

Inter-religious reflections

Francis X. D'Sa

In the world of religions today a new phase is gradually emerging. The newness of this phase refers to aspects like the following: Awareness of the existence of religions other than our own. Such awareness is mostly accompanied by a certain suspicion of the “other” religions. At the same time, serious study of religions is also picking up. An important question about how to go about a religion that is not one’s own is also becoming increasingly thematic. Awareness of the existence of religions other than our own.

Existence of religions other than our own is a truth that we have had to accept grudgingly. During the colonial period the “other” religions have had to keep a low profile. As nation after nation in the developing world became politically independent their religions began to discover their voices. Two major voices have been louder than the rest: Islam and Hinduism. To make things worse both found to their dismay (1) extremist tendencies becoming uncontrollable in their own backyards and (2) hijacking their religion for political ends.⁹³ Both have become a source of embarrassment to their belief-communities.

The middle of the twentieth century witnessed a strange phenomenon, namely, indifference towards (if not outright rejection of) religion appeared to be a widespread phenomenon. Perhaps the perception and analysis were erroneous. The latter half of the last century has been showing a tendency towards fundamentalism in almost all religious traditions coupled with aggressiveness vis à vis other religions. This has influenced even the moderates in these traditions

⁹³ The present Minister for Home Affairs in India’s Central cabinet Mr. Chidambaram coined the phrase “saffron terror” (because of the colour employed by the *Hindu* right-wing terrorists).

who have been rendered unsure and insecure. Understandably openness to dialogue has taken a backseat.

But interestingly there is a plethora of publications on religions. That is to say, there is also a group of scholars and writers who is interested in writing and researching religions and who believe that there is a group who is interested in reading and studying such material. This confirms the conclusion that there still are publishers who take the risk of publishing books in this field.

This observation, a methodological one, is specific to our age which over the years has been losing its hermeneutic innocence bit by bit as it were. In an earlier age a question like this would not have arisen, so great was the concern at that time with the *cognitive* dimension of religion. Today we seem to have gone beyond this. Our preoccupation is with the *religious* nature of religion. This is not surprising in an interreligious world where interreligious situations are on the rise. Allegedly abuse of religion and misuse of religious authority are leading some people to give up their allegiance to their traditional religions. At the same time it is making others who are serious about their religiosity to inquire more deeply into the religious character of religion.⁹⁴ Doctrines and doctrinal systems do not appear to be their cup of tea.

The Background

To understand all this, the background needs to be articulated. Unlike in Europe where institutionalised religions are no more “in”, the Asian subcontinent is witnessing a phase where religions are being instrumentalised for political and commercial ends. Thinking persons detect a serious deterioration in the religious character of established religions; and persons who are really seeking the path of peace and happiness are no more as gullible as they used to be. They have become, I believe, more discerning. Perhaps that is one reason why the visibility of Gurus on the socio-religious horizon is on the wane.

However, interreligious situations do not necessarily mean a positive or pleasant situation. Where historically religious allergies

⁹⁴ Where the Church in certain countries has lost credibility because of its lack of seriousness in tackling the problem of paedophile priests a fresh concern for reform in the life of the Church and the hierarchy is very evident in our age.

and prejudices have become rampant one encounters not infrequently zero tolerance for tolerance. Appearances to the contrary such situations are really not religious, in spite of some veneer of religion. Unfortunately there is a tendency, generally speaking, to make things worse by attributing these sentiments to all followers of this or that religion in the mistaken notion that this is true of their respective religious tradition as such. But the time has come to be less emotional and more discerning in our judgements. Throwing out the baby with the bath water betrays lack of discernment. (By the way one of the positive signs of cultural and religious encounters is the general need of *discernment* felt in almost all serious traditions. Popularity is not always a sign of growing relevance!)

The time has now come for believers not only to distance themselves from every sign of antireligious behaviour but to make common cause with peaceful interpretations of our respective religions. Some Christians are realising that they have to distance themselves from antireligious ideas and behaviour of some Christians; similarly some Muslims are distancing themselves from antireligious ideas and behaviour of some Muslims; the same is to be said of Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, etc. As of now the common concern of all religious traditions is to distance themselves from antireligious ways of thinking and acting. What must be made crystal clear to the world is that “believers” (whichever religious tradition they may belong to) cannot and should not be divided for short-term benefits. True believers, because their life is built on the rock of hope and not on the sand of expectation, always project long-term goals and long-term alliances. This has to be a major factor uniting religions in the face of signs of inhumanity, injustice and all kinds of violence. If religion, every religion, has to regain its credibility then issues of justice, compassion, love, peace etc. have to constitute benchmarks in public and political life, not just in the private practice of religion.

