

Inter Religious Dialogue & Ecumenism

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Abstract

Trinity itself is dialogical and the constantly engaged in the communication of love. In the other hand the image and likeness of God which the humankind bears with them, has become the gateway for the emerge of different religions, beliefs, rituals and sometimes agnostic and atheistic currents in the modern world. The Church is required under modern definitions of "ecumenism" to engage in conversation with adherents of other religious traditions. Theology and theological education "ought to be taught and done in relation to the people of other faiths, and have to take inter-religious dialogue seriously" if the Church's ecumenical mandate or perception is to minister unity and regrowth to the entire Christian community as well as to set out on a worldwide mission and seek the unity of the entire human race, that is, the entire occupied earth. After that, dialogue becomes a crucial and fundamental component of the Church's mission, which makes it crucial for Christian theology. One of the most important missiological currents of our day is "theology of dialogue," which has gained strong support from the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church alike. Due to this theological understanding, the ecumenical groups have called bilateral and multilateral conferences and established a number of links with African traditionalists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Inter-religious dialogue is not only an ecumenical mandate; it is also an ecumenical praxis too. It paves and facilitates the need of working on employing faith into action, which will in turn widen the earthly liberation of people. It is the Theology for the Church to incarnate among the oppressed. The inter religious dialogue and ecumenism invites people of all faith and beliefs to deepen their personal faiths. All participants in the conversation, identifying as "believers," are encouraged to strengthen their adherence to their faith and to react more sincerely to God's personal call and gift of the Divine Self. Searching for the truth and dialogue as mission are some other urging aspects which need to be addressed in the light of scripture as well as qualities of humanity. In an era where it marks the 59th year of promulgation of II Vatican document on Inter Religious Dialogue; *Nostra Aetate*, the need to redress the Sri Lankan context heavily on the subject and the utilization of the same in its

basic principles. Also it aims to discuss the following specific barriers to interreligious discussion are less significant in ecumenism: hazards associated with Christian relativism, the divisiveness of faith individuality, interreligious brutality, and the "dilution" of religious beliefs. It examines how important ideas from ecumenical experience relate to interreligious dialogue, including identifying suitable dialogue partners, the value of comprehending others, the "purification of memory," ecumenical and interreligious "gift exchange," interpersonal friendship, and shared prayer.

List of Abbreviations

CCC : Catechism of the Catholic Church

NA : Nostra Aetate

LG : Lumen Gentium

RCC : Roman Catholic Church

UR : Unitatis Redintegrato

Jn : John (Gospel)

FABC : The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

EG : Evangelii Gaudiam

PP : Populorum Progression

Introduction

Three persons in One God is in a continuous dialogue of love. Therefore, dialogue and its very nature origins and derives from the Trinity (McEvoy, 2012). In the other hand, the image and likeness inculcated within human have resulted the ever urging desire to seek Godhead. Yet, this desire has out poured in a multiple ways, not restricted to a certain religion, but a has been expressed through a series of rituals and prayers (Armstrong, 2009). Some remains so agnostic¹, while some of them choose to be atheistic². Despite either these stages, in a given point understanding human as a religious creature is not questionable.

“From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’” (Acts 17: 26 -28)

Having such background, the Mother Church teaches us that our innate calling is to enter into dialogue with oneself, one and other as well as with God (CCC No.28). In appreciating the Church’s invitation to engage in dialogue with the followers of other living faiths, it is helpful to recall Pope Paul VI’s four circles of dialogue. This dialogue with other religions or other faiths is the third area or circle of engagement. Some recent Church milestones illustrate the role of dialogue in contemporary Christian living. The Second Vatican Council and recent Popes have affirmed that interreligious dialogue is integral to a comprehensive understanding of the Church’s mission in the contemporary world. This perspective emerges from the Council document *Nostra Aetate* which exhorts Church members to enter into “dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions” and to “recognize, preserve and promote” the “spiritual, moral, and sociocultural values” in these faith traditions (NA 2).

In the light of teachings of the Church, this article tries to promulgate Inter Religious Dialogue under three main aspects ; Dialogue as Ecumenism, Dialogue as the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Dialogue as the Shape of Sri Lankan Theology. These aspects and its practicality intends to re

¹ The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of agnostic is “a person who holds the view that any ultimate reality (such as God) is unknown and probably unknowable,” or “one who is not committed to believing in either the existence or nonexistence of God or a god.”

² A person who does not believe in the existence of a God or any Gods

define the discipleship of Christ. According to David Bosch, the conceptual theological praxis of Church do enlightens the lives of Human kind and allows this light to be taken as the basis to answer the challenges that evolves in recent times.

