

## THE CHURCH AND DIALOGUE<sup>1</sup>

### *CHIESA E DIALOGO*

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#### Introduction

Dialogue is to be understood as the means used by God to create the universe and the human beings (*Gen 1:1-3*). He seems to be the Lord and source of Dialogue. He has passed this on to all the creatures and especially to all the human beings. Indeed the survival and the continuation of life depend on dialogue. In this way the dimension of Dialogue is inexhaustible. What we discuss and talk may embrace only a tiny aspect of the immeasurable aspects of Dialogue.

#### 1. New premises to understand religion

Dialogue enters into all spheres of life. As we restrict ourselves to Church and Dialogue we try to talk about Church (as religion) and what she has to converse with other religions.

One essential feature of religion is that it belongs to the entirety of humankind; no religion is the sole possession of the immediate community of its believers. In other words all religions are universal, (they belong to the humankind) they are gifts given by God to humanity.

Creation account *Gen 1:1-24*; Noah 6:11-13; and the tower of Babel *Gen 11:1ff.* remarkably refer to common experience of humankind everywhere. Hence the question raised is what the religions have to contribute to the welfare of the World and humanity.

The entire creation belongs to God (*Ps. 24*) so do all religions to humankind, under divine dispensation. According to Prof. Wilfred "no religion can claim full of its beliefs and practices". In his opinion,

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ownership in Christian tradition is justified only when it is for the purpose of self-governance and communion. Hence, belonging to a religion acquires meaning only in so far as it is a means of communion. All religions and their Scriptures are open to a wide spectrum of interpretations.

It is interesting to note that the classical Indian hermeneutical tradition compares a text to a woman. It affirms that because the father has generated a daughter need not mean he is also the best judge of her beauty; the best judge could be her admirer, lover or husband.

The sacred texts need not be interpreted by a small group of its believers; the interpretation is open - ended. In its primary sense all religions belong to humankind as a whole while a particular religion belongs to a limited community of its believers, in its secondary sense. Every religion is considered as addressed to the whole of humanity. Every human being could draw on the heritage of humanity to the extent that it enhances her quest for life and spirituality.

The mystery about which all religions talk is not the possession of any particular religion. It belongs to the entire humanity which participates in that mystery. No religion can claim to exhaust that mystery, and possess it. It is almost a sin to claim for oneself what in reality belongs to all. Believers mean to be witnesses. Believing is witnessing to what one had experienced the mystery. This experience of the witness surpasses the limited reason of herself and her community.

Various experiences of Religion (Creeds, rituals, laws etc.) are not end in themselves but only a means. Even Scripture is only a means to attain the experience of God. Religion is a penultimate reality not the ultimate one. It is futile to compare religions; they are incommensurable. There is a distinction in each religious tradition. No one should place them in a hierarchical order of high and low.

## 2. The Present Scenario

Religious plurality has become a strong and inevitable experience today. Plurality of religious beliefs and practices fills all the spheres and spaces. Equality of all religions is proposed and voiced. It gets momentum and is predominantly discussed. Different religions are obliged to revisit their traditional approaches and take to endless approaches.

It is evident that there is a resurgence and revitalization of religions everywhere. This phenomenon defies the secularization thesis once emphatically prevalent in academic circles, in the activists of social movements and in civil societies and so on. Today ‘a post secular’ or a non-secular *ethos* is on the horizon. Religions are being practiced without taking into account of the secular critique. Religion is considered as a ‘*sui generis*’ reality

There is an increasing interest today, to belong to a religious tradition. The followers identify themselves with it and become vocal or silent representative of a particular tradition. There is a shift towards belonging to a tradition in terms of practice rather than believing a set of doctrines and beliefs.

Religions have the ability to transcend the boundaries set by secular ethos. They have come to be present both congenially and challengingly, in the public sphere, impacting upon the political process. This factor has facilitated the emergence of religious nationalism to capture politics and wielding a hegemonic dominance over different others.

