

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN ASIA AT A TURNING POINT
TOWARDS NEW CHRISTOLOGIES AND ECCLESIOLOGIES*

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I propose to present here my humble understanding of the progress and problems of inter-religious dialogue in Asia, as it reaches a turning point towards demanding as well as evolving new Asian christologies and ecclesiologies.

In the recent decades we have rightly pre-occupied ourselves in searching the reasons for dialogue and establishing the need and necessity for it. It is no more a question about the need and necessity of dialogue. Nor is it even trying to reach more and more agreement on commonalities and shelving back the unpleasant differences and difficulties for the future. It is now time for a sincere and committed review of our own faith, of the form (formula) and content of our belief and for facing the consequences of such a renewed faith for our Asian Churches moving towards God's Kingdom.

In the light of our new experiences in Asia, with the people of other faiths, in the light of our own histories and the religio-cultural heritage God has given to us, in the light of all socio-political challenges facing us in Asia, we are called to justify, express and witness our belief in a new way in Jesus Christ and his church. In the Asian continent, defined as one rich with cultures and religions but poor in socio-political-economic realities, it is only right and fitting that christianity be contextualized both in the richness and poverty of Asia. In responding the challenges of the turning point we do not overlook or under-value our christian sources. The sacred scriptures will continue to inspire us, the heritage of christian tradition and magisterium (as constitutive elements of an evolving christianity) will continue to guide and help us. It will be our sacred responsibility to be faithful to these as well as to the new demands of our Asian journey around the turning point.

1. *Our convictions are strengthened about new directions for the future*

a) *We can move only forward*

What is for us beyond doubt is that we cannot go back on Vat. II. We can move only forwards (Final statement, Extra-ord, Synod 1985). As far as the third world churches are concerned, Vat. II is "a great stride forward, in the direction of the coming of God's Kingdom" (Engelbert Mveng, *Afrikanisches Profil von Theologie und Kirche*, in: ZMR Heft 2/8 1986 p. 154). We cannot stop with Vat. II either - as a conclusion valid for all times. The fruit of Vat. II lies not merely in concluding a counter-reformation period, but more in initiating and encouraging a progress for the future. The universal magisterium of the day is obliged therefore not to stifle but to

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discern optimistically the Spirit of Vatican II, moving also over Asia. The very Holy Spirit who inspired Vat. II with the renewal of the church from within (LG, GS, AG) and opened the church to the world outside (GS, NA, DH) continues to operate in the Asian churches and even in other religions too on their journey towards the Kingdom.

b) *Our search with others is not against authentic christian faith*

There is no such thing as a partial renewal of the church, only from within. The 'inner and outer' renewals are inter-dependent and simultaneous. A deeper renewal of the church as that of Christ will imply a new relationship with the world of religions, cultures and ideologies. And a sincere openness and collaboration with the world of religions and cultures will result in appreciating and strengthening our own faith and life in the church in an authentic way. In other words, a life of deep faith in Christ and within his church is not to be falsely polarised as against a sincere and collaborative search with people of other faiths for ultimate truth and realities.

c) *Nor are we giving up our specific richness*

The dialogue experience with other religions do not demand a giving up or a watering down of the specific richness that is revealed in the mystery of Jesus Christ nor of any specific richness that was assumed by his church through the early encounters with other religions and cultures of the West. On the contrary, dialogical experiences will only help us to situate the mystery of Jesus Christ *in a wider perspective of the divine presence in the whole world* and show how the Divinity is active also in other eastern religions. It will also help us to situate Jesus the Christ *in the right order of divine revelations*, and the church which came after him, *in the proper context of world religions*. Exclusivity and isolation with respect to Jesus Christ and to his church will only amount to hiding the light under the bushel, or preserving the salt and leaven in a bottle.

d) *Jewish-christian revelation does not exhaust all divine revelations*

We have had in the past a concept of revelation which limited all divine revelation to Jesus Christ and his church in a narrow sense. The truth that we profess that all revelations reach their fulness in Jesus Christ or that Jesus Christ being the fullness of revelation must not be interpreted to limit and impoverish the infinite revelatory action of God to "only in and through Jesus Christ", but must be understood only in relation to the revelations made to the Jews in their history.