Before goes into the main subject area of discussion it is worth to refresh the history of inter religious dialogue within the economy of salvation and within the history of the Church. The Old Testament gives a solid foundation on “ *And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* ” (Exodus 19:6), which gives a whole exclusive idea on chosen people of Yahweh and in the other hand the foreigners or sojourners who were not of Israelite community. But this idea cannot be completely facilitated since the same Old Testament preferably give reference to instances where God has chose individuals of other nations as example to people of Yahweh. But when it comes to the New Testament, the fullness of Divine revelation; the incarnation of Word as bewildered the then understanding of “exclusive chosen” concept. In Christ, all dimensions of human kind have been called to salvation (Greggs, 2009).

The inclusive aspect was further understood in the first Christian Church as well as in the teachings of Church Fathers. Justin Martyr’s understanding of *Logos* was a crucial fact that according to Richard Hughes and Gibson and James Edward Beitler III confirm humility as a crucial aspect of communication in their book, *Charitable Writing: Cultivating Virtue through Our Words*, noting, “Humility is the virtue that allows us to see not only our finitude and fallenness but also the goods of our communities. Clement of Alexandria, Origan also engraves that the Eastern religious approach on Spirituality, ascetic practice and silence deepens the understanding of God. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) approached the 'religious others' of his era. His dealing with religious diversity is exemplified through two case studies: his attitude vis-a-vis the Donatists as 'Christian others' and his appreciation of the pagans as illustration of his attitude to the “religious other” ad extra. Augustine's initial invitation for a peaceful dialogue was not accepted by the Donatists. This refusal caused him to accept a by the state organized policy of forced conversions of the Donatists, during which he appropriated Cyprians adage "*salus extra ecclesiam non est.* " He however did not accept the forced conversion of non- Christians to Christianity, as the example of his approach of the pagans clarifies. In theory, Augustine only saw truth and salvation within the one Catholic Church. In concrete life he was tolerant, and was of the opinion that nobody should or even could, be forced to convert.

The middle ages of the Church marks an aggressive approach towards other religions, especially under the crusades. But it is significant to illustrate the works of Francis of Assisi and Nicholas of Cusa. St Francis can rightly be considered the forerunner of inter-religious dialogue because of his meeting with the Moslems in the Middle East, especially with the Sultan of Egypt, Melek el Kamil, in 1219-20 during the 3rd Crusade. After the peace meeting in 1986, Assisi has been called "Prophecy of Peace" (Mizzi, 2006).

“ As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your heart. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness and harmony through your gentleness. For we have been called to this: to heal the wounded, bind up the broken and recall the erring.”

Cusa’s discussion begins with the assertion that all religions worship the same God. One must wonder how a number of modern Christians would take this argument, especially since Cusa extends it beyond the monotheistic faiths to polytheism as well: *“All who have ever worshiped a plurality of gods have presupposed there to be deity.”* And deity, Cusa writes, must be understood as eternal and unchanging perfection. Since all rational persons already believe this, the first duty of interreligious dialogue is to recognize the fundamental identity of the worship and end of religion (Bossoletti, 2014).

The 20th century understanding of Inter Religious dialogue sprung out with the encyclicals promulgated by Leo XIII *Diuturnum illud, Immortale Dei, Libertas praestantissimum, Annum sacrum*, the II Vatican *Nostra Aetate* marks the most outstanding Church conception towards non-Christian religions. It has been further facilitated by the post Vatican encyclicals *Dialogue & Proclamation, Dialogue & Mission*. Thereafter, all social teachings of the Church has addressed the positive idea on Otherness without rigid prejudice compared to middle ages of the Church.

Inter Religious Dialogue as Ecumenism

Pope John XXIII said that the unity of the Church was the “compelling motive” for his calling of the Second Vatican Council. When he spoke at the opening of the Council, he made it clear that he regarded the unity of Christians as a major concern of the Catholic Church: *“The Catholic Church considers it her duty to work actively so that there may be fulfilled the great mystery of that unity which Jesus Christ invoked with fervent prayer from his heavenly Father on the eve of*

his sacrifice.” To advance his vision of ecumenism, John XXIII established the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity in 1960. Later on, Saint John Paul II penned an entire encyclical on ecumenism (*Ut Unum Sint* - 1995). His Holiness explained that it is very evident that the effort for Christian unity known as ecumenism is not merely a "appendix" to the Church's customary activities. Rather, ecumenism must permeate all she is and does since it is an inherent part of her life and work. In fact, ecumenical discourse is a component of the modern Church's revitalized mission.

The Council rejected the view that the Church of Christ is to be identified solely with the Roman Catholic Church which is Roman, with its implication that other Christians have no part in Christ's Church. The Council Fathers spoke of the Church of Christ as subsisting in the Roman church.

“This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structures” (LG 8).

