

Pluralist religious theology in Indian thought

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Pluralism and relativism in Indian religions¹⁸

“India appears to be a country – or rather a continent – in which the religious element is still very much alive, a culture whose soul continues to be shaped by religion. But is this shaping due to a diversity of religions or a universality of religion? Are they a unifying factor for Indian society, for the peoples of India, or are they a source of strife?”¹⁹ National statistics reveal that the many religions, languages and traditions – not to mention a turbulent history – have given rise to a pluralism and relativism in Indian religious thought. Even Hinduism and its relations with other religions, such as Christianity, have not been spared, although the caste system still plays a major role, despite being banned by the Indian Constitution.²⁰ The 19th and 20th centuries saw the

¹⁸ Schmidt-Leukel cites a parable of Buddha’s to show why there are so many different religious doctrines: “A king arranged for some men, who had been born blind and came from a rural area where elephants were unknown, to be taken to an elephant. Each blind man had to touch the elephant at a different place and then describe what an elephant looked like. The man who touched the elephant’s ear said that an elephant was like a winnowing basket. The one that touched the tusk said it was like a ploughshare. The man who felt the leg compared it to a tree trunk, and the man who clasped its tail said an elephant was like a broom. Thereupon the blind men quarrelled violently among themselves, much to the king’s delight. This story relates explicitly to the dispute between those “who only see one part.” The all-seeing king, on the other hand, probably stands for Buddha and his comprehensive insight. The inclusivist-seeming parable may perhaps ... even be making an exclusivist point, as it is stated here that a fragmentary knowledge of other doctrines is not enough to point the way to redemption.” (Schmidt-Leukel, P., *Gott ohne Grenzen. Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen*, Gütersloh, 2005, 174.)

¹⁹ Neuner, P., “Einführung und Moderation. Indische Religionen – Vielfalt oder Einheit?” in: Schubert, V., (ed.), *Religionen im Aufbruch? Identität – Konflikt – Toleranz*, Wissenschaft und Philosophie, Interdisziplinäre Studien, vol. 18, St. Ottilien, 1999, 181.

²⁰ This is guaranteed by the Fundamental Rights, especially Art.15 of the 1950 Consti-

emergence of Hindu reform movements which became influential vehicles of “Neo-Hinduism.”²¹

This period also witnessed an attempted renewal of the intellectual traditions of India by confronting Hinduism with Christianity and Modernism, whose representatives articulated the various religious paths. Ramakrishna is supposed to have had had a vision of the truth of the One with many names, having experienced God in a temple, a mosque and a church respectively, which inspired him to compare the different paths to God with different stairways leading to a single pond. Tagore, on the other hand, compared the various religions’ notions of God with light and asked why it should not be possible to let the various religions emanate their own particular light to suit the needs of the various kinds of souls. Gandhi also considered that different religions are different pathways to one and the same goal.²² In order to achieve a correct understanding of the pluralism they describe, one must not only be prepared to recognise the existence of several kinds of faith, but also their equality of status and value. “Beyond all exclusivities and inclusivities, beyond all syncretic attempts at and lip service to pluralism, the inter-faith situation we are in today forces us to recognise that the plurality of religions is divinely ordained.”²³ For no nation, no language, no culture has privileged access to the one divinity.

Human life requires a new meaning and a new responsibility if God is experienced in all religions as the creating God. “The basic ethical attitude derived from this is expressed in trust (Judaism), love (Christianity), submission (Islam), devotion (Hinduism) and

tution (Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth).

²¹ They include the *Brahma Samaj* Society founded by Rammohan Roy, who is often described as the “Father of Modern India” (with which other well-known names of Reform Hinduism are linked, such as those of Rabindranath Tagore and Kesab Chandra Sen); the parallel *Arya Samaj* organisation founded by Swamy Dayananda Sarasvati; and the Ramakrishna Mission. The name of the latter refers to the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna and also to Rama and Krishna as two divine incarnations (avatars) worshipped as being central to Hinduism. (Cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *o cit.*, 402-403.)

²² Cf. Mall, R., “Der Hinduismus als ein Ort der Ökumene von Religionen” in: Schubert, V., (ed.), *o cit.*, 192.

²³ *Ibid.*

compassion (Buddhism).”²⁴ The divine presence in the world is so intensely perceived as to alter the whole way of life.

