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THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

The article spells out some of the leading aspects of Indian theology on other religious traditions, based on the lived experience of these religions and in the light of the Bible. The article shows how there is an alternate way of looking at other religions and living Christian mission in a pluralistic world, centred on the inexhaustible Mystery of God, the common origin and destiny of all (NA 1).

As the continuation of God's mission manifested in Jesus Christ the church is missionary in its very being irrespective of the location of its existence. That mission is to be exercised in its living reality as Jesus himself did. As far as the church in India is concerned, that reality, though not exclusively, is that of the many poor, in a wider sense, and the many religious traditions. Consequently it is only to be expected that the theology of the Indian church is characteristically influenced by the presence of these religious traditions and by its relation to them in its mission. Significantly, the Indian church is the only local church in the world that has lived in ongoing dialogue with the followers of other religions all through its existence from apostolic times to this day. This paper is an attempt to underline some of the salient hues of Indian Christian reflections on other religious traditions.

Before the Portuguese Arrival

Christian awareness of religious pluralism is not something new but goes back to the earliest days of Christian inception. However, the New Testament generally does not speak about other religions since the Christian community in apostolic times did not identify itself as a religion but as a sect within Judaism, as it proclaimed Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic promises, in the light of the

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there is hardly any difference between Christians and others in the quality of life. Normally all have similar religious practices like prayers, visits to the temple, mosque or church, feasts, fasting, pilgrimages, charitable practices, and so on. Practically all have their own scriptures as well as the faith in a Transcendent Power. Some scholars have shown how faith in one God originated with Zoroastrianism that permeated Babylon which in turn had its impact on the Jews during their exile, after which the Jews developed strict monotheism. Further, all genuine adherents of different religious traditions lead a morally upright life. Hence it should not come as a surprise to anyone that the statement of the Plenary Council of India, Bangalore 1960, was the first official recognition by the Catholic church, in modern times, of the positive value of other religions when it declared: “We acknowledge indeed that there is truth and goodness outside the Christian religion, for God has not left the nations without a witness to Himself, and the human soul is naturally drawn towards the one true God.” Already in 1913 an Anglican missionary working in India tried to explain Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Hinduism, anticipating the modern fulfillment theory which is the dominant position among many Catholics even to this day.

**The Inexhaustible Divine Mystery**

Indian openness to plurality is ingrained in the Indian church’s understanding of the divine mystery, in contrast to the western understanding of God. For the western church, under the impact of Greek culture and philosophy, God has uniquely revealed God’s self in the Bible and thus the fullest knowledge of God is considered as an exclusive privilege of the biblical tradition. Aware of how their co-religionists in India have been praying from time immemorial, “From the unreal lead me to the Real, from darkness lead me to the Light, from death lead me to immortality” (Brahadaranyaka Upanisad 1.3.28), Indian Christians understand the Divine as an inexhaustible ocean into which many rivers flow or as an immense mountain to which many roads lead. The rivers and roads are compared to different religions, none of which can claim the monopoly of the Reality or can have an exhaustive grasp of the Reality. The Indian Theological

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Association expressed this relationship of the supreme Mystery and the many religions: "Every religion is unique and through this uniqueness, religions enrich one another. In their specificity, they manifest different faces of that supreme Mystery which is never exhausted. In their diversity, they enable us to experience the richness of the One more profoundly."  

This is not a question of syncretism, or passive relativity, as it is generally understood, rather it is the humility in front of the inexhaustible divine Reality that cannot fully be captured by any human instrumentality, despite divine inspiration. Indian Christians do not compromise their faith in Jesus Christ as the only mediation between God and humans, in so far as he is the Incarnation of the Divine Word, through whom God creates and enlightens all human beings (Jn 1:1-18:9). But this does not lead to any exclusivism, as the Indian Theologians reminds us, "Since Christ is experienced as one who denies himself on the cross in his unconditional surrender to the Father, this theology of religions gives us the vision and courage to transcend the inherent limitations of God's self-communication through Jesus Christ. We, therefore, do not claim any kind of ultimacy for any of the articulations of our own faith-experience nor do we deny the role of such statements in the course of history of a lived faith." Having insisted that religion is an articulation of spirituality, S. Peinuth holds that "every religion evolves out of an intense experience of encounter between the divine and the humans."  