Eurocentric approach that treats religions of the world as other religions is not accepted today. Religious Scholars have begun to speak about world religions. One begins to speak of independent traditions emerging on their own with their own validity in the global world.

Religions are increasingly getting integrated with construction of social, cultural, civilizational, political identities today; social relationships are maintained along religious lines. Religion enters into all the spheres so much that there is a danger of ‘civilization clash’ marked by religious identities.

Conflicts or violence, implicating religion openly or stealthily have increased. Religious intolerance and open acts of terror have multiplied. They have become a gruesome reality. Constant attacks on minorities in majoritarian polities, is a disturbing phenomenon.

All these factors have led Peter Bayer to pronounce that, a performativity rather than functional dimension is the greater need of the hour when one speaks of dialogue between the religions. Today interreligious dialogues are concerned more about concerns of peace, conflict-resolution, and ways of co-existence.

Interreligious dialogues, especially in the Christian circles, were intended to share religious experiences with other people of different

faith. The Church's efforts were guided by theological evaluation of the salvific character of religions in general and of other religions in particular. The church spoke in terms of Exclusivism, inclusivism, parallelism and pluralism and so on, while holding dialogues with other religions. Different theological approaches were used to be pastorally relevant methods of evangelization in an age of increasing religious pluralism.

The church began to understand how the concerns, methods and spaces of interreligious dialogue grew and broadened to embrace everyday-life contexts. Responding to ever-changing contexts of dialogue it has become indispensable for the Church to widen, deepen and broaden the spheres, methods and concerns of dialogue. Prof. Gnana Patrick writes deeply on this topic.

### 3. The Church on dialogue

Thanks to Vatican II, the Church took an audacious move to converse with the people of other faiths. This unthinkable move she activated stunned the believers and provoked them to think positively of other religions. Through her positive approach she has come to realize and respect the unfathomable god-talks found in the sacred books of other religions. She started to absorb the fact that 'God is the common origin and goal of all religions; His providence, goodness and saving designs extend to all men' (*Document on Other Religions* No.1). In recent times the Church clearly stated that 'dialogue with other religions is not intended to convert any of the partners to the other religions. This perception is definitely inspired by the new understanding of dialogue.

It is also suggested that the church should dialogue with other religions since good and holy elements are found in them (Nos.1-2). Document on the word of God affirms 'God has never ceased to take care of human race. For he wishes to give eternal life to all those seek salvation by patience in well doing'.

In the document on the 'Church in the modern world' the emphasis on human dignity and on conscience as the voice of God speaking to each one irrespective of what religion that person may belong to, is significantly seen and expressed. Karl Rahner, one of the revolutionary

theologians of the Vatican time, for the first time, voiced that a genuine seeker of God can be saved in and through his religion.

As the Church grew in its experience of Dialogue it could learn various dispositions and approaches regarding dialogue with other religions. The Church, while taking of its relationship with other religions, says: ‘the relationship is rooted on what binds humans together as one community’. According to *NA.1 (Nostra Aetate)* all people comprise a single community, and have a single origin. One also is their final goal. The Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in all these religions.

Her wise statement on dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions emphatically stresses that she acknowledges, preserves, promotes the spiritual and moral goods found among these men as well as the values in their society and culture (*NA.2*). Dialogue stems from the inner being of the religions themselves. The unity of human in its origin, the final goal and basic religious experience oblige her to embrace dialogue and cooperation.

#### **4. The disposition of the Church**

The church should learn and continuously reform and renew itself through dialogue. Dialogue would become a way of life for the Church. The partners of dialogue should have a spirit of open search for truth with great humility. They must be ready to learn and receive from one another’s traditions and values, experiences and insights. Religious dialogue fosters collaborations and communion for a common cause of humans and the society at large. It demands a deep spirituality of dying to one’s own narrow and selfish outlook in a new surrender to God in response to his will and guidance. This means, the Church must seek the gift of the Holy Spirit to discern its disposition towards others religions. The Church has to remove her superiority complex, and come forward to accept and acknowledge the validity of other religions.