Diversity and unity in Hinduism

Hinduism is devoid of any founder, historical revelation or dogmas, but the “sum of the religious experiences of countless sages, saints and philosophers. Though God is transcendent, He is not outside the world, but realises Himself in individual souls and the empirical world; He is unique but assumes different forms as manifested to the gods of the Hindu Pantheon; many paths lead to Him, which is why all world religions must be seen as relatively true.”²⁵ Just as the world image of India is shaped by the many different cultures, ethnic groupings and languages that make it up, so the hidden Divinity (Brahma) manifests itself in a diversity of forms, such as gods, human beings, animals, indeed in all beings and phenomena of this world. Because the beginnings of the gods and the world are shrouded in darkness, even the gods – as the early Vedic scriptures tell us – do not know the secret of the beginnings of the cosmos; “a primal ‘it’ evolved into the endless diversity of the phenomenological world. In the pluralism of the cults and traditions of worship the seeker of enlightenment is able to relativise such coexisting inessentials and see through to the hidden One within.”²⁶ The wisdom of India has sought the hidden One in diversity, and the many myths of India have repeatedly told of the change of the hidden One in diversity.²⁷

The Constitution of India also upholds diversity and does not favour any particular religion. It manages to dispense with references to God and “professes an indifference to religion as such and the equal standing of all religions”.²⁸ Although the modern state desires diversity

²⁴ Painadath, S., *Der Geist reißt Mauern nieder. Die Erneuerung unseres Glaubens durch interreligiösen Dialog*, Munich, 2002, 38.

²⁵ Regamay, C., “Hinduismus” in: *Lexikon fuer Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 5, Freiburg i. Br., Basle, Vienna, 1986, 372.

²⁶ Bürkle, H., “Die Entdeckung religiöser Alternativen in asiatischen Traditionen” in: Müller, G.L./ Serretti, M., (eds.), *Einzigkeit und Universalität Jesu Christi*, Einsiedeln, 2001, 56-57.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 57.

²⁸ Wessler, H.W., “Indiens Einheit in Vielfalt. Zwischen traditionellem Multikultur-

in principle, it still seeks ways of encouraging the many minorities to identify with the state.²⁹

In recent decades the thesis of the unity of Hinduism has become an open question and an interpretation of Hinduism is being promoted that treats it as a unified group of different religions. “According to this view Vishnuism, Shivaism, Shaktism, etc. are religions in their own right and not just different traditions that have grown up within one and the same religion and, although they are in a state of intensive interaction with the other Hindu religions, they, like the individual Abrahamic religions, have preserved a clearly distinct identity.”³⁰

All religions unified by spirituality

Although there is great diversity in the forms of religious expression, the diverse Indian religions are also linked by a deep spiritual unity. All religions ultimately derive from a divine origin: the one divine spirit is in the hearts of all human beings, and the *one* divine love binds them together. For although there are many possible ways of bestowing the gift of salvation, all religions are concerned with making man whole. Religion is the symbolic expression of, and the form assumed by, spirituality – spirituality being the depth dimension of religion, in which the transpersonal spirit is experienced as a personal God with name, forms and shapes. In the spirituality of all world religions we find three dimensions or basic ways of encountering God (albeit with different emphases, concepts and symbols): God as ineffable mystery; God as personal being and loving person; and God as all-pervading and healing spirit.³¹

A dialogue can take place wherever respect is shown for singularities and differences. The basis for a successful inter-faith dialogue is to be

alism und modernem Nationalismus” in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 131 (2006) issue 10, 669. He explains this as follows: “Behind this is the neo-Hinduist theory that not only all Hindu school traditions, but basically all historical religions constitute different paths to the one truth – a theory that is highly controversial even within Hinduism” (*ibid*).

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 675.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 670. The author concludes: “It is correct that internal Hindu ecumenism – the community of denominations within Hinduism – consists of a multiplicity of theologically diverse schools of thought” (*ibid*).

³¹ Cf. Painadath, S., *loc. cit.*, 38.

found in the aforementioned dimensions of universal spirituality. Key symbols, persons, cases of healing, stories and narratives provide the faithful with access to their religion. Exchanging spiritual experiences with others can strengthen one's own faith and also make us realise the manifold workings of the divine spirit.

Christians find access to this experience of salvation in Jesus Christ, as for them he is the path to truth, the light in which Christians understand history and interpret scriptures. Not that faith in Jesus Christ can justify a judgement on – and certainly not a condemnation of – Buddha or Shiva, Torah or Koran. “Those of other faiths are our sister and brother pilgrims; we all find ourselves on the road to that destination God is preparing for us” (John Paul II, Assisi, 1986). It is not by dissociating oneself from other people, but by associating with them that our own identity is strengthened and realised.³²

Hinduism has a polytheistic or pantheistic conception of gods, in which countless lesser gods exist alongside the main ones. Many households and families, even whole regions, worship their own deities. Hinduism has precise notions of what the gods look like. There are many pictorial and other representations of every deity. The Hindus also believe that their deities are reborn and have already been on earth in all sorts of forms. The three main groupings in Hinduism are: Shivaism (in which the central role is played by Shiva, the destroyer of the world, which was created by Brahma and preserved by Vishnu); Vishnuism (the God Vishnu is the preserver of the world); and Shaktism (in which mainly female deities are worshipped). Because of the many gods and kinds of faith in Hinduism there are no fixed religious doctrines or any church, though there are many temples and thousands of places of pilgrimage.