This is not an argument against the private practice of religion. The practice of religion has neither office hours nor special areas. Like the air we breathe in and breathe out religion and its practice have to be all-pervasive spatially and without intermission temporally.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ See John Paul II's Encyclical (1990) *Redemptoris missio* §28: “The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time.”

There can be no religion-free hours or days in much the same way that being human has no religion-free hours or days.

A New Face of Religion⁹⁶: Sacred Secularity

What is urgently needed is a new face for all our religions, a face that exudes credibility and evokes confidence. It has to be like a website where different faith-traditions are sympathetically and empathetically presented. Each person, more specifically, each believer is a mosaic stone in the mosaic projection of a religion, as also in the general mosaic of all religions. However, it is unfortunate that the mosaic face of most of our religions is dominated by religious leaders (who seldom witness to the internal liberation which is the hallmark of authentic religion) and by terrorists who claim to be saviours of their respective religion but who in fact are the worst enemies of religion, indeed of all religion.⁹⁷

The new face that I am referring to has to show not only awareness of the condition of the needy and the helpless. More importantly, it has to recognise and understand the questions of our time which in a deeper analysis are the cause of such a situation. The primary task of religions has to be its ability to interpret courageously and relevantly the signs of our time so that it responds to today's search for meaning – interreligiously and interculturally.

Gone are the days when religions tended their own flock. It can no more be the case given the kind of interreligious and intercultural interactions that are taking place. Today what a religion is, does and speaks becomes almost instantly an item on the agenda of public argument and discourse. At once it gets transmogrified in unimaginable ways among all kinds of people – whether believers or non-believers in their respective cultures.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ See Phan, P.C., “Jesus the Christ with an Asian face”, in: *Theological Studies*, September 1, 1996.

⁹⁷ MacLachlan, M., London/Pakistan (in: *UCANews*. Asia's most trusted independent Catholic news source, March 8, 2011) reports: Fears about extremists using the blasphemy laws as cover for terrorism. Worried Pakistani Christians have stepped up security following the assassination of minorities minister Shab haz Bhatti last week, according to Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha of Lahore.

⁹⁸ A good illustration of this is Benedict XVI's Lecture at the Regensburg University, Germany, 2006.

Religion surely has to be political, but not party-political. “Political” in my sense of the word refers to all that is required to become a responsible citizen in today’s world, not just in our own nation-state!

Our contemporary world is witness to major problems like the objectification of every one and everything, the extreme individualism that bedevils our age and the increasing irrelevance of institutionalised religious traditions.

But there is a silver lining too. In contrast to the process that objectifies Man and World, (ignoring the depth-dimension that is at work in every being everywhere,) a new consciousness is emerging⁹⁹ that is discovering a new relationship between Man and World (in movements like Green Peace), between human beings themselves (in movements like Amnesty International), between women and men (in the women’s movements,) and above all, between Man and the Divine (in the emergence of new sects and new reforms in religions).¹⁰⁰

It is a challenge that every generation has to respond to. Pope John XXIII insightfully called it “aggiornamento” when he convoked the Second Vatican Council. Aggiornamento is not to be misunderstood as keeping up with the times and assimilating the *Zeitgeist*. It refers to the signs of the times scrutinised through the reading glasses of “discernment”.

Earlier the trend was to separate religion from the rest of our life. Religion as pursuit of the Sacred was confined to the “Sunday” of our life as it were. The rest of the week had to carry the burden of the profane. Perhaps this may have contributed in some measure to the attitude that considers the world and all that is connected with it as

⁹⁹ Panikkar, R., Ch.VIII “The Emerging Mythos”, *The Rhythm of Being*. The Gifford Lectures (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 368-404.

