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The Concept of Dialogue and the Economy of Salvation

V. F. VINEETH*

Introduction

By the word economy of salvation I mean in this paper the universal salvation plan that was hidden in the mind of God, the Father, from all eternity and was revealed in the fulness of time in and through Jesus Christ. "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."¹ This economy of salvation, therefore, involves;

1. The historical nature of the salvation plan;
2. The trans-historical nature of all salvation plans;
3. The universality of salvation;
4. The place of Jesus Christ in the universal salvation.

By the word dialogue I mean "inter-faith" dialogue. Hence it is a dialogue between Faiths giving birth to religions and quasi-religious traditions. Religion may be defined in its narrowest sense as "cult of God or gods." In a wider sense religion may mean man's quest for transcendence. This may include the primitive religions where the idea of God was not yet present or the highly developed religions like Buddhism where the idea of God was not found necessary. In either case it points to something which is most important for man. It is the quest for the ultimate meaning of his existence, his "directedness towards the Unconditional."² All religions express the Unconditional in terms of the conditional forms which the Unconditional tend to transcend. A dialogue with any religion takes us to the Unconditional as well as to the conditional cultural forms in which the Unconditional finds its expression.

In the modern world we find a tendency to treat modern ideologies along with religion. Such modern ideologies and socio-political movements are sometimes termed as quasi-religions.³

* Fr Vineeth CMI teaches at Dharmaram College, Bangalore.

¹ Eph. 1:9.

² Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?*, 1969, p. 59.

³ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, 1963, pp. 1 ff.

This is not because they are real substitutes for religion but because in some way they stand for certain values forgotten in the traditional ways of our life. So these values tend to work as substitutes for religion, especially in a secular-minded society. Hence the concept of dialogue in its wider perspective may include these ideologies which shape the mind of men today. However, in this article the word dialogue is understood more in terms of dialogue with the living religions of India.

From Non-Dialogical to Dialogical Attitude

The Christian consciousness is subject to growth. As the reflection of the consciousness of the Word realized in the limitations of human flesh, it grows in time and space, in and through history. It changes, it evolves. Evolution in consciousness, however, does not mean, that it relinquishes its basic positions with regard to its commitment to Christ or his Church; but it means a new understanding with regard to its doctrines. Thus the Church has moved from a triumphant and self-justifying attitude to a humble and self-criticising attitude, from an attitude of judging other religions from her own standpoint to an attitude of learning religions from within and even accepting values from them, though of course subject to her criticism and balanced judgement. In psychological terms, this is a shift of emphasis from an attitude of "I am OK—You are not OK" to an attitude of "I am OK—You also are OK."

In the mid-nineteenth century the missionaries thought that the non-Christian religions were natural, mundane associations of evil worshippers: dedicated to the spirit of the world. A. Sutton in his book *Orissa and its Evangelization* wrote: "Of all the temples which covered the land, not one was devoted to the living God. Of all the endless acts of worship daily performed, not one was offered to him who alone is worthy. Not one prayer was addressed really to God."⁴ From such a negative attitude the Church has moved to a positive attitude of mutual acceptance, openness, sharing and collaboration even in the field of exploring the divine. A positive outlook with regard to the other religions is the basic minimum requirement for a meaningful dialogue. Pioneer theologians like Brahmabhandab Upadaya, Sadhu Sundar Singh, A. J. Appaswamy, P. Chenchiah, V. Chakkarai, P. D. Devanandan, R. Pannikar paved the way for a new understanding of Christianity encountering other religions and other religions encountering Christianity.⁵ In the Catholic world the second Vatican Council gave a new push to dialogue and publicly proclaimed the eternal values present in the non-Christian religions.⁶ Several conferences and seminars that

⁴ A. Sutton, *Orissa and its Evangelization*, 1850, p. 106.

⁵ Cf. Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 1969, revised edn. 1975.

