning, stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people. According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the common good indicates 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily'."*³⁸

The inalienable dignity, unity and equality of all people that is at the basis of the common good makes inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue a possible reality and a lofty ideal to which every human person has to commit self. The human family is capable of expressing global processes, local identities, and above all an inseparable interconnectedness; all that humanity³⁹ holds dear: all that unites, a strong bond of solidarity, compassion and concern for common good and truth. Speaking of concern for truth Bryan Massingale writes:

"A recognition of the valuable but limited insight of every culture into the reality of God means that faith communities are also called to be communities of conscience, that is places where the truth is spoken about the ways in which particular cultures have both formed and malformed our public lives".⁴⁰

Pooling together of insights of every culture not only enriches the human family but also challenges it to be ever on the alert to be constructive and creative in finding ways and means to promote common good.

"Truth is the appropriate object of the mind and intellect, since reason is a kind of light by which we perceive the evidence of what is true and by which we can decide whether what is said is true or false. In this matter there is a

great contest between the truth placed in reason and the human intelligence: what reason can demonstrate as false, the intellect cannot judge to be true."⁴¹

In Asia numerous efforts are made to "balance individual needs with the solidarity of all in the common good". Even in the struggle for life, the common good in health and health care is given priority in many countries of the Asian Continent.

Education is viewed as an important instrument for stimulating the integration of people especially minorities and promoting their social opportunities. The growing need for better-trained people makes it essential for the education system to be opened up to those to whom the language and cultural barriers are too high. In this way the common good can be promoted. Levelling down of cultural barriers, bridging the marked difference between home and school environment, encouraging inter-cultural and inter-religious encounters are all valid means to create awareness in students on how common good is the concern of all. Allowing "Dialogue of life" (RM, 57) to lead the way of interreligious dialogue is one of the most challenging adventures in the field of education. Scholarly studies on religions and cultures and comparative studies are very essential.

"Scholarly comparative study takes the dialogue further. In our institutions and centres such academic studies must be undertaken. The guidelines further affirm: 'Finally there is a specialized form of this scholarly dialogue whose main object is new research into the tenets of religion, and which is concerned with the comparative study of religion. [...] Research Institutes and scholars should be encouraged to enter into this area with humility and seriousness' (n. 80/81- Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue issued by C.B.C.I. Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism October, 1989-Second Revised Edition). Such an intellectual dialogue among representatives of different religions is required to dispel ignorance and prejudice which are wide spread among people."⁴²

A careful analysis of the common good and social pluralism undoubtedly will help to highlight the necessity of a healthy and dynamic inter-cultural dialogue. The Compendium of the Social Teachings of the Church is clear when it states that:

*"The common good depends on a healthy social pluralism. The different components of society are called to build a unified and harmonious whole, within which it is possible for each element to preserve and develop its own characteristics and autonomy. Some components –such as the family, the civil community and the religious community respond more immediately to the intimate nature of man, while others come about more on a voluntary basis."*⁴³

The dimension of transcendence

The necessity of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue to promote the common good becomes a fascinating challenge in Asia because people of Asia are well aware how they need to pay attention to the dimension of transcendence. The common good and the dimension of transcendence are very closely linked. The Asians are looking much beyond a merely historical and materialistic vision. Openness to the transcendence is a lived reality in Asia. "A purely historical and materialistic vision would end up transforming the common good into a simple socio-economic well-being, without any transcendental goal, that is, without its most intimate reason for existing." ⁴⁴

Urged by Solidarity

Both inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good has a solid foundation which is based on the fact that we are all responsible for each other.

*"Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people (but)...a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and to each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."*⁴⁵

The world today is becoming ever more conscious of how interdependent we are. We are all really responsible for each other and our cultural and religious values spur us on to commit ourselves to the good of all.

*"For us, as for Jesus, sharing in the life of a community is not just a preliminary mission but is the very core of mission. For it is our solidarity with others which is the basis both for our openness to receive what they have to offer and for our willingness and eagerness to share with them the gift of faith in Jesus and the other gifts we have been given".*⁴⁶

Offering models of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue

"Concern for our neighbour transcends the confines of national communities and has increasingly broadened its horizon to the whole world."⁴⁷ Asians who are committed to inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue can enrich the world by offering models of dialogue. According to Robert Schreiter, *Ministry in a multicultural world* has the following goals: *"The implicit goal is reducing conflict. The three progressive goals are recognition of the other, respect for cultural difference, and healthy interaction between cultures"*⁴⁸. Well planned and wisely carried out pastoral ministry in the multicultural and pluri religious contexts of Asia can help to offer models of dialogue for common good. "To guide those engaged in the process, the Synod suggested that a directory on interreligious dialogue be drawn up".⁴⁹

In John Paul II's words: "It is therefore important for the Church in Asia to provide suitable models of interreligious dialogue evangelisation in dialogue and dialogue for evangelisation and suitable training for those involved".

