

Dialogue in a New Key

Michael Amaladoss, S.J.

Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions,
Loyola College, Chennai.

A look around the contemporary world makes us aware of various inter-religious conflicts and tensions between religious groups: Muslim-Christian, Hindu-Muslim, Buddhist-Hindu, Hindu-Christian, Sikh-Hindu, etc. This is true of North America, Europe, Africa and Asia. This situation is so well known to us that I do not need to elaborate it for my purpose here. These conflicts often have economic and socio-political dimensions and causes. Religious fundamentalism affirms and defends the identity of a group as opposed to other groups in the name of religion. Communalism is the use of religion as a political force. In the course of defending group identity and interests some in the group take to violence, either in perceived self-defense or revengeful offensive. Some of this violence may be terrorist, attacking innocent people. Terrorism can also be state-sponsored. While the phenomenon is global, I would like to limit my focus here to the Indian situation. In such a situation of conflict, religions often end up justifying the violence. But unlike economics that is guided by the quest for profit and politics that is directed by the search for power, religions which speak about values can also be elements for promoting peace and reconciliation. In a multi-religious situation, they need to dialogue with each other in promoting peace.

What does dialogue mean in such a situation? The answer to this question will vary according to where one is talking from. I would like to make it clear that I am talking here as an Indian Christian.

Dialogue between religions is an acceptable practice among Catholics at least since the Second Vatican Council. It is my contention that the perspectives that govern this practice have been chang-

ing in recent years in the light, precisely, of such practice. This is what I indicate in my title *Dialogue in a New Key*. 'New key' is a musical metaphor. It refers to a shift in tone which changes the way a piece of music sounds. I suggest that inter-religious dialogue is taking new directions today. At least, it needs to. As a matter fact, there are not one but three shifts in perspective and practice. Let me spell them out briefly before going on to explain them.

The first shift is from dialogue as a preparation for mission to dialogue itself as mission with an objective proper to it. This follows a new theology of religions which looks at other religions as facilitating divine-human encounter which is salvific. The other religions are no longer objects of mission, but partners. This dialogue takes place at the strictly religious level. I think that we should stop talking about mission because of the overtones it still evokes, especially from those who are 'objects' of that mission. Mission means sending. Many people feel sent by God with a message. But in our case it has somehow acquired a colonial ring because of historical circumstances. Therefore we could speak in terms of a 'Quest for the Reign of God' in the world and in history.

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Religion is also a socio-political reality. The political use of religions demonstrates this. So inter-religious dialogue today has to move from a strictly religious level to a socio-political level which involves religion. This indicates the second shift. Different religions can dialogue and collaborate in the promotion of common human and social values, even though each religion may justify them in its own terms.

In a situation of conflict, as we are experiencing at present, inter-religious dialogue, promoting peace, will have to start as negotiation leading to conflict-resolution and reconciliation before going on to conversation, collaboration at the socio-political level and dialogue at the religious level.

This is the third shift.

Though our awareness of the shifts has grown in the order presented here the more logical order will be the inverse. However, as a matter of fact, in a particular situation all three kinds of dialogue may be going on at the same time, mutually supporting each other. Let us now look at the shifts one by one. I may also mention here that what I am saying about religions will also apply to ideologies, that are quasi-religious or even non-religious.

Inter-religious Dialogue and Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is a complex process. It has to be based on truth. It has to promote restorative rather than retributive justice. The guilty will have to acknowledge their responsibility for the violence, individually or institutionally or symbolically, before being forgiven. Economic and socio-political amends or restitution will have to be made to those who had suffered loss of persons, property and human dignity. All this supposes, not only conversion from anger, hatred and violence at various levels, but also control of various agencies that cause violence. A healing of memories will have to take place, especially when the conflict has been protracted. A third-party mediation, wide social approval and encouragement and backing by government authority may also be required in the process of reconciliation. I am not here going into this complex process. I shall only look at the role that religions in dialogue are called to play.

