

GOD OF ALL THE NAMES AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Another world is possible. But it is only possible through a transformation of this one. Such a transformation involves the integral liberation of the humans and of the world, which cannot happen without transformation in the fields of cultures and religions. The transformation of religions is however complex. Religions tend to be both legitimating and prophetic. In their attempt to become relevant to a particular situation religions get socially and politically contextualized. They justify existing economic and socio-political structures. The caste system in India, slavery and Apartheid as well socio-economic inequalities have been justified in this way. At the same time, in the name of the deeper values or of the Transcendent they witness to, they also challenge the people and their living situations and structures to change. Every religion, in this sense, has both oppressive and liberative characteristics. They may be represented by different groups within it. Institutions tend to be conservative while charismatic persons or movements tend to be prophetic. The prophetic and liberative dimensions of religions seek to remake the world. They are animated by hope. Not only do they affirm that a new world is possible; they claim to offer ways of attaining it. Hinduism quests for freedom from the burden of the cycle of births in this world by promoting righteous action without attachment. Buddhism seeks to transcend a life of suffering by rooting out desire or clinging. Christianity searches for liberation from sin and its oppressive structures by love and selfless service of the others. Islam aims at promoting universal justice and community by obedience to God's law.

One would have thought these religions can collaborate in freeing the people of their sufferings in this world and usher in a new one. But a look around the world shows us that religions, as a matter of fact, seem to be part of the problem. Flashpoints like Iraq, Palestine, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Sudan, Kashmir, the Philippines, Indonesia and even Thailand point to underlying inter-religious tensions all over the world which have created an atmosphere of self-defensive fear. Religious pluralism therefore is not merely a fact, but a problem. For the metacosmic religions it is not merely a social and political problem; it is also a religious one, if they think of themselves as the only true religion. Among Christians, however, there has been an increasingly positive appreciation of other religions and a desire to dialogue and collaborate with them in building a new world. This new theological outlook has not yet gained wide acceptance, at least in official circles, and needs still to be explained and defended. But it is crucial for any efforts at building another world. I would suggest that all religions need to develop such a positive outlook towards other religions. Before I outline this new theology, let us look a little more closely at the situation that has given rise to it. All theology is, after all, contextual.

Religions in Conflict

The fact of religious pluralism in the world needs no demonstration. That today their mutual relationships are in a conflictual mode, more or less hostile, if not violent, is also obvious.¹ A glance at history will show that inter-religious conflict has always been there.

¹ See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. London: Touchstone Books, 1996; Sudhir Kakar, *The Colours of Violence*. Delhi: Viking, 1995; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. New Delhi: Oxford, 2000; R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000; Veena Das (ed), *Mirrors of Violence*. Delhi: Oxford, 1995.

When we are the victims we call them persecutions which produce martyrs. Why should religions be in conflict? I think that there are two sorts of inter-related reasons.

The first reason is that *religion is used as a political tool*.² Politics has a social base: a group, a nation, an empire. The source of unity of such a group can be *external*, like political or military domination or simply territory or *internal* like language, ethnicity, culture or religion. When empires collapse and nation-states emerge such principles of identity and unity are particularly in demand. Ancient Egypt and Rome had state religions where the king was divinized. People who did not pay homage to the king were considered strangers, even enemies. When the Roman emperors became Christian, they used Christianity as a unifying force, even calling ecumenical councils to ensure this. Islam does not make a distinction between religion and politics. Even today, where Muslims are a majority, Islam is the religion of the state. Christianity enjoys a quasi-official role in Euro-America – in spite of the recent European Constitution. Nepal is a Hindu kingdom. Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma are Buddhist states. Japan is Shinto. In most countries minority religious groups are tolerated. The impact of a certain brand of Christianity on the recent elections in the USA is too well known to need comment. Religion is therefore used as a source of identity and community building, besides justifying the existing situation. Rooted in ultimate, even transcendent, dimensions of life it is perhaps the strongest force for social cohesion. Politicians consciously use religion as an easy means of bringing and knitting people together into a group. Such a unity would embrace and transcend even economic and socio-political inequalities. People who belong to the same religion are made to feel that they share the same economic and political interests. Even where individual rights are affirmed social relations are governed by group identities. In a majoritarian democracy the religion of the majority is privileged. Recent stories centring round crucifixes in the class room, both in Germany and Italy are illustrative. In India, which has a secular constitutional framework, a Hindu party has been seeking, unsuccessfully, political domination by a simplistic identification of culture, religion and nationality. The Islamic community or *umma* seeks to transcend national boundaries. In such situations, though the real causes for inter-religious conflict are political, supported by economic interests, religious symbols are used to motivate the masses. It may even be that the leaders of such movements are not themselves believers in the religion that they make use of as a political tool. But they certainly play with the simple faith of the masses.