The significance of the individual gods in Hinduism is, however, seen in relative terms and it is said that the One appears under many names without prejudice to its essential unity. “Sat – being, truth – is one, and the sages give the One different names” (Rig Veda).³³ Although the relativisation of human notions of the various gods results in a certain tolerance of other views, the history of Hinduism

³² Cf. *ibid.*, 38–40.

³³ Rig Veda 1, 164, 46.

has seen superiority assigned to certain specific forms of religion. Everyone believes that anyone who appeals to God under another name is really appealing to the God that they appeal to, only the other person is doing so in a way that is not quite correct.

A similar sentiment is to be found in the Bhagavadgita, one of the holy scriptures of Hinduism:

„21. yo yo yam yam tanum bhaktah
 sraddhayarcitum icchati
 tasya tasyacalam sraddham
 tam eva vidadhamy aham

“Whatever the form in which a pious devotee
 wishes to worship faithfully,
 I shall fortify this his faith.”³⁴

“Hinduism thus assumes the basic experience of the unity of reality. Multiplicity is not meaningless, but the result of the playful creative powers of God (called purple): the One plays in the Many. Ultimately, however, diversity is dissolved in unity, when the true or ultimate nature of the world is recognised.”³⁵ More recent Hindu writers, such as Radhakrishnan, emphasise that the different religions are only partial truths or stages.

Christianity and Hinduism

Tradition has it that Christianity was brought to India in the first century A.D. by the Apostle Thomas, who preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Jewish and other non-Christian religious communities settled along the southern coast of India. He is said to have met a

³⁴ Radhakrishnan, S., *Die Bhagavadgita. Sanskrittext mit Einleitung und Kommentar*, Baden-Baden, 1958, 254. The commentary states: “The highest God strengthens the faith of everyone and grants the rewards that the individual yearns for. However far the soul has fought its way up, so far God stoops down to it. Even such contemplative seers as Buddha and S. do not dismiss the common people’s faith in the gods. They were just as aware of the ineffability of the highest godhead as of the endless number of possible manifestations. Each surface owes its firm base to the depths below it, just as each shadow reflects the nature of the object that casts it. Moreover each act of veneration ennobles. It matters not what we venerate. If our veneration is earnest enough, it helps us progress” (*ibid.*).

³⁵ Brück, M. v., “Indische Religionen – Vielfalt oder Einheit?” in: Schubert, V., (ed.), *o cit.*, 203.

violent end in India. Today's Saint Thomas Christians trace their beginnings and their name back to the work of the Apostle. Early Christianity in southern India was able to develop without any major confrontation with the native religions. They also adapted at some point to their Hindu environment and often had friendly contacts with the Hindus. At the beginning of the modern period Portuguese Catholics came to the country, followed by Protestant missionaries in the wake of the British, Dutch and French East Indian Companies. In addition to their mission of spreading the Gospel, today's Christians and their missionaries promote the cause of more social and legal equality and pursue an active educational policy. Thus, although they live their Christian faith in a society shaped by many religions, they make a positive contribution to the development of modern India.³⁶

A few comparisons may show how fundamental are the differences between the Christian and Hindu traditions as regards their notions of God, man and the world.

In the Hindu tradition the whole world is in a state of perdition that renders people incapable of understanding reality. Only the light of true cognition will banish the darkness of bedazzlement. In the Christian tradition, by contrast, man is the centre of everything. Christianity speaks of the salvation and perdition of man, salvation having to do with love. Because God is love, only love can make man godlike.

In the Hindu tradition worldliness (Samsara), cosmic history (Karma) and cognition are the basic elements of human existence. In the Christian tradition freedom, responsibility and history are seen as essential features.

Both traditions have a different understanding of history based on their understanding of truth. In the Hindu tradition man is bound up in the cycle of rebirths (in the state of Samsara). He is "dazzled" by it and therefore unable to acquire a proper understanding of truth. The Vedic revelation (Shruti, "what is heard") states that the understanding of truth is of an ontological nature and refers to the highest mystery,

³⁶ Cf. Schmidt-Leukel, P., *o cit.*, 397-402.

the highest reality. “What is true is what is immutable and enduring.” To the Christian tradition historicity is an important criterion of truth: if it really happened, then it’s true.

For the Hindu tradition the truth can only be attained in the final stage; Karmic history³⁷ plays a negative role. For the Christian tradition truth is a characteristic of reality; the anthropocentric perspective plays a positive role here.