Religions tend to justify violence, though it

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may have economic, socio-political or ethnic causes. Such justification sanctifies one group and demonizes the other. Islam speaks of *jihad*, Christianity of the ‘just war’ and Hinduism of the *dharma yuddh* (righteous fight). While religions must condemn injustice, they must refrain from encouraging violence, especially when it is indiscriminate. While economics is ruled by the profit-motive and politics is a game of power, religion stands for values. It is committed to promote community and peace with justice. In a conflict in which many religious groups are involved religious personnel and institutions must work for peace and reconciliation. They must provide motivation and inspiration for conversion, repentance and forgiveness. Religious institutions may have to be reformed and de-politicized. Religious perspectives on violence and conflict may have to be re-interpreted in new and evolving socio-historical contexts. They should also have a vision of community that respects freedom of religions and treats them as equals in the socio-political sphere. Religions can and should do this together in dialogue with each other. They can be mutually prophetic. But each religion must find the necessary resources for this within itself. This makes inter-religious dialogue concrete and relevant. Comparative theology or sharing of spiritual experience may not be relevant nor necessary at this stage. Leaders of different religions can come together to urge peace and reconciliation. This will have wider symbolic significance and a real impact on the warring communities. One dimension that we need to explore is non-violence, both as attitude and practice, as promoted by the various religions or other ideologies.

In the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi in India had been the leading proponent and practitioner of non-violence, promoting peace between conflicting religious groups, not only through personal contact, but also through inter-religious prayer meetings. His non-violent methods of struggle had inspired other leaders like Martin Luther King, Don Helder Camara and Nelson Mandela. Gandhi’s practice of inter-

religious prayer was picked up by John Paul II when he invited leaders of different religions to come together at Assisi in 1986 to pray for peace. Religions, however, can go beyond praying to convert the people who indulge in or promote violence in their own traditions and engage together in practices of conflict resolution and reconciliation when a conflict is taking place or has taken place. There are many organizations promoting conflict resolution in the world today. An inter-religious basis would certainly enhance their effectiveness.

Inter-religious Dialogue at the Socio-political Level

Before religions can dialogue with each other at the strictly religious level, they should be able to live and work together at the socio-political level. Even when the religious groups are not in conflict with each other there must be a formal equality at the socio-political level. Every shade of discrimination or domination of one religious group by the other must disappear. In practice, the majority and minority characteristics of religious groups with their socio-political consequences cannot be avoided. But at the legal level there must be equal recognition and respect. While the socio-political dimensions of religious identity cannot be avoided, religions should not become political tools. The historical background and the present situation of inter-religious relations in India gives us a good case study from which conclusions can be drawn for similar situations elsewhere.

Inter-religious dialogue at a socio-political level is not new to India. It is not a recent discovery because of socio-political tensions between the religions. In the third century before the Common Era, the emperor Ashoka who had become a Buddhist, had respect for all religions. One of his edicts reads:

King Priyadarsi honours men of all faiths, members of religious orders and laymen alike, with gifts and various marks of esteem. Yet he does not value either gifts or honours as much as growth in the qualities essential to religion in men of all faiths.

This growth may take many forms, but its root is in guarding one's speech to avoid extolling one's own faith and disparaging the faith of others improperly or, when the occasion is appropriate, immoderately.

The faiths of other all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others. For if a man extols his own faith and disparages another because of devotion to his own and because he wants to glorify it, he seriously injures his own faith.

Therefore concord alone is commendable, for through concord men may learn and respect the conception of Dharma accepted by others.¹

Ashoka had a special minister in his government to make sure that all religions were protected and honoured.

The Mughal emperor Akbar promoted a regular dialogue between different religious experts in his court and even attempted to found a new religion – *Din Ilahi* – consisting of what he considered good in the different religions.² A certain openness to other religions is part of Indian tradition. Swami Vivekananda writes:

As so many rivers, having their source in different mountains, roll down, crooked or straight, and at last come into the ocean – so, all these various creeds and religions, taking their start from different standpoints and running through crooked or straight courses, at last come unto Thee.³

Gandhi followed this tradition. This does not mean

that there were no conflicts between religions in India. The ‘re-conversion’ of many from Buddhism and Jainism to Hinduism may not have been totally painless. Some Muslim kings plundered and destroyed Hindu temples and levied a tax on the members of other religions. The Christian Portuguese in God had converted some Hindus by force and destroyed their temples. Sikhs carry little daggers in self-defense as part of their wardrobe and have been violent in recent years. Hindu-Muslim ‘riots’ have a history of over 80 years in India. Hindu groups have also indulged in violence against Christians in the 20th century.

