

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *ECCLESIA IN ASIA*

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Pope John Paul II, at the twilight of the second – or, at the early dawn of the third – millennium, gave the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (henceforth *EA*) searching various ways and means as to *how* the Church can proclaim its belief “clearly and convincingly” (*EA* 29). Today, proclaiming the Christian faith, as the Pope himself observes, meets unique challenges, particularly in the “multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural situation of Asia (*EA* 21). For this multi-religious context, the document does not suggest ways and means that are radically different from what has already been said in the earlier Magisterial teachings, yet it indicates various ways of introducing Jesus to Asia.¹ It highlights some images of Jesus Christ, such as: Jesus as the Teacher of Wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the

¹ Kurien Kunnumpuram, “Towards a New Church in the New Millennium: An Indian Reading of *Ecclesia in Asia*,” *Mission Today* vol. II (2000) 441, writes that *EA* “does not make any attempt to develop a new ecclesiology. But scattered through the document are valuable insights, which can contribute to the emergence of a new Church in India. To be sure, these insights are not totally new.” James Thoppil writes that in *Ecclesia in Asia* we hear of proclamation in a voice which is both old and new. It is ‘old’ in so far as it resonates afresh the teachings of the Church since the Second Vatican Council. It is ‘new’ because it is addressed anew to the Christians of Asia today with sincerity, conviction and deep hope.” See article “Proclamation in *Ecclesia in Asia*,” in the same volume of the *Mission Today*, 315.

Spiritual Guide, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, etc., that the Synod Fathers thought to be appealing to Asian minds and cultures. Yet, the document is clearly aware of the difficulties in proclaiming Jesus as the "only saviour" in the context of "Asia's great religions." The difficulties are, as the document itself notes "compounded by the fact that Jesus is often perceived as foreigner to Asia." It is indeed "paradoxical that most Asians tend to regard Jesus as a Western rather than an Asian figure" (EA 20). Despite this observation, and having known that Asian religions preach several "saviors" and "redeemers" along with Jesus Christ, it is unfortunate that the document fails to reflect – explicitly and logically – as to why most Asians tend to regard Jesus as Western rather than an Asian figure.²

However, the document does recognize the ancient religious traditions and civilizations, and to them is attributed a certain salvific dimension.³ However, it is the consistent view of *Ecclesia in Asia* that through the religions and cultures of Asia, "the Father prepares the hearts of Asian peoples for the fullness of life in Christ (EA 20). The religious values, which the Asian traditions teach, "await their fulfillment in Jesus Christ" (EA 9). And the grace of

² The real problem in Asia is, as S. Karotemprel, amongst others, writes "how to present Jesus Christ as the unique and only Saviour of all. In the philosophical and cultural context of Asia, it is almost impossible to make such Christological perceptions intelligible to Asian peoples." See article "The Christology of Ecclesia in Asia," *Mission Today*, vol.II, (2000) 456-466.

³ Over the last fifty years, the Church's appreciation of other religions has been changing. We started with the idea that other religions cannot facilitate salvific divine-human encounter, and today, other religions are considered as ways to God. M. Amaladoss observes that "this is a strange history...If what we asserted fifty years ago was so wrong, how do we know that what we are saying today is right." M. Amaladoss, "Religious Pluralism and Mission," in T. Malipurathu and L. Stanislaus, ed., *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium*, Bombay: St. Pauls, 2000, 70-71. One wonders whether Amaladoss seeks a recognition of the salvific character of the world religions! See also Paul Knitter, "Catholics and Other Religions: Bridging the Gap between Dialogue and Theology," *Louvain Studies* 24 (1999) 319-354.

Jesus "brings to fruition the seeds of divine wisdom already present in the lives, religions and peoples of Asia."⁴

In this context, dialogue is affirmed as an essential part of the Church's mission. Christian dialogue – within Christians and with other religious faiths – gets a prime place. This dialogue can take place at various levels: scholarly exchange between experts in the various religions, common action for integral human development and the defense of human and religious values.⁵ In this paper, let me, at first, outline the salient features of the Christian dialogue as given in *Ecclesia in Asia* and then critically reflect on the meaning and goal of dialogue, and outline the appropriate model for interreligious dialogue. Then, we shall discuss how doing interreligious dialogue with the "religious Other" and the "suffering Other" could proclaim Christ to Asia and also would promote what the *Ecclesia in Asia* calls "integral human development."

