

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: A VIEW FROM ASIA

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THE EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT

For us Asian Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems and others are part of our life. We share a common culture and way of life. We belong to a common economic and political system. We have a common history. Our religious differences have cultural, political and even economic implications. In this ongoing dialogue of life we have begun to appreciate the believers of other religions. We respect and read with profit their Scriptures and other sacred writings. We learn from their *sadhana*, methods of prayer and religious experience. We regard positively their moral conduct. We collaborate with them in the promotion of common human and spiritual values like freedom and justice, love and service. We do not feel 'superior' to them. On the contrary, some mystical, non-dual traditions in Asia consider us, as being at a stage of inferior spiritual development, still busy with rituals and symbols. We are often sought after more for our social and educational services than for our spiritual example or leadership.

At least for some of us, inter-religious dialogue is also an interior, personal search for our own religious roots which we want to rediscover and integrate.

THE ECCLESIAL CONTEXT

Though this openness to the other believers had started earlier in Asia, it has been supported and strengthened by the Second Vatican Council. A positive view of other believers and religions

emerges from a convergence of texts. The Asian Bishops, in their first document on Evangelization from Taipei (No. 15), saw in them God's self-manifestation. John Paul II, in his symbolic gesture at Assisi in 1986, acknowledged the legitimacy of other religions. He also frequently calls for the collaboration of all believers and of all people of good will for the promotion and defence of common human and religious values.

THE REFLECTIVE CONTEXT

While theologians tend to speak of the religions as systems or as ways of salvation, we prefer to speak of people and of God reaching out to them. Religions do not save; God does. Religions are only expressive mediations of divine-human encounter. What is important is the experiential and personal aspects of this encounter, not the rituals in which it is celebrated and the systems which organize, express and reflect on it.

Because of this change in approach our way of expression and reflection moves away from abstract, conceptual categories to experiential, symbolic ones. While concepts tend to be clear and distinct, to distinguish and separate (either-or), to compare and contrast, symbols are rich and polyvalent, integrating and inclusive (both-and), seeking convergence and harmony. An interpretative reflection need not be less rigorous than a deductive one.

Let me now evoke some of the questions that are frequently raised with reference to Asian theology in the field of inter-religious dialogue.

A POSITIVE VIEW OF OTHER RELIGIONS

One of the starting points of Asian theology of inter-religious dialogue is the acceptance of the reality and legitimacy of other religions as social-symbolic mediations of divine-human encounter. This perception of other religions is based not on an evaluation of them as systems, but on the experience of other people who practise them and of the action of God in those people as shown by their moral and spiritual action. It is not helpful to isolate and reify the religions as systems in themselves,

set apart from this experiential complex. As systems they are limited expressions; they may have sinful elements too, because they are human expressions. But they are also symbolic mediations of divine action and human response in freedom.

This quality of real, if limited legitimacy, also characterizes the elements that constitute the religious system, like scriptures, rituals and symbols. Indian theologians, for example, have asked whether other religious Scriptures can be considered as inspired and revealed and whether we can participate in the rituals of other religions. Inspiration and revelation are not qualities in themselves to be attributed to texts independently of a community and of God's action in it. Ritual symbols have meaning only in the context of the life of a community in its relationship to God. If our attitude to divine-human relationship in a religious community is positive, then it will be positive also to its Scriptures and rituals, without ceasing to be critical.

To look at other religions in this manner has consequences to the way we look at our own. Though we speak of the Church as pilgrim and think of ourselves as sinful, we tend to think of the Church institution as somehow escaping all historical and cultural conditioning. We give the impression that inspiration and revelation are used as absolute qualities of our Scriptures, though we would accept today the need for interpretation. With regard to rituals, the 'ex opere operato' principle, instead of affirming the primacy of God's action as compared to the human disposition or response, seems to be reified in the ritual itself in a magical way. Some extend it also to the Church. It is difficult for us to accept, that whatever we may say about the 'mystery of the Church', the institutional community to which we belong is limited and culturally and historically conditioned. I do not in any way deny or minimize the authenticity and absoluteness of the action of God in and through the social-symbolic structures of the Church. I only question the attribution of such authenticity and absoluteness to institutional aspects and practices of the Church.