Another reason for inter-religious conflict is that metacosmic religions, claiming to be based on a special revelation of God or on the privileged experience of a founder, consider themselves the unique or the better way to achieve the goal of human life, however it may be described.³ Christianity claims that Jesus is the only saviour and that every one who is saved is related in some way to the Church. Islam thinks that every one is born a Muslim, because it is the natural religion. Buddhism stresses that the only way to nirvana is the path that has been shown by the Buddha. The Hindus believe that whatever practices various religions may follow,

² Cf. Bipin Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*. New Delhi, 1984; S. Arokiasamy (ed), *Responding to Communalism*. Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1991; Achin Vanaik, *Communalism Contested. Religion, Modernity and Secularization*. New Delhi: Vishtaar, 1997; Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism. Hindus and Muslims in India*. Delhi: Oxford, 2002.

³ Cf. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God. Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. London: Harper Collins, 2000; Lionel Caplan, *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*. London: Macmillan, 1987; Leo. D. Lefebure, *Revelation, the Religions and Violence*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988.

their only goal is experiential, non-dual oneness with the Absolute. The religions are open to the others, but on their own conditions. Even such limited openness disappears when they become political tools. They further radicalize the socio-political division. The conflict is interpreted in the context of an ongoing cosmic conflict between good and evil. One identifies oneself with God, while the other, the enemy, is identified with the devil. The others are then demonized and violence against them is deemed a virtue. Religions with a sacrificial tradition can also justify most violence as having a sacrificial significance. So we have the crusades, the jihads and the holy wars. At that stage, people no longer feel guilty killing the religious other; they may even consider it a sacred duty. One is even ready to sacrifice one's own life in fulfilling it.

Any theology developed in this context will have a double role. On the one hand, it has to help in the purification and transformation of religion itself into a liberative force. On the other hand, it has to make religion into a collaborative force rather than a cause for conflict and violence. In this essay, taking the first necessary step for granted, I shall focus on the second dimension of inter-religious relationships.

Search for a Method

There are two ways of approaching the phenomenon of religious pluralism. One looks at them as it were from the outside. One may claim it to be an 'objective', 'scientific' or 'philosophical' approach. The other looks at them from within one's own religious tradition in which one believes and to which one is committed. I think that this is the proper theological approach. Let me illustrate.

Some look at religion in an abstract manner as an effort to apprehend and reach out to the 'Real' or as a way to human liberation.⁴ Religions are obviously many. This pluralism is then approached with a readymade framework: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. A religion is said to be exclusive if it claims to be the only way. It is inclusive, if it tolerates other religions, but on its own conditions. It is pluralistic if it accepts many ways. Inter-religious conflict can be avoided only if a pluralistic position is adopted. At first sight, such a framework looks like a useful tool to classify theologies of religion. If we look at Christian theology, for example, some claim that the Church is the only way to salvation. These are the exclusivists. Others accept a certain role for other religions but suggest that Christianity is the best way or has the fullness of the means of salvation. They are the inclusivists. The pluralists affirm that Christianity is one true way to salvation; but there can be other equally true or effective ways. If all religions are not the same, at least they play the same role in human society. Some philosophers may even suggest cynically that the really "Real", if it exists, is after all beyond all these human efforts to understand and express it. This framework of "exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism" has been dominating the field of reflection on religious pluralism in recent years. Theologians of religion seem to feel obliged to take a stand in relation to it. Even theologians who refuse to adopt the scheme are forced into it. The problem is that few believers in any religion will feel comfortable