Ecumenical Dialogue and Inter-faith Dialogue

EA states that ecumenical dialogue is both a "challenge and a call" to conversion for the whole Church, especially for the Church in Asia where people expect from Christians a clear sign of unity.⁶ In Asia, the document points out, where the number of Christians is proportionately small, division makes missionary work still more difficult. "The scandal of the divided Christianity is a great

⁴ Any dialogue with Asian religions and cultures has to involve and engage the diverse traditions of popular religiosity and devotions of these communities of Asian Catholics. For a clear understanding of this point, see Anscar Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity and Catechesis*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992, 95-133.

⁵ Official Church documents distinguish four forms of interreligious dialogue: dialogue of life, of action, of theological exchange, of religious experience (*Dialogue Mission* 29-35; *Dialogue Proclamation* 42).

⁶ D. Alphonse, amongst others, notes, *EA* "has not much to say about intra-Church dialogue which implies listening to what the Spirit is saying from the experience of the Asian Churches, the laity, etc. D. Alphonse, "Lifegiving Spirit in Asia" Paper to be published in *Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth*, Pune.

obstacle for evangelization in Asia." In fact "the division among Christians is seen as a counter-witness to Jesus Christ by many in Asia who are searching for harmony and unity through their own religions and cultures." Therefore, the Catholic Church feels especially "impelled to work for unity with other Christians, realizing that the search for full communion demands from every one charity, discernment, courage and hope" (EA 30).⁷

In their reaction to the *lineamenta*, the Synod of Asian Bishops stressed that proper attention is given to the necessity of dialogue. The bishops of Sri Lanka added that in Asia, "there is a necessity of a missionary spirituality of dialogue." The Indian Bishops too stressed that "dialogue is not merely one ecclesial activity among many. It is a constituent dimension of every authentic local Church ... After Vatican II, to be Church means being a faith community-in-dialogue." Taking up these in consideration, *Ecclesia in Asia* also devotes a whole section to interreligious dialogue (EA 31).⁸ The Pope starts this section reiterating what has been said in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, that the advent of a new millennium offers a great opportunity for interreligious dialogue and for meetings with the leaders of the great world religions. While strongly encouraging contact, dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions, EA makes it clear that dialogue is part of the Church's mission. The Pope, by recalling what he wrote for the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, says that "although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy" in other religious traditions, it, nevertheless remains duty bound to proclaim Jesus Christ "as the way and the truth and the life." The

⁷ For a clear overview of the relations between Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches and for the dialogue between the two Churches, see a recent study by W. Purdy, *The Search for Unity: Relations Between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches from the 1950s to the 1970s*, London: Collins, 1996. See also an informative article on the same subject by Adelbert Denaux, "The Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue about Authority in the Church," *Louvain Studies*, 24, (1999) 291-318.

⁸ See also the Pope's Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Inuente* - "At the Beginning of the New Millennium" no.56. For a good synthesis of the document, see Gispert-Sauch, "The Pope on the Third Millennium," *Vidyajyothi*, vol.65, no.2, 128-131.

Pope concludes that "the fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people." And to realize this, the Pope urges the Church in Asia to provide "suitable models of interreligious dialogue and – evangelization in dialogue and dialogue for evangelization – and suitable training for those involved" (EA 31).

The Meaning and Goal of Dialogue

After the Second Vatican Council, the Church has come to see itself as a religious community in dialogue with other religious communities. In deed, it has come a long way from "outside the Church no salvation" to expressly recognizing "the active presence of God through His Word" and "the universal presence of the Spirit" not only in non-Christian individuals but also in their religions.⁹ Following this affirmation of the value of other religious traditions, there has been a clarion call to take these values seriously in genuine dialogue with them.

