

# Dialogue with World Religions— Basic Approaches and Practical Experiences

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This paper seeks only to attempt a preliminary answer to three simple questions related to Christians engaging in dialogue with people of other faiths and religions.

I. What theological and practical considerations lead us to undertake dialogue with people of other faiths and religions?

II. In what spirit, with what attitudes and expectations, should we as Christians enter into dialogue with people of other faiths and religions?

III. What important lessons can be learned from the experience so far in dialogue with people of other faiths and religions?

In answering these questions, we should take into account the problems created by

(a) theological differences between Christians

(b) sociological and cultural differences between various situations.

This paper has been written from the theological background of the Orthodox Tradition, but with some sympathy and understanding for the Protestant and Roman Catholic Traditions as well. The background of the writer of this paper is one of a Christian minority amidst a preponderant Hindu majority, and a Muslim minority that is at least five times as large as the total Christian community, not to mention the Sikhs who are almost as numerous as the Christians, and various other smaller minorities like Buddhists, Jews, Parsis, Jains. But an effort will be made here to look at the issue of dialogue with people of other religions from the perspective of post-Christendom Europe and America.

## I. Theological Considerations

The tone for the western Christian approach to unbelievers was, perhaps, set by Augustine of Hippo. When Nectarius of Calama wrote to him about the contradiction between Augustine's assertion that man can do good deeds only through the grace of God in Christ,

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and the common experience that unbelieving pagans sometimes do show forth some splendid virtues, Augustine's reply to Nectarius was simply that the virtues of the pagans were but splendid vices.

If we were to say the same thing about the many instances of unbelievers in our secular society sometimes putting Christians to shame by their superior spirit of unselfishness and self-sacrifice, we would be regarded as bigoted and narrow-minded. We cannot write off a Gandhi or a Marx or a Lenin as simply pagans with splendid vices. Augustine's loyalty to the doctrine of an exclusive grace that comes to Christians alone for the doing of good deeds goes both against our experience and the spirit of our age.

But a similar exclusivism and bigotry was more recently manifested by reputable modern Protestant theologians like Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer. Ever since Tambaram 1938, Protestant Christians who want to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths have found themselves inhibited by the contention that God's revelation comes only to Christians, and that others are so totally or almost totally in error that there is no point in talking to them.

I do not know of any respectable Roman Catholic theologians who have revived Augustinian intolerance in so virulent a form. Theologians like Karl Rahner, with a broad-minded Existentialist, neo-Thomist orientation, have been quite open to the possibility that other religions can be a positive factor in the understanding of divine revelation:

The divinely intended means of salvation for the individual meet him within the concrete religion of his actual existential milieu and historical contingency, according to God's will and forbearance (which so intermingle, that they are no longer clearly separable).<sup>1</sup>

The position stands in stark contrast with Karl Barth's dictum in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/2 para 17:2, entitled *Religion als Unglaube*:

Wir beginnen mit dem Satz: Religion ist Unglaube; Religion ist eine Angelegenheit, man muss geradezu sagen: die Angelegenheit des gottlosen Menschen.<sup>2</sup>

The context for this imperious intolerance against religion is not simply the fact that the fight against liberalism would permit no loophole through which some kind of "natural revelation" would get in. More illuminating is the fact that the Jerusalem international missionary conference had posed the problem of mission and unbelief in

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religion," in *The Church: Readings in Theology* (New York: J. P. Kennedy and Sons, 1963), p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> German text I/2 (1945 edn.), p. 327. The English text is as follows: "We begin by stating that religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed we must say that it is the one great concern, of godless man" (I/2, pp. 299-300).

that peculiar form. According to one rather liberal but influential Anglo-American faction at Tambaram, the enemy was secularism with its denial of God and revelation, and all those opposed to secularism should join hands in combating the sprawling monster of secularism. This meant that the appeal of Jerusalem would be that Christian missionaries join hands with the adherents of other religions in fighting the common enemy—secularism. The issue was only raised and not resolved at Jerusalem 1930. It was only in Tambaram, India, 1938, that the battle was really joined between the Anglo-Americans under the leadership of the Anglican Richey Hogg identifying the enemy as secularism, and the continental theologians under the leadership of the Dutch Reformed Hendrik Kraemer locating the enemy as these other religions so full of human error, superstition and ignorance. For Kraemer, it was fatal for Christianity to ally itself with the other religions. Secularism was less of an enemy than those religions. It was this line that Kraemer's disciple Theodore Van Leeuwen further developed in his *Christianity in World History*, where the argument is that secularisation is God's action, that it is the form in which the Gospel goes on, and that the world religions which have resisted the Christian mission will not be able to stand up against the sweeping torrent of secularisation.<sup>3</sup>