¹⁰⁰ The Christian version of this is found in John Paul II’s Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* §28: “The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history: ‘The Spirit of God with marvellous foresight directs the course of the ages and renews the face of the earth.’ The risen Christ ‘is now at work in human hearts through the strength of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end.’”

not being sacred. But this has not worked. Indeed this may even have been one of the factors that has made institutionalised religion look more irrelevant than it really is.

It was Raimon Panikkar who coined the felicitous phrase “sacred secularity”: “One of the mature traits of our so rightly criticised epoch is the acute awareness of what I call *sacred secularity*. This world (saeculum) is sacred and our secular moves have transcendent repercussions.”¹⁰¹ Panikkar insists that the whole Cosmos is a living reality. The saeculum as both time and space, is our world of space and time. “The traditional insight sees the entire universe, and not the earth alone, as a living organism that constitutes a Whole of which human life is the root metaphor [...] all is Life, or rather, that *the All is alive*.”¹⁰² But there is an important distinction between singular life (*bios*) and Life (*zōē*).¹⁰³ “Singular life, *bios*, has an end. Life as such, *zōē*, does not (need to) have an end.”¹⁰⁴ More interestingly:

“Many traditions have not limited Life to Men, animals, plants, and things. The earth is a living being; the universe is a living being, the whole cosmos is alive; it has an inner dynamism, a *nexus*, a movement, and perhaps even its own growth. There may also be superior sorts of living beings, and even a supreme Being, the bearer of pure Life. Or, as the *Gitā* says: ‘my superior nature enfolds into life by which this universe is sustained.’[VII,5.] In short, reality is alive. Life is coextensive with Being, with reality.

¹⁰¹ See Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being*, 350.

And again 370-371: “The kosmos is the body of God, say some religions. Christianity likewise claims that the kosmos is the body of Christ, and qualifies this by saying that this body is still in pangs of birth and on the way to an *eschaton* that will be reached by every realised (liberated) person. This cosmotheandric kosmology is the religious novelty of our times that I have called *sacred secularity*.”

“Kosmology tries to understand and interpret, more or less profoundly, whatever enters the field of our consciousness. Cosmology only admits what has passed the scientific examination, what has passed through the assessment of our analytical cognition.”

¹⁰² Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being*, 270.

¹⁰³ Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being*, 272.

¹⁰⁴ Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being*, 272. Panikkar here quotes *Chāndogya Upanishad* VI,II,3: “It is by this subtle principle (essence) that the whole universe is enlivened; this is the real (the truth); this is the *ātman*; this art thou.” Here Panikkar adds helpfully: “This are we, living beings, Life. This is our ultimate identity, the experience of Being, the experience of Life.”

Life is not a mere quality of some beings, it is another name for Being, for the whole of reality.”¹⁰⁵

The lengthy quote is intended both to paraphrase Panikkar’s sacred secularity and at the same time to show the sweep of the Sacred. Secularity in this phrase is far, very far indeed, from its controversial political nuance. It includes the whole of reality, transcending the cosmology of the scientists and opening up to the kosmology of the faith traditions of the world.¹⁰⁶

Religions in an Age of Pluralism and Dialogue

Against this panorama of Reality, Being and Life every religion has the homework of articulating its self-understanding. More specifically today religions can no more take it lying down. They have [to learn] to spell out their beliefs in such a way that their alleged relevance becomes tangibly meaningful in a *pluralistic context*. Religions have to learn to understand and speak the language of the other religions. It is here that Panikkar’s efforts can facilitate this process. The framework he has been suggesting for a long time is the framework of the cosmotheandric intuition¹⁰⁷, (in which the interpenetration of the cosmic, the human and the divine dimensions constitutes reality) with the help of diatopical hermeneutics¹⁰⁸. On this background discovering homeomorphic or functional equivalents¹⁰⁹ are great helps on the path of intercultural and interreligious encounters.

¹⁰⁵ Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being*, 274.

¹⁰⁶ See the section on Cosmology and Kosmology in: Panikkar’s *The Rhythm of Being*, 368-378.

¹⁰⁷ See Panikkar’s latest (perhaps last) formulation of his cosmotheandric (or theanthropomorphic) intuition, “The Triple Interdependence: The Cosmotheandric Intuition,” in: *The Rhythm of Being*, 276-318.