Interreligious dialogue has become an integral part of the Church's mission ever since the publication of *Ecclesiam Suam*, in 1964. The Church should "enter into dialogue with the world in which it exists and labours" it said (67). Five documents of Vatican II – *Nostra Aetate*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Ad Gentes*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Dignitatis Humanae* – contain important elements for understanding the Church's role *vis-a-vis* world religions. Some general themes are: the need to recognize within religions "element of truth and grace" (AG 9), "treasures which the bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth" (AG 11) and recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit (GS 11, AG 11, LG 17). Although these documents promote an attitude of profound respect toward all world religions, it is *Nostra Aetate* that emphasized that contact, dialogue and co-operation with the followers of the other religions

⁹ Some Catholic theologians argued that implicitly the Second Vatican Council was recognizing the religions as channels of saving grace. See Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* New York: Orbis Books, 1985, 123; and Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 165-170

is both a "duty and a challenge." Documents such as: *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Dialogue and Mission*, *Redemptoris Missio*, *Dialogue and Proclamation* - that have been published ever since also underscore the fact that dialogue is a constitutive dimension of the Church's evangelizing mission. Dialogue is seen as an important bridge to cross into the third millennium.¹⁰

Dialogue is not just conversation or talk, or exchange of views among persons. It not just announcing how much each religion has in common. It is neither a technique nor a device for leading people along the path of conversion from one faith community to another, rather enabling each one to realize the common core within and amidst them. Dialogue is but an attitude and an activity of committed followers of various religions who "agree to meet and to accept one another and work together for common ideals in atmosphere of mutual respect and trust."¹¹

Redemptoris Missio and *Dialogue and Proclamation* say that dialogue is "a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment" (RM 55, DP 9). One has to notice carefully that enrichment is mutual. It not only possible but also probable that both partners in dialogue have something to gain. In dialogue, partners are ready to be "questioned," to be "purified," and to be thoroughly "challenged." Dialogue involves not just a chit-chat or causal comparing, but a willingness to be shaken up and a willingness to let go a triumphalistic attitude. Having been challenged and questioned, one should be ready to be changed and allow "oneself to be transformed by the encounter" (DP 47). The change and transformation can actually lead one to conversion - "a deeper conversion of all toward God." In the process of conversion, "the decision may be made to leave one's previous spiritual or religious situation in order to direct oneself toward another" (DP 41). In as much as we are "open," ready to be challenged and questioned, we are also, nevertheless, thoroughly content that we

¹⁰ See the rich collection of Pope John Paul II's statements on interreligious dialogue and reactions from Buddhists, Jews and Muslims in L. Byron Sherwin and H. Kasimove, ed., *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.

¹¹ CBCI Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Delhi: CBCI centre, p.34. See also Thomas Menampampil, "Dialogue in Trouble Times," *Vidyajoti*, vol.65, no.5, 325-328.

have the final and full truth and in the final analysis say that all must follow and acknowledge that truth. Is it not, then, a contradiction, or can we really dialogue?

Dialogue and the Normativeness of Jesus Christ

The Synod of Bishops insisted that authentic dialogue is possible only with a new kind of a non-exclusivistic Christology. Instead of emphasizing the uniqueness of Jesus by insisting on his superiority over others, Asian bishops urged a way of showing Jesus' distinctiveness through the way he and his message connect and work with the truths of other ways. Japanese Bishops sharply told that "if we stress too much that 'Jesus Christ is the One and Only saviour,' we can have no dialogue, common living, or solidarity with other religions. The Church, learning from the kenosis of Jesus Christ, should be humble and open its hearts to other religions to deepen its understanding of the Mystery of Christ."¹² In a similar vein of thought, Sri Lankan bishops added that "the uniqueness of Jesus and of the Church has been a perennial problem and poses its own distinctive difficulties for authentic dialogue."¹³ The Indian Bishops, too, argued similarly and added that "the Indian Christological approach seeks to avoid negative and exclusivistic expressions ... We cannot, then, deny, a priori, a salvific role for these non-Christian religions."¹⁴

The uniqueness of Jesus is indeed a perennial problem. Although an extensive treatment of the issue is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to underscore that the so-called pluralistic school of thought argues that the idea of God – "infinite and ineffable" mystery – forbids any one religion from having the 'only' or 'final' word.¹⁵ Longdon Gilkey, for example, writes that

¹² See Knitter, "Catholics and Other Religions," 333.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. For a brief overview of the Christology of the pre-synodal preparatory documents, see S. Karotemprel, "The Christology of *Ecclesia in Asia*," 457-458.