Asian Epistemology

Along with the understanding of the Mystery goes also the Asian epistemology that works not so much on the principle of contradiction as on the principle of relationship. Whereas the principle of contradiction advocates separation and isolation, the principle of relationship places one in a web of relationship with others as the mark of meaning. The principle of contradiction emphasizes that a thing has to be what it is, it cannot be at the same time A and non-A. The meaning of A is derived from the fact of its being in opposition to others. Hence there is room for uniqueness, in so far as what one is, the other is not. The Christian understanding of God and revelation is considered to be unique in so far as others do not have that revelation and that understanding of God. Christian identity is defined in terms of negation to others concerning what Christianity alone is.  

In contrast to this approach Indian epistemology understands the meaning of a thing by relating it with others. Meaning is derived from the relationship, by reaching out and identifying with others. In this sense being and non-being are the characteristics of the Ultimate Reality. Sat (being) and asat (non-being) are the qualities of the unknowable Brahman. Reality cannot be conceived in terms of either-or but both-and. In this framework Indian Christians cannot be indifferent to the followers of other religions, and even less negate their religious value. What one has experienced is touching the person in that person's totality at the deepest roots. It is something specific and cannot be traded with others. Thus, Indian Christians are open to religious pluralism with an attitude of acceptance of all religions. Commitment to one's faith implies also respect for others leading to inter-relationship.  

Non-Biblical Scriptures

In the light of what has been said the post-Vatican Indian church has taken an interest in the non-biblical scriptures "in proposing that the sacred scriptures of other religions are, in some form or other, carriers of the Word of God to humanity and have significance for the Christian community too," as pointed out by G. Gispert-Sauch. Prompted also by the rich content and inspirational character of other religious Scriptures, like the Bhagavad Gita, Quran, Guru Granth Sahib and others, the Indian church conducted a research seminar on inspiration in Non-Biblical Scriptures in December 1974. The seminar argued that just as there is an internal connection between the church and inspiration, in so far as it is the church that fixes the canon under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also because the books of the bible came about within the community of believers and for the

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6 Parapally, Theologizing in Context, 168.
7 S. Peinuth, We are Co-Players, Delhi: ISPCK, 2006, 25.
community (n. 25) and in so far as the Scriptures are the "objectification" of the faith experience of the community (n. 12), and since the church is an open community, i.e., moving towards the formation of a new wider community as wide as God's economy of salvation (n. 13), the Christian community can speak meaningfully of the inspiration of the Scriptures of other religions (n. 13). These scriptures are to be seen not as dead letter, but as leading the followers of the religion concerned to God. For this we need to have an inside approach to these Scriptures, in the context of the experiential dialogue between the Scriptures and the believers. The differences between them and the Bible need not be an obstacle, rather can be seen as complementarity in the face of the unfathomable mystery of God, mutually enriching to the followers of the respective religions and to us Christians, and they point to the ground and goal beyond (n. 14). All Scriptures are historically conditioned and hence none can contain the entirety of Divine self-manifestation. They are the product of human instrumentality and thus limited. Since the Spirit of God is present and active in every experience of God and these Scriptures are sources of divine experience, the action of the Spirit cannot be denied and they cannot be taken merely as human word (n. 15).

In the light of these reflections Catholics became more open to the use of non-Biblical Scriptures for para-liturgical and devotional practices. Some justified even the substitution of the first reading in the Mass from the Old Testament, when there are three readings, with texts from these Scriptures, which was banned by the Magisterium.

Revelation and Faith

A theme associated with inspiration and non-biblical scriptures is the understanding of revelation and its relation to faith as it has bearing on our understanding of other religions. Vatican I had described revelation primarily in terms of communicating supernatural truths inaccessible to natural reason, and faith was the acceptance of the revealed truth. Since the Bible was taken to be the body of revealed Truth and the church its custodian, other religions had no share in it. However, Vatican II offered a personalistic understanding of revelation and faith leading to salvation in the light of modern biblical research and the findings of theology. Dei Verbum presents revelation as God's self-gift to humans to make them share in the divine life. It is God's life-giving encounter with humans. Dei Verbum 2 shows how God in God's goodness and wisdom chose to reveal the God-self and to make known to humans the hidden purpose of God's will. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity. Then in number 3 Dei Verbum asserts that creation is revelation in deed, and continues: "to make known the way of heavenly salvation, He went further and from the start manifested Himself to our first parents. ... He ceaselessly kept the human race in His care, in order to give eternal life to those who perseveringly do good in search of salvation (cf. Rom 2:6-7)." This revelation is salvific when humans surrender to the revealing God wholeheartedly as Abraham did and this total surrender is what faith is. In Hebrews 10, the author of the letter spells out with different examples, how faith is surrender to God. Similarly St. Paul in Galatians 3:2 reminds us how faith is not just a matter of assent to the Law but surrender to God. This takes us to a further step in our understanding of other religions: to the extent they become instrumental to their followers to make a total surrender to God they are not devoid of divine revelation. Though the salvific dimension of the death of Jesus on the cross need not be discarded, especially since it enables us to transcend self-centeredness to other-centeredness, salvation is available to all who search sincerely to do God's will.