In Hindu tradition cognition is salvation; in the Christian tradition it is love. Redemption occurs through love: one is touched by love, one is genuinely liberated, freed from the “obsession with self” (Indian = Ahamkara) and free for the “whole” (Indian = Sarvam).³⁸

Hans Küng shows in the answers of Christianity and the Hindu religions two more points of agreement in the striving for redemption. These were intended as practical paths and not just as theoretical answers:

Both the Christian and Hindu religions recognise alienation, worldliness, and the world’s need for redemption.³⁹

Both religions hope for redemption through an Absolute.⁴⁰

³⁷ Raimon Panikkar explains what he means by Karmic history and a Karmic world view: “All modes of understanding share the conviction that there is a link between action and effect. Karma means the undivided, non-dualistic view of reality, in which the action is not separated from its effect. The Karmic world view assumes an understanding of history that stresses the ontal aspect, while the understanding of history of the anthropic world vKatoiew emphasises the theoretical, cognitive aspect. Although Karmic history (‘what happened to you when you did it’) is related to the history that we write, it is more comprehensive than anthropic history (‘what they did’) and hence inexhaustible” (The Law of Karma and the Historical Dimension of Man, 30f).

³⁸ Cf. D’Sa, F.X., “Die verschiedenen Glaubenswelten der Religionen am Beispiel von Christentum und Hinduismus” in Bernhard Nitsche (ed.): *Gottesdenken in interreligiöser Perspektive. Raimon Panikkars Trinitätstheologie in der Diskussion*, Paderborn, 2005, 66-74, 71f.

³⁹ Hans Küng explains this as follows: “Both know in some kind of way about the ignorance and bedazzlement, loneliness and transience of man, about his base instincts, apathy and fear: in short his colossal self-centredness. Both are distressed at the unspeakable suffering caused by man’s own deeds and their effects, but also at all the misery in this miserable world of ours.” (Küng, H., “Eine christliche Antwort”, in: idem, Ess, J.v., Stietenron, H.v./ Bechert, H., *Christentum und Weltreligionen. Hinführung zum Dialog mit Islam, Hinduismus und Buddhismus*, Munich, 1984, 329.)

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.* Redemption by an Absolute is presented as follows: “Both yearn for the

Different paths of salvation leading to redemption may be identified in greatly simplified form in Hinduism and the three main Christian denominations. Three such paths – expressed in stereotypical terms – may be mentioned here:

“Karma-Marga: the path of action, deeds, works – whether in the sense of ascetic or cultic-ritual observances – might be called the Roman Catholic path.

Jnana-Marga: the path of knowledge, cognition, *gnosis* – here again very much in the sense of existential experience and often combined with a demand for elitism and asceticism – might be compared with the Graeco-Alexandrian path; and

Bhakti-Marga: the path of unconditional devotion (bhakti = allocation and participation), of trust, of faith, of love might – despite all the differences – prove analogous with the Augustinian-Lutheran-Reformed path, which does not wish to rely wholly on works or on knowledge.”⁴¹

Some decades ago large numbers of people, including many young Europeans, flocked to Asia, especially India, in search of answers to

cognition, transformation, enlightenment, liberation and redemption of man and his world. Both hope to achieve this by entering a final, unconditional, highest state: the ultimate reality, whatever it is called and however it is understood. Both know that this ultimate reality, however close it may be, is concealed, that the Ultimate is not immediately objectifiable, accessible, available, that the Absolute itself must convey enlightenment, revelation, abolition of suffering” (*ibid*).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 329-330. Küng goes on to mention two *basic attitudes* in the striving for redemption: – the *cat’s path*: “As a kitten lets itself be carried by its mother, man should let himself be carried by unconditional trust in his God. In Christianity the justification is not based on pious deeds, but on trusting faith alone. Thus passivity comes before activity!” (*ibid.*, 330). Heinrich von Strietencron comments as follows: “The cat’s path includes the love of God. But just as the kittens also become active in time, the love of God does not remain passive either.” (Strietencron, H.v., “Hinduistische Perspektiven”, in: Küng, H., Ess. J.v., idem / Bechert, H., *o cit.*, 319). – And on the *monkey’s path*: “Just as the little monkey actively applies its own powers, the just man should also confirm his Christian faith through works of love. Thus activity arises out of passivity!” (Küng, H., *loc. cit.*, 331). Here, too, Heinrich von Strietencron provides an explanation: “For the Hindus the monkey’s path includes asceticism, the path of the deed (above all the fulfilment of one’s own duties, making sacrifices to one’s ancestors and gods and providing succour with gifts and ‘good works’) and the path of knowledge, which also includes Yoga.” (idem, “Hinduistische Perspektiven”, in *loc. cit.*, 319.)

their questions. It may have been the spirit of adventure and the lure of the unknown that made them flee from established society. But many were driven, deep down, by a need to discover the meaning of life. This led to an interest in Asian religions, doctrines of rebirth and the alternative messages of Indian religions and deities. Not infrequently revelations were torn from their religious context and adapted to private desires and a secular way of life. The doctrine of rebirth deprived death of its sting. Man remained the master of his fate even beyond the grave. Death had lost its finality: what one had neglected in this life could be caught up with in the next.