⁶ Vat. II, *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*, Ch. 2.16. Cf. also *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*.

followed it made the concept of dialogue a widely accepted idea in Christian theological thinking, though with varied understanding and interpretations by different theologians.⁷

Towards a Theology of Dialogue

Earnest and authentic dialogue is motivated by a sincere quest for mutual sharing. It includes accepting from other religious experiences as well as giving from one's own. Is such a position theologically tenable, if one believes that in the person of Jesus Christ the fulness of truth has been revealed? This was the problem with missionaries of the early nineteenth century. If we are the possessors of the fulness of truth, then what is the point in having a dialogue? We are rather people committed to teach, to give, not to receive and to get converted. This outlook forgets an important aspect of all revelatory process, namely its essential limitation. Revelation, by the very fact that it is the manifestation of the Unmanifest in certain otherness, is bound to be limited. God cannot reveal without concealing. What is manifested will always be a *nāmarūpa*, a name and form, of the One who has no name and form. As Sankara puts it, all manifestations are *āvaranavikṣepa* (concealment and projection at the same time). Limitation is the inherent structure of all revelation, no matter how supreme and singular it is. This is true also with regard to the manifestation of the Word in Jesus Christ, the basic *nāmarūpa* the Word has assumed. Though the Word is supreme and infinite, the manifestation in the form of flesh is definitely finite, subject to the limitations of culture and history. Yet the flesh is that medium through which the Word is manifested. Since the content of the Word is always inexhaustible, no manifestation can claim to have expressed the entire content in such a way that no further expression is needed. The revelation of God in limitedness, therefore, always needs newer and newer expressions of the same as long as it continues to be a process in time and history. As Panikkar puts it, the primordial fulness appeared in Jesus only in a "certain fulness" and will appear in "capital fulness" only at the end of time.⁸

Till that eschatological moment people will understand and experience it differently. Each understanding and experience may unveil dimensions which other experiences have not yet succeeded in doing. A genuine dialogue with other experiences takes us to these new dimensions of reality that have been unveiled in other religions which can inspire me to discover my own experience in greater depth.

⁷ For a study of the documents of these seminars, cf. Anto Karokaran, *Evangelization and Diakonia*, 1978, pp. 183 ff.

⁸ R. Panikkar, "The Category of Growth in Comparative Religion: A Critical Self-Examination," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 66, 1973, pp. 115-116.

Different religions unveil different aspects of Truth. God being infinite and religions being man's way of relating himself to God, all expressions of religions are necessarily bound to be finite and therefore no religion can claim that it has perfectly articulated all aspects of truth for all men. Therefore each religion can learn from the rich traditions of the other. I am reminded of the famous Vedic dictum: *ekam sat viprah bahudhā vadanti*: "the seers call that which is One in many ways."⁹ It is against this background that we have to understand the word dialogue.

Dialogue and the Question of the Uniqueness of Religion

For Christians the Christ-event is very central to their faith. Against the trans-historical nature of the oriental religions the historical dimension of religion is especially stressed in Christianity. Christ is also seen as the centre of all history. He is the beginning, middle and the end of the revelatory process of God. In him is all history summarized and all humanity gathered up. Because the Christ-event is one decisive moment in history for all men, from the Christian perspective, which sees in the person of Christ, the Universal becoming the particular once for all, the salvation worked out in and through Christ is universal. True and authentic dialogue does not want the abandonment of any of these cherished doctrines or articulations of faith. Yet it may ask for a new understanding of them.

A meaningful dialogue is possible only if a certain amount of equality is accepted by both parties. If one party thinks he is on the peak of religious experience, there is no point in going for a dialogue. It is simply not earnest enough. The general accusation raised by non-Christians is that Christians come for dialogue with a superiority complex. This is quite easily possible, because the general tendency of the Christian is to identify truth with Christ. This is understandable, but becomes unjustifiable, when he keeps on identifying the whole truth of Christ with its finite forms of expression of which he is actually in possession. On the other hand, the general tendency of a Hindu is to rise above all forms of particularizations of truth, including the one he is attached to. It is this tension between the stress on the particularization of the absolute and the absolutization of the particular that we actually face in the encounter of the religions of the East and the West. This does not mean the end of a dialogue. On the contrary, this could pave the way for a rich dialogue. The particular without the corrective of the absolute can turn out to be an anthropomorphic idol, whereas the absolute without the corrective of the particular can become an empty concept of pure being. So the stress on differences can be mutually complementary. We will come to this point later.

