

Interreligious Relations: Past, Present and Future

(A Personal Case-Study Illustrative of Christian View-Point)

As one who has involved himself in interreligious dialogues for years, I may be justified in making an analysis of the past and the present with a view to finding certain orientations to the future. I would like to make this analysis through making a case-study of my own life-journey. For, I see clearly that the different phases I have gone through in my personal life is illustrative of the phases which the Church also has traversed in so far as her relationship with other religions is concerned.

In so far as the past relation of Christianity with other religions is concerned, one may definitely say that there are two clear-cut stages in it: (a) A Phase of *Isolation* and (b) A Phase of *Interaction*. The present phase of Christianity's relation with other religions may be designated as (c) The Stage of *Integration*. This way of identifying the present stage is certainly true in my case. And I wish it is true also in my Church as a whole. It is from here that I draw certain principles which in my opinion are pre-requisites for strengthening the bonds of interrelationships of religions in the future. Thus there are distinguishable stages of Interreligious relationships: Isolation, Interaction, Integration leading to Interrelationship. I will try to explain each of these phases as it has happened in my personal life to illustrate my religion's relation with other religions.

1. The Past Phase of Isolation

The village I hail from is surrounded by many Hindu villages. Even adjacent to my village there is a big village populated only by Hindus. There was just a broad road separating my village from theirs. Yet it was sufficient for our ancestors to develop a distinctly Christian identity for our small village. It consisted of only Christian houses all arranged together in four rows with the Church as the focal point. As the Church was dedicated to St. Michael; my village was named after him and as such it was and is distinctly known as Michealpatinam.

There used to be daily mass early in the morning at 5 O' Clock. People would attend it in large numbers. There used to be in the church common prayers recited in the evening which we, the children were expected to attend without fail. Many older people also would participate in the community prayers. On Sundays and feast days invariably there was Benediction. Our parents were very strict in inculcating in us the value of participating in these practices of the Church. I remember that my father once beat me severely for indulging in street-games at the time of a prayer-service in the Church. He even branded me with a red-hot iron piece. Besides the community prayers in the Church, we used to say Rosary at home. All the family members would recite it together every day just before dinner. The Church bells would go three times a day as a reminder for people to pray. At the very first stroke of the bell, people would stand still, refraining from any work, and recite the Angelus prayer. Thus the whole village was vibrant with a specifically Christian atmosphere.

Sociologically, however, our village was very well connected with the Hindu neighbours all around us. We used to get labourers on daily wages from other villages. Some of our poor people also would go as labourers to the Hindu neighbours. Most of the people from Hindu neighbours would gather around Tea-shops in our village and spend time in gossiping. Our relationship with our Hindu neighbours was so intimate that it was lasting for generations. Those whom my grandfather used to address as '*thambi*' or '*anna*' (younger or elder brother) were called by my father as '*chithappa*' or '*periyappa*', and we in turn used to address them as '*chinna thatha*' or '*periya thatha*'. In the same way, those whom my father used to address his Hindu friends as '*anna*' or '*thambi*' were addressed by us as '*periyappa*' or '*chithappa*'. The speciality of these different terms is that they indicate a specific blood-relation. Unlike the English word 'uncle', used both with reference to strangers as well as blood-relatives, the Tamil language makes use of specific terms to indicate blood relation as against the polite ways of calling strangers. Here the terms '*chithappa*' '*periyappa*' are used only to indicate the blood brothers of one's father. It is precisely these terms that have been used to indicate our relationship with our Hindu neighbours. It means that the bond of friendship that existed between my parents with their Hindu neighbours was so close that it almost

bordered on blood relationships. They shared their joys and sorrows with us just as we did ours with them. No special function will be held in our family circles without their active participation. Similarly we used to join their family-celebrations like weddings or funerals as actively as their own family members.

Despite this type of close relationship at the social level, our village enjoyed a 'splendid isolation' insofar as religious matters were concerned. The reason, I believe, was a particular world-view of the Church at that time. We were taught by the clergy that our faith was supreme and true, and that Hindus' faith was diabolic. We worshipped the true God while they were idolaters. In fact we were told by our parents that their temples were all abodes of satanic power so much so that we would not even dare go near a Hindu temple. Our form of worship was sublime but theirs was crude. The very fact that we were baptised was an assurance for us to go to heaven. However, it was not at all certain that even the best of Hindus would go to heaven by all means. If at all they go they might go because of God's special act of grace and mercy, but not because of their religious faith. Our religious practices were the best while theirs were satanic. Our morality was noble but theirs was a turpitude.