Another reason for seeking answers to the meaning of life in the alternative notions of Asian religions may have been that people had lost touch with the message of their own Christian faith and were unable to understand it. But the Asian religions cannot just be used selectively as a substitute for lost Christian faith. Thus the answer was not infrequently stitched together from the tenets of many religions without reference to their religious context, although Christians were not really allowed to engage in this relativisation of religions, especially Christianity, which stresses the uniqueness of Christ as revealed truth. People are still looking for answers in Asian or Indian religions even today, perhaps to an even greater extent.⁴² They are thus “meeting the need to extend the non-committal surfing among the many meanings of life on offer nowadays to include religions as well.”⁴³

Inter-faith dialogue in India

In the *inter-faith dialogue* it is not acceptable for specific tenets of a given religion to be reduced to the same level as all others just for the sake of harmony. What would be gained if Christians, under the influence of Hellenism and contrary to the faith they profess, were to reinterpret the incarnation of the divine Word, Jesus Christ, as a general “religious significance of Jesus and if they were to bring Mohammed, Buddha and Gandhi, acting as catalysts and mediators of a religiosity directed at the beyond, into this hermeneutic framework,

⁴² Cf. Bürkle, H., “Die Entdeckung religiöser Alternativen in asiatischen Traditionen” in: Müller, G.L. / Serretti, M., (eds.), *o cit.*, 58 –59, 68.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 68.

which is congruent neither with Islam nor with Buddhism?”⁴⁴ Thus the first thing to do, before turning to the situation in India, is to see what inter-faith dialogue is and what it is not.

Inter-faith dialogue does *not* refer to any of the following relations between diversity and unity. It does not mean unity *and* diversity (for that would presuppose a non-existent point outside them both). Nor does it mean unity or diversity (for that would presuppose an equally non-existent choice between diversity and unity). One cannot say it means *neither* unity *nor* diversity (for that would presuppose the existence of another possibility). And finally one must dismiss the thesis that it means *both* unity *and* diversity (for that would make it unclear what was actually meant).⁴⁵

Interreligiosity must *not* mean: eclectic, patchwork religion; comparative religion; theoretical scientific or analytical reduction, or any reduction of the claim to truth.⁴⁶

Put in positive terms, *inter-faith dialogue* is the name given to an enduring conviction that the one divine Truth is expressed in many religions. This entails the rejection of a Hegelian claim to absolute knowledge (the resolution of differences to produce a single doctrinal concept); the discovery of mutually enriching convergences (e.g. in the fields covered by the terms “religion”, “God”, “redemption”, “revelation”, “sin”); and opening the door to a deeper understanding of our own identity by reading religious history as a history of salvation.⁴⁷

Unity and diversity of religions

A large number of religious denominations in India are engaged in talks with one another, their diversity resembling the diversity of languages. If at the same time Asian religions could exist within one another, it would be possible for someone to be Buddhist and

⁴⁴ Müller, G.L., *Mit der Kirche denken. Bausteine und Skizzen zu einer Ekklesiologie der Gegenwart*, Würzburg 2002, 268.

⁴⁵ Cf. Mall, R.A., “Der Hinduismus als ein Ort der Ökumene von Religionen” in: Schubert, V., (ed.), *o cit.*, 197-198.

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 196.

Confucian, Buddhist and Shintoist simultaneously.⁴⁸ The mystical attitude is characteristic of Buddha as well as of Hindu thinkers, such as Shankara on the one hand and Ramanuja on the other. In many different forms mysticism forms the uniform background of the higher forms of Asian religion. “Such mysticism is characterised by the experience of identity. The mystic loses himself in the ocean of the All-One, whether this is depicted in emphatic *theologia negativa* as ‘nothing’ or positively as ‘everything’. In the last stage of such an experience the ‘mystic’ will no longer say to his God ‘I am Thine’, but ‘I am Thou.’”⁴⁹

Monotheism in India is associated with mysticism. It is open to monism and is the product of evolution. That is why the gods were never overthrown. Instead there has been a peaceful compromise between God and the gods, between monotheism and polytheism.⁵⁰

Joseph Ratzinger refers to Hans Bürkle⁵¹ in order to emphasise that the concept of the person is indispensable for the Indian image of man. Hans Bürkle notes that “the Upanishadic experience of identity of the ‘tat tvam asi’⁵² is unable to substantiate the residual validity and dignity of the individual uniqueness of each individual person. It cannot be reconciled with the notion that this life is only a transitional phase in a series of succeeding stages of rebirth. The intrinsic value of the person and their dignity cannot be defined as a transitional phase and hence subject to change.”⁵³

⁴⁸ Cf. Ratzinger, J., *Glaube – Wahrheit – Toleranz. Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen*, Freiburg i. Br., Basle, Vienna, 2003, 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 29-30.