As the movement for Indian independence from British rule got serious in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, the Muslim minority felt concerned about having to live under the Hindu majority in a free India and proposed the ‘two nations’ theory based on religious identity. Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817 – 1898) proposed this and founded Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh in 1875. It became a University later. The *Muslim League* was founded in 1906. The ‘two nations’ theory was supported by the popular poet Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938) and picked up later by Muhammad ‘Ali Jinnah (1876-1948). It led to the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947.

In the meantime, the Hindus sought to discover their identity, after centuries of domination by the Muslims and the Christian British. The *Hindu Maha Sabha* was founded in 1907. Veer Savarkar proposed the ideology of *Hindutva* in 1923. It is a theory of cultural nationalism, but rooted in the history of Hinduism as different from Islam and Christianity which had been in India for many centuries. But many of the Hindu leaders were in the Congress party. Apart from a few like Jawaharlal Nehru, who were not religious but neutral to all religions, most people like Mahatma Gandhi were tolerant of other religions in a positive sense, rooted in the Hindu tradition, represented by people like Swami Vivekananda.

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The Constitution of the Indian Republic, proclaimed on January 26, 1950, adopts a positive approach to all religions. It affirms the freedom for all citizens to practice and propagate their religion. It opposes discrimination on the basis of religion. It recognizes the identity of religious groups and proclaims the rights of minorities (including religious ones) to preserve and develop their separate identity through educational and cultural institutions.

Side by side, Hindu-Muslim tensions and occasional riots continue, especially at festival times, from the 1920s onwards, though its worst manifestation was during the partition of the country. The Congress party presented itself as the defender of the religious (Muslim) and caste (Dalit) minorities. In the 1980s, however, communal political parties based on castes and religions either emerged or became strong. Even the Congress courted the Hindu majority by favouring Hindu ideology. In a majoritarian democracy it is the majority, religious or other, that holds power. The Constitution still preserves the secular framework. But the State is no longer the secular or neutral arbiter between conflicting groups that it should be if it rules the country or state according to the Constitution. The politicians and the police tend to favour the majority more or less openly. For example, in Hindu-Muslim riots in Mumbai, Coimbatore and Gujarat, as elsewhere, the Muslims are on the receiving end. After the Hindus riot, the government appoints an enquiry committee. It submits a report after a couple of years. It normally absolves the police and the Hindu political leaders. Violence is attributed to unruly mobs and anti-social elements. No actions is taken. The report is shelved. But, when the Muslims retaliate with bombings, immediately the Muslim leaders are picked up and cases are filed against them. The government thus becomes partisan of the majority. In this situation it is the law courts that seek to preserve secularism, maintain justice and defend the Constitution. Recently the Supreme Court forced the Gujarat government to re-open cases in which the Hindus were too easily absolved.

Secularism therefore is no longer a given, but something that has to be constantly negotiated within the Constitutional framework and defended and protected by the judicial system. It is here that inter-religious dialogue at the socio-political level becomes urgent and relevant. Dialogue then starts as negotiation and moves to collaboration in the promotion of the common good, seen as the good of each one and every one. There is no attempt to develop an abstract a-religious secularism that privatizes and marginalizes religion. Rather, secularism is seen as a positive attitude to all religions. It recognizes, respects and accepts all religions and invites them to collaboration.