In this context it has to be said that the traditional salvation-centred sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross as the only source of the salvation of humankind completely bypasses what Jesus himself said about salvation, responding to the lawyer (Lk 10:25-28; Mt 12:34-40; Mk 12:28-31). Jesus adheres to the Old Testament with regard to the means of salvation: Loving God with an undivided heart (Deut 6:5) and the neighbour as oneself (Lev 19:18), spelling it out with the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) and the application of it given in the context of the final judgement (Mt 25:30-46). A clear interpretation of these texts in the spirit of the four gospels can make a radical difference to the whole Christian soteriology and mission theology with direct consequences for the theology of religions. The only newness that Jesus introduced to the Law was in the demand of loving the neighbour as Jesus did (Jn 15:12-14), to the extent of giving one's life for others. Interestingly it is in association with this text that Jesus presents himself as the way to the Father (Jn 15:6). The core of the Matthean Sermon on the

Mount (5:1-7:29) and the Lucan Sermon at the plane (6:17-7:1) is Jesus’ teaching on the law of love, whereby the community of the disciples becomes the salt and light to the world.

There has been a struggle among Indian theologians to be faithful to the biblical revelation and to be open to religious pluralism. In doing this some have insisted on the centrality of God while others stress the Word or the Spirit. Thus Michael Amaladass speaks of the same Spirit and the many Gods of different religions. Others would focus on the Word as the only Saviour. To a large extent, I am inclined to suggest that this is a semantic question since a closer examination of the Bible will show that the biblical emphasis is not on any one, God—Word—Spirit, separately, but on God acting through God’s Word in God’s Spirit. However, this is not to say that the Bible is obstinately insisting on a Trinitarian theology that the church developed in the course of time. The biblical perspective is total universality with the underlying one God. This is the very first assertion of the Bible that begins with the creation narrative as the work of God through God’s Word in God’s Spirit (Gen 1:1). We may not compartmentalize divine action as that of the Spirit or of the Word, but must realize the underlying unity of the divine action. This is said only to highlight, along with Vatican II, how all peoples “have a common single origin, since God made the whole race of people ... One also is their final goal: God” (NA 1).

**Sacred History**

Unlike the bifocal view of world history as history of salvation and secular history, retrieving the biblical spirit, the Indian church is increasingly interpreting history as one, in which humans realize their salific encounter with the Divine who acts in history. The whole history is a salvation history as we have in the Bible. Since the time of creation, God has not distanced God’s self from creation, rather is continuously present in it and guides it and is involved in the history of every people. Hence prophet Amos reminds the Israelites whose root-metaphor was the exodus experience, that they are like the Ethiopians to God, who has brought Israel out of Egypt, even as he brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir (Amos 9:7). God’s reign is happening in history whenever and wherever people try to follow God’s will in their lives. In this process the church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, by rendering visibility and tangibility to what happened in Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Son, by his constant search to do the will of the Father, through its service of love and compassion especially to the poor and the marginalized (Lk 4:16-19).

Looking from this perspective there is no room for asking if other religions are only facts out there or if they have also a right to be there, in other words existing with their own rights as part of the divine plan. Living in the midst of cultures and religions that have sought God incessantly and in the context of many Christians finding the ways of prayer and meditation existing in them very conducive to God-experience, Indian Christians are not very much impressed by that sort of distinctions. Practically all Indian theologians today would see religious pluralism as part of the divine plan, though there was a time when many of them subscribed to a sort of fulfilment position, i.e., these religions are seeking fulfilment in Jesus Christ. What the late D. S. Amalorpavadas wrote could be said to be representative of the prevailing thought: “The religions of the world and all that is religious, we may say, are in a state of vocation to salvation; they implicitly yearn for Christ to have their meaning and fulfillment; they tend towards Christ like the rest of the historical movement; they constitute an ensemble to be purified and transformed by the ferment of the gospel; they fall within the universal sovereignty of God.”