Van Leeuwen was not against all non-European cultures. If only these cultures would rid themselves of the obnoxious religious element, then Van Leeuwen would be very charitable towards them:

Once the religious myth has been blown away, there is room for the traditions of the non-Christian cultures to bring forth their treasures.<sup>4</sup>

Some of my Hindu friends detect a highly reprehensible element of European cultural arrogance in such a statement. What it says to him is, in effect, "Oh yes, once you are sufficiently trained in our western secular civilisation and you shed your Hindu religious identity, we will co-opt you into a world civilisation which will of course be dominated by European secularised culture."

Whatever theological or other reasons we as Christians may have for engaging in dialogue with people of other faiths, we should be explicit and honest about them. If we are engaging in dialogue with the secret intention of converting them, as many religious people in Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism suspect, then our partner is bound to be wary and our dialogue inauthentic.

The attempt here is merely to present first the Christian theological basis for dialogue with all human beings, and then to advance a few simple arguments to show that we should begin dialogue without much more dilly-dallying with theoretical reflection.

<sup>3</sup> A. T. van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History* (Edinburgh, 1964). See esp. pp. 411 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 419.

It is not necessary in this connection to start with any concept of *Uroffenbarung* as Paul Althaus<sup>5</sup> does, distinguishing it from *Christus-offenbarung*. Neither does it seem essential to follow the line of Carl Heinz Ratschow, and posit some kind of *Hervortreten* or stepping forth of God which is then regarded as being apprehended by people of other religions. One can approach people of other religions without any presuppositions about General or Original Revelation or about the salvific values of other religions.

The basic theological position may be set forth thus:

Christ is the first-born of Creation, the head of all created reality. He loves not only all men, but also all that is created. I am united to Christ in Baptism and Chrismation. My mind is the mind of Christ. Therefore my love is non-exclusive and open to the whole creation. Nothing is alien or threatening. Love and compassion for the whole creation is the characteristic of Christ. The Church as His body shares in this love and compassion. I as a member of that body have to express that love and compassion in faithfulness, integrity and openness with sympathetic understanding. This is sufficient and compelling reason for me to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths. It is love in Christ that sends me to dialogue.

It seems that is quite sufficient theological basis for dialogue. If you want additional arguments, here are a few:

(a) If dialogue with "secular" man is justified on the ground that he is my neighbour, then "religious" man is also equally my neighbour and I must communicate with him.

(b) If theology has as its task the understanding of what God does in the world and how he deals with human beings, then we must know something about man's present state as created, fallen and redeemed. Such an understanding of man cannot be built upon knowing European or Christian man alone. The vast majority of humanity belong to other religions and what they experience and aspire to should be part of our knowledge of humanity. Present western theology is defective precisely because of its defective and partial understanding of what constitutes humanity. Dialogue can help in remedying this defect.

(c) What God does in history cannot be confined to Christians alone. How Christ has affected people who are not members of the Christian Church is an important aspect of God's action. The great religions of the world have been profoundly affected by exposure to the person and teachings of Christ. This work of God can be understood only in patient and trusting dialogue with people of other faiths.

(d) There is some truth in the statements of some liberal theologians like Ernst Troeltsch who advocated "replacement of missionary attacks on the other world religions by cross-fertilization" for

<sup>5</sup> P. Althaus, *Die Christliche Wahrheit*, Bd. I and II, Gutersloh, 1947.

cultural exchange and mutual stimulation. This need not be based, as it was in the case of liberalism, on some value-neutral acceptance of the empirically given without any over-riding criterion of judgement. As one exposes oneself to people of other religions, one's own judgemental criteria are transformed. One's understanding of Christianity itself can be changed. It may not be so unwise to follow Paul Tillich's advice to use the knowledge of other religions as a means "to penetrate into the depth of one's own religion, in devotion, thought and action."

In the depth of every religion there is a point at which 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. This is what Christianity must see in the present encounter of the world religions.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, dialogue with other religions strengthens and stimulates our Christian faith.

(e) The Christian Church is an instrument of God for bringing humanity together in unity, creativity and righteousness. Such a unity can neither impose uniformity nor condone unrighteousness. It means a critical reconciliation of opposed elements in such a way that their creative possibilities are enhanced and released. What we are looking for is more than what the late Prof. R. C. Zaehner recommended—namely the transition from a mere convergence towards a "Concordant Discord."<sup>7</sup> What we need is more like what Pannenberg recommends—the development of a Tradition that is rich in its diversity, conscious of its incompleteness, and always "open for the future in an unlimited way." The Christian Church has to play its role as a unifying force among the various discordant elements in humanity. Religion is one of the most deeply rooted of these elements that divide man from man. By putting men into dialogue with each other, the Church would be contributing towards a rich and diverse creative unity of humankind.