The implication is that all those elements that Christ willed for his Church are to be found in the RCC, but nevertheless Christ's Church cannot be totally identified with the RCC alone. Also, this does not imply that the RCC and her members always fully live and use these gifts to their best effect. The Council was trying to balance the tendency to identify the one Church only with the Catholic Church. *“That unity which Christ bestowed on His Church subsists in the Catholic Church, as something she can never lose” (UR 4).* Yet, although this gift is found in the Church, often *“its members fail to live”* by this ideal (UR 4). *“The Church, embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal” (Lumen Gentium 8).* She is *simul justus et peccatur* (both holy and sinful); her self-understanding is an *ecclesia semper reformanda* (Church always needing reform and renewal).

This is a realistic description of the Church and her members. What is the relationship between the RCC and other Churches? It is true that there are "splits in the garment of Christ," but this does not imply that it has broken apart into several parts. In order to achieve the unity that Christ intended for his Church, restoration of unity must be seen as the RCC's convergence with other Christian churches as common gifts are found in both our own and other churches (Jn. 17:21). Clearly, the Council is asserting that the Catholic Church does not exclusively possess all the

Lord's gifts: "many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside its visible structure. These elements [Baptism, Eucharist, Scripture, faith, Holy Spirit, grace, deeds of Christian charity, prayer], as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity" (LG 8). We Christians really are in a fraternal relationship. These other Christian communities are validly termed: churches, communities and ecclesial communities (UR 3, 4, 22 in several places). There is a question on why? They validly possess (at different levels) those elements which make the baptized a church, "and the Catholic Church embraces them as brothers, with respect and affection. For people who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect. All who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ's body and have a right to be called Christian" (UR 3). This section could be concluded with reference to the Theological opinion raised by Cardinal Casid at the 08th People and Regional International Conference, where he states that when the evil identifies all followers of Christ as one singular reality, it is meaningless to be separated among the communities regarding the matters that could be amicably and by active exchange of theological opinions be resolved. It is because when reality of Christ is being accepted as faith under a common fatherhood, then it unapologetically becomes dialogical spectrum of faith.

A Potential Theology of the Oppressed

The Bible reveals a God who hears the cries of the oppressed and loves to bring deliverance. The mission of God sets an agenda for the Church. In our preaching, prayer and worship we need to recover an integrated vision of the gospel as a message of liberation 'from every kind of oppression'. Church should not be a cozy retreat from the world, an insulated spiritual bubble containing privatized piety. Instead, churches ought to pray for the spiritual and material needs of the world, and educate and empower their members to tackle injustice. Church following the foot steps of Christ, is in a continued effort to open up to the challenges and provide an answer to crisisgenic situations of human existence similarly to the very nature of any Asian religion (Locklin, 2006). The entire Old testamental social praxis has been based on "The Lord shall reign forever and ever." (Exodus 15:18), where not only Jews but a variety of people were called to serve the intention of God despite their religiosity neither the exclusive approach that seem to be highlighted

through the concept of Covenant people.³ These characters walked an extra mile beyond the Israelite religious frame into the first creation – the original nature where peace and equity existed. The social exodus that a community experiences is the life giving blood that nourishes the heart of religion, explains Phillip Gibbs.

This same idea has to be bore in mind and lived when it comes to the point of understanding Inter religious dialogue as a potential Theology of the oppressed. The need of redressing the contextual issues that exist in a third world ; the reality of poverty, curtailment of rights, freedom and justice shall be a call for all religions to united for the humanity and its dignity is a key component in this regard (Patterson, 2007). This common religious approach is in a way portraits the shades of the Theology of Accomplishment that produce a Public Theology. Although the term itself is contested, Elaine Graham (2013) has provided a working definition of public theology as ‘the study of the public relevance of religious thought and practice’. Sebastian Kim has defined the role of public theologians as ‘Christians engaging in dialogue with those outside church circles on various issues of common interest’ so that Christians may contribute ‘to the formation of personal decisions and collective policy-making in economic, political, religious, and social realms’. In other words, theologians ‘go public’ (or become socially-engaged public intellectuals) when they attempt to enhance public discourse by demonstrating the relevance of theological literacy regarding matters of societal interest in a widely accessible way that gains a hearing beyond the Church and academy. Thus, public theology seeks to overturn conventional assumptions such as: that there is a distinct separation between the Church and the rest of society; or that society is a pathological ‘bundle of social sinfulness’ in need of redemption; or that the Church is insulated from critique by possessing some ‘immutable and transcendent truth’. This is the dialogue of action. It is he realization of “ Your Kingdom come; Your will be done” (fitzgeralds & Borelli).