Such an approach to other religions is also new to Christianity. Before the Second Vatican Council, the prevailing attitude was to consider other religions as untrue and maintain that 'error had no rights'. It was only at the Council that the freedom of every human person to follow any religion according to his or her conscience was recognized and affirmed. By inviting them to come together in Assisi in October 1986 to pray for peace in the world, John Paul II implicitly recognized their ability to facilitate divine-human encounter in prayer, thus accepting their identity as religions and not merely the freedom of the humans to practice them in the civil sphere. As matter of fact, he had told the other religious leaders at Chennai in February 1986:

By dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God... As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare and civic order.⁴

It is clear that this is not merely a political collaboration, but a religious one in the social and political sphere. At the same time the move from a strictly religious to a socio-political dialogue is also evident. Four years earlier (1982) a group of South Asian Bishops meeting in Chennai had said:

Since the religions, as the Church, are at the service of the world, inter-religious dialogue cannot be confined to the religious sphere but must embrace all dimensions of life: economic, socio-political, cultural and religious. It is in their common commitment that they discover their complementarity and the urgency and relevance of dialogue at all levels.⁵

But, in practice, multi-religious groups working for social justice seem to bracket their religious identities while inter-religious dialogue is understood and practiced largely at the religious level, focusing on intellectual and spiritual exchange, except for a few groups like the *World Conference of Religions for Peace*.

Inter-religious dialogue at the socio-political level would then mean different religious groups dialoguing together in a multi-religious and multi-cultural situation in view of promoting the common good of all. Operating at the level of civil and political society they seek to evolve an overlapping consensus which can be the basis of concrete political and legal options.

From Mission through Dialogue to Dialogue as Mission

Now we come to inter-religious dialogue at the strictly religious level. Though at the level of the universal Church this started only after the Second Vatican Council, it has a longer history in India.⁶ Brahmabandab Upadhyaya (1861-1907) called himself a Hindu-Christian: Hindu socially and Christian religiously. His attempts to found an ashram were not approved by the institutional Church. He thought that Hindu philosophy will find its fulfillment in the Christian philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. His ardent nationalism later led him to positions which seemed more positive to Hinduism. J.N. Farquahar wrote a book on Christianity, as *The Crown of Hinduism*. (1913) Pierre Johanns pub-

lished a series of pamphlets: *To Christ through the Vedanta* (1944), showing how the search of the Vedanta will find its answers in Christianity. Abbe Jules Monchanin and Dom Henri le Saux founded the ashram *Shantivanam* at Thannirpalli in South India to dialogue with the mystical traditions of India. Le Saux wrote a book, *Saccidananda*, showing how the advaitic mysticism of Ramana Maharishi finds its fulfillment in the Christian experience of the Trinity. We see in all these efforts a positive appreciation of Hinduism, though it needs to find its fulfillment in Christianity. This attitude was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council (1965), which discovered the ‘seeds of the Word’ in other religions and saw God as the common origin and goal of all religions. Inter-religious dialogue understood in this context was seen as a preparation for mission as proclamation of the good news of Jesus, converting the others to the Church. We need not be surprised by this, because every religion thinks of itself as the best. It is in dialogue with other religions that they discover their limitedness and conditioning by culture and history, besides other personal factors.

A living encounter with other religious believers however led Christians in Asia to a growing positive appreciation of other religions, recognizing the presence and action of God in them, so that they can really facilitate salvific divine-human encounter. Indian theologians, for instance, have recognized that the Scriptures of other religions may be considered inspired in a certain sense used for our enrichment.⁷ They also suggested the possibility of sharing worship with other believers under certain circumstances.⁸ John Paul II recognized this openness when he accepted the presence and action of the Spirit of God in other cultures and religions.⁹ Reflecting on this experience, Asian theologians suggest that the goal of mission is the Reign of God and the Church as its symbol and servant. Other religions are seen as co-pilgrims to the Reign of God. Conversion of people who wish to become disciples and co-workers of Jesus is not excluded, but is not any longer the only goal of mission.

