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Many Religions Offer Salvation
Jacob Kavunkal

The ever growing globalization process with its built-in mechanisms of information dissemination and mass people movement as well as the post-colonial self-assertiveness of the religions of the world, including what are described as primal religions, have brought a new awareness of the reality of religious pluralism, making it "difficult to believe," as Claude Geffre reminds us, "that any specific culture or religious tradition could justifiably claim to be universal and exclusive." 449

The religious landscape of the world at large has undergone rapid changes due to people movement triggered by many causes. Religious pluralism as such is not new to Christianity as it encountered other religions right from its inception and in some parts of the world like India Christianity existed all through its history in interaction with the followers of other religious traditions. What is new is the fresh ways of thinking about religious pluralism, which is not just tolerance or isolation, but the awareness of each religion's right to exist with an equal right to respect for its claims. 450

In contrast to the past, today any reflection on Christian mission has to be in relation also to the need of a harmonious society, where all can live alongside people of other faiths. The gracious ways of treating others cannot be ignored in our reflection on Christian mission. This does not imply we adopt a practical pluralism with a 'live and let live' ideology. A Christian cannot abandon the Christian call

450 Even in this respect the Indian church, the St. Thomas Christians, have always, until the arrival of the Portuguese, been open to the followers of the way, a position that was condemned by the so-called synod of Diamper. See Mundadan, A.M., Pefha of Indian Theology, Bangalore 1996, 38.
to follow Jesus as he/she is sent as Jesus himself was sent by God (Jn 20:21). Hence this paper analyses the specific Christian service in the context of religious pluralism. Due to the key role salvation and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ played in Christian mission, the paper will begin by examining the biblical understanding of salvation, to be followed by a presentation of the biblical realism of creation that becomes a source of revelation, bestowing a “supernatural” character to all religions. Together they will show the centrality of the Mystery of the Word, the only mediation between God and humans. This prepares the ground for the Christian witnessing in a multi-religious world.

Biblical Perspective of Salvation

Christian mission in the past was understood nearly always as saving people by bringing them into the church. The salvation itself was understood as something related to life after death, accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, as Marcus Borg has pointed out, salvation, in the Bible, is seldom about an afterlife; rather, it is transformation this side of death.451 In the Bible the word salvation occurs about 127 times, but rarely does it mean an afterlife.452 It is liberation from chaos and bondage. In the books of Genesis or Exodus we hardly come across the idea of salvation as otherworldly. Life after death, especially the idea of resurrection appears in the Bible only after the Babylonian exile, because of which it could be said that the biblical faith in resurrection was influenced by Zoroastrianism that was the religion of the Babylonians; Zoroastrianism believed in resurrection.

Salvation, in the Bible, implies freedom from economic bondage, liberation from political bondage as well as liberation from religious bondage. The Lord saved Israel (Ex 14:30). Salvation is return from exile. “Israel is saved by the Lord with everlasting salvation” (Is 45:17). Cyrus, the Persian emperor who liberated Israel from the Babylonian captivity, is called messiah (the anointed) in Isaiah (45:1). In the Psalms where salvation occurs frequently, salvation means: rescue, deliverance from the pit, and similar ideas (Ps 27:1; 51:12; 85:5; 99:29; 118:21 and others). In contrast, in the book of Daniel, we find explicit reference to life after death (12:2-3).

In the New Testament too we come across similar ideas. The very announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom, the Messianic salvation, is accompanied by healings and casting out of demons. It is also a new kind of life, a new relationship with God and neighbour (Lk 18:8-9). Salvation is political as well, transformation of the city where humans live together (Lk 19:28-44).