THE PLURALISM OF RELIGIONS

To accept the legitimacy of other religions is to accept the

pluralism of religions. But we do not seem to have found a proper way of speaking about pluralism. Pluralism of religions does not mean that all religions are the same. They are not. If we take some attribute like 'salvific', then it may apply to all religions. But there is no reason to reduce the significance of religion to a particular attribute like that. Another way of handling pluralism is to place them in a linear, development mode and see them as more or less true or revealed or perfect. Or one speaks of complementarity. This approach can have two sources. One sees the relationship of pluralism and unity as that of the parts to the whole. The unifying principle then is either complementarity or proportion (more or less). Another source is the view of history as a linear process leading to more and more perfection or development. This approach has its origin partly in a positivist view of history and partly in a projection on the whole of human history of the particular historical structure offered by the Bible. Even the classification of religions as exclusive and inclusive does not get out of a quantitative perspective.

I think that to have an adequate understanding of pluralism we have to get out of these quantitative categories to personal ones. The roots of pluralism are the freedom of God and of the humans and their relationships. God's free self-communication is neither limited nor conditioned by anything exterior to it. The Spirit blows where, when and how She wills. The response of the humans may be conditioned by history, culture and their own limited possibilities; but it is still free and creative and therefore pluralistic. The pluralism is not chaotic because God is one and we believe that God has a plan for humanity. This assures a basic community. But it is a community of persons that has to be explored in human terms of communion and convergence or of freedom and harmony, and not in material terms of quantity and number, complementarity and comparison.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The experience of the pluralism of religions of course raises the question of the identity of the Church. What is it for? As long as we thought that it had the monopoly of revelation and salvation, religious pluralism was merely factual. It had no

significance in the history of salvation. The whole world was destined to become Church. When this monolithic view of the Church broke down, we sought to understand its significance in terms of partial-full revelation, of implicit-explicit faith, of difficult-easy divine-human relationship. But where there is God's real self-communication such categorizations seem exterior to it, if not meaningless.

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the Church as a sacrament, that is symbol and servant of communion with God and of unity among all peoples. This is the reality of the Reign of God. Starting with this the Asian theologians speak of the Church as the symbol and servant of the Reign of God. Sacrament affirms a symbolic and social dimension. It speaks of a real, but a non-exclusive, relationship. The Reign of God is larger than the Church. This difference between the Church and the Reign of God makes space for the other religions. It gives the Church not a dominant, but a servant role. The Church is not focussed on itself, but on the Reign of God. It does not proclaim itself but Jesus and the Reign of God which Jesus himself proclaimed. It welcomes people as disciples of Jesus to continue fulfilling its role of service of the Reign of God in the world. But its primary aim is building up the Reign of God. It builds itself up only in view of its service to the Reign. It thus discovers a wider field of service and mission. The Church and the Reign of God must not be separated; neither should they be confused. The Church has its existence and meaning only in the context of the Reign of God. The Reign of God, in God's plan as we know it, is related to the Church, though it transcends it.

One important element of this complex awareness is that the Church does not monopolize God's presence and action in the world. Even within the Church, while Paul may plant and Apollo may water, it is God who gives life and growth. But God also continues to act in the world, outside the Church, in other peoples. Some theologians speak of this as the mission of God. Others talk about the work of the Spirit. Still others suggest the cosmic Christ. This depends on one's theology of the Trinity. The mission of the Church is set in the context of the mission of God, not vice versa. The Church is called to proclaim the good

news revealed to it. But perhaps it should listen first, so that its proclamation may be relevant to the situation and respectful of God's own continuing action there.

I think that in the kind of approach we are developing, focussed on divine-human relationship, theological discourse that remains at the level of truth and its revelation and of faith as its acceptance and affirmation is not denied but transcended. Similarly, the divine project of salvation is not limited to individuals but extends to the whole world leading to cosmic reconciliation and unification. The Church is aware of a special indispensable role and mission in this cosmic process, without however identifying itself with it, simply because the action of God transcends it. That the Church is not able always to understand the mysterious ways of God does not in any way weaken its call to witness to what it knows of the mystery. We can always proclaim the great work that God has accomplished in us, without denying what God may be doing among others. Unfortunately our vision of unity is reductive and possessive.