#### **5. Meaning of dialogue and its salient features**

Dialogue facilitates a process designed to elicit, gather, synthesize the collective wisdom of a group of people in answering specific

questions achieving the broadest possible participation and achieving the broadest possible ownership of the resulting decisions.

Dialogue becomes an attitude and activity of committed people coming together to meet and accept each other and collaborate with one another for common ideals in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Dialogue as a way of life, is reciprocal communication between individuals and groups for accepting a common goal. This ought to lead to interpersonal communion and intimate relationship.

Dialogue serves to bring out the truth; to find devices for peace and to inspire strategy for peace. Dialogue entails not only sharing one's own experiences and ideas but also bringing to common action the power and inspiration of one's social commitment for establishment of just and human society. In dialogue four principles are recommended: Examination of other's beliefs, articulation of one's own belief, readiness to learn from others and open criticism with respect to the conception and practices of beliefs. Disagreement may exist but it becomes an asset to the dialogue of reform.

Dialogue incessantly works for justice, life, morality, brotherhood, equality, freedom, love and communion.

## 6. The prerogatives for a successful dialogue

### 6.1 *Religious experience*

'Dialogue takes place on religious experience'. The partners of dialogue share their experiences of God, contemplation, faith, methods of searching for God. Doctrines, dogmas and objectives of their religions come next. The primary aim of dialogue must be mutual enrichment, fruitful cooperation for promoting peace, brotherhood, justice and human dignity.

### 6.2 *Theological insights*

Here the partners share their religious heritage, ideological changes and destinies. They do not fail to discuss their mutual contributions and conflicts. They are ready to deepen and enrich religious experiences and try to solve the problems of evil, suffering and freedom.

### *6.3 Dialogue on life*

Life of the human beings is precious, sacred and invaluable gift from God. They have to be safeguarded and respected. Dialogue should give special attention to the subalterns, the marginalized and those living at the bottom of the society.

Interreligious dialogue should take place taking the life struggles and complications into strong consideration. In Dialogue, everyone is treated equally. Human dignity and self-esteem are to be defended with openness and sincerity. The partners of dialogue should not only protect but also promote life in all the situations.

### *6.4 Collaboration*

Collaboration between religious partners liberates human life from all forms of bondage, consumerism, exploitation and social segregation. It ensures social justice, fraternity, equality. Collaboration is a very useful tool to initiate emancipatory and empowering activities.

Dialogue of social reform propels the partners to eradicate the in-human, exploitative and unjust traditional practices of religions, and to make existing religious beliefs relevant. Reform redesigns itself according to the life situation in the society. Social reform promotes non-discriminative, non-competitive, egalitarian, loving and participatory community. It should move from social service to the field of social justice and human rights. It has to form groups to work for social change. It should actively work for the defence of freedom, defence of the poor from the tyranny of the market. This would give a new impetus to create harmonious and all inclusive communities.

The partners of dialogue should not forget to protect the nature and environment from man-made catastrophe. They enter into dialogue concerning common good, constitution of India, casteless society, pluralism, secularism and religious harmony.

### *6.5 Dialogue of acceptance*

Acceptance paves the way for equality. Here no one is superior or inferior. Acceptance enjoys inclusiveness and shuns exclusiveness. An

ideal dialogue is possible only where there is acceptance, humility to learn and enrich, and to accept failures. Mutual trust and respect is essential for a fruitful dialogue. The inviolability of the individual, his conscience and his dignity are respected here. The partners in dialogue accept the other partners as potential source of truth and revelation.

### *6.6 Knowledge*

Half knowledge is dangerous, says Francis Bacon. Hence dialogue aims at complete understanding of reality due to the differences in partners. They should search for their own roots, tapping the source for discovering new insights. Knowing becomes inner awakening; it guides us for deeper communion with one another. It is evident that we come to know similarity in difference and difference in similarity. Complete openness to the other and total commitment to one's own tradition enhance dialogue in its true sense. Here, conversion is possible, which need not be a shock, rather is a genuine conviction of one's belief which needs appreciation.