Later when I had an opportunity to undergo priestly formation, I did all the spiritual exercises prescribed to seminarians with a sense of commitment. As soon as I got up, I devoutly recited morning prayers. After brushing teeth, I would do the meditation for half an hour, then, participate in the Eucharist with full emotional involvement. Before lunch, I spent some time in spiritual reading and made examination of conscience. Then in the evening, I would say my daily rosary and also recite the formal evening prayers. Finally before going to bed, I would make another examination of conscience. Besides, there were many spiritual exercises like the weekly Confessions and the monthly Recollections, annual Retreats all of which I followed as seriously as one could. In fact the Annual Report about me by the Rector of the Seminary would invariably contain one statement year after year: "a sincere seminarian". When I had to leave the Seminary for reasons of ill-health, everybody on the Faculty as well as the students-community was unhappy. They all felt that the Church was losing a promising

clergyman. However, how shallow was my spirituality I realized only years later when I came into contact with a highly spiritual person, my Research-Guide Professor K.J. Shah. It is this phase I would like to call *Interaction*.

2. The Phase of Interaction

Already during my childhood I had come across certain Hindus who were known for their uprightness of character, equanimity of soul, great sense of justice, utter detachment to material comforts. Obviously this fact of experience was contrary to the belief upheld by Christianity then, viz. that nobody would be saved except through the Church. I used to wonder whether those Hindus who were living outside the boundaries of the Church would be denied of salvation which Christianity promises. However, it remained no more than a query that arose out of curiosity.

The problem became acute when I pursued my research on Interreligious Dialogue in a secular university, under the guidance of a non-Christian professor. Here was a person who was well known not merely for his vast knowledge and profound thought but also for uprightness of character, legendary simplicity and nobility, and genuine integrity of soul. He was a banya by caste. His brothers were managing their commercial enterprises in Mumbai. But a committed professor as he was, he never got himself involved in those affairs. All his concerns were only centred on scholarship, cutting new grounds in Philosophy. He was a rich person through inheritance. But he was legendarily so simple in his lifestyle that he was a living exemplar of aparigraha (non-possession). He appeared to me a real model of being poor in spirit. He was so detached to position or power. When he was on his duty-leave, one of his colleagues would act as Head of the Department. He was so wicked that he was indulging in even taking some actions that were detrimental to my Professor, the actual Head. Yet, my Professor would never bother about it. Even as students we were, we used to ask him to take stringent action against his unjust colleague. But he would calmly retort to us: "How could one waste time in tackling these petty issues with a person of wicked temperament?" Here I found in him a concrete illustration of what Jesus prescribes to his disciples: "Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you" (Mt 5:39).

Above all, the different types of vows he would take of and on struck me much. All of a sudden he would abstain himself from ghee which is an essential item for a vegetarian meal. This he would continue for nearly a month. If you ask him the reason, he would just say: "For fun". At a later period of time, he would just take a few *chappathis*, abstaining from rice totally. This also would go on for a month or so. On certain occasions, he would totally refrain from taking tea and coffee too for a month or two. When we asked him, he would simply say that he was doing it just for fun. Only later I came to know that it was all his measures of disciplining himself. "Otherwise there is a danger of one becoming an addict even to ordinary things like tea and coffee or any one item of our meals" he said.

The more I came to know Professor K.J. Shah, the deeper I realized the meaning of spirituality. Till then I had believed that a spiritual person is one who involves oneself in various spiritual exercises. In fact if I had sincerely followed all the spiritual exercises of my seminary life (nearly eight years), it was only because I wanted to become genuinely a spiritual person. But I don't think I had ever integrated those pious exercises with other dimensions of life.