The crucifixion of Jesus is associated with political salvation, that is leading, not to domination and tyranny but, to service and love (Mk 10:42-45). As opposed to the Anselmian interpretation of the substitutionary atonement, Jesus in his predictions about his death does not indicate at all that he is going to Jerusalem in order to die for the sins of the world, rather that he will be killed by the authorities.453 Marcus Borg insists that the use of the term “ransom” in Mk 10:45 is to be situated in the context of liberation from slavery: the price to be paid to liberate the bonded. In fact, Jesus speaks of his death in conjunction with the raising from the dead, showing God’s role in it for the sake of the people.454

Biblical Perspective of Religions

Admittedly, the Bible does not indulge in developing a theology of religions but it does provide enough orientations for us to acknowledge religions. As far as the traditional Christian understanding of other religions is concerned, there is one word that has been so much “housed” “nature”. As Christina Peppard has reminded us there is need for us to “denature nature”.455 “Nature is a historically constructed idea whose meaning is affected by dynamics of power, privilege, and patriarchy,” observes Elizabeth Johnson.456 Nowhere is this true

452. Cf. ibid., 39.
453. Cf. ibid., 79. Interestingly, responding to his lawyer’s question as to what is to be done to inherit eternal life (Lk 10:25), Jesus refers only to the law of love and no mention is made of his death. Similarly, when Zaccheus has repented of his wrongdoings, he is assured of salvation, again, without any references to the atoning death.
as the Christian theology of other religions through its distinction of nature and revelation, forgetting that the fact that in the Bible what we call nature is suffused with the Word and Spirit of God (Gen 1:1-31).

What we call nature is creation and that makes a theological difference. The whole creation is the result of "God acting through the two hands of God,"467 the Word and the Spirit. The language of creation, Johnson reminds us, is "pervaded with the absolute presence of the living God who empowers its advance in the beginning, continuing now, and moving into the future."468 Similarly Walter Kasper has argued: "Through the presence and action of the Holy Spirit creation already always has a supernatural finality and character."469

The biblical wisdom literature reaffirms what has been said in the Genesis' narrative of creation. Biblical scholarship has shown the importance of the figure of personified wisdom particularly in the books of Job, Proverbs, Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon.470 Wisdom is closely associated with God's work of creation, and is present with God at creation as a skilled co-worker (Prov 8:30; Wis 7:22, 8:6). It pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:24). Wisdom "reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other and orders all things well" (Wis 8:1).

Wisdom is presented in the image of a woman, lady wisdom, whose primary mode is relational (Prov 1:8-9; Sir 1:9-10; Wis 6:11-12). No aspect of reality is closed off from her. She exists as it were in a tapestry of connected threads, patterned into an intricate whole of which she is the centre.471

The first nine chapters of Proverbs give a series of poems in which Lady Wisdom looms large. God created Wisdom as the first born (8:22). Wisdom has come from the mouth of God (Sir 24:3) and has a sway over all nations. She comes to the earth like mist, as the breath of God covers the waters (Sir 24:3-7). God has placed God's eye (alam) in every human being (Sir 17:8). Roland Murphy summarizes wisdom as "a divine communication: God's communication, extension of self, to human beings. And that is no small insight the biblical wisdom literature bequeaths to us."472

Jesus Wisdom Incarnate

The early Christian community identified Jesus with wisdom463, identifying Jesus with wisdom's care for the orphans, the household of all creation. "It was this identification between Jesus and Sophia that was to be the bridge whereby the community which believed that God had raised up Jesus of Nazareth came to see this Jesus as the pre-existent one", observes Dennis Edwards.464

In this the Christian thinking was influenced by Philo of Alexandria (c. 50 BCE – c. 50 CE) who made use of the Greek concept of the logos, introduced by Heraclitus as the principle of continuity in the world of continuous change and later used by Plato as the immanent and transcendent mind of God, as an intermediary between God and humans, as the agent of creation and through which humans understand God. No doubt, Philo was influenced by the Old Testament Wisdom literature that we described earlier. As Francois Bovon has shown, the Hebrew God of history tends to become the Lord of space and world, becoming more distant and more transcendent. To restore the balance, the Septuagint Jews of Alexandria made use of the Greek concepts of Sophia (wisdom), Logos (word) and others, as intermediary which occurs in the supplementary to the Hebrew bible, the Sapiential books, where these appear as personal beings.465 Though the personality and pre-existence of the logos are not very clear in Philo, for him logos is God's instrument in creation.466