¹⁵ See J. Hick and P. Knitter, ed., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, New York: Orbis Books, 1987. See also criticism mounted by G. D' Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, New York, 1990. For further books and essays on this topic, see Arul Pragasam, "The Dreadful Journey of Crossing the Rubicon: Testing the Bridges Ten Years Later," *Vidyajyoti*, vol lxi, no.9. 585-602.

Christians should admit honestly that within our human condition, there can be no one Way, no one Truth valid for all peoples for all times. He writes: "No cultural Logos is final and so universal criterion for all the others ... no one revelation is or can be the universal criterion for all the others."¹⁶

Alluding to such views, in a very succinctly written open letter,¹⁷ addressed to Pope John Paul II, the Dharma Rakshana Sammelan, expressed its fears that Christianity, in view of its central teaching that Christ is the unique saviour, becomes intolerant and aggressive towards other faiths. *The Indian Express*, in its editorial, went further saying that "*Motivated dialogue is not dialogue, your Holiness!*" In addition, it said that all those "who expected the Pope to unfold a new doctrine that takes into account the religious and cultural diversities that the Asian continent represents seem to have been disappointed." Despite the Church's "deepest respect for the various religious tradition" and the goodwill "to engage in sincere dialogue with their followers," the editorial accuses that the Pope has a hidden agenda.

Dialogue is necessary not because there is need for religious co-existence, but because 'the religious values they teach await their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.' In other words, dialogue is with a view to furthering the great mission their Lord has entrusted to them with - i.e., to go, preach and baptize. Conversion thus remains the cardinal objective of the Church and it sees in Asia great opportunities because 'it is home to nearly two thirds of the world's population with China and India accounting for almost half the total population of the globe.'¹⁸

It is indeed true that many would feel that the Church has lost a good opportunity to develop the practical or pastoral aspects of Christology. Preaching Christ as the one and only saviour

¹⁶ L. Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 48.

¹⁷ *The New Indian Express*, 6th of Nov.

¹⁸ *The Indian Express*, quoted in K. Kunnumpuram, "Towards a New Church in The New Millennium: An Indian Reading of *Ecclesia in Asia*." 451-452.

remains, as Betty Maheu, among others, points out "one of the major stumbling blocks" to the other religious people of Asia. As Maheu continues, the Church "remains adamant that this aspect of faith cannot be watered down in any way."¹⁹ As D. Alphonse says,

while on the one hand EA speaks of the need for openness, willingness to listen to other religions and understand others and readiness to respect differences EA ultimately reduces dialogue to "an expression of the mission ad gentes, which 'does not eliminate the need for the explicit proclamation of the Gospel in its fullness.' What seems to be implied here is that the Church already has the Gospel in its fullness and what is needed is only the right, step by step pedagogy. Such an understanding of dialogue as an appropriate pedagogy of proclamation does not seem to leave much space for being taught by the Spirit whose power none can set limits to (Num 1.23) and which "blows where it chooses" Jn 3:8).²⁰

This brings up the question as to which is the appropriate model for interreligious dialogue?

Towards an Appropriate Model of Dialogue

Taking the plurality of the various religious traditions seriously, John Hick and Paul Knitter proposed what is called a "truth-seeking-dialogue." This type of dialogue is proposed against what is known as "confessional dialogue" where each religious person approach the dialogue table convinced of the idea that she/he "has absolute truth" while all others only hold on to a "relative truth."²¹ In such a dialogue, one gives the impression that

¹⁹ Betty A. Maheu, "A Missionary Spirituality for Asia: Reflections on Ecclesia in Asia," *Mission Today*, vol.II, (2000) 317-318. See also S. Karotempel, "The Christology of Ecclesia in Asia," 456-466.

²⁰ D. Alphonse, "Lifegiving Spirit."