One day I might have made a good meditation on the virtue of detachment. That very day, within a few moments after the meditation on detachment, as I was approaching the refectory for breakfast, if I smelt the *Poories* were being served at the table, I would be the first person to rush to the refectory, because I like them very much. Worse still, I would grab as many *poories* as possible, and dump them into my plate, I would have gone to a lonely place and ate them all, unmindful of whether all other members of the community would get them for breakfast. It was not I alone that would be doing it. Nearly all my fellow-seminarians would indulge in such a practice that it became an accepted pattern of behaviour. So much so that those who were deprived of breakfast that day would rush to the refectory in greater speed the following day.

All this did not seem wrong to me at that time. As I was coming to know Professor K.J. Shah more and more, I began to wonder what impact a meditation on detachment had made on me or on my fellow-seminarians.

Likewise, I used to reflect upon the impact the regular churchy behaviour-pattern made on the specifically Christian-fellowmen of my village. They were all so keen on putting into practice the spiritual exercises of the Church's prescription. But all their devotions were confined to the Church-premises only. I did not perceive any tangible change in their day to day life on account of their pious practices. My villagers were all as quarrelsome as my Hindu neighbours. They were equally possessive, deceitful, loathsome, lethargic, etc. as anybody else. All this was not be explained in terms of personal weakness of people, or the gap that always exists between the ideal and the actual. I would go beyond it and see the reason elsewhere.

The main reason was that there was a dichotomous world-view underlying the Church's approach to life. It was clearly a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Spirituality meant for us, the Christians, to believe in the uniqueness of certain truths like the historicity of Christ's Resurrection, the Atonement theory etc., and to do certain practices prescribed by the Church viz. getting baptism in the Church, going to Church on Sundays and participating in the Eucharist. Once we had fulfilled the Church obligations, we felt we were free to do what we want, what our reason dictates according to its whims and fancies in the realms of the secular, be it political, commercial, emotional, cultural and even the erotic level. Perhaps it is this sort of dichotomy that explains the fact that the so-called Christendom was responsible for the numerous wars like the Crusades, the great World-Wars, Inquisition etc.

In contrast to that type of approach I learned from my Professor that spirituality is no spirituality unless it penetrates and changes all other dimensions of life. This I learnt not through formal lessons from him, but through *the dialogue of life*. The fact I spent four years of intimate discipleship with him, enabled me to imbibe the values he cherished and the world-view he held. Thus I consider that my close interaction with Professor K.J. Shah's family was crucial not only to my own spiritual growth but even to a new way of understanding of my faith, which I would like to call the phase of *Interaction*.

3. The Phase of Integration

My interaction with Professor K.J. Shah enabled me to grasp where I had failed in my spirituality. I had laid much emphasis on holding on to certain doctrines of my religion and following certain religious practices rather than integrating them with my life and thereby growing in greater holiness. In me there was a certain dichotomy between my beliefs and practices on the one hand and my life as a whole. Instead of the beliefs and practices influencing and changing my life, they remained in one compartment as it were, and I was leading my life according to my emotional vagaries and temperamental whims and fancies without much reference to my religious beliefs I held and religious practices I followed.

In the course of my research I realized that my failure to integrate was not due to personal weakness of an individual but to the distortion of message by the religious community itself. Specially as I began to take Mahatma Gandhi's rejoinders with the Missionaries of those days seriously, I came to realise that my Church as a whole was suffering from a dichotomy between its beliefs and its life-style. It preached about Jesus the crucified, who vindicated the truth about Him by non-violence and voluntary suffering. However, the life style of the Church was clearly pompous and triumphalistic. It openly advocated violence and force for establishing truth. The Crusades and the Inquisition are but two well-known examples. The so-called Christian countries believed in the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. But, never did they even dare to put them into practice in politics. Rather, they conveniently shelved them as "good counsels for individual perfection but not practical enough in politics".

It is perhaps this dichotomous approach that was one of the factors that led the Church to emphasise uniqueness to its beliefs. This in turn made Western Christianity to assume a sort of superiority to itself as compared with other religions which did not advocate the beliefs. Thus Western Christianity was keen on confronting other religions and converting their followers into its fold. The Church in the past was anxious to conquer other religions rather than collaborate with them.