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Dialogue with other religions is meaningful in itself. If the Spirit of God is operative in them, she may also speak to us through them. Christians therefore approach other religions and their believers, not only to convert and teach them, but also to learn from them and to enrich themselves. Dialogue is not comparative study. It is not an interaction between two systems. It is an encounter between two believers who are seeking God or the Ultimate. God or the Ultimate is always present as a third pole of this encounter. And it is an encounter in freedom: the freedom of God and the freedom of the persons. This kind of dialogue is happening in Christian ashrams today. Sebastian Painadath, for example, has been preaching retreats based on the Bhagavad Gita. Inter-religious dialogue, at the strictly religious level, leads some to mutual enrichment. It can mature into intra-personal dialogue.

This has happened to Hindus like Gandhi. A modern Christian example is Swami Abishiktananda, whose spiritual diary and other writings are available.¹⁰ Attracted by the advaitic experience of Ramana Maharishi, he tried to show that it can find fulfillment in the Christian experience of the Trinity. Then he began to seek for advaitic experience. In his diary he claims to have had it. For years he struggled to reconcile his experience of God in and through Jesus and his non-dual experience of God beyond ‘name and form’. He expressed this need for dialogue in depth when he initiated his disciple Marc into *sannyasa* jointly with Swami Chidananda of Sivananda Ashram. I think that in the last weeks of his life he understood that the two experiences were two ways of encountering God and that he cannot reconcile them rationally. Swami Abishiktananda would probably have considered himself a Hindu-Christian, but beyond the ‘name and form’ of both religions. I think that this is the summit of inter-religious dialogue. It does not lead to inclusive integration, but to acceptance of difference at the rational, phenomenal level. Since God is one there must be an integration, but it can be beyond ‘name and form’, open to many symbolic manifestations.

This kind of spiritual and intra-personal dialogue is limited to a few individuals. It has a symbolic value for others. It can have a trickle-down effect on the community. At this level we are not interested in a comparative study of religions. We respect the freedom of God and the freedom of the individuals in responding to God. The interaction between these two freedoms often take place beyond the limits of symbols, rituals and institutions

Conclusion

Our discourse on dialogue often remains at the strictly religious level. But dialogue is not merely between religions, but between believers. Religion is only one element in society, even if it may be the deepest in terms of giving meaning to life. Because of its meaning giving function it affects and is affected by other elements that constitute society together with it. We must therefore avoid both privatization of religion and its politicization. While we have to realize its identity, we also have to understand its relatedness. Awareness of the relationships of religion will also make us perceive its limitations. Dialogue with another religion is possible without any real reference to its socio-cultural and historical context as in the case of Swami Abishiktananda. While he was deeply engaged in encountering Hinduism in the depth of the *advaita*, he was not directly involved, though not uninterested, in the socio-political situation of India. But it is interesting and inspiring and it shows the positive value of difference. At the same time it is not going to solve problems of inter-religious violence which have economic and socio-political causes. The prac-

tice of dialogue also supposes that we wish to live as a multi-religious community at the regional or national level, recognizing, respecting and accepting each other as different but complementary. Dialogue can no longer be looked at merely as a preparation for mission as proclamation. On the contrary dialogue must lead to collaboration on our way to the Reign of God to which God invites all of us.

¹Rock edict XII, in N. A. Nikam and Richard Mckeon (eds), *The Edicts of Ashoka*. (Mumbai, 1962), pp.49-50

²Cf. John Correia-Afonso, *Letters from the Mughal Court* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1980)

³*The Complete Works*, I 390

⁴*Origins* 15 (1086) 598

⁵G. Rosales and C. Arevalo (eds), *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Manila: Claretian, 1992), p. 199

⁶See Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Chennai: The Christian Literature Society, 1969)

⁷Cf. D. S. Amalorpavadass (ed), *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1974)

⁸Cf. Paul Puthanangady (ed), *Sharing Worship* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1988)

⁹*The Mission of the Redeemer*, 28

¹⁰Cf. Swami Abhishiktananda, *The Ascent to the Depth of the Heart* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1988)

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Hecker Center, Suite 100

3025 Fourth Street, NE

Washington, DC 20017-1102

Phone: 202-832-3112 Fax: 202-832-3688

E-mail: uscma@uscatholicmission.org Web site: www.uscatholicmission.org