One last word about the theological position. Roman Catholic theology itself has recently moved from what may be called the "proportion of truth" approach to other religions which characterised the theology of the Vatican II decree on non-Christian religions. We

<sup>6</sup> P. Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York and London, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> See R. C. Zaehner, *The Convergent Spirit* (Oxford, 1963), where he sees the religions moving towards a common point, and his later (1967-69) Gifford Lectures, *Concordant Discord. The Interdependence of Faiths* (Oxford, 1970), where he advocates moving from "discordant concord" to "concordant discord." Zaehner strikes the non-Christian as being a bit too imperialistic in his oversimplified handling of other religions and in his eagerness to show Christianity as superceding all religions.

cannot simply say that the Church has 100 per cent of the Truth while other religions have varying proportions or percentages of the Truth. God is Truth. Christ is Truth. The Truth liberates, but it cannot be objectified and quantified. The new approach in Roman Catholic theology seems to be based on "the universal salvific will of God." This is reflected in Karl Rahner's writings as well as in the article of Fr Eugene Hillman in *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*:

Every religion serves God's saving purpose in history, insofar as it offers its followers an awareness of their own inadequacies before God even when God may be only a suspected influence behind the immediate questions of human destiny. Every religious act is a saving act, insofar as it directs persons to a greater love for one another.<sup>8</sup>

Fr Hillman does not assert that one religion is as good as another. Neither does he think that we have reliable criteria for evaluating "the comparative salutary and humanizing value of the countless religions of the World." He is in fact simply reviving an earlier Protestant approach, the *praeparatio evangelica* approach when he states:

The fathers of Vatican II have clearly taken the position that non-Christian religions should be regarded at least as preparations for humanity's reception of the Gospel. Are these religions perhaps related to Christianity in somewhat the same way that John the Baptist was related to Jesus, or as Christians believe the Old Testament is related to the New?<sup>9</sup>

This approach, which was characteristic of enlightened Protestant missionary policy in the pre-Tambaram days, was found to be too patronising to be acceptable to non-Christians. Even Raimundo Panikkar's *Unknown Christ of Hinduism* is offensive to sensitive and intelligent Hindus, for in claiming what is good in Hinduism for Christ, Christians are being imperialistic, patronising and superior, as the Hindu sees them. Fr Panikkar's statement that Christ came "to bring to its fullness every religion of the world" is seen as the "Christianity—the Crown of all Religions" kind of haughtiness.

<sup>8</sup> E. Hillman, "Evangelization in a Wider Ecumenism: Theological Grounds for Dialogue with Other Religions," *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1974), pp. 2-12.

<sup>9</sup> Fr Schoonenberg is more cautious and holds that religion is only one of the many forms of historical experience. See his "The Church and Non-Christian Religions" in D. Flanagan (ed.), *The Meaning of the Church* (Dublin, 1966), pp. 89-109. H.R. Schlette is more categorical in asserting that God reveals himself in other religions. See his *Towards a Theology of Religions* (New York, 1965) and his *Colloquium salutis—Christien und nicht-Christien heute* (Cologne, 1965).

The other Roman Catholic approach, based on "the universal salvific will of God," is exemplified by H. S. Schlette and Piet Schoonenberg. Their position is that, since man is a historic being by nature, God's salvific will must also be historical, i.e., not limited to specific moments and individuals in history, but operating in history as a whole. (This is also the Pannenberg line.) From this they go on to argue that God is actively being revealed to non-Christians through their historical religions. The line of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan seems to be similar—the grace of God is universally operative and open to all human beings; in all our knowing and willing we are reaching out towards reality and thus to the Infinite Transcendent. Religion is an explicit reaching out to the Infinite and that procures special grace. The various experiences of this special grace are then socially objectified and systematised into organised religion, since man is a social being.

But most of these theologians, when pressed, may deny that the religions have full salvific value; they are at best partial and preparatory. They would agree with Protestant theologians that Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation.

The position of this paper is that it is not necessary to raise and resolve these questions before engaging in dialogue. Christian love is a sufficient and compelling basis for entering into dialogue. There are other reasons of a more pragmatic nature which push us into dialogue. This conclusion is extremely important for what follows in the next section.