Scripture scholar Bruce Vawter has noted that the oldest Christology may well be the one based on these wisdom categories.467

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467 Ismaeus, Advatns, Herreini, IV, 20.1.
468 Johnson, Elisabeth, op. cit., 5.
472 Murphy, Roland, op. cit., 7.
473 Cf. Col 1:15-20; Eph 2:14-16; Phil 2:6-11; 1 Cor 1:24; 2:18-22; 1 Th 1:1-18 and others.
474 Edwards, Denis, Jesus the Wisdom of God, New York 1995, 34.
These early hymns express the early church’s faith in Jesus Christ risen from the dead and identified him with the wisdom of God, and thus attributes to him a cosmic role in creation and salvation. This all-pervading activity of the Logos prompted St. Augustine to recommend that the first five verses of the Johannine prologue be written in gold and displayed in the most prominent places in every church. This has profound significance for today’s Christian search for acknowledging, preserving and promoting the value of other religions, in the context of the church’s faith in Jesus Christ.

The Centrality of the Mystery of the Word

Christology lies at the core of Christian theology and Christian mission. A committed Christian cannot water down his/her faith in Jesus as the centre of Christian living. What we are trying to do is only to make our commitment to Jesus Christ ever more relevant and meaningful in a multi-religious world. Our reflection of Jesus Christ and his mission must include the horizon of our readers as well.

Though faith in Jesus Christ originates from the particular Jewish background through the hope for the promised Messiah, the bible opens up the horizon to extend the mystery of Jesus Christ to all peoples in so far as Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the divine wisdom as narrated by the wisdom literature and the Johannine prologue. Raymond Brown is of the view that John subordinated Sophia with Logos because the latter is masculine while Sophia is feminine.

Though the pre-existence of Jesus Christ is not absent in the synoptic gospels, only John describes the activity of the pre-existent Word that became Jesus of Nazareth. The Word that became incarnate in Jesus was God and was with God from the beginning. With the use of the imperfect en (was), throughout verses 1 and 2, John brings out the timelessness of the activity of both God and the Word which are described thereafter. The salvific activity of God in the Word is an eternal one, preceding even creation.

No doubt, the focus of the prologue is the advent of the pre-existent Logos, Vak in Indian tradition, into the world at a certain moment of time. But at the same time it asserts the universality of the work of the Logos. The world is Word-permeated, as everything was made through him (Jn 1:3). The Word is the source of life and this life is the light that enlightens every human being coming into the world (1:4-5, 9). This describes the revelatory character of the Word.

No wonder Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, Dei Verbum number 4 says how “the Word that enlightens all human beings” was sent by God and “Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, ... Moreover, He confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed: that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life.” Through this Dei Verbum upholds the existence of divine revelation from the time of creation through the Mystery of the Pre-existent Word.

From what has been said it follows that just as there is only one God, regardless of whatever name that God is addressed, that God reaches to humans only through one mystery, which Christian tradition identifies as the Person of Jesus Christ. What is important is the reality and not the name. The names, logos, vak, wisdom, word, and others, are cultural.

On the other hand the reality itself is beyond human grasp. John P. Meier has shown how we cannot know the total reality of Jesus of Nazareth with all his thoughts, words, deeds, feelings, etc., but only the historical Jesus who is a scientific reconstruction based on the gospels and other available sources. If so, how much less do we know the Word. Hence it is better to refer to the mystery of the Word. Mystery was used by St. Paul in his letters (Eph 1:19; Rom 16:25; Col 126 et al). More significantly, mystery would be acceptable to the followers of other religions as well.