In this connection I wonder whether the Church can consider itself as normative in God's plan of salvation. Today we would rather speak of the Word of God as the ultimate norm. But if the Word of God, both as revealing and as active, is not limited to its expression in the Bible as text and story, our familiar framework breaks down. We have to explore other frameworks like analogy or compatibility. The Word of God cannot contradict itself. But it need not repeat the same thing. And contradiction should not be assumed too easily, looking at things from our limited point of view. We should rather imitate Mary in pondering in the heart the significance of experiences and expressions that we do not fully understand.

PROCLAMATION AND DIALOGUE

Considered from this broad perspective the tension between proclamation and dialogue disappears because their orientation and focus are different, though convergent. Proclamation witnesses to God's mystery as it has been manifested to us. Dialogue reaches out to the mystery of God active in others. Both proclamation and dialogue have their role in building up both

the Church and the Reign of God. The tension between them arises when they are both focussed on building up the Church.

In the practical sphere too an opposition between proclamation and dialogue is artificial. One can of course define them in the abstract in such a way that one stresses their difference from one another. But they are not primarily concepts. They are relationships of communication between people. When we are in a situation of the dialogue of life with other believers, we do not proclaim at one moment and dialogue at the next. They are aspects or elements of one complex relationship. Their mutual relation within this one relationship may be articulated differently at different times and places or with different persons and groups. But even when I am proclaiming my faith to another person, I cannot do so seriously without taking into account the other's God-experience and liberty — that is, dialogically. This is what the Asian Bishops mean when they describe evangelization in Asia as a dialogue between the Gospel on the one hand and the religions, cultures and the poor of Asia on the other. It is proclamation in a dialogical mode. To look on this holistic vision from the point of view of the proclamation-dialogue dichotomy is foreign to Asian experience and perspective. Similarly, if dialogue is frank sharing of one's faith convictions, it is also proclamational.

I think that such a dichotomous view comes out of an attitude to the believers of other religions as people simply to be won over. In such a perspective unity is possible only in subordinating dialogue to proclamation. One detects a desire for domination, however nuanced, — of course in the name of God and of Truth. One speaks of 'conquering' the world for Christ. This reflects, not the spirit of Christ who chose to humble himself even unto death, but other historical forces. The Indian theologians have spoken about the kenotic dimension of Christianity in the context of religious pluralism.

THE REIGN OF GOD

We have been using the term 'Reign of God' rather frequently in the foregoing sections. I think that the meaning that Asian theologians give to it is often misunderstood. Some think of the

Reign of God in a purely ecclesial context. The Church is growing in history towards the Reign of God in an already — not yet dialectic. The Reign of God is then seen as the eschatological future of the Church. The reality of the other religions does not directly enter into this framework.

Others are opposed to a merely interior, spiritual vision of the Reign of God and wish to give it a socio-economic and political content, even if it is still in an eschatological framework of already — not yet. They emphasize that the Reign of God has to be built up here and now in history and has to be realized in communities of freedom, fellowship and justice, even if the fulness of its realization may be in the future. This is seen by some as an effort to historicize and materialize the Reign of God. This is an ongoing dispute between the liberation theologians and others opposed to them.

The Asians tend to use the term 'Reign of God' in a double sense. On the one hand, it indicates the wider reality of God's mystery, not merely eschatologically, but also in history, which serves as a counter-point to the reality of the Church as a visible, institutional community. On the other hand, it refers to the common human community of freedom, fellowship and justice, towards the building up of which all believers are invited to collaborate. Each believer finds inspiration and motivation for his/her commitment in his/her own religion. But they try to develop a common human vision and project through dialogue. Part of this common project is also the harmony among the religions themselves. Some seem to think that an effort at building a common human community is disloyalty to the project of building the Church. Is it not possible to promote both the Church and the Reign of God, neither identifying them nor opposing them one to the other?

Talk about inter-religious dialogue tends to remain at the religious level. But religion is for life. It has to do more with behaviour than with knowledge. Orthopraxis must concern us more in the process of dialogue than orthodoxy. Common action for justice is not merely a context for, but an expression of, inter-religious relationships. Unfortunately our tendency is to instrumentalize everything in the service of religion. Inter-religious conflicts can be avoided only when the religions stop

focussing on themselves and find their common focus in discovering God in human community.