²¹ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, 117. Hick discuss this position in a number of articles written since 1980. See his *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, London: Macmillan, 1985; *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, London: Macmillan, and New York: Yale University Press, 1989); "A Pluralist View," in Okholm and Philips, ed., *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, 27-59.

one is superior to others or one indicates that others should learn from the superior faith that the one has. One is of the view that one stands at the center of the world, and all others "dispersed around its periphery."²²

Thus, if one the partners insists that he or she has "the God-given full, final and unsurpassable vision of truth," then, "the dialogue cannot take place, as they are not on a level playing field." If Christians think that they are in possession of the "fullness" of truth,

then they retain a position of advantage. This means, then, that it is from the vantage point of Christians any conflicting truth claims should be decided. If Christians have the norm, then they are not really able to recognize any truth or value in other religions that is genuinely different from what they already have; whatever truth or good may be found in other traditions has to be 'fulfilled' or included within the final Christian faith.²³

Such a dialogue, Hick says, is not rewarding. Instead, what is rewarding is "truth-seeking dialogue" in which "each is conscious that the transcendent Being is infinitely greater than his [her] own limited vision of it, and in which the partners accordingly seek to share their visions in the hope that each may be helped toward a fuller awareness of the divine Reality before which they both stand."²⁴ From this point of view, then, in inter-faith dialogue, one need not operate with "an assumption of the religious superiority" of one's own tradition. One need not also "sit in judgment over the other" great world faiths.²⁵ All begin dialogue with an acknowledgment that religions are equally effective and equally

²² Ibid., 119.

²³ Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul Knitter*, NY: Orbis Books, 1997, 7.

²⁴ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 117.

²⁵ Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and Philosophy of Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 144.

valid paths to salvation.²⁶ Hence, we all can eliminate the inadmissible conviction that only one's own faith has the truth while all others have no or only relative truth. For, in their view, religious truth is not given, it still evolves. Echoing this, Wilfred Cantwell Smith writes, "in all ultimate matters, truth lies not in an either-or but in a both-and."²⁷ For Hick, truth is not "essentially a matter of either-or. It is either this or not this: it can be both."²⁸ For Knitter, "all religious experience and all religious language must be two-eyed, dipolar, a union of opposites."²⁹ Thus, for the pluralists, the truth of religions is relative, culturally conditioned, dipolar and evolves in only a truth-seeking dialogue. In addition, Hick emphasizes the urgency of a truth-seeking dialogue, so that we may come to the realization that "the transcendent being is infinitely greater" than any one of our limited visions. All of us, Hick tells us, should share our visions in the hope that each may be helped "towards a fuller awareness of the Divine."³⁰ Hick hopes that such a dialogue, resulting in "mutual criticism, enrichment, and transformation," will lead towards "a growing world ecumenism," in which "the common commitment of faith" in God would significantly demand brotherhood on earth and all differences between the religious traditions will seem proportionately less significant."³¹

This kind of dialogue is welcomed by some in a pluralistic religious context, but I contend that, besides its popular appeal, such a dialogue is not viable. What is essential, however, is

²⁶Ibid., 141.

²⁷ W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, London: Gollanez, 1963, 17.

²⁸ J. Hick, "A Philosophy of Religious Pluralism", in F. Whaling, ed., *The World's Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies. Essays in Honour of Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, 164.

²⁹ P. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 221.

³⁰ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 81.

³¹ Ibid., 57.

"committal dialogue" where participants can retain an element of factual content as part of their particular belief. Of course, religious truth-claims are conflicting.³² God is worshipped as *God the Father* in Christianity, as *Adonai* in Judaism, as *Allah* in Islam, as *Ekoamkar* in Sikhism, and as *Ram* and *Krishna* in Hinduism. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the saviour for all, and Buddhists understand that *Nirvana* ought to be perused. This being the stance, asking religious believers to surrender all their faith claims for the sake of dialogue or for an evolving truth is not convincing. What should be done is, as J. Lipner wrote, "where truth-claims conflict, sharpening the focus of their factual content" must be carried out towards "progress in unitive understanding."³³ Scholars of one faith seek to deepen their understanding of the religious traditions of other religions, and, when and if necessary, to correct the misunderstandings of their own faith by others.

Dialogue should be "a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the differences, the contradictions, and the mutual exclusions between their various ways of thinking."³⁴ Christianity, too, as Pannenberg remarks, "should be open and ready to accept

³² There are "innumerable broad oppositions" between the religious traditions, even within particular religious traditions. Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, London: SCM Press, 1993, 140. HICK, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*, London: SCM Press, 1995, 51-56. The first significant attempt to treat the "conflicting truth-claims" was that of William A. Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1972). We have "direct" disagreements between religions. Namely: the Torah's statement that Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac at Mount Moriah (Genesis 22) versus the Muslim interpretation of the Qur'anic version (in Sura 37) that it was his other son Ishmael; and the New Testament witness that Jesus died on the cross versus the Qur'anic teaching that 'they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown them' (Sura 4.156).