⁴ Cf. Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A critical Survey of Christian Attitudes to World Religions*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985; *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995.

with such a pluralist position. I do not think that this framework is a useful tool for theological reflection. We cannot have a universal theology of religions.⁵

Liberation theologians, more than others, are aware that the starting point of theological reflection is faith commitment. This has two elements. One is the experience of life with its sufferings, problems and questions. The other is a faith vision which helps one to confront and live this life. Theological reflection is a correlation between these inter-linking elements. Such a correlation can lead to mutual transformation. We seek to transform life in the light of our faith commitment. On the other hand our understanding and expression of faith may also change in the light of our experience and struggles. Today we experience religious pluralism not only as a fact but as a problem. If we wish to adopt a positive, dialogical approach to other religions, then we must find a space for other religions within our theological world. Every religion must make a similar effort to make space for other religions within its own theological framework.⁶ Only then can they dialogue at the level of faith. I think that it is at this level that one can speak of real inter-religious dialogue. Not any kind of inter-religious encounter qualifies as inter-religious dialogue. Let me explain.

Collaboration and Dialogue

In a society where there are many religious groups, people have to live together. This can be done in various ways. A first model is that of a religion-free public social order.⁷ It refuses to give religion any kind of public, social role. Religion is privatized, so to speak. This happens in countries like China and France. People are free to practice any religion of their choice. This freedom is a human right. So long as the exercise of this right does not interfere with the right of others to practice their own religion and does not upset public order the State must respect and protect it. Collaboration between religious groups at the secular level is possible and necessary. But religions do not enter the scene. The Decree on Religious Freedom of the Second Vatican Council, for example, did not go beyond this level. It demanded freedom for religions in civil society. But civil society itself should be free of any religious elements. Communist states seek to impose such a religion-free social and political order. Secular states like France also try to do the same as can be seen in the recent case of Muslim girls wearing the head scarf in state schools.

This model, however, encounters two problems. First of all, the multi-religious community must agree on economic and socio-political values that it wants to pursue. If religions are to be kept out of the picture on what principles can these values be based? The French would advocate reason. The Chinese would advocate ideology. The question is whether every one would agree on reason and/or ideology as adequate sources for a social vision and values. Many would feel that only religion, in so far as they speak of ultimate questions in life, can be the root of such vision and values. They would say that in this case reason and ideology are functioning as quasi-religions. The second problem is that no true religious believer would

⁵ Cf. W.C.Smith, *Towards a World Theology*. London: Macmillan, 1981; Leonard Swidler (ed), *Towards a Universal Theology of Religion*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987.

⁶ For example: Michael Amaladoss, *Making Harmony. Living in a Pluralist World*. Delhi: IDCR, 2003, pp.123-134.

⁷ Cf. Rajeev Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and Its Critics*. Delhi: Oxford, 1998; Neera Chandhoke, *State and Civil Society. Explorations in Political Theory*. New Delhi: Sage, 1995; Keith J. Pavlischek, *John Courtney Murray and the Dilemma of Religious Tradition*. Kirksville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1994.

agree that his/her religious faith should control only his private life and should have nothing to say about his social and public life.⁸ I am sure that liberation theologians would be particularly sensitive to the attempt to reduce religion to the purely private sphere.