One of the earliest to reflect on other religions in modern times was Raymond Panikkar. Basing himself on the biblical affirmation, “God in the fullness of time sent his only Son” (Gal 4:4; Eph 1:10), Panikkar observed how Christ has an historical and trans-historical primacy, as the focal point of creation. This is the cornerstone of all his later theology of religions like Christ the Crown of Hinduism and the rest, centred on Jesus Christ who, however, has to be seen from his historic and ontic existence. Though the two are not separate persons there is a distinction in so far as the historic, limited as it is, does not exhaust the trans-historic dimension. In the trans-historic ontic dimension Jesus Christ is present in all religions. Christ as the unique Son of God “is not only the ontological goal of Hinduism but also its true insipier and his grace is the leading, though hidden, force pushing it towards its full disclosure. He is the Product’ that spoke to men and was already at work before Abraham.”

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14 D. S. Amalorpavadas, Approaches in Our Apostolate Among the Followers of Other Religions, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1976, 33.

expresses it all with a single clause: "Whatever God does ad extra there Christ is at work." In Panikkar's perspective Christ belongs to God and as such belongs to the whole humanity. The whole created existence is nothing but a Christophany.

In recent times increasingly Indian theologians are taking a more positive approach to other religions without their being ordained to find fulfilment in Christ. Michael Amaladoss writes: "Our experience is that we see God active in the hearts and in the communities of other believers. We know that God relates to us in a particular manner through our religion, its myths, narratives and rituals. We know that God is relating to others too, not only without the mediation of these myths, narratives and rituals, but through other myths, narratives and rituals." Here we have a more independent validity linked to the religions of the world based on God's activity through sources linked to them, without any reference to a fulfilment in Christ, or some sort of relationship to the church, and rightly so because that kind of paternalistic assessment of them is one-sided and has not done any service, except perhaps the soothing of Christian arrogance. As we have already seen, according to the Bible they are also recipients of divine revelation through creation and through the enlightenment through the Word.

The last point requires to be elaborated further, for two reasons. In so far as all religions are human responses to the divine revelation through the Word (creation and the enlightenment), and Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of the same Word, there is no point in saying that other religions are to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. On the other hand the Pre-existent Word as such is not Christ, but becomes Christ through his Incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection (Acts 2:22-36). Therefore, theologically it is incorrect to speak of a cosmic Christ who is present in all humans through his creative and enlightening process. For the same reason Christians are not justified in imposing an identity of "anonymous Christians" on the followers of other religions, though we can still affirm that the Mystery of the Pre-existent Word who is operative in all humans and who became Incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth is the only mediation between humans and God. It may be added however, that since the name Word, in Sanskrit Vac, is cultural and since we cannot explain fully

the Reality, it may be better to speak of the Mystery, through which God reaches out to all humans, in the context of religious pluralism. In this we can take a clue from St. Paul who speaks of the Mystery made known in Christ (Eph 1:9; 3:11; Rom 16:25). The tag "Christian" is given only to the followers of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ (Acts 11:26) and they belong not just to one among many religions, but they have a special service to render to the world as the salt, light and leaven to the world, the mission mandate given to the community in the Matthean gospel (Mt 5:13-15), through their efforts of bringing the blessings of the Kingdom to the poor, to those who mourn, to the voiceless and those who struggle after righteousness (Mt 5:1-11) by following him in his ministry.

However, all religions have their own specificity and role and every religion despite its limitations and human fragilities, can become the means of salvation to its committed followers. Every religion, as Felix Wilfred has underlined, is based "on the unfathomable character of Divine mystery with its innumerable facets, each of which deserves respect and attention. There is a mystique and spirituality behind the acceptance of the legitimacy of diversity."

At a descriptive level Semitic religions, as Sebastian Painadath has pointed out, "tend to emphasize the interpersonal relationship between the human person/community and God; the religions of the Indian origin and of the Chinese origin tend to stress the transpersonal experience of the absolute reality." Similarly religions of Semitic origin, rooted as they are in the personal vocation of a prophet, uphold ethical values, while the Indian and Chinese religions, with their enlightenment experience, lay stress on the introspective elements of a mystical spirituality. While the former group present the divine as the absolute thou, for the latter the Absolute is the intimate I (self). Taking these differences in the spirit of complementarity, Indian Christians have no difficulty in adopting Eastern forms of prayer or contemplation, as part of the divine expressions in other religions.