THE PLACE OF CHRIST

Where is Christ in this whole process? The uniqueness of Christ is often presented as a burning issue in the context of dialogue. I think that in Asia the person and role of Christ is not a problem. The real problem is the attempt of the Church to monopolize Christ. I have the impression that what is often presented as the question of the uniqueness of Christ is actually the problem of the uniqueness of Christianity. If we do not identify Christ with Christianity, then Christ need not be an obstacle to dialogue between religions. The ghost of the claim "There is no salvation outside the Church," often takes new forms in formulae like the "necessity of the Church for salvation." The Church then becomes the visible part of a mysterious, a-historical entity, identified as the mystical body of Christ and every person who is saved becomes an anonymous Christian. To call a believing Hindu an anonymous Christian is offensive, unless one is also ready to be considered an anonymous Hindu. If we believe with the Second Vatican Council that the Holy Spirit offers to every one the possibility of participating in the paschal mystery in ways unknown to us; if we are aware that more than 80% of humanity are not Christian, that is if we include all those who are Christians only in name; and if we do not continue to play with concepts like implicit and explicit that come not from experience, but from *a priori* argumentation then we can make space for other religions. What seems clear to us today is that God's universal salvific will does not depend on the historic-symbolic mediation of the visible, institutional Church alone. However the tendency to identify the Church with Christ is so great that some prefer to attribute to the Spirit any divine action outside the Church, though the Spirit will be immediately characterized as the Spirit of Christ, thus taking away with one hand what is given by the other.

We believe in the centrality of the paschal mystery of Christ in God's saving action. But we need not adopt the sacrificial, juridical and ontological theories developed in a different cultural

and philosophical context. Considering universality as the universalization of a historical particularity also depends on a particular view of history and its relation to mystery. We also believe that this mystery is linked to the Church in a special, but not an exclusive way, provided this specificity is spelt out, not triumphalistically, but in terms of kenosis and service. To our traditional questions we may add a new one: how salvation in Christ is mediated to people through other religions or even no religion at all. But the practice of inter-religious dialogue need not wait for a clear answer to these questions and explorations. Perhaps inter-religious dialogue may throw further light on some of these mysteries. The Theses do not go into the Christological question. I do not intend to, either.

CONCLUSION

I think that what we are facing in Asia is a new and different type of living faith experience that gives rise to new questions and to a new theology. When questions are asked about this theology, it is not enough to look at the questions in themselves; we have to look at the presuppositions, perspectives and experiences that lie behind the questions.

In concluding these reflections I would like to point to two principles of Asian theology that are relevant to the area of inter-religious dialogue. The first is the need to go beyond physical and conceptual categories to personal ones like freedom and relationships. This is the basis for pluralism. Without personal categories, unity in pluralism can be thought of only in terms of hierarchy. I am also wary of easy and neat classifications like exclusivism and inclusivism, Theo-centric and Christo-centric, etc. I think that the development in Asia of a theology of harmony is worth looking forward to.

The second principle that seems to be guiding Asian theological reflection, consciously or unconsciously, is that of the *advaita* or non-duality. The principle of *advaita*, explained in various ways by the philosophers, tries to hold together two realities that are experienced as neither one nor two. It resists the temptation to solve the problem by identifying them. Rather than enter into a metaphysical discussion here, I shall illustrate it with a couple

of examples. The Second Vatican Council says that the one Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. The tendency today seems to be to equate 'subsists in' with 'is'. For a dichotomous way of thinking, if one does not say 'is', then one is saying 'is not'. There is no middle ground. 'Subsists in' indicates a middle ground that seems difficult to understand or express in a certain philosophical approach.

Similarly, one starts saying that Jesus proclaims the Reign of God. Then one goes on to assert that Jesus in person is the realization of this Reign. A further step leads to the affirmation of the Church as the progressive realization of the Reign of God in history. It seems only one more step to identify all three and make claims on behalf of the Church that can properly be made only on behalf of Christ. There are certainly relationships here. But there are also real differences.

The spirit of dialogue is the ability to live with differences, accepting tensions, but overcoming them through human relationships converging towards harmony. I think that we have to discover today that one of the goals of evangelization is the promotion of reconciliation and harmony in the world in view of God's plan for the unification of all things.