Proclamation can only be possible in a spirit of dialogue, and the essential part of dialogue is proclamation. Proclamation and dialogue are in fact, one but not distinct. Dialogue and proclamation should not be seen in words but in action. Religions must initiate to hold common religious worship, orientation, value education and joint protest against communal violence and politics, and joint action against environmental disaster. While they find their roots in their own faith they should come together to identify common issues of the society and environment.

This rootedness and transcendence do not oppose each other for one complements the other. Rootedness helps to re-examine our relatedness to our absolute doctrine, dogma and truth claims of our religions. In the words of Robert Bayer, 'Collaboration engenders a community of love where everybody gets an equal share. In this community of love there is no partiality, nepotism and favouritism'.

### *6.7 Secularism*

The aim of secularism is to allow everything to function effectively and assist in the functional relationship among various sectors of

society. Secular nature of all religions has to be promoted, such as co-existence, tolerance, impartiality, equality and so on. Secularism is the regulatory and reformative principle of any religion on earth. It is opposed to the oppressive, traditional, exploitative and unjust practices of religion. It tries to make them relevant. Its aim is to eradicate all that is evil and embolden all that is good and liberative. It sustains pluralism, freedom, creativity in all religions. Religion formed by secularism is a reformative and wise system for society. It helps to reject the deviations of the magical and superstitious universe of an archaic culture. Meaningless practices are to be revised and new religious models for construction of just and ethical society have to be created. At the same time it can be a threat to contemplative attitude.

### *6.8 Obstacles*

The main factor may be the insufficient knowledge of one's own faith and that of the other faiths. This will have a negative impact on dialogue. Certain religious terms like baptism, conversion, dialogue may not only invite aversion but also incite religious fundamentalism, fanaticism and communalism. Mistrust certainly shatters the aim of dialogue. Attitudes of self-sufficiency and self-defence would spoil the dialogue completely. The hurts and ill-treatment of the past would obstruct fruitful dialogue. Suspecting the motives of dialogue and using dialogue for ulterior motives would not create a healthy atmosphere for dialogue. There are other elements like open and aggressive intolerance towards others due to political and various other reasons, growing materialism, religious indifference, multiplication of sects and so on which would not easily facilitate dialogue.

## **7. The Church in Asia**

The situation in Asia is different especially in India. Religion is very much associated with the life, culture and ethos of Indians. Any impolite word or action would at once provoke or ignite passion and conflicts resulting in violence and disturbs harmony. In Asia, particularly in India many of the people live in sub-human level. Poverty, misery, destitution, dehumanization and injustice are rampant. In the

context of dialogue, the Indian bishops recommend a dialogue of action through “unselfish service to the World”. They have no reluctance in acknowledging the presence of the Divine mystery in manifold forms in other religions. It is their firm conviction that pluralism is to be in no way deplored but acknowledged as itself a divine gift. The Church must make a firm determination to transform the pathetic situations of oppression and de-humanization into a healthy situation where the people live as brothers and sisters enjoying equality and freedom. Since dialogue is intrinsic to the very life of the Church and the essential mode of all evangelization the Church in Asia has to engage herself in the activities of human development and witnessing to justice. The Gospel has to be effective in liberating the poor and the oppressed. Everyone, who hears the voice of the spirit, has to declare and accept that the liberation of man from all forms of evil and restoring him to his pristine glory must be the prime aim of dialogue. In this way the reign of God can be made visible on earth.

## Conclusion

The salient features of Dialogue keep on growing on the horizon of the ecclesial and scholastic circles. To imbibe and follow the spirit of dialogue we need patience, courage, conviction and steadiness when we face opposition and threats. Dialogue involves a lot of risk but it is worth taking because the joy and reward of dialogue excel the pain and humiliation undergone and experienced. May the God of dialogue continue to inspire all who engage themselves in this arduous task, for the survival and the continuation of life depend on it.