Hence a distinction must be made between the Jewish-christian revelation that has come to us through the medium of the church and the other (non-christian) revelations (of the same God) in the religions and cultures around us. We need to complement our Jewish-christian linear notion of revelation with a God-centred but allradiating and all-pervading notion of divine revelation.

"History of Israel is no longer the unique place where God's action for the salvation of the world is realised. It is a paradigm, a powerful example of how God's mission makes its way into the history of the nations of the world. What happened in Israel happened in the history of other nations as well" (JAN VAN BUTSELA, *Israel in Ecumenical thinking: an analysis*, in: IRM July 1988, p. 444).

Accepting christian revelation should not lead us to deny or depreciate the revelatory force of other religions and cultures, but on the contrary, show us a christic way of praising and thanking God for his marvels among men.

e) *False fears of syncretism could impoverish our idea of God*

False fears that dialogue with or openness to other religions will lead to syncretism have made some of us unwilling to open ourselves to anything outside the church and outside the christian revelation. Our understanding of God and Jesus Christ has been nourished only by a christian revelation – and that too filtered through scholastic philosophy and theology of the West. As a consequence we tend to impoverish our concept of God and forget a fact that is evident in all world religions – “God is All in All”. This does not mean that the christian revelation is imperfect and wanting. It only means that the wholeness of God be not denied for the excellence of the part.

f) *The need for a Kingdom-centred christology and ecclesiology*

The Jewish-christian revelation, though linear, yet points towards an understanding of the finality and goal of all religions and cultures. Jesus' revelation was all about the Kingdom and he presumed a whole variety of religions and cultures from East and West meeting on the last day (Is. Lk. 13:29; 60:4-7; Ps. 72:10). Instead of developing a Kingdom-centred christology, eschatology and ecclesiology, we have been influenced probably by the earthly kingdoms, principalities and powers, and moved away in other directions. Consequently we have inherited only a narrow understanding of revelation, salvation and even of the Kingdom! This narrowness has made us somewhat uncomfortable in the total context of the God-given religions and cultures, and made us less concerned, or even unconcerned, about the Kingdom for the vast majority of humanity.

We used to interpret the “May thy Kingdom come” into “may thy church grow”, and consequently interpret missionary zeal and activity in terms of quantitative church-growth. Vat. II has helped us to rediscover the Kingdom-centred Christ and the Kingdom-centred Church so that all our missionary efforts will be within the parameters of a Kingdom centred christology, ecclesiology and missiology. In this perspective inter-religious dialogue is an integral and indispensable dimension of the new missionary vision of the church.

g) *We Asians can contribute to the enrichment in the understanding of Christ/Church*

In the first phase of evangelization the Asians accepted Jesus Christ and his Church in the dress and language in which he was accepted by the Jews, the Greeks and the Romans. What was presented then to the Asians was not the historical person of Jesus Christ and the form of early communities of believers in him. It was an already developed christology and an already fortified institutional church. We have gone along with such a christology and ecclesiology for three to four centuries.

But such a christology and ecclesiology, by their monopolistic-exclusivistic absolutism cannot meet the demands of the Asian pluralism. *Nor are we wanting in the necessary religio-cultural and socio-economic categories that can grasp and express belief in Jesus Christ and his Church.* Hence we are faced with the obligation to re-discover Jesus the Christ from the biblical sources through Asian categories and allow an Asian christology to evolve in history. Similarly we have to re-discover the constitutive elements of the early christian communities (Word, Spirit, Faith, Worship, Eucharist, Service etc.) and allow Asian christian communities of believers to move towards new ecclesio-genesis (new local churches, basic christian communities etc.).