³³ J. Lipner, "Truth-Claims and Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Religious Studies*, 12 (1976) 230.

³⁴ John V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis for Interfaith Dialogue," in Hick and Hebblethwaite, ed., *Christianity and Other Religions*, Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1977, 212,

whatever truth the Christian can accept and learn from other religious traditions in order to incorporate those elements of truth into our own understanding of God and his revelation." One may be enabled to recognize the face of Christ in some of the persons who follow other ways of religion. "The Christian may also recognize the work of God's providence in their lives and in the development of their own tradition."³⁵ Therefore, it is unfair to assume that one may not have fruitful dialogue while holding his/her own religious claims. Truth claims do not necessarily impede conversation; they still allow "a genuine dialogue simply for the purpose of information and mutual understanding of positions ... [without any] impact on my own religious stance or conviction."³⁶

Dialogue towards Liberative Mission

In recent times, various encyclicals and Magisterial teachings of the Church have urged a dialogue among religions to foster a world community of peace and harmony. The Gospel is come to be seen containing a liberative force. Therefore in the proclamation of the Gospel, it has been urged, to place a great emphasis on human liberation, promotion and advancement. In other words, religions should dialogue together to alleviate poverty and oppression and promote what the *Ecclesia in Asia* calls "integral human development." *Dialogue and Mission* described the dialogue of action in a liberation perspective as "the concrete commitment to the service of humankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structures which produce it" (DM 13). *Dialogue and Proclamation*, too, underscored "the importance of dialogue for integral

³⁵ Pannenberg, "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims," 103. The goal in interfaith encounter, as Rowan Williams remarked, "is to invite the world of faiths to find here, in the narrative and practice of Jesus and his community, that which anchors and connects their human hopefulness - not necessarily in the form of 'fulfilling their aspirations' or 'perfecting their highest ideals,' but as something which might unify a whole diverse range of struggles for human integrity without denying or 'colonizing' their own history and expression." Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism," in D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 10.

³⁶ Monika K. Hellwig, "Response," in Swidler, eds., *Death or Dialogue?*, 101.

development, social justice and human liberation." It continued further saying that "there is need to stand up for human rights, proclaim the demands of justice, and denounce injustice, independently of the religious allegiance of the victims (DM 44). *Ecclesia in Asia* clearly indicates "the persistent violations of human rights in many parts of the world," and particularly in our continent where "teeming millions are suffering from discrimination, exploitation, poverty and marginalization," and expresses the need for all to come to a "clear awareness of the inescapable and unrenounceable challenge involved in the defense of human rights and the promotion of justice and peace" (EA 33). Thus, seeking to promote human dignity, *Ecclesia in Asia* "shows a preferential love for the poor and the voiceless," with a special concern towards migrants, indigenous and tribal people, women and children, "since they are often the victims of the worst forms of exploitation" (EA 34).

Dialogue towards Integral Human Development

Dialogue must flow into human liberation. The need has arisen now, more urgently than ever before, to combine a praxis of interreligious dialogue with a human liberation praxis. As Aloysius Pieris stressed, in the context of massive poverty and the religiosity of the masses, the Asian Church must find a new way of being Church in Asia by a "symbiosis" of two-fold praxis: liberation praxis and a praxis of interreligious dialogue.³⁷ To the local Churches in Asia he makes his appeal: "enter into the steam at the point where the religiousness of the Asia poor ... and the poverty of the religious Asian ... met to form the ideal community to total sharing."³⁸ Thus, the call to unite the praxis of human liberation and interreligious dialogue into one concern has had, as Dupuis points out, "a deep echo in the Asian Churches."³⁹ Thus,

³⁷ Aloysius Pieris, "Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation: Some Religio-Cultural Guidelines, in V. Fabella, ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, New York: Orbis Books, 75-98.

³⁸ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, NY: Orbis books, 1988, 50.