Inter religious dialogue being the Theology of the oppressed is in a way re defines peace in a constantly developing world; Development, the new name of peace. A leading Theologian Hans Kung explains it as follows :

³ Non Israelite daughter of Pharaoh (Exodus 2:6-10), Hebrew Midwives (Exodus 1: 15-22), Jethro the Midian (Exodus 3:1), Ruth

“one cannot expect peace among states or countries where there is no peace among religions. Peace among religion does not exist when there is no dialogue among religion. Therefore, to give birth to dialogue among religions, a platform must be provided for the exchange of religious opinions.”

Peace does not refer to no-war context or appear on behalf for a balance of material power (PP, No.75), it is the fulfilment of “*Abad*”⁴; serving human that accomplishes the fullness of worship. It is the spirit of non-acquisitiveness or the renunciation of mammon (Peiris, 2009). Pope Francis speaks out that “Evangelization and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another” (EG 251), further believes that “Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities” (EG 250).

Shape of Interreligious Dialogue in the Sri Lankan Context

The religious framework of Sri Lanka has been established being biased to the mainstream Buddhism and Christianity being treated as the invading and colonizing party’s deploy (Rev. Fr. Quere). All time religious renaissance had an enmity among each other rather than dialogical approach to know the other (Stirrat, 1992). Even though a vast majority of Sri Lankan context has been influenced by Christianity, still it is an omnipotent event which is still absent among the people of the land for a certain extend.

Christ was an Asian (FABC Prayer for Asia, 1978). It paves the way towards not only for dialogue of religions, but also towards a Theology of Sri Lanka. As FABC explains “ *a church incarnate in a people, is a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life- realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own.* ”

Addressing the Sri Lankan theology of dialogue, the poverty and multicultural elements has to be accepted. The church need to free herself from the European governing mentality in order to

⁴ “Abad,” which translates to serve or work, emphasizes the call for humans to actively participate in the divine order. This is highlighted in Genesis 2:15, where it is stated, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

answer the questions raised from such environment (Tombs, 1997). This could be imaged in Christ's baptism at river Jordan, when Jesus became one like us, emptying willingly with divinity and sharing the reality of religiously poor and little. This was the means of delivering one from material slavery. Concept of *Anawim* ; that expresses any kind of poverty, the weak, the neglected, those who own nothing and therefore means nothing for others is what word of God became and shared equal with us.

The need to develop an open platform of academia to enter into deep religious conversations with the other, especially the need of producing experts in the subject would further evolve the minimalizing of non respect for otherness and religious extremism.it highlight the fact that each and every religious participant has to be transparent and open to dialogue that does not been influenced by any hidden motives. It is the overcoming of interreligious brutality, and the "dilution" of religious beliefs. Quoting Hans Kung once again, "*how could it be possible to expect a success or at least bare minimal existence of dialogue when one intrinsically intends to believe that the other partner ends up in hell?*" (Smith, 2007). The reinstatement of *Missionary Animation team* and *Secretariat for Ecumenism and Dialogue* could facilitate the adherence of regional level activities on Inter Religious Dialogue to be promptly conveyed and practically carried out at national level.

The need to promote a Theology of reconciliation amongst fellow Sri Lankan is another keenly felt urgency at hand. The dialogical love is the basis of novelty in universality. The liturgical and Theological language need to be refurbished accordingly to mitigate the prejudicial approaches that may occur towards other religions. Paulo Fiere explains that where there is no love born to the world or to the man, then it is unpredictable that inter religious dialogue be born. Similarly, Kevin Quigley in his article *The Challenges of Inter Religious Dialogue* further elaborate this idea as follows :

" dialogue cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and recreation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. It is thus necessarily the task of responsible subject and cannot exist in a relation of domination... because love is an act of courage not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause.. and this commitment is because loving is dialogical."

As a final comment, the politicization of religions need to be freed at the earliest most possible. It has marginalized the true commitment towards the needy. Religiosity and popular religious cultures have imprisoned and hindered the spirituality. Inter religious dialogue has now become an optional – extra. The European manifestations of evil has encroached the spiritual realm by initiating trends like Believing without Belonging, consummate throwing – away culture etc. the same political manifestos have encouraged the generalization of extremist character upon the majority of innocents. The success of inter religious dialogue lies where it is freed from the bonds of material concepts.

Conclusion

The future of interreligious dialogue is manifold thanks to the many different people and initiatives involved in it. If it were not for the various churches, religious institutions, and faith-based organizations, interreligious dialogue would not be what it is today. It is clear that inter religious dialogue does not simply means the in –group Christians just communicating with out – group religions. It is the sole acceptance of otherness of the brother. Understanding the Word / *Logos* in the Asian religious surrounding, daily events of human life is an untouched area of theology of faiths. The liberation from worldly experiences that exodus the people to deepening their own faith, while understanding the otherness in a positive and inclusive sense is the aim of this entire process. Especially, in the root of Asian truth where it lies the poverty and multicultural elements, the church's pastoral approach should be *Ecclesia Discerns* but not *Ecclesia Docens*.

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