18 Ibid., 138.
19 Raymond Panikkar, Relation of Christians to Their Non-Christian Surroundings: Indian Ecstatical Studies (July-October 1965); 310.
21 Painadath, We are Co-Pilgrims, 19.
Mission Not Directed to Non-Christians as Such

Indian reflection on other religions is not a mere intellectual curiosity forming part of the academic industry, but dovetails into the church's engagement in its mission. The positive insights about other religions are not excuses for escapism from mission, but an invitation to collaborate with others in the realization of the church's mission of serving as the sacrament of the Kingdom (LG 5, AG 1). The Indian church's experiential knowledge of other religious traditions compels it "to consider other religions also as paths leading to salvation and join hands with them to journey together towards the final goal," as opposed to a self-imposed isolation from others considering itself to be the only true religion, or making others only the targets of its mission. Following the Gospel demand of serving as the salt, light and leaven in all cultures, the Indian church is aware of the need to have ecclesial communities in all cultures (Mt 28:19), though ecclesial mission cannot be identified with giving rise to new communities alone. The only absolute in the church's mission, Paul VI has shown, is the Kingdom, making everything else relative (Evangelii Nuntiandi 8).

An immediate consequence of what we have been saying is a radical reassessment of the understanding of mission ad gentes. The phrase ad gentes, though originally used to mean "all nations" has gained a coinage to replace the former "missions" and "foreign missions" with the meaning of geographical areas of the people of other faiths, mostly identified with former colonies. Mission must no longer be directed against the followers of other religions but against non-kingdom situations. The missionary "frontier" is not any longer between the Christian world and geographical areas of other faiths but lies somewhere between the prevalence of the kingdom and the absence of it, which can be anywhere in the world, ultimately it is in the human heart. It is a mission without frontiers determined by culture, religion, or geography. In the light of what we have seen mission is becoming sal terrae, salt of the earth. With its transforming impetus, it has an extroverted dynamism though the community remains a "little flock" (Lk 12:32). An important means of exercising this mission is interreligious dialogue aimed at the conversion of the non-kingdom tendencies and situations into the realization of the Kingdom, both for the church and for other religions.


Concluding Remarks

This article has not painted the entire spectrum of Indian theology of religions, but some of the leading perspectives of the same, emphasizing the experiential aspect of it and in relation to the mission of the church. Its implications can affect the entire range of theology and Christian discipleship and not just the outlook to the followers of other religious traditions. The whole question of election, salvation, Christ-event, the absoluteness of Christ and of the church, all will have to be interpreted and understood in the light of the Christian understanding of other religious traditions and their role in the divine plan. As the Indian theologians asserted, "an authentically dialogical theology of religions will necessarily affect the whole of our theology as it naturally raises radical questions concerning our beliefs and the way we have articulated them." What Indian theologians are trying to show is that there is an alternate way of living Christian life and its mission in a religiously pluralistic world, without looking at other religions as opposed to Christianity or as false or preparatory religions and trying to convert them, but seeing them as part of the divine plan and revelation and thus valid in their own way and thus allow them space in the Christian worldview, based not on abstract reasoning but on the daily experience and the Bible. The credibility of Christianity consists not in claims and condemnations but in the Kingdom lifestyle it leads and inspires.

Abstracts

Dieser Artikel beschreibt einige wesentliche Denkansätze der indischen Theologie in Bezug auf andere religiöse Traditionen, auf der Basis der alltäglichen Erfahrung dieser Religionen und im Licht der Bibel. Er will damit aufzeigen, dass es zur üblichen Beurteilung der nichtchristlichen Religionen und der Ausübung der christlichen Mission in einer religiösen pluralistischen Welt eine Alternative gibt, die grundlegend ist im unergründlichen Geheimnis Gottes, der der gemeinsame Ursprung und das gemeinsame Ziel aller Völker ist (NA 1).

Cet article décline quelques-uns des aspects majeurs de la théologie indienne concernant les autres traditions religieuses, à partir de l'expérience vécue de ces religions et à la lumière de la Bible. L'article montre comment il existe une manière alternative de considérer les autres religions et de vivre la mission chrétienne dans un monde pluraliste, centrée sur le Mystère inépuisable de Dieu, origine et destinée commune de tous (NA 1).

Este artículo describe algunos de los aspectos centrales de la teología de la India referente a otras tradiciones religiosas que se basan en la experiencia vital de estas religiones y se realizan bajo la luz de la Biblia. El artículo muestra cómo existe una manera alternativa de mirar otras religiones y de vivir la misión cristiana en un mundo pluralista, que se centra en el misterio insondable de Dios como el origen común y destino de todos (NA 1).