⁹ Rig Veda 1, 164, 46.

As regards the level of equality from where we can start the dialogue, this much should be certainly guaranteed: each one's religious experience, no matter what religion he belongs to, is a unique experience. It is his or her intimate experience, holy experience, sacred experience and salutary experience. It is a unique experience for the one who experiences it. Here there is no question of comparison, nor is there any place for inferiority or superiority complex. It is the unique experience of an individual in a sacred realm where the finite encounters the infinite.

The acceptance of the uniqueness of individual experience does not mean the renunciation of one's own creeds and tenets. It is just the other way about. It is laying stress on each one's particular form of religious experience and considering it as supreme. A meaningful dialogue with religions does not mean the giving up of what one considers most dear and most meaningful.

Hence the basic conditions for a meaningful dialogue are: (1) acceptance of the uniqueness of each one's religious experience; (2) earnest adherence to what one thinks worth retaining. For example, Christ is very central to the Christian religious experience. Hence there is no point in leaving out Christ or belittling His importance in any way in order to enter into a true dialogue with other religions. Though Christ is the fulness of truth as the eternal Word of God, the expression of it even in Christ himself is finite, insofar as Christ is the divine self-expression in human form; and it is much more so with regard to the reception of Christ in us. Though what we really possess is God in Christ, what we actually manifest and what we can manifest is just a tiny bit of the vast possibility of God's self-expression in Christ. Unless moved by Christ Himself there is nothing extraordinary to be admired as far as an outsider is concerned. Every faith-claim is internal.

Hence it is not with a mentality of giving up what is dear to us, but with a mentality of genuine openness that we have to enter into the dialogue. Perhaps it can happen that what we think to be dear may not be that much dear and worth keeping. Perhaps it can also happen that what we think worth keeping could be kept in a better way if we relinquish some of our ways and accept some other ways instead. And this conviction could be hastened if we allow ourselves to be influenced by the presence of the other religions. Thus dialogue will be mutually influential, highly contributive and complementary.

That this should really be so, we should consider the following point as supremely important: there should be no judgement without some elements of self-criticism. We should never judge another religion without also making a serious self-examination, because it is not a question of truth encountering falsehood, but truth encountering another expression of truth, both of which may have their "false elements" in actual life. This kind of judging the other religion with earnest self-criticism

will take dialogue to a way of living which is predominantly characterized by the spirit of give and take. What happened in the past was that there was much judgement, but very little self-criticism, great enthusiasm to give, little readiness to receive.

May I conclude this section by quoting Paul Tillich who concludes his book *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* as follows: "In the depth of every religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence."¹⁰

Conclusion: Dialogue and the Understanding of the whole Christ:

To the question why dialogue, my ultimate answer is that dialogue is for understanding the whole Christ. Christ is the eternal Truth manifested in time and space for all humanity. As every manifestation is finite, so too is the manifestation of Truth in Christ, which would therefore require successive stages of further manifestations so that the full content of Truth may be unveiled. The Christian-awareness of this is brought to light in the expression of the cosmic-Christ. But what is our knowledge of the cosmic-Christ? Even if we know and accept the cosmic dimension of Christ in theory, we do not really know much about the marvellous possibilities in which it can express itself. Each religion, as it unveils one or the other dimension of the Truth in a particular way, can provide us with a new possibility of understanding Christ and the economy of human salvation. God has wrought in and through Him. Each of these possibilities could be as good and great as what we have today in western Christianity, which is but one of these different forms. This one form has also drawn its inspiration from its past heritages—cultural as well as religious which were predominantly western, though quite often it was misunderstood as *the* form of world-Christianity or Christ's self-expression on earth. It is true that for a believer all these forms would be based on one and the same Christ-event which for him is God's self-manifestation in history. For him the economy of salvation wrought in Christ is all-pervading. Hence the Christian sees Christ in all religions and all religions in Christ. Until the final fulness of Christ is manifested in that eschatological moment, in which everything will be gathered in Christ, he will keep on discovering new dimensions of Christ in and through his encounter with other religions. Thus "dialogue" will go on and on and will be considered helpful for a deeper and wider understanding of the very Christian economy of salvation.

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, p. 97.