The alternate model would be that each religious group seeks to develop its own vision and values for social life. In a multi-religious situation, different religious groups seek, through dialogue, to arrive at an 'overlapping' consensus regarding visions and values that they wish to pursue together in collaboration.⁹ The religions therefore are allowed a certain public presence and role in civil society. Religious groups enter into discussion, mutual persuasion and consensus formation in the public, civil space in discussion groups, in the written and spoken media, in the universities, etc. Accepting other interlocutors and working towards consensus supposes equality between religions at a formal level, irrespective of numerical strength and political power. Theological questions start right here. A particular religion may have difficulty in recognizing the other religions as equals. It may privilege its own ethical perspectives as better or even non-negotiable. Such disagreements can happen even within religious groups as, for example, in the USA with regard to contraception, abortion, and homosexuality. It can very well happen between religious groups. The status of women, for instance, seems to be a sore point between different religious groups. Religious groups therefore have to dialogue with each other already at this level. Such dialogue may lead to a change in perspectives within each religious community. Hinduism, for instance, had a period of reform and renaissance under the impact of Christianity and British culture at the end of the 19th century.

Beyond this dialogue at the socio-political level, religions can also encounter each other at the strictly religious sphere. Inter-religious dialogue in this sense supposes that the other religion is recognized, respected and accepted as a valuable partner in dialogue. This means that one hopes not only to give, but also to receive. One feels ready to be challenged to change at the religious level. Dialogue becomes mutual prophecy. It is here that inter-religious dialogue becomes a theological problem. The theological question then is what space do we make for other religions within our own religious vision and how does this affect other aspects of this vision. In Christian terms this would mean: what is our theology of religions and how does it affect our ecclesiology, Christology and eschatology. This is where a new theology, which favours inter-religious dialogue emerges.

A New Theology of Religions

Christian theology had always recognized that people belonging to other religions could be saved by God if they are sincere to their conscience. What is new is that today we believe that God is reaching out to the people, not in spite of their religions, but in and through their religions.¹⁰ The roots of this change of perspective are found in the Second Vatican Council, though it did not affirm this positively. In its constitution *The Church in the Modern World* the Council made a strong assertion of the universal salvific will of God. (No.22) The document on

⁸ Cf. Neera Chandhoke, *Beyond Secularism. The Rights of Religious Minorities*. Delhi: Oxford, 1999; T.N.Madan, *Modern Myths and Locked Minds. Secularism and Fundamentalism in India*. Delhi: Oxford, 1996.

⁹ Cf. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

¹⁰ Cf. Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999. This book has a large bibliography.

Other Religions accepted God as the common origin and goal of all peoples and found ‘good and holy elements’ in other religions. (Nos. 1-2) The decree on mission rooted the mission of Jesus Christ in the mission of God that embraces the whole universe and the whole of human and cosmic history. (No.2) The Council however did not say anything positive about other religions as such. Theologians like Karl Rahner affirmed that, if God reaches out to other believers, given their human and social nature, it must be through the beliefs, symbols and rituals of their religions through which they are trying to reach out to God.¹¹ Asian Bishops and theologians also developed a similar perspective.¹² Such a positive appreciation of other religions received a symbolic confirmation when the Pope invited the leaders of other religions to come together at Assisi to pray for world peace. As authoritative commentators pointed out at that time, this gesture of the Pope recognized the other religions as legitimate, since the other believers can pray – that is, be in touch with God – through their rituals and, secondly, their prayers will be heard by God. A more formal confirmation of the presence and action of the Spirit of God in other religions came in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*. (No.28-29)

Such a positive appreciation of the other religions in God’s economy of salvation is integrated into Christian theological tradition in two different ways. A group of Indian theologians have described this as a paradigm shift.¹³ The first paradigm is a linear one. History starts with various religions. Even if the Spirit of God is present in them, it is only in a limited manner. Then God reveals Godself to Abraham and Moses. Jesus Christ is the final and ultimate word. All other manifestations of God find fulfillment in him. The Church has the fullness of the means of salvation. The second paradigm is more complex. God has a plan: to share God’s life with every one. God also wishes to gather all things in harmony. God sends the Word and the Spirit into the world and reveals Godself to various peoples in various ways. God’s self-revelation provokes a human response of faith. This divine-human dialogue is always salvific. Part of God’s plan is to become personally involved in the process. God chooses the Jews to prepare God’s coming and the Word becomes flesh in Jesus. Jesus and the Church are the symbols and servants – sacraments – of God’s plan. God chooses to do this in a humble, kenotic, dialogical way. The different manifestations of the Word are not opposed to each other, even if the Word incarnate has a special role and mission. But this role is to bring all things together. Fulfillment itself is eschatological. We do not know how this would happen. We are but humble servants who are called to dialogue with all people of good will. The Spirit who is present everywhere is the animator of this process of reconciliation and communion.