This mystery is the only one mediation in which all human beings participate. All religions are the social and historical expressions of the human response to the divine revelation through the creation and

446 Col 1:15-20; Eph 2:14-16; Phil 2:5-11; 1 Cor 1:24; 3:18-22; Jn 1:1-18 and others.
449 The use of the definite article in the Greek original gives the possibility of drawing a distinction between the divinity of the Word and the Absolute divinity of God.

enlightening of the Word (Jn 1:4, 9). Hence it is incorrect to distinguish apriori between revealed and natural religions, though as human responses, religions can be mixed with limitations as well.

Despite the revealing activity of the Word from the beginning, due to the personal character of the divine dealing, this revelation ultimately takes on a human character. The entire ministry of Jesus was rendering visibility, tangibility and concreteness to the divine love. So much so, time and again, people exclaimed how the power of God was manifested in him (Mk 2:12). Jesus himself, in the Johannine gospel, towards the end of his ministry asserts that those who have seen him have seen the Father (12:45; 14:9). Hence, Pope Francis, quoting his predecessor, asserts: "Being a Christian is not the result of an aesthetic choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a new decisive direction." 474

Before we continue to discuss the Christian service in the multireligious context, we have to bear in mind how the heart of the mission of the incarnate Word, was inaugurating the divine reign, according to the Synoptics, 475 and manifesting God, according to the fourth gospel. At a deeper level there is no disjunction between the two: even the fourth gospel emphasizes how the manifestation of God is a matter of deeds of light (Jn 3:16-21), for "he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God" (Jn 3:21).

Though Jesus is the Word incarnate, in the gospels we do not come across this Jesus engaged in the Word, pre-existent (Jn 1:1-5; 9-10), but in "going about doing good" (Peter's summary of Jesus ministry, Acts 10:38), and thereby inaugurating the divine reign and manifesting God. Thus, he is the path, halakha, (Jn 14:6-7) and the community of his disciples is called to follow him (Mt 4:19; Mk 1:17; Lk 5:11; Jn 1:37 and par) and it is sent out as he himself was sent by God (Jn 20:21) to be his witnesses (Lk 24:48).


474 Commenting on Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom, Lois Tverberg writes: "To a Jewish audience, to proclaim the kingdom of God was to make a shocking announcement that God's promised Messiah had arrived, because the task of the Messiah was to establish God's kingdom on earth." Tverberg, Lois, Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus, Grand Rapids 2012, 27. Similarly Marcus J. Borg writes: "Mark affirms at the beginning of his gospel (Mark 1:1) that Jesus is the Messiah, the hope-for and longed-for savior of Israel. This good news is the story of Jesus the Messiah." Borg, Marcus J., Meeting Jesus in Mark, London 2011, 20.

Christian witness

The incarnate Word is God's reaching out to the humans and in his life and ministry he invites the disciples to live more and more in this life of relationship and communion, bringing life to the full, the realization of the kingdom. The mission of the church is then to focus on the Word incarnate and follow him rather than developing doctrines and claims to set itself apart from the followers of other religious traditions. It implies, as Pope Francis has underlined, going out of self, "reaching out to others and seeking their good" (EG 9).

The first step in our service is that we Christians refrain from making claims that intimidate the followers of other religious traditions, distancing them from us. We have to abstain from theological positions germinating mistrust, hatred or conflict. Our soteriological theories are not for proving Christian superiority, but to be true to God's plan as we have in the bible, that we become a 'blessing to the nations' (Gen 12:1-3). Not only Asian religions have discounted the Christian claims of exclusiveness but even indigenous thinkers in the west too have done the same. George Tinkler, American-Indian theologian, has argued how soteriological exclusivism was used to justify European colonial expansion. It was "used to justify a western supremacist agenda whereby universal truth claims such as the idea that salvation can only be obtained through Christ, were used to reinforce 'amer-european Christian triumphalism'." 476

Our call is not for making judgements on others and their faith or to ask if their right to exist is only de facto or also de jure. We have to move away from claims of our uniqueness and superiority and return to those aspects of mission that go back to Jesus — loving to the extent of losing oneself; serving solely as an expression of love; forgiving as the manifestation of the divine quality; working for the kingdom of God on earth.