¹⁰⁸ See Panikkar’s *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics. Cross-Cultural Studies* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), 9-10.

¹⁰⁹ See Panikkar, “The Rules of the Game in the Religious Encounter” in: *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, Revised edition 1999), 67: “Homeomorphism means rather that the notions play equivalent roles, that they occupy homologous places within their respective systems. Homeomorphism is perhaps a kind of existential-functional analogy.” And 68: “It is quite clearly false, for instance, to equate the upaniṣadic concept of *Brahman* with the biblical notion of *Yahweh*. Nevertheless it is equally unsatisfactory to say that these concepts have nothing whatever in common. True, their context and contents are utterly different; they are not mutually translatable, nor do they have a direct relationship. But they are homologous; each plays a similar role, albeit in different cultural settings. They both refer to a highest value and an absolute term.”

The dialogue of cultures and religions is not at all an easy enterprise. But it is the need of the hour. Good will alone, though a major component of such dialogue, is not enough. But it is an important presupposition.

At the base of pluralism we find not a pluralistic system but a pluralistic attitude.¹¹⁰ However a pluralistic attitude does not fall in the lap. Theologically it is a grace. Philosophically it is an insight. Sociologically it is openness to the other, the other person, the other culture, the other religion and their respective worlds. Spiritually it is the expression of the freedom of the Spirit who alone in the last analysis makes us free, free to be.

Accordingly the pluralistic attitude is not just the product of reason and debate. Its inspiration derives much more from the sole agent of all inspiration - which is the Holy Spirit. The pluralistic attitude does not state that everybody is right but that everybody has the right to confess and proclaim her beliefs. For Christians this should not be a problem. John Paul II's Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (=RM) §56 states:

“Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit. Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church: they stimulate her both to discover and acknowledge the signs of Christ's presence and of the working of the Spirit, as well as to examine more deeply her own identity and to bear witness to the fullness of Revelation which she has received for the good of all.”

These statements embody a sense of mission that is at once interreligious and interactive, a mission in which “The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man.” RM §29.

Finally in an article such as this, the charge of the “dictatorship of relativism” needs to be answered. Panikkar's view does not succumb to this. Indeed Panikkar calls his stance relativity because for him the truth of a belief is relative to its belief-world.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Panikkar, “A Self-Critical Dialogue”, in: Prabhu, J., (Ed.), *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar* (Orbis: 1996), 257.

¹¹¹ Cultural relativity means the “insight that any perception, experience, or knowledge

For the Christ, the symbol of the cosmic, the human and the divine Dimensions, is the Mystery through whom everything was made. This of course is the Christian name. Other religions have their own experience of and their own name for this Mystery. The Christic experience (expressing this the Christian way) will evidently be different in different cultures and religions. (I read this in RM §56: “to discover and acknowledge the *signs of Christ’s presence* and of the *working of the Spirit*” in the other religions! My highlighting.)

For Christians, everything was created through Him (the Christ), in Him and for Him. The other religions express their beliefs differently because they experience this Mystery differently. The beliefs of each religion are valid only within their belief-world where they originally emerged. A belief from one belief-world will not make sense in another belief-world. Thus the Incarnation will not make sense in the Hindu belief-world in much the same way that the *Avatāra* will not make sense in the Christian belief-world.

The purpose of dialogue is not to give up our respective religions but to make our belief-expressions interculturally and interreligiously more intelligible and more significant. Through dialogue and faith-sharing the diverse religions can learn mutually to correct and complement their belief-expressions according to culture and historical age. And the reward will be great: The revelation in other cultures and religions of the “other” faces of the Christ! This will always remain on the one hand an unending and unfinished task because no religion and no culture can ever exhaust the richness of the Mystery of the Christ, but on the other it will be the beginning of the eschatological feast of Pentecost where every one will understand the other in her own mother tongue!

is related to the horizon and dependent on the myth which makes the perception, the experience, or the knowledge possible.” See Panikkar’s, *Indra’s Cunning*, 112-113 (Forthcoming). Cultural relativity means the “insight that any perception, experience, or knowledge is related to the horizon and dependent on the myth which makes the perception, the experience, or the knowledge possible”. Again *Indra’s Cunning*, 112-113.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



Edited by

Klaus Krämer and Klaus Vellguth