Such a re-discovery with respect to christology and ecclesiology is not counter to, nor a denial of the one faith, one baptism, one church, nor even a contradiction of the scholastic christology and ecclesiology that is taught in Europe. The Asian christologies and ecclesiologies by their diversity, will only help enrich the universal understanding of Christ and his Church.

2. The New Testament origins of christology and consequent development in the first centuries, will still remain fundamental and constitutive for future development

We who are familiar with the origins and foundation of the New Testament christology are also aware

- a) that behind all christological developments, there stands the historic figure of Jesus and the claims – direct and indirect – which he made for himself in the midst of a judaic audience.
- b) that it was the resurrection of Jesus which gave the decisive stimulus to christological thinking of Jesus as Lord and Messiah.
- c) of various tools – Palestinian Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, Hellenistic Gentile – used in evolving christology and
- d) that the roots of christology were in the application of expectant and nostalgic categories from the O. T. and Judaism to Jesus.

We are also aware that the development of christology during the first few centuries of the church has been stimulated by heresies and erroneous claims made by different churches. Hence the teaching of the Universal Church assumed the form of an apologetic christology which gradually reduced the functional claims of Jesus as Christ and increased an ontological absolutism about his being and nature. This led to an exaggerated christocentric sense in christology and revelation, to the detriment of a theo-centric sense in them. The experience of dialogue with other faiths can help us to move away from such an exaggerated pre-occupation with Christ to a more realistic and beneficial understanding of Christ in human history. The first Christ-event is not an end in itself, but an effective pointer (Sacrament of God) to the wider presence of God in history. The factors that contributed to early christology also remind us of the new factors from our own time and place, which can shape the future christologies.

3. Need to rethink and revise the absolutist and exclusivist claims of Christology and Ecclesiology

We have passed the initial stage of joy and consolation at discovering some similarities between christianity and other religions, at seeing Christ and christianity latent in other religions, and at seeing other religions and their scriptures as having a preparatory role in relation to christianity similar to that of Judaism to christianity.

With the official statement given by Vat. II against the absolutist and exclusivist stance of the church with regard to itself, with regard to salvation, with regard to the non-catholic christian churches (LG. 15,16,8; N.A. 1,4), we are slowly led to discover the kernel of that openness of Vat. II in things such as universal salvific will of God, possibility of salvation in other religions, the true church of Christ only subsisting in the Roman Catholic Church, the action of the Holy Spirit outside the Church etc. All these have the cumulative effect of calling for revision and reunderstanding of our old theological formulae – and among these eminently, those of chalcedonian christology and counter-reformation ecclesiology.

Contrary to the accusations that dialogue with other faiths can relativize (reduce) our faith in God, in Christ, in Church etc., we Asians have a different experience. We start from the experience how God the Infinite has relativised Himself as man in order that he be understood, how he has revealed himself in various forms and in stages in the history of humanity, and how he has been active and still active in our cultures and histories. In such a perspective we feel that the christian revelation and its contents have been too much isolated and absolutised.

Vat. II, realizing the difficulties of harmonising the traditional christian teaching with that of the local religions and cultures, admits that such difficulties must stimulate the mind to a more accurate and penetrating grasp of the faith through new theological investigations. Hence its exhortation that theologians take "to more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the men of their times" (GS. 62 abc).

Further the conviction that we are responsible for our own salvation and that we Asians must take more seriously and evaluate positively all the God-given native religions and cultures of Asia, is growing. The fear of syncretism decreases and the heroism to take risks increases – especially after Vat. II's clear statement that "the deposit of faith or revealed truths is one thing, the manner in which they are formulated without violating their meaning and significance is another" (GS 62c). Hence many of the Asian theologians reject an unparalleled, unsurmountable uniqueness, absolutism and exclusivism in their christology and ecclesiology.