⁵¹ Cf. Bürkle, H., *Der Mensch auf der Suche nach Gott – die Frage der Religionen*, AMATECA, vol. 3, Paderborn, 1996, 130f.

⁵² “Tat tvam asi”, a term from one of the Five Vedas of the Holy Scriptures of Hinduism, of the Samaveda (Chandogya Upanishad, 6 Prapathaka), which in Vedanta philosophy describes the spiritual path of man in search of himself and means “That is You”. (Cf. Deussen, P., *Sechzig Upanishad's des Veda*, Darmstadt, 1963, 157f.)

⁵³ Bürkle, H., *loc. cit.*, 130. He continues: “The reforms of Hinduism in the Modern Age therefore essentially revolve around the issue of human dignity. The Christian view of the person is adopted by them in a general Hindu context without their being rooted in any understanding of God” (*ibid.*, 130).

Dialogue among religions

Despite the many religions and forms of faith there are in India, they do try to co-exist in an atmosphere of tolerance and dialogue, with regular meetings, study groups and conferences. But given the size of the country and the large number of religious groups and philosophies within the various denominations, it is in fact impossible, not to say inconceivable, that representatives of all religious groupings should find common ground, the search for which is often the greatest obstacle to conducting the dialogue. Yet the dialogue must go on, partly so that each can understand the others better and partly so that each can get to know themselves a little better.

One person who is considered a pioneer of the inter-faith dialogue is Raimon Panikkar, not least on account of his unusual biography.⁵⁴ In pluralist theology circles he is mentioned in the same breath as Hick and Knitter. His career has been a journey between cultures. His focus in the inter-faith dialogue between Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism has been on the binding factor (the ‘*Laut*’) between the three religions. In his later works he speaks of a mutual “fulfilment” or “fertilisation”. His new pluralist way of looking at the relationship between Christianity and Hinduism lies in Christology.⁵⁵ Put more precisely, in the interrelationship between God, man and world, (‘cosmotheandric’⁵⁶ is the expression he has coined) which Panikkar

⁵⁴ Raimon Panikkar, born 1918 in Barcelona to a deeply religious Spanish Catholic mother and a father of the high Hindu nobility; ordained as a priest in 1946; in India from 1950 to 1960; doctorates in Philosophy, Chemistry and Theology; professorship at Santa Barbara, California; and member of faculty at several universities in India, Europe and America. He is one of the “outstanding Catholic protagonists of inter-faith and intercultural dialogue in the 20th and early 21st centuries. Coming from such a parental home, Raimon Panikkar was predestined to take part in the dialogue between the religious systems of Christianity and Hinduism. The intellectual confrontation with agnosticism and atheism and the encounter with Buddhism came later.” (Nitsche, B., “Begegnungen mit Raimon Panikkar. Chancen der interkulturellen und interreligiösen Forschung” in: idem (ed.): *Gottesdenken in interreligiöser Perspektive. Raimon Panikkars Trinitätstheologie in der Diskussion*, Paderborn, 2005, 13.)

⁵⁵ See also: Menke, K.-H., *Jesus ist Gott der Sohn. Denkformen und Brennpunkte der Christologie*, Regensburg, 2008, 437-439.

⁵⁶ Nitsche, B., *o cit.*, 13. This portmanteau word focuses attention on the trinity of God (*theos*), world (*kosmos*) and man (*anthropos*). “... in this triad men lead their lives in quest of meaning and that truth which is attested to in the religions as divine mystery and guidance in life” (*ibid.*, 13).

in Christian terminology calls 'Christ' and the concrete person of Jesus of Nazareth."⁵⁷

Panikkar distinguishes between two kinds of dialogue. On the one hand, there is the "dialectic dialogue" consisting of analysis, discussions and methodology, which is important for mutual information and correctives. On the other hand, there is the "dialogical dialogue", which refers to the witness of faith and may have a transformational quality. Because the inter-faith dialogue is concerned with personal, intercultural and pluralist questions, it is a dialogue between subjects (about their faith experiences and witnesses to the faith).⁵⁸ As Panikkar sees it, inter-faith dialogue should neither bring together the many world religions in a universal religion (the rich diversity of religions should on no account be reduced to a single tradition), nor should total agreement between religions be sought. The ideal aim of inter-faith dialogue is the improvement of relations and discussions between religions and cultures. The chasm of ignorance and misunderstanding can only be bridged if everyone speaks their own language and can share their own faith experience with others.⁵⁹ Perhaps – Panikkar hopes – a point can then be reached at which mutual fertilisation is possible. "Christianity is not a one-sided fulfilment of Hinduism; rather a mutual self-fertilisation could take place between Hinduism and Christianity."⁶⁰

The inter-faith dialogue is also necessary because the problems besetting today's globalised world in the fields of justice, environment, peace and human rights cannot be solved without mutual understanding between religions. History teaches us that Christianity "has its roots in Judaism and in the Greek, Roman, Irish and Germanic

⁵⁷ Schmidt-Leukel, P., *o cit.*, 417.