Thus I found two levels of dichotomy: first, at the *intra-religious level*, the dichotomy was between the belief-system it held and the life-pattern it advocated; or, between ritual practices like the Eucharist and the life-style of its people. Secondly, at the *interreligious level*, the dichotomy arose as a sequel to affirmation of uniqueness of its beliefs or practices. The Church affirmed that it alone was the true religion while all other religions were either false or partially true. This realization about the double dichotomy dawned upon me only when Prof.K.J.Shah initiated me to take Mahatma Gandhi seriously as a thinker on religion. Gandhi was a person who had imbibed the Sermon on the Mount so thoroughly that he made it the life-norm of perfection. So much so it affected his life in all its dimensions : social, economic and political. May be this gave him an authority to challenge the Missionaries of his times regarding their dichotomous approach to life as well as their confrontational approach towards other religions. Salvation is not merely a matter of belief or a particular practice, however unique it may be. It is primarily a way of life, resulting in a state of Perfection, Attainment, Transcendence, or Realization, he emphasised.

The message of Jesus is contained in his Sermon on the Mount as a whole. unadulterated and taken as a whole.... The message, to my mind, has suffered distortion in the West. Much of what passes as Christianity is negation of the Sermon on the Mount. And, please, mark my words! I am not, at present, speaking of Christian conduct. I am speaking of the Christian belief, of Christianity as it is understood in the West. (A.T.H. pp. 53-54)

Gandhi was well aware that although one is at every moment of ones life trying to live up to one's profession, one's conduct falls short of those professions. So far from criticising the Missionaries' conduct he placed before them his fundamental difficulties about Christianity itself. Similarly, he disputed the claim the Christianity was the only true religion, though he agreed that it was also a true religion:.

Why do you think that the truth lies only in believing in Jesus as you do?.... God is not encased in a safe to be approached only through a little hole in it, but that He is

open to be approached through billions of opening by those who are humble and pure of heart. I invite you to step down from your pinnacle where you have left room for none but yourself (ATH. p.71)

Stimulated by such challenges made by Mahatma Gandhi as well as K.J. Shah, I became more and more convinced that the core of my faith could not really be a particular belief or practice alone. I also became convinced that salvation could not be prerogative of my religion alone. It cannot be a matter of just 'belonging to' a religion or 'holding on' to a particular belief or practice that makes a person spiritual. Rather, it is the life of transformation brought about by a religion, or a religious belief or practice that constitutes the essence of spirituality. However, a committed Christian as I was, I could not accept my own findings of my reserach unless I dug out my Sources and found out my own Scriptural evidence that validated my findings. Thanks be to God, I did find them too. Just to mention a few :

Not everyone who call me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do. When Judgement Day comes many will say to me 'Lord, Lord! In your name we spoke God's message, by your name we drove out many demons and performed many miracles!. Then I will say to them, 'I never knew you; Get away from me, you wicked people (Mt 7:21-23)

In conjunction with the statement affirmed above, if one takes the Final Judgement Narrative (Mt.25:31-46) one will find that the Master himself gives importance to deeds rather than profession of any belief or practice.

Similarly, I found a lot of support from the Gospels for recognising *the fact of the existence of saints* in boundaries other than my own. When the Apostles reported to the Master that they asked a man to stop driving out demons in his name, because he *did not belong to their group*, Jesus thells them: "Do not try to stop him, because whoever is not against you is for you" (Lk. 9:49-50). Indirectly, Jesus condemns those of the priestly class who were too keen on converting people from

other religions thus: How terrible for you teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convert, and when you succeed, you make him twice as deserving of going to hell as yourselves are" (Mt.23:15) I was very happy to find that the Documents of Vatican Council II as well as the Post-Conciliar Documents give enormous support to interreligious dialogue.

Based upon such evidences from my own Sources, I could clearly affirm that a life of transformation is indeed the pivot of genuine spirituality or the core of religious faith, rather than the claim of uniqueness to any belief or doctrine or ritual. Thereby I was also enabled to reconcile the dichotomy that existed at three levels: Firstly, at my personal life I am making a genuine effort to bridge the gap between my belief and my life. Secondly, I would like to convince my fellow believers that the core of our faith does not consist so much in ascribing to my religion certain points of uniqueness as translating those claims into concrete life-style of people. (In this respect, I found that the so called problem of how to maintain uniqueness of Jesus Christ or of the Church in our dialogue is no more a problem to be solved but rather it is dissolved). Thus, I was able to establish integration between my beliefs and practices within my religion. Finally, I was able to integrate my religion with other religions. Stressing on uniqueness of a belief or a practice only divides religions. But emphasising a particular life of uniqueness gives me room for religions to dialogue with one another and even to collaborate among themselves. That is why I would like to call the present stage of Hindu-Christian dialogu as a stage of *Integration*.