While we uphold the unity and universality of the Mystery of Christ in the divine plan for human salvation, we have, equally, to be open to the role of other religious traditions in the same divine plan. This was demonstrated by Pope John Paul II at Assisi in October 1986. The Pope, quoting Nostra Aetate, assured the assembled leaders of...
world’s religious traditions: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions” (NA 2). As Claude Geffre has pointed out, “We cannot reduce the vast history of salvation to the cursory sequence that coincides with the history of Israel and of the church.” 476

As long as the followers of any religion try to submit themselves to the will of the Supreme, perceived through the creative and enlightening activity of the Mystery of the Word, they are all part of God’s people. Hence it is questionable if we Christians can monopolize the right to be called ‘the people’ of God, unless we understand it in the same way as many tribes and nations do, considering themselves to be at the centre of the world. Nor should we maintain any hope that they will find their fulfilment in the church. Christianity, along with them, pilgrimages towards the final fulfilment and fullness of salvation (1Cor 15:28), at the eschatological times, “like a pilgrim in a foreign land” (LG 8).

We have a common origin and a common destiny with the followers of other religions (NA 1) which demands that we do not stereotype other religions, attributing to them “ambiguities” or their having only “a ray of hope.” Ambiguities are part of all religions due to the human liminality. Other religions are “institutional shapes” 477 due to God’s working in them through God’s creative and enlightening Word and through God’s Spirit. Consequently we have to overcome the theological habit of seeing only “a seed of the Word” working in other religions rather than God’s working in them. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India’s response to the Working Document of the Asian Synod 1998 was inspired by this vision. The Bishops asserted: “Salvation is seen as being channelled to them not in spite of but through and in their socio-cultural religious traditions. We cannot, then, deny a priori a salvific role for these non-Christian religions.” 478 God united God-self with humanity at least six million years ago when human beings are believed to have evolved from primates. 479


Such a Christian faith will generate confidence in the followers of other religious traditions paving the way for recognizing each other’s identity and enabling Christians to enter into dialogue with them as required by Vatican II (NA 2), as a major step towards the realization of the divine reign.

Interreligious Dialogue

The post-Vatican II Magisterium has uniformly been dedicated to the cause of fostering dialogue with the followers of the religious traditions of the world that was initiated by John XXIII whose advocacy for the Jews led to the evolution of the Council’s Declaration on the church’s relation to other religious traditions, Nostra Aetate. Already in 1964 Pope Paul VI set the tone for interreligious dialogue not only through his first encyclical Ecclesiam Suam but also by his counsel to the leaders of different religions whom he met at Bombay in December 1964: “We must come together with our hearts, in mutual understanding, esteem and love. We must meet not merely as tourists, but as pilgrims who set out to find God.” 480

Continuing this spirit, John Paul II made use of every opportunity to promote dialogue among religions. We have already referred to his initiative in bringing the religious leaders together in Assisi in 1986. In his encyclical on mission, Redemptoris Missio, the Pope acknowledged how “inter religious dialogue is a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission ad gentes; indeed it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions” (RM 55).

Despite the Roman curia’s concern for proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only Saviour in Asia, in the post Asian Synod Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in Asia, the Pope pointed out that proclamation in Asia has to be in the spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence existing in Asia, and that proclamation in Asia has to be through Asia’s own spirit of harmony and complementarity (EA 6).

The millennial Apostolic Letter, Novo Millennio Ineunte spoke of the great challenge of interreligious dialogue to which the Church must be committed in the new millennium for, “In the climate of increased
cultural and religious pluralism, which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread spectre of those wars of religion which have so often blooded human history" (n 55).