⁵⁸ Cf. Mendonca, C., "Panikkars Beitrag zu einer interreligiösen und interkulturellen Hermeneutik aus indischer Sicht" in Bernhard Nitsche (ed.), *Gottesdenken in interreligiöser Perspektive. Raimon Panikkars Trinitätstheologie in der Diskussion*, Paderborn, 2005, 83.

⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁰ Thus Panikkar after Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *o cit.*, 415. And further: "Christ is just the Christian name for the mystical unity of world, God and man. For this reality was discovered by Christians in and through Jesus and is therefore, for Christians, expressed in the combination of the words Jesus and Christ. Yet the same mystical unity can also be found in other religions, in which case it will be expressed differently. In Hinduism, for example, it is Rama, Krishna, Isvara or Purusa" (*ibid.*, 415).

traditions. Hinduism, too, has its roots in many other religions of the Indian subcontinent.”⁶¹

The necessity of a dialogue between religions is seen at three different levels: firstly, on the personal level (man is not just a single individual, but is capable of entering into a relationship and dialogue with others; dialogue and faith make a man a man); secondly, at the level of religious traditions (people meet members of the other traditional faiths in their daily lives, in schools, offices, even in the Internet; thus questions are raised which may enrich, but also alarm; the traditional religions cannot evade the mounting problems of today’s world and must assume tasks in an open dialogue: “either they open themselves to dialogue or they will fall into decay.”); and finally on the level of history (genuine religiosity is also historically minded and concerns itself not only with history and the fate of men, but also with history and the fate of the world: “Without a dialogue between religions the world might collapse.”)⁶²

Another representative of the inter-faith dialogue in India and an advocate of a pluralist position is *Stanley Samartha*.⁶³ In his opinion, the Christian Christology for India and Asia must be revised.⁶⁴ It is understandable that Christians all over the world believe that Jesus is the Son of God, which he does not dispute. But what about the people of other religions? Do Christians sincerely believe that they too have something to say? That they too have stories which are of great significance, such as those of Buddha, Rama and Krishna? That they have questions to which no answers can be obtained? For Samartha,

⁶¹ Mendonca, C., *o cit.*, 85.

⁶² Panikkar in: Mendonca, C., *o cit.*, 86.

⁶³ He belongs to the Church of Southern India and for a long time headed the Dialogue Department of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and was the first Director of the WCC’s “Dialogue Programme”.

⁶⁴ According to Samartha this “revised” Christology rejects the universality of the Christ event as unfounded. The originality of Christianity does not consist in the statement that Jesus Christ is God, “[...] elevating Jesus to the rank of God or restricting Christ to Jesus of Nazareth are both temptations that must be resisted. The first entails the risk of leading to an impoverished ‘Jesology’, the second of becoming a narrow ‘form of Christomonism’. A theocentric Christology helps avoid those two dangers.” (Stanley Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions. Toward a Revised Christology*, Maryknoll, 1991, quoted in: Amato, A., “Einzigkeit und Universalität des Heilmysteriums Jesu Christ.”).

however, they have a special significance and message of salvation: “the proclamation of liberation and enlightenment by Buddha, the promise of liberating, divine grace from Rama and Krishna”.⁶⁵ For Christians he sees in Jesus the promise and conveyance of God’s presence, but not in the sense of an exclusive uniqueness.⁶⁶ Modern Hindu thinkers not only see the cults of Indian gods as conditional and provisional, but also apply this relativisation to every religion. Thus Jesus Christ appears as an, admittedly, outstanding figure, in whom the direct merging of the mystic with the Divine is revealed. When the Bible speaks of Jesus as the Son of God, of His sacrificial death, His resurrection and His return, these topoi are seen as later misunderstandings and superficial reinterpretations of His role as teacher (guru).⁶⁷ In this “Hindu relativisation of the nature of (Christian) revelation the representatives of the Indian doctrine of enlightenment see a reason for mutual tolerance between religions”.⁶⁸

The encyclical *Fides et ratio* on the cultural tradition of India

In the encyclical *Fides et ratio* ⁶⁹ John Paul II talks of the relationship between the Christian faith and pre-Christian cultures. He mentions yardsticks that have to be applied when the Faith encounters these cultures and takes Indian culture as an example, as it is so rich in very old philosophical traditions. He points out that “a magnificent

⁶⁵ Samatha, S., *o cit.*, quoted in: Schmidt-Leukel, P., *loc. cit.*, 422.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Cf. Amato, A., *o cit.*, 102. “... M. Thomas Thangaraj also considers the claim of absolute salvation in Jesus to be untenable in any universal sense. It would only be acceptable if it were made clear that “Christ was unique and absolute only for Christians”. He bestows upon Jesus the title of *guru* (master) and comments: “Jesus should be regarded as one of many *gurus* and not as the one and only *guru*.” (Stanley Samartha, *o cit.*, 124) These and other authors assume that the various non-Christian religious traditions in all their diversity should be regarded as equal and complementary and that each forms an equal part of God’s plan of salvation. The aim is to overcome the assertion of the exclusive uniqueness of the salvation event of Christ, which appears to show a lack of concern for the experience of the adherents of other religions who worship other redeemers” (Amato, A., *loc. cit.*, 102-103).