4. Pre-requisites of Interrelationship

It is indeed heartening to see that the Church as well as most other Churches have entered into dialogue with other religions right earnestly. But for the encouragement from the official teachings of the Church, I don't think people would have involved themselves in interreligious dialogue. However, I think it is not sufficient merely to have good will to enter into dialogue with other religions. On the contrary the dialogue-partners must accept certain common parameters, as prerequisites of their dialogue process. Then only they would have paved a strong basis for lasting interrelationship. The most important ones may be mentioned here.

(1) Primary of Life-Transformation

Religions owe their origin to a transformed life in the great Seers or Founders, and are meant to transform the life of millions of people. All the religious beliefs, doctrines, rituals and practices are oriented to this one goal. They derive their meaning only in the context of the transformation they are able to bring about in people's life. God will ask not how one labels oneself but what one is. For him deed is everything. Belief without deed is nothing. So also, worship and all other practices must be geared to transformation of life. If that does not happen, then the meaning and purpose of rituals and doctrines is lost. Whatever uniqueness one may ascribe to a belief or a rite or practice is pointless unless it leads one to transform one's life.

(2) No Monopoly of Truth by any religion

If life-transformation is central to religions, and if transformed life is found in every religion, then they all contain Truth. Actually the fact of the existence of saints is an attested truth in the History of Religions or Comparative Religions. In fact, one can find even saints of parallel nature in two different religions, with entirely different sets of doctrines, rituals, and with entirely different historico-cultural settings. This only indicates that Truth is no monopoly of any one religion. Granted that human beings never think alike, and that they always see Truth in fragments, and given the different angles of perception, differences are bound to be there in their perception of Truth. Therefore their formulation of Truth in either belief-system or rituals etc. is bound to vary from place to place and from time to time. However, this does not mean that one is superior to another. So long as they all have transformed-life as the reference point, they all are said to have Truth as the point of reference and they are all one.

(3) Imperfection in every religion

All religions have Truth, but not complete Truth. Imperfect instruments as human beings are, Truth received by them is bound to be imperfect. No two human beings will express Truth in identical terms, just as no two bodies are identically the same. Truth of religion is not only received and expressed by imperfect medium of human flesh, but

also it is explained and commented upon by numerous others who are all imperfect. Thus the Truth of religions is bound to be admixed with certain interpolations and extrapolations. Hence, imperfection is bound to be there in every religion.

(4) Every religion needs to grow

From the fact of imperfect understanding of Truth by every religion, it follows that every religion is subject to a process of growth, re-juvenation. If every religion contains the spark of divine revelation as well as stains of human instrumentality, then there is a need for every religion to purify itself more and more. In this sense, therefore, every religion needs to grow from imperfection to perfection, from un-truth to Truth or from lesser Truth to greater Truth. In fact it is with this end in view that interreligious dialogues should be encouraged. While a religion is engaged in dialogue with other religions, it should be able to learn from the noble features of other religions, and enrich itself by integrating all acceptable features of other religions with its own.

Conclusion

It is already an appreciable thing that Christianity has clearly moved away from the stage of isolation, and hostility. It has constructively interacted with other religions wherever it encountered them. If many Christians today realise a flaw in the traditional claims of exclusivism and are even keen on advocating pluralism as a valid model of Theology of Religions, it is certainly because of their creative dialogue with other religions. If this phase of interaction gives rise to a stage of integration both in its intra-religious level (giving up its erstwhile dichotomy of world view and also in its interreligious level (integrating all the acceptable features of other religions into itself) it is good. That alone will make the existence of religions meaningful in today's world which is becoming more and more shrunk. However, if interrelationship of religions is really to last long and strongly binding, there is a need to follow the principles mentioned above. They will prove to be good guidelines for strengthening the bonds of interrelationship. They will in turn enable followers of religions to be firmly committed to their own religious roots and at the same time to open to other religious truths, thereby making dialogue-partners engage in interreligious dialogue in a constructive way.

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