If we pose any doctrine of God's universal salvific will, we have two problems on our hand. What is the role of Christ's incarnation in it? In what way do Christians share in this that others don't?

## **II. Spirit, Attitudes and Expectations**

The spirit in which one approaches people of other faiths is decisive for the outcome. This spirit is negatively and positively influenced by our attitudes and expectations.

If your basic expectation is eventually to convert your partner in dialogue to the Christian faith, it will inevitably entail certain attitudes and approaches on your part and certain inhibitions on the part of your partner which could make dialogue self-defeating. It is true that many of our friends in the other religions already suspect dialogue to be another devious technique of evangelisation. Dialogue cannot be an alternative for mission or evangelism.

Personally, I do not like to use the terminology of mission, since it is associated in my mind with western colonialism and imperialism. This paper would prefer therefore to speak about the relation between dialogue and evangelisation.

In religious dialogue two or more human beings meet each other, with mutual trust and openness, each respecting the convictions of the other; the object is to understand each other in their varying

religious traditions, and to be mutually helped in one's own grasp of the truth.

In evangelisation the baptised believer in the Crucified and Risen Christ speaks to the unbeliever, on behalf of Christ and His Church, to declare the good news that in Christ Jesus God calls all men into the Kingdom through faith, repentance, baptism and the Christian life.

Evangelisation is accompanied by signs of the Kingdom—acts of love and compassion, miracles of faith, symbolic acts repudiating the values of the world and manifesting the values of the Kingdom. But these acts should not be called evangelisation. Evangelisation is proclamation, annunciation, declaration of the good news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and is made the Master and Lord of all creation.

Evangelisation is a charisma—a gift of the Spirit (Eph. 4:1). No charisma except love is common to all members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27-30, 1 Cor. 12:19). Evangelism is the task of those who are endowed with that particular charisma. It should not be engaged in by people without the gift. Indiscriminate preaching by self-proclaimed evangelists has proved itself to be counter-productive in our time.

Dialogue and evangelisation are both tasks of the Church. Dialogue is not specifically mentioned in the New Testament. But it too is a charisma of the Holy Spirit for our time. The evangelist does the work of evangelisation in the name of Christ as a member of the Body of Christ. The Christian engaging in dialogue with people of other religions also does so in the name of Christ and as a member of the Body of Christ.

It is conceivable that the same person has the gift for dialogue and the gift for evangelism. Judging from experience, however, such instances are rather rare. Both are tasks of the Church, and the Church does not abandon one because she is engaged in the other. By beginning dialogue with people of other faiths, the Church does not give up evangelisation. But in both she maintains integrity and honesty. She does not use dialogue as a means of evangelisation. When she, through her chosen and gifted members, enters into dialogue with people of other religions, she exposes herself to the risk that these members may be influenced by the people of other religions. Being so influenced is normal in any undertaking that involves exchange and communication.

In engaging in dialogue with people of other religions, the Christian keeps in mind the following principles:

- (1) One does not hide one's own faith; one is not ashamed to confess one's faith when called upon to do so in dialogue.
- (2) One does not, however, use dialogue as a means of persuading one's non-Christian partner to become a Christian.
- (3) One does not approach dialogue with any sense of superiority. One is quite happy, as a Christian, to put oneself on a level with one's dialogue partners, as members of the same humanity.



(4) One is genuinely interested in the life, faith, and aspirations of one's dialogue partner. One respects the other's convictions, and tries to understand the other positively wherever possible.

(5) At those points where one has to be critical of the partner's convictions, one does not hide one's mind, but expresses the criticism with love, respect and courtesy. Dialogue should always be in love and truth, not in fear and dissimulation.

(6) In dialogue one accepts the possibility that one's own views may be radically changed by the dialogue. Only mature people who are not afraid of exposing themselves to persuasive presentations of other people's religious views should engage in dialogue.

(7) In preparation for dialogue one should make a study of the religious scriptures, customs, ritual writings, practices etc., of the dialogue partner, whenever and to whatever degree possible.

(8) Dialogue cannot be a single act. It is a process of living together in openness to each other and genuinely growing together into a deeper understanding of reality.

(9) Dialogue may lead to practical consequences—perhaps to work together in a specific field or in a particular project; perhaps to manifest inter-communal harmony in some public way, perhaps to issue joint statements, articles, publications.

(10) Dialogue begun should not be broken abruptly. If abruptly broken, the resulting relation is usually worse than what it was before dialogue began.