³⁹ Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 375.

the Thirteen Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association wrote that,

the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy brings sensitivity and attunement to the recovery of the liberative core of religions manifesting itself as a liberation-salvation process. We are, thereby, called to a re-reading and a re-articulating of the fundamental faith-affirmation for a liberating inter-human and inter-religious fellowship of peoples."⁴⁰

A combined interfaith praxis towards integral liberation and development is an urgent task, they concluded.

The same perspective is developed by some Indian theologians.⁴¹ The praxis-oriented thrust will enable religions to progressively discover one another, "discover themselves with their weakness and strength and encounter more intimately the mystery they bear, symbolize and convey." This amounts to the fact that dialogue descends from the level of experts to the level of ordinary people, the poor who struggle together for liberation and fulfillment. "It is not faith meeting faith in their individuality, rather faiths committing themselves together to promoting justice and social order."⁴² Or as Samuel Rayan writes, "working together for liberation and for a community of justice, equality and peace, the religions enter a process of self-discovery and inter-fecundation."⁴³

In the West also, Hans Küng, very lucidly and powerfully expressed that, "there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue between religions. There can be no

⁴⁰ Indian Theological Association, 1991, 342-343.

⁴¹ F. Wilfred, *Sunset in the East: Asian Challenges and Christian Involvement*, Madras: University of Madras, 1991; ed., *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, Arokiasamy and Gispert-Sauch, ed., *Liberation in Asia: Theological Perspectives*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987; Irudayaraj. X. ed., *Liberation and Dialogue*, Bangalore: Claretian Publication, 1989.

⁴² Michael Amaladoss, "Liberation as an Interreligious Dialogue," Wilfred, ed., *Leave the Temple*, 171.

⁴³ Samuel Rayan, "Religions, Salvation, Mission," in Paul Mojzes and L. Swidler ed., *Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue*, Lewiston: EM Press, 1990, 130.

dialogue between the religions without research into theological foundations." ⁴⁴ If the nations of the world are going to confront and resolve the crises threatening humanity today, then, the world religion should cooperate through dialogue.

Paul Knitter also has developed this thought. For him, "all our efforts at dialoguing or understanding each other be preceded or accompanied or pervaded by some of shared practical efforts to remove eco-human suffering." Participants in such a dialogue, Knitter says, "do not begin with conversations about doctrines or rituals, not even with prayer or meditations, rather the encounter begins on the level of some form of liberative action, some form of praxis on the human needs of the national context."⁴⁵ By this, the persons in dialogue should feel themselves unified by an *energy* – need not be explicitly religious – and should find themselves gathered together by a *call* – a call of the suffering and marginalized. Social injustice and ecological abuses must be overcome and only through a "globally responsible, correlational dialogue of religions, one can overcome these and promote what Knitter calls "eco-human well-being." That is, in interreligious dialogue, the emphasis is not just on "the religious other" but "the suffering other" with whom the Church must carry on its mission of dialogue. As Christians "we can and must open our minds and our hearts to the many religious others and the many suffering others who dwell and toil upon this earth."⁴⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx sees this as a new form of ecumenism:

A common concern in solidarity for the poor and oppressed reunites men and women in the ecumene of suffering and humanity and this action is solidarity can then bring us back to theory; in other words, through orthopraxis we can again confess and express in new words an authentic and living orthodoxy.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethics*, New York: Crossroad, 1991, 105.

⁴⁵ Knitter, *One Earth and Many Religions*, 138.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God* (NY: Crossroad, 1990, 83. See also his "The Religious and the Human Ecumene," in *Expanding the View: Gutierrez and the Future of Liberation Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990, 127.

Dialogue towards Kingdom of God

Christian mission has several goals – immediate, ultimate, spiritual, soteriological, ecclesial, organizational and sociological. In the history of Christian mission, the emphasis on the goals has been shifting from one to another and it is only natural that the emphasis at a given moment in history should shift from one to another of the goals. Today, the emphasis seems to have shifted towards the ultimate goal of mission, that is, the Kingdom of God. Thus, as the Pope summed up, the goal of mission as the proclamation and establishment of God's Kingdom, which is inaugurated and fully realized in Jesus Christ, especially in his death and resurrection. Mission is ultimately building up the Kingdom of God in the hearts of people and society. "Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in its forms. In a word, the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness" (RM 15).