The Church and the Reign of God

How does one relate the other religions to the Church? Starting with the affirmation that the Church is necessary for salvation, some affirm that all the people who are saved are related to the Church in some mysterious way. I think that it is better to set the other religions in the context of the Church and the Reign of God. Jesus proclaims and inaugurates the Reign of God.

¹¹ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* V (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), p.128.

¹² See “Theses on Interreligious Dialogue” by the Theology Advisory Committee of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences in John Gnanapiragasam and Felix Wilfred (eds), *Being Church in Asia*. Manila: Claretian, 1994.

¹³ For this paradigm shift see Thomas Malipurathu and L. Stanislaus (eds), *A Vision of mission in the New Millennium* Mumbai: St.Paul’s. 2001.

Jesus sends the Church into the world as the symbol and servant or the sacrament of the Reign of God. There are however two ways of looking at the Reign of God. Some, while accepting that the Church is the beginnings of the Reign and is not identical with it, will see the Reign of God as the future of the Church. The Church will grow into the Reign. Others will however see the Reign of God as wider than the Church and present wherever God's grace is operative. Other religions are also part of the Reign of God. The Church therefore relates to other religions as collaborators in the project of realizing God's Reign in this universe. In the ongoing struggle between God on the one side and Satan as the personal power of evil and Mammon as the social power of evil on the other, the religions are on the side of God and of the Church. They are allies rather than enemies. The Church's own role is not one of domination, but of service to the Reign of God, wherever and however it is being realized.

The Reign of God is an eschatological reality. It is not purely other-worldly waiting to be realized at the end of history. It is not going to be fully realized in this world either. God has not promised us that. But the Reign is constantly being realized as human communities of freedom, fellowship and justice are being built up. The people may be economically poor and politically powerless. Yet they are slowly realizing the Reign of God in their lives and their communities, praying "Your Kingdom come" and hoping for its full realization at the end of times. It is this hope that keeps people struggling, finding joy and peace in the midst of their struggle. It is in this context that another – a very different - world seems possible and is being realized by people of good will, of whatever religion or ideology, working together and energized and empowered by the Spirit of God.¹⁴

Jesus, the Liberator

What is the role of Jesus Christ in the process? Most Christians confess that Jesus is the only saviour. So they seek to relate every one who is saved to him, if not through explicit faith, then by implicit faith. Implicit faith refers to a system that is operative without the conscious awareness of the people who are its beneficiaries. Some, however, think that Jesus is one among the saviours. The people of other religions are saved in other ways. In technical terms they say that the role of Jesus in the salvation of others is 'representative', not 'constitutive'.¹⁵ Of course, it is difficult to see what Jesus represents to people who do not recognize or acknowledge him. The problem, once again, is that the argument is abstract, *a priori*.