### III. Lessons from Past Experience

(1) Bilateral dialogue is always easier to handle than multilateral dialogue. When representatives of two religions speak to each other one may find that it is possible to agree on many points and to state the agreement in commonly acceptable terminology. But when several different religions are present, the task becomes difficult. If, for example, Orthodox Buddhists are present, it may be difficult to use God-language. If Muslims or Jews are present certain concepts like the unity of God and Man ("I and the Father are one," "that they all may be one in us," etc.) cannot be freely discussed with adherents of eastern religions.

Experience shows that bilateral dialogues should be more frequent and numerous, whereas multilateral religious dialogue should be a comparatively rare phenomenon. Multilateral dialogue can be used to survey the experience of bilateral dialogues and to improve techniques, preparation and conduct of bilateral dialogues. Multilateral dialogue can also be used for promoting inter-communal harmony.

(2) The deepest levels of communication between religions take place at the level of spirituality and worship. There are three basic levels:

(a) dialogue on common social or economic problems and about common projects and practical collaboration;

(b) dialogue on the theoretical or theological aspects of religion;

(c) dialogue in which (a) and (b) are transcended into the realm of entering into each other's spiritual experience and group worship.

The level of skill and preparation required is higher as one moves from (a) to (b) to (c). Quite obviously (b) level is advisable only when the participants are theologically or theoretically trained. It is unproductive to have a theological discussion among the theoretically untrained. Even more skill and confidence are required when entering into the partner's spiritual experience. It is possible to enter into a Muslim's or Hindu's experience of worship without compromising one's own faith. A Christian's worship can be directed only to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So when a Christian enters the worship experience of a Muslim who prays to Allah, it becomes necessary for the Christian to enter sympathetically into his worship of Allah as in fact identical with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are important theological problems here which have not yet been sorted out. To whom are the Christian's prayers directed? Can it be to the same God as the Muslim prays to?

Is the identity of the God to whom my prayers or the prayers of a Muslim are directed dependent on his or my conceptual understanding of that God? If I identify the true destination of the Muslim's prayers as the same God the Father whom Christians worship, does that imply my recognition that Muslim prayers are also authentic?

The problem becomes more complicated in the case of Hindu worship involving idols; even more problematic is Buddhist worship which does not include the idea of God at all.

These theological problems notwithstanding, experience shows that participation in each other's spiritual experience can be a deep and meaningful experience of dialogue.

This point of view, that encounter at the level of spirituality is more rewarding than theoretical dialogue, was ably put forward by the former Swiss Ambassador to New Delhi and Athens, Jacques-Albert Cottat (*The Encounter of Religions*). Ambassador Cottat actively promoted such dialogue in India and Sri Lanka with some remarkable results.

Similar approaches have been practised also by people like Swami Abhishiktananda, by Murray Rogers and by Fr Bede Griffiths among others. Fr Griffiths has published his conclusions in an interesting book called *Return to the Centre*, where he argues that the closer you are to Christ, the less divisive appear the differences between Christians and adherents of other religions.

On the other hand to many Christians whose bold on the Christian faith is primarily intellectual-theological, such encounter at the level of spirituality appears rather threatening. The fear of syncretism is often advanced as an argument against attempting such encounters.

This fear is not experienced by Christians who are spiritually secure like Fr Bede Griffiths. If our faith is threatened in dialogue with people of other religions, that seems to be an indication that our faith is either insufficient or inauthentic.

(3) The experience of dialogue has taught us that not everyone profits from it the same way. People who are emotionally and spiritually secure, who have a genuine desire to "fuse their horizons" (to borrow a phrase from Gadamer) with people of other religions and cultures are best suited to dialogue and derive most profit from it. Recent converts and those whose faith is still precarious or unformed may suffer from exposure to dialogue. It is therefore important for the Churches to prepare people who are spiritually deep, emotionally mature, strong and secure in faith, and endowed with the spirit of compassion and openness towards the whole of humanity, to participate in dialogue with similar people in other religions.

(4) Dialogue requires special skills in certain special situations. For example, dialogue between western Christians and the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt or the Ananda Marga of Hindus would be exceedingly difficult, and might give undue recognition to a fascist communal group which would extend its influence through such recognition. But dialogue between the World Council of Churches, the World Buddhist Council or World Council of Mosques would be of a different kind. Western Christians engaging in dialogue with a Saudi Muslim organisation or Muammar Gaddafi's Muslim spokesman would have to keep in mind the fact that these partners are actively engaged in financing anti-Christian activities in the Philippines, Malaysia and elsewhere. Yet a carefully planned dialogue may help to ease tension even between Jews and Muslims.