Mystics/contemplatives in the modern supermarkets

Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue carried out in the genuine spirit of love and service and aimed at promoting the common good will certainly produce unexpected results. It will bring to the forefront the contemplative dimension that is so very part and parcel of the Asian being. The characteristic note of contemplation is that God's presence is experienced. Pope John Paul II had a stupendous intuition when he affirmed: "My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation." ⁵⁰

*"God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. He moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us. [...] You seem to be the same person and you are the same person that you have always been: in fact, you are more yourself than you have ever been before. You have only just begun to exist. You feel as if you were at last fully born. You have sunk to the center of your own poverty, and there you have felt the doors fly open into infinite freedom, into a wealth which is perfect because none of it is yours and yet it all belongs to you. And now you are free to go in and out of infinity."*⁵¹

Starting locally and going beyond

What may prove fruitful for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good is to start locally. Philip Jenkins draws attention to another important aspect:

*"If in fact the bulk of the Christian population is going to be living in Africa, Asia or Latin America, then practices that now prevail in those areas will become even more common across the globe, This is especially likely when those distinctive religious patterns are transplanted northward, either by migration, or by actual missions to the old imperial powers, to what were once the core nations of world Christianity."*⁵²

There are a number of initiatives, local stories and ways of living that have proved effective and successful. And these provide marvellous opportunities for inter-religious and inter-cultural reflection. Discernment at any case is a must when efforts are directed towards common good.

*"The 'laboratory of life' still offers testimony; and grace, building on nature-open-to-and-hungry-for –grace, can cause 'local stories' to burst to life through their intersecting with the Great Story of what God did for us in Jesus. So it is important to be aware of where signs of life are concretely present and to see how far these are able to bring us. The movement has to be from small to great, from local to global; culturally we must take that much from post-modernity."*⁵³

A careful study of the "local" and the "global" can offer a wider frame to understand what the local provides and the global is not able to offer. They are: a sense of

belonging or identity, a source of moral authority for guidance in life, and a framework of meaning to explain life's events.

"In his studies of minority cultures and ethnic enclaves, educational theorist James A. Banks has hypothesized that ethnic communities provide three things that are often lacking in majority or dominant cultures. They are: a sense of belonging or identity, a source of moral authority for guidance in life, and a framework of meaning to explain life's events.⁵⁴ The larger society (or putative global culture) may hold out options for these three but generally cannot deliver a configuration of them that will be satisfying. To the extent that larger cultural units cannot do this, local cultures persist."⁵⁵

Efforts have to be made to find the significant similarities that link different religions and the differences that distinguish them. In every religion and culture there is something that can enrich the other.

"In spite of Heschel's emphasis on the profound differences among some of the most basic assumptions of Judaism and eastern thought, he argues that Judaism would be enriched if dialogue would occur 'between the river Jordan and the river Ganges.'⁵⁶ He believed that it was vitally important... for Judaism to reach out into non-Jewish culture in order to absorb elements which it may use for the enrichment of its life and thought."⁵⁷

In a world in which we are bombarded by blown up images of intolerance, we need to prepare men and women who will document for us the blossoming of new forms of inter-religious and inter-cultural cooperation and commitment for common good. The process of learning and discerning calls for the task of integration.

"The process of learning and discerning calls for a third task, that of integration. The critically evaluated and articulated truth or practice, derived from another religion, needs to be integrated into the whole of the Christian mystery whereby this truth or practice will appear in a new perspective, and it in turn will shed new light on the Christian mystery itself."⁵⁸

For an appropriate integration of fact and theory in a global context comparative sociology becomes crucial. Today instead of holding on to multiple, mutually oriented centers or to the center-periphery model it is needed to "Know locally and in historical depth, speak currently and globally!"⁵⁹ For a harmonious integration of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good we need to practice dialogue locally and in religious and cultural depth, verbalize our experience and speak globally. Building up of new forms of solidarity and community are fundamental today. It is interesting to highlight that distances are not a barrier today neither for communication nor for relationships.