Perhaps a closer look at the New Testament will throw some light. The disciples encounter Jesus, listen to his proclamation of the Reign of God and witness to his initiation of its realization. His violent death at the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities shatter their dreams. But his resurrection makes them realize that Jesus was no ordinary human being and that the reign of God he inaugurated was eschatological – already present and yet reaching out to fulfillment beyond history. First they say that God has raised him up. Then they slowly realize that this ascent follows a descent. Deeper reflection on this mystery leads them to assert the pre-existence of Jesus in their early hymns. Paul sees God creating everything in Christ and also gathering up all things in him. (Eph 1:3-10) John sees Jesus as the incarnation of the Word, who was with God in the beginning, in whom everything was created and who is enlightening

¹⁴ See John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God. The Message of Jesus Today*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002),

¹⁵ Cf. Paul F. Knitter, "Comitment to One – Openness to Others", *Horizons* 28 (2001) 255-270.

everyone coming into the world. (Jon 1:1-14) What happens here is that what God does in the humanity of Jesus is related to what is happening in eternity. What Jesus does therefore should not be isolated. Nor should it be reduced simply to a historical manifestation or symbol of an eternal mystery. Eternity is being played out in cosmic history and what happens in history is relevant to eternity. The descending and ascending of Christ is not simply play acting. The divine involves itself in history and transforms it. But the principal actor here is God: Father, Word and Spirit. The Word that became human in Jesus has been active in various ways all through history. The different religions may be seen as expressions of the different manifestations of the Word through the Spirit. What God does through the Word cannot be reduced to what God does through Jesus, though they are obviously interrelated. Jesus is a special manifestation in so far he is the incarnate Word. But he comes as a self-emptying servant, not to assert his superiority, dominate or control. So when we confess Jesus as the only saviour we are using the principle of the 'communication of the idioms'. God - Father, Word and Spirit – is the only saviour. God is working in the world in various ways. The Word becoming flesh is God's work. But it does not monopolize God's work, but is at its service. Jesus as the Word of God is the only saviour. The Word made flesh is the sacrament – or symbol and servant – of this mystery. Its service consists precisely in entering into history and in collaborating with the many ways in which God is active in it.¹⁶

To confess therefore that Jesus is the only saviour is to acknowledge that the mystery we name Jesus is present and active every where, not to claim any kind of superiority to Jesus. This very mystery calls us to collaboration between the various ways it is manifested in history. The incarnate manifestation of the Word is not its only manifestation, though it is a special one. But its speciality is humble service. Its role is one of being at the service of the mystery and its many manifestations. The service that it envisages and demands is one of dialogue.

A Call to Dialogue

This dialogue however is not simple because every divine manifestation involves a human response. Both God's self manifestation and the human response are free. While God's manifestations are interrelated, God is not obliged to repeat Godself. The human response is also conditioned by history and culture as well as by the sinfulness of the humans. This is true also of the Church. It is because of this pluralism of God's manifestations and human responses that the dialogue can be mutually prophetic, purificatory, and enriching.

While God and God's Reign are points of convergence, pluralism of religions is not only a value, but inevitable, given the diversity of divine manifestations and of history and cultures and of the human groups themselves. The Biblical vision of history is one of bringing together, of gathering, not of making one, so that "God may be all in all." (1 Cor 15:28) It is harmony and communion rather than unity, certainly not uniformity. This supposes freedom and equality, justice and solidarity. Thus a theology of dialogue can be supported by a theology of pluralism and harmony.¹⁷ The Muslim *umma* (universal community), the Buddhist inter-being and the Hindu dharma confirm this vision of harmony.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Jesus Christ as the only Saviour and Mission", *The Japan Mission Journal* 55 (2001) 219-226

¹⁷ See "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony" in Franz-Josef Eilers (ed), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 2 (Manila: Claretian, 1997), pp. 229-298.

Openness to the other is not against the affirmation of one's own identity. Dialogue becomes a problem only when the different identity of the other is denied or down graded. The theology through which one seeks to justify to oneself the possibility of dialogue is itself not the object of dialogue.