It is only God who is "absolutely" absolute, exclusive and unique. Religions, christianity inclusive, can only opt for a "*restrictive absoluteness*" that can compromise with *religious pluralism*, with salvific values in other religions and even salvation in other religions. Thus each religion enjoys a "*relative absoluteness*" which is different from the absoluteness of God. Religious beliefs and their practices are only experiences of an Absolute Reality far beyond their limits.

4. The distinction between the historic person of Jesus and his christological titles is necessary and important

The unity of the person Jesus Christ was established in Chalcedon (451) as a definitive answer to all the christological errors that arose in the 4th and 5th centuries. But an uncritical acceptance of this dogmatic truth has led catholic theology to overlook an important distinction between the historical Jesus and his christological titles and has helped to identify totally Jesus as Christ and Christ as Jesus. It is now questioned not for any heretical reasons as in the 5th century, but by those who see an important and necessary distinction between the once and for all definitive event of a historical Jesus and the christological titles given to him later by particular beliefs and cultures that accepted him. Seeking a reunderstanding of the Chalcedonian christology is not to go back to anti-Chalcedonian heresies or watering down the christological belief of the present Church. It is precisely to make real and intergrated our christological faith in Jesus that such a revision, rethinking and reformation is demanded. An example of how experiences and expressions of the ultimate reality are conditioned by languages and cultures of people is seen in the distinction and parallel ALOY PEIRIS draws between Jesus the Christ and Gautama the Buddha. He brings out the dangers of a closed and total identification between the human person and the titles they inherit from their believing communities and indicates a prophetic christology vis à vis the buddhology. (The Buddha and the Christ, Part III, in: EAPR 1988/2.)

Asians will accept and acknowledge the historic Jesus and profit from the christological titles given by the early christians of the Judeo-Hellenistic communities. But we will not stop with those titles. We will accept and acknowledge the same Jesus in our own categories.

5. Asian christologies and ecclesiologies must have a cultural and liberative dimension

In the language of the West, a neat distinction has been made between religion, culture and between social, political and economic conditions. That this distinction

cannot hold water in Asia is the experience of Asian Christianity. It is struggling to live as an institutional church, foreign to the religio-cultural character of the people but promoting inter-religious tolerance or dialogue. Even the socio-economic development services are being attempted through a superiority of Western funds and technology. In recent times parallel to its openness and optimism towards other religions there are also attempts at inculturation and contextualization. But the futility of promoting culture and at the same time attempting development in the above way, namely, without a dialogue with the culture and religions of the people, without harnessing the local potentialities and without involving them directly in the process, is emerging clearly in many instances.

Asian theologians, taking religions, cultures and socio-economic realities of the people as constituent components of the one emerging society will find theological value not merely in a purely restricted inter-religious dialogue of the word nor in a restricted inculturation or contextualisation, but in a *dialogue (dialectic) of life* that encompasses religion, culture and socio-economic conditions. Hence Asian Christologies and Ecclesiologies must vibrate with the religio-cultural richness as well as with the socio-political poverty of Asia.

Conclusion: Dialogue as dialogue or its goals and methods have not been our primary concerns here. We have tried to see the demand and impact of inter-religious dialogue in the evolution of Asian christologies and ecclesiologies. There are many ways to prepare raw materials towards Asian theologies. For example, the struggles of the Asian masses on one side for justice and freedom – in the face of dehumanising injustice and oppression – and on the other side, the various images of Jesus, as emerging even in popular Asian religiosity, will contribute to the future christologies and ecclesiologies in Asia.

Christology or ecclesiology is not the goal of dialogue, nor dialogue the goal of any christology or ecclesiology. But dialogue in so far it remains *a movement of life, of sincere searching together towards the Ultimate Truth and Ultimate Happiness* will have the greatest impact and evolutionary force on these sciences. And conversely a progress in these sciences, through their praxis-doxis consensus will greatly enhance and enrich the movement of humanity towards the Ultimate.

May all attain this Ultimate Moksha, Nirbana, Eternal life and Kingdom.