*"The study of mechanisms of social solidarity remains as essential to sociology as it ever was, but the new forms of solidarity are not captured by these distinctions. For example, the creation of 'intimacy' in post-traditional emotional relations today is neither the Gemeinschaft nor Gsellschaft. It involves the generating of 'community' in a more active sense, and community often stretched across indefinite distances of time-space. Two people keep a relationship going even though they spend much of their time thousands of miles away from one another; self-help groups create communities that are at once localized and truly global in their scope."*⁶⁰

A new religious and cultural identity

A person's identity is marked by growth and characterized by dynamicity.

*"[...] Christian identity becomes clear today only as it is compared with other possible identities. If this comparison is made only through the eyes of Christians of earlier times, it will be distorted. Christians must repent their sins in this regard. They can hardly form the new identity of repentance if they know of other religious identities only vaguely. The study of other attractive religious identities, therefore, is essential to shaping a healthy Christian identity today."*⁶¹

Constant interactions between people of different religions and cultures necessitate the development of a new religious and cultural identity, including doctrines, rituals and codes of behaviour and ethics which would ascertain and maintain his/her special place in the world as a corporate entity. This identity favours the growth of dialogue of spiritual experience. Writing on 'Dialogue of Spiritual Experience', Agnelo Gracias highlights:

*"In this dialogue, adherents do not deny their own religious identity – on the contrary, real dialogue is only possible if one is a convinced believer in one's faith. This is true of all forms of inter-religious dialogue".*⁶²

In the Asian context it is necessary to bear in mind that our dialogue partners are culture-specific and religion-specific, and at the same time under a humanitarian perspective they are all part of the one goal the common good.

*"[...] Now it seems to me that we theologians must be as interested in Asian though as the early Church was in Greek questions; Africa should interest us as much as the Celtic concerns that freely entered earlier Christian conversations. I think also of how Martin Luther King brought the Declaration of Independence into his own preaching. I remain interested in fragments and forms from all the great traditions."*⁶³

The World today is witnessing a sharp shift in the movement of Christianity from Northern to Southern continents. This leads to challenging theological, inter-

religious and inter-cultural reflections taking shape in the South. Kenneth Fleming, in his book *Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism*, attempts to understand better the theological issues faced in the Asian context to which the three Asian theologians: Kosuke Koyama, Choan-Seng Song and Aloysius Pieris “relate and the challenges that emerge from it.”⁶⁴ The author affirms:

*“Through their work the three theologians argue that the minority status of the Christian community can be a starting point for rich theological reflection, which seeks to grapple with some of the thorniest and most challenging areas of theology today such as religious pluralism and socio-economic liberation. Their dialogue with Buddhism, it will be shown, relates to the wider social concerns of ordinary Asian peoples, not simply or even primarily to issues of religious belief and doctrine.”*⁶⁵

A new spirituality

Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good, if carried out in the spirit of humility and genuine openness can truly help us to recognize the “mysterious presence of God in the wisdom of all religions.” The more we enter into dialogue with human reality, with cultures and religions; we commit ourselves to build up that unity between action and contemplation.

*“In sum, Christian mission is nothing more or less than ‘participation in God’s existence in the world’. It is about a respectful, dialogical crossing of cultural, religious, personal, racial, class and even geographical boundaries, it is a ‘single but complex reality’, of proclamation and witness, liturgy and contemplation, efforts at inculturation, participation in interreligious dialogue, commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, and engagement in reconciliation.”*⁶⁶

This new spirituality that strives for unity between action and contemplation reminds members of various religions to become aware of the “pedagogical function” of other religions.

*“But the proper object and product of Inter-Faith Dialogue is mutual understanding and exploration. [...] However, the only commitment likely to be reached by the dialogist is to further dialogue and not to a change of faith-commitment in either of them. And this outcome of furthering comprehension and exploration has to be the Dialogist’s intention, by which this Species is distinguished.”*⁶⁷

Encounter with other cultures and religions calls for dynamic interaction and constant spiritual discernment. “The Council’s guidelines—set forth in *Gaudium et Spes* and other documents of open, respectful and cordial dialogue, yet

accompanied by careful discernment and courageous witness to the truth, remain valid and call us to a greater commitment."⁶⁸

*"The most productive way to arrive at the truth is to intercommunicate the truth that one holds with truths that others hold. The result of such dialogue could be an enlargement of the truth held by each engaged in such a dialogue"*⁶⁹

To promote a constructive conversation between religions, cultures and contemporary thought dialogue and interaction are necessary. On the basis of the new spirituality there should open a view of the world, a foretaste of its essence, an assessment of its values, a determined way of responding to modern day challenges. Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good should enrich the world's understanding of religions and cultures because from the world and its problems questions are raised to religion. In this ever dynamic and ever new, transforming encounter, a fruitful illumination of human existence is attained.