In Kingdom of God, Christians have a common ground for dialogue and co-operation with the people of all religions and ideologies. Kingdom of God is the central message of Jesus Christ and our central theme of mission also should be the same – the Kingdom of God. Conversion and Church are not end in themselves but means to proclaim the Kingdom already come. As Ernest Kasemann said, "Christians and Church communities are credible only as long as people hear issuing from them the passionate cry, 'Your Kingdom come.'"⁴⁸ The Lord's prayer itself is a "sustained cry" for the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus himself came preaching the Kingdom and referred to it many times. Jesus' coming was a revelation of God's love and will for his people. The community of disciples were sent to bear witness to the good news of this love, the good news of Kingdom. The community is the servant of the Kingdom. It is the God intended sign "to signify what God's Grace has accomplished and continues to accomplish in the world."⁴⁹ "The Kingdom is the field of God's action and it is present wherever God is present and active. If God's presence and

⁴⁸ Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, 61.

⁴⁹ Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 355.

action is not limited to the Church, the presence of the Kingdom of God is not limited to the Church either."⁵⁰ The Church must be seen as "the place where we find the maximum concentration of the Father's activity."⁵¹

Our quest of the Kingdom of God – which is also our goal – calls us to collaborate with the believers of other religions and all people of good will. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God without demands in respect of justice, peace, and equity will only suggest

a conscience-soothing Jesus, with an unscandalous cross, an otherworldly kingdom, a private, inwardly limited spirit, a pocket God, a spiritualized Bible, and an escapist Church. Its goal is a happy, comfortable, and successful life, obtainable though the forgiveness of an abstract sinfulness by faith in a unhistorical Christ.⁵²

Conclusion

The Church today feels a deep need to enter into contact and dialogue with all the major religions of the world. Actually, the future of mission is dialogue. As Pannikar says: "It is desirable for missionaries to look not so much to the fulfillment of our labours in the conversion of those to whom we preach, as to develop a conversation in which both partners may be transformed to a greater awareness of the wisdom and religious experience of both traditions. If missionaries were to pursue dialogue with the same commitment with which we have pursued conversions perhaps we would really convert ourselves and the world."⁵³ Dialogue, in this context, should be understood as to have a spirit of great respect

⁵⁰ M. Amaladoss, "Religious Pluralism and Mission," in T. Malipurathu and L. Stanislaus, ed., *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium*, Bombay: St. Pauls, 2000, 74.

⁵¹ J. Eagleson and P. Scharper, eds., *Puebla and Beyond*, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, 152.

⁵² Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom*, New York: Orbis books, 1982, 80.

⁵³ Raimundo Panikkar, "Mission as Dialogue: The Encounter of Christianity and Melanasian Religions," *Inter Culture* 97 (Oct 1987, 13).

and concern for the other who is different than us. We need not look upon other believers as potential members of the Church, nor as anonymous Christians, but as collaborators in promoting integral human development. Dialogue with different faiths will not only bring about deeper religious cordiality but also should promote greater humanum. A practical and praxis-oriented dialogue will accomplish better results and move from a limited horizon to a broader vision of religions. In dialogue, the people of different religions will be brought to hear and understand their own and each other's scripture and beliefs with new eyes and heart.

Our aim, therefore, through dialogue, is to promote the Kingdom-centric values such as justice and peace in a world full of oppression and wars. This is the good news of the Gospel here and now. Mission is building the Kingdom of God – a process unfinished until the eschaton. Such a praxis oriented mission will bear greater fruit.

Through the Gospel message, the Church offers a force for liberation, which promotes development precisely because it leads to conversion of heart and ways of thinking, fosters the recognition of each person's dignity, encourages solidarity, commitment and service of one's neighbor, and gives everyone a place in God's plan which is the building of his Kingdom and peace and justice, beginning already in this life (RM 59).

That which gathers and unites Christians and the believers of all other faiths is the recognition of a need for prayer. In *EA*, the Pope said it is important "to revitalize prayer and contemplation in the process of dialogue" (*EA* 31). It is my cherished hope that the Church in India, through the power of prayer, makes a renewed commitment towards praxis oriented dialogue to promote the message, and the man behind the Kingdom – Jesus of Nazareth.