Pope Francis too attaches great significance to inter religious dialogue. In his Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium the Pope outlined interreligious dialogue as a necessary condition for peace in the world, and presented it as the duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. Quoting the Indian bishops the Pope wrote, dialogue "is a matter of "being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows. In this way we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking and speaking." (n 250)

As Pope Francis reminds us, we are "missionary disciples" (EG120) and this implies that we reach out to the followers of other religions not as raw material for our mission, but as collaborators in realizing the divine reign. Lumen Gentium 1 describes the church as the sacrament of union with God and the unity of all humans. The very Christian identity is to be seen in its two-fold relationship to God and humans, manifesting God's own self-reaching out to humans as the biblical narrative shows. This becomes the motive for the realization of the prophetic words of Cardinal Bea, a key architect of Nostra Aetate, at the promulgation of the decree: "The Declaration on the Non-Christian Religions is indeed an important and promising beginning, yet no more than the beginning of a long and demanding way towards the arduous goal of a humanity whose members feel themselves truly to be of the same Father in heaven and act in this conviction.461

Discipleship does not adopt a "one among the-many" attitude, but the call to follow the Word Incarnate in his mission of realizing the divine reign that includes giving rise to communities of disciples where such communities are not existing (Mt 28:19-20). However, in the context of religious pluralism that we have analysed theologically, it is a call to dialogue. As John Paul II wrote to Cardinal Casaly on the occasion of the XIII International Meeting of People and Religion,


"We must all be bolder on this journey, so that the men and woman of our world, to whatever people or belief they belong, can discover that they are children of the one God and brothers and sisters to one another."462 As Pope Francis has reminded us, our call is not to proselytize, but respect others' beliefs and thus we can inspire others through our Christian witness so that we grow together through communication.463

Inter religious dialogue is not just for creating a harmonious civil society, but for the realization of the reign of God. Pope Paul VI has taught how Christian witnessing is not just a question of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographical areas, but "affecting and as it were upsetting through the power of the Gospel, humankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (Evangelii Nuntiandi 19). Christian witnessing through interreligious dialogue includes a process of changing life patterns that are in contrast with the values of the Kingdom, which in contemporary context no particular religion can hope to accomplish, but would require the collaboration of all people of good will.

By quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 as a sort of programmatic summary of the ministry of Jesus (Lk 4:16-19), the Lucan gospel presents the salvation that Jesus proclaimed as the content of the Kingdom that he inaugurated and it includes sight to the blind, the ability to walk for the lame, and liberty to all those who were bound in any way. Interreligious dialogue, to the extent it contributes to the realization of the Kingdom, is the realization of salvation as well. Dialogue among the followers of religions must lead to a dialogue with the poor, with the oppressed and the exploited, enabling them to experience the arrival of the acceptable year of the Lord. Hence, authors like Wayne Morris remind us how interreligious dialogue must lead us "to struggle with those who live under oppression, irrespective of their faith commitments to transform it."464

463 Pope Francis, "Interview with the Editor", Argentinian weekly Viva, 27 July 2014, 14.
Conclusion

In summary, we need a fresh approach with regard to other religions in our thinking, seeing, feeling, talking and living: a thinking that is formulated in the light of the bible, a feeling that participates in God's feeling, seeing things from the contemporary perspectives and acting and living in collaboration with the followers of other religious traditions. It is the personalization of the divine presence (shekinah) through the community of the disciples of the Word Incarnate.

Through this dialogue practice the Christian community becomes the sal terrae (salt of the earth), in the spirit of the beatitudes (Mt 5:2-15), while it remains a "little flock" (Lk 12:32). Christian mission is no longer directed against the followers of other religious traditions, but against non-kingdom situations. The "frontier" of Christian witnessing lies, not between the Christian world and other faiths, but 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.