*"A new consciousness of the world-wide Church and the interdependence of humanity had begun to raise questions about some of the assumptions, which theological education in the Western world was built. Cross-cultural awareness made those in the West conscious that their culture and religious view of the world were no longer normative. Theological schools in North America were faced with the challenge of educating students who would have a new global mandate within a global Christian community, confronting the realities of religious and cultural pluralism, demanded answers."*⁷⁰

Join the dance of life

*"Today, the dialogue of the Christians in Asia should be as an insider. We take our Asianness seriously as the context of our being Christian, fully involved in the joys, sorrows and struggles of people in the construction of their nations in the light of the Gospel values. The dialogue should be concerned about the evolving consumerist culture. Christians in Asia must actively participate in creating a new world order of civilization where the good values of Asia challenge the consumerist and market oriented values of capital. For this the Asian Christians have to be rooted both in their Christian faith as well as their culture."*⁷¹

The changes of the religious and cultural self-comprehension on the level of society, of the faith community, of the individual express themselves in changing and ever new patterns. It will be utter waste of time to pretend to have a fixed and neat ready-made schema that will offer us a clue on the various expressions of the changes of the religious self-comprehension. Migration, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue has set the music for us and we need to enter into the dance of life. Lead by the Spirit and in constant openness to that inner voice that calls us to put on the heart of flesh, we need to make time to listen to real life

stories. Stories of our neighbours, their daily struggle for survival and their burning desire to respond to the call of the other.

*"I think that any search for cosmic or universal communion should be based on inter-religious understanding. At that level every religion can contribute certain universal perspectives. A dialogue between them can lead to mutual understanding, enrichment and collaboration. Globalization based on such foundations will certainly lead to cosmic harmony."*⁷²

Conclusion

Leadership for common good may sound strange but it is needed to promote effective inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. Leadership inspires and mobilizes others to undertake collective action in pursuit of the common good. Strengthening relationships with believers of other religions and cultures is possible in the company of leaders who are able to motivate and set the example. Remember: A boss says, "Get going!" A leader says, "Let's go!" No one can aspire to leadership who does not delegate authority. This is the true test of leadership and also the prime compliment to those to whom authority is delegated. Delegation in the field of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good will also favour the building up of healthy human communities. The most important concern of a leader is the other person, the person he/she leads. Within the context of our theme, this concern becomes a delicate and responsible task as it has to deal with people of different religions and cultures. "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader" declares John Quincy Adams.

Hans Küng ⁷³ presents dialogability as a "deeply democratic virtue which can only survive under the umbrella of a positive intellectual, cultural, and religious pluralism, under the reign of liberty, equality, and fraternity."⁷⁴ The stress no doubt is on the attitude that prompts dialogue and the way the other is viewed:

*"Those leading dialogue do not want to impose their will on others; they do not perceive others any longer as threat, but as an enrichment to life, not as competitors but rather as partners. Actually, how many crises, catastrophes, and human miseries could have been avoided, had this virtue of dialogability not been continuously kicked about?"*⁷⁵

Leaders with a contemplative slant are in a better position to lead dialogue and guide others to the common good. The task of discerning God's saving work in the here and now of our history necessitates that we are tuned to read the signs of times in which we find ourselves. From this springs forth the urgency to encourage more collaborative and interdisciplinary reflections in the field of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue for common good.

*"Only a humanism open to the Absolute can guide us in the promotion and building of forms of social and civic life-structures, institutions, culture and ethos-without exposing us to the risk of becoming ensnared by the fashions of the moment. Awareness of God's undying love sustains us in our laborious and stimulating work for justice and the development of peoples, amid successes and failures, in the ceaseless pursuit of a just ordering of human affairs. [...] God gives us the strength to fight and to suffer for love of the common good, because he is our All, Our greatest hope."*⁷⁶

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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).

Biblical Evidence for Dialogue with Cultures and Religions in Asia

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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.