Intra-personal Dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue may start as collaboration in the pursuit of agreed upon human and spiritual values at the economic, social and political level. At some stage religions encounter each other as religions. Faith encounters faith. At a basic level there is an effort to know and understand the other religion. Ignorance and prejudice will have to be overcome. The attempt to understand leads to comparative study, because one's point of reference is one's own religion. Understanding may lead to appreciation. We believe that God has spoken to them and that they have devised ways of experiencing God or the Ultimate. God may have spoken to them in a way different from the way in which God has spoken to us. Still, in so far as it is God who has spoken, we feel that what God has manifested to them is not totally irrelevant to us. It may be even complementary. Some people then read and are nourished by the scriptures of other religions. Others may seek to experience God or the Ultimate following the *sadhana* or spiritual practices of another religion. We know Hindus who have sought to be disciples of Jesus and follow his teachings. There are Christians who practice Hindu yoga or Buddhist systems of meditation like Zen or Vipassana. They have been spiritually enriched. Some seem to succeed in integrating such methods and experiences with their Christian context and identity. There are others who do not succeed in such integration. They seem to feel that they are different, but equally valid experiences of the Absolute. These people may offer experiential support to the experience of religious pluralism. The fact that God is the common origin and goal of all the religions and that it is the same Spirit of God who is present and active in all the religions does not mean that all religions are the same and have the same religious or spiritual experience. People who are open to the spiritual experience of other religions are often accused of syncretism. Syncretism is an indiscriminate mixing of religious meaning systems. People who are engaged in inter-religious dialogue at the level of spiritual experience are not being syncretistic. It is an intra-personal process. They are rooted in their own faith, while being open to other faith experiences. When no integration is possible, there is a dialectic. It is mutually challenging and creative. I am not indulging here in hypothetical considerations, but trying to make sense of reported experiences.¹⁸

Dialogue as Reconciliation

Where there has been inter-religious conflict no true dialogue is possible without conflict resolution and reconciliation. So we also need a theology of reconciliation. The starting point for reconciliation is of course the recognition that some thing unjust has been done and people have been hurt. There is an acknowledgement of guilt or at least of responsibility, either individual or collective or both. People want to rebuild community based on justice. The justice they look for is not retributive, based on revenge, but restorative, based on forgiveness. Revenge

¹⁸ Cf. Dennis Gira and Jacques Scheuer (eds), *Vivre de plusieurs religions. Promesse ou illusion?* Paris: L'Atelier, 2000.

can often lead to a spiral of violence. Forgiveness promotes reconciliation and community. Forgiving need not mean forgetting. As a matter of fact memory may remain a useful warning signpost for the future. But memories too have to be healed. Restorative justice involves an attempt to restore to people what they have lost during the violence. People, of course, cannot be brought back to life. But means of livelihood can be provided. The sense of human dignity that one loses when treated as an object can be regained when the stories of one's sufferings are listened to. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* that the South African Government established after the end of the Apartheid regime was a pioneering effort in this area.¹⁹ Such efforts could be imitated elsewhere.

The theological bases for reconciliation are found in the life and death of Jesus. Jesus witnessed to the forgiving love of the Father, healing people by forgiving them. His new commandment of love goes hand in hand with the demand that they forgive each other. Both God and Jesus are held up as models of forgiveness. The prayer "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" sums up the attitude. Asking pardon can be as hard as forgiving. The Church itself had the courage to ask pardon for its misdeeds, not without some quibbling, only in recent years.

Dialogue and Conflict

While pluralism by itself need not lead to conflict, struggle may be inevitable when pluralism leads to division, domination and injustice. Unjust structures do not change by themselves. Is a spirit of dialogue opposed to conflict in such circumstances? The horizon of all our actions and struggles is the community of the Reign of God. Any struggle must be set in that context. This would mean that the necessary struggle would be non-violent and leads to negotiation and progressive change. Violent revolution may occasionally succeed in throwing out a dictator. But it hardly ever brings peace and justice. Jesus himself is the model of non-violent struggle. Following his example, leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dom Helder Camara and Nelson Mandela have shown its contemporary relevance.²⁰ Where struggles and violence are frequent, structures to promote conflict resolution may have to be set up.

Dialogue, conflict resolution and reconciliation can be analyzed in terms of social psychology. Theology however is involved when we are exploring inter-religious conflicts. Religion also gives a depth to the process of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Religions that do not speak much about sin may not also talk about forgiveness. But all understand the need for reconciliation and peace.