⁶⁸ Bürkle, H., “Die Entdeckung religiöser Alternativen in asiatischen Traditionen” in: Müller, G.L./ Serretti, M. (eds.), *loc. cit.*, 57.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Enzyklika FIDES ET RATIO von Johannes Paul II an die Bischöfe der katholischen Kirche über das Verhältnis von Glaube und Vernunft*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, no. 135, Bonn, 1998

spiritual upsurge leads Indian thought to search for an experience having the value of an absolute in that it liberates the spirit from the conditionalities imposed by time and space. In the dynamism of this search for liberation grand metaphysical systems are to be found.⁷⁰ Joseph Ratzinger interprets this passage as a clear indication of the universalist tendency of great cultures, of their transcendence of space and time, of their attempts at defining the purpose of human life. This is where Ratzinger sees an indication of the ability of cultures to hold dialogues among themselves, in this case between the cultures of India and those that have grown out of the Christian faith.⁷¹ The encyclical speaks of dimensions which can open up to Christianity. While the basic needs of man as a transcendent being are identical in all cultures, the encyclical also stresses that the Church must not abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Graeco-Latin thought. This applies especially when the Church enters into contact with great and previously unknown cultures. If the Church avoids such contacts, she is acting against God's plan of salvation as He leads His Church in time and history. Finally, the encyclical recognises as legitimate the claim of Indian thought to be special and original. However, this cannot be allowed to mean that a cultural tradition in all its diversity can shut itself off from other traditions in order to assert its identity in terms of its opposition to others, since this is in contradiction to the essence of the human spirit.⁷²

It is to be hoped that, while the second millennium was still characterised by denominational conflicts and the absence or decline of dialogue, the third millennium will promote and expand the worldwide dialogue between religions and lead to a positive outcome. Religions must not disappear in the process. Many people seek an inner spirituality, an access to the experience of the divine spirit without worrying too much about the external appearances of religions. "We are living in a completely new age of the spirit, a mystical age. A new, global spiritual consciousness is slowly dawning. Perceiving this upsurge of the spirit and promoting it is at the very heart of the dialogue culture."⁷³ We keep

⁷⁰ John Paul II, *o cit.*, 74.

⁷¹ Cf. Ratzinger, J., *o cit.*, 159.

⁷² Cf. John Paul II, *o cit.*

⁷³ Painadath, S., *o cit.*, 41.

asserting that our task today is to concentrate more on what religions have in common rather than on what separates them. In 1986, John Paul II said at an ecumenical prayer meeting in Assisi that the differences between the religions appear secondary in comparison with the unity between them, which is radical, fundamental and decisive. We may be sure he did not mean relativisation on matters of substance.⁷⁴ But because all religious experiences ultimately proceed from one single divine source and convey the healing presence of God, it is necessary for the faithful of every religion to read the scriptures of others with an open mind and seek to understand the symbols of others with genuine respect. How can I love my neighbour if I am not prepared to respect my neighbour's God? Surely today's global world shows us that the Holy Scriptures of all religions are the legacy of all humankind. Does this not mean that the diversity of religions is part of God's plan of salvation?⁷⁵

There is no contradiction between the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and His Church and the inter-faith dialogue, which we hope and feel to be necessary in relation to the Asian religions, especially here in my Indian homeland. The one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church sees itself as a sacrament in the service of "the Others", not as an "island of truth" nor as an "island of the chosen". The catholicity of the Church betrays itself if it suppresses, ignores or even extinguishes the otherness of the others. The apostolicity of the church betrays itself if it combines ethnic, cultural, national or political representations with the representation of Christ. And the Church's attributes of unity and holiness will be perverted into their opposite if they are not lived in the sense of the inclusion of the Christians in the representation of Him who was Crucified.

⁷⁴ This point was made explicitly by John Paul II in an address to a group of Indian bishops of the Latin Rite on the occasion of his "Ad Limina visit" in 2003, when he said that he well understood that they were confronted on their Indian subcontinent with cultures rich in religious and philosophical traditions. "The inter-faith dialogue is not a substitute for the meaningful proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God incarnate. It would be an even greater falsification of our faith if relativism were to lead to syncretism" (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2003/july/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030703_ad-limina-india_ge.html, 21.11.2011).

⁷⁵ Cf. Painadath, S., *o cit.*, 38-40.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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