Prophetic Dialogue

I have suggested that each religion has to develop its own theological perspectives with regard to its relation with other religions. It is not meaningful to speak of a universal theology. We tend easily to accuse others of being fundamentalistic, unforgiving, etc. Christianity has been fundamentalistic till recently. Our openness to dialogue is still half-hearted and often has a

¹⁹ Cf. Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

²⁰ Cf. George Pattery, *Gandhi, the Believer*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1996.

hidden agenda. Even today Asians with their living experience of other believers seem more open to dialogue than Euro-Americans. We began asking forgiveness for our past misdeeds only a few years ago. Hindus have shown themselves more open to dialogue than Christians in India. Therefore we need not rush to judge others. Theological dialogue with other believers may provoke others to reflect and develop their own theological traditions and to become more open to dialogue. We have seen this happening among Asian theologians of liberation of all religions.²¹ Every religious tradition is trying to make space for other religious traditions within its own religious context and is open to dialogue and collaboration not only in the socio-political sphere but also in the religious one.

Dialogue with Ideologies

We have been talking so far about inter-religious dialogue. Much of what we have said will also apply to our interaction and collaboration with people who are not particularly religious but follow an ideology. They may be non-believers, agnostics or marginal believers. But they may believe strongly in an ideology and follow it with commitment. If our aim is to achieve harmony among human beings we cannot ignore ideologies. We have to collaborate with their followers too. They too can be fundamentalist and violent, having a blind faith in their ideologies. They may not believe in God. But we believe that God is working also through them. When Jesus evoked the picture of the final judgment he conferred blessedness, not on people who were faithful practitioners of religious ritual, but on people who were close to the poor and the suffering, who were compassionate and helped those who were in need. It is significant that the World Council of Churches has a sub-unit for dialogue with faiths and ideologies. Ideologies are quasi-religions. Their followers attribute a certain absoluteness to them. They shape their vision and values.

Conclusion

A new world then is possible. All people have to build it together. Even if some struggle is inevitable, it can be non-violent leading to justice through negotiation and reconciliation. Religions and ideologies need not be obstacles to such collaboration. All religions make space for such inter-religious collaboration, based on their experience of pluralism and their belief in one God. This is true today also of Christians. A new theology of religions and of mission and a new practice of dialogue are emerging among them. This new awareness brings new challenges and new possibilities for faith-praxis.

This is perhaps the moment to rethink our title. The phrase “God of many names” may make it appear that the different religions are only different names for one and the same God. This image does not take seriously the identity and difference of the various religions. Every religion is an interplay of divine and human freedom.²² They are different experiences and expressions of divine-human encounter. God is neither a common denominator nor the great Unknown. God is the source of richness and diversity. God manifests Godself in various ways to various peoples at various times in various cultures under various historical circumstances. God is the inexhaustible source of this diversity. Pluralism therefore has to be acknowledged,

²¹ Cf. M. Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom. Liberation Theologies from Asia*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997.

²² See John Paul II, *The Mission of the Redeemer*, 28-29.

accepted and respected. But this pluralism is not chaotic. There is one God and this God has a plan for the universe which is working itself out in history. We believe that this plan includes also an incarnate manifestation of the Word of God, besides the universal presence and action of the Word and the Spirit. But it is meant to be sacramental. God's goal is to create a new world:

See, the home of God is among the mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
They will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more;
for the first things have passed away.
And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." (Rev 21:3-5)

It is our task to discern God's action in history and through peoples and to collaborate with God and with others in realizing the new world. This collaboration will have to take place at all levels: economic and political, personal and social, cultural and religious. Inter-religious dialogue is only one element of this collaboration. But it is a crucial one since it provides meaning, motivation and inspiration in an ultimate context. That is why dialogue between religions is interesting and necessary. Such dialogue will lead to cosmic harmony where "God will be all in all." (1 Cor 15:28)

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