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# RELATIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT FAITH COMMITMENTS

## Toward a Christian Paradigm

### The signs of our times

The explosion of communication nowadays has brought even the remotest parts of the world to our doorstep. News of events and developments in far-away lands, as well as perspectives on them, can be followed in one's own living room in a different country going through different types of experiences. Pluralism is the setting in which contemporary societies exist. Accordingly, not only scholars and explorers, but also ordinary people in the street in many nations are becoming increasingly aware of religious traditions other than their own.

At the beginning of the present century there were Christian voices from the west calling for evangelisation of the world in their generation: the challenge was for the announcement of the Christian message in the non-Christian world. Speaking out of my Asian context, the national movements for liberation from western colonialism often fell back on the theme of defending their own nation, religion and culture to rally popular support. With the regaining of national independence, major religious traditions which had undergirded culture in these nations became resurgent and even missionary. New confidence grew about the superiority of these age-old religious systems in relation to a Christianity brought in from the west. 'After all,' some Buddhists asserted, 'the Christian West had plunged the world into conflict and war not just once but even twice. It will only be the message of *metta* and *karuna* (love and compassion), as taught by the Buddha, which will bring peace for humanity.' Such sentiments were associated with the holding of the Sixth Buddhist Council at Rangoon, convened in an artificial cave simulating the original, natural one which was the venue of the first council in the sixth century before Christ. Some 2500 Buddhist ecclesiastical leaders attended that council from 1954 to 1956 in a series of sessions to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of the attainment of *Nippan* by the Buddha. Others pointed out that the western influence, with its emphasis on material development arising out of the application of science, spurs people on to think of 'having more', while the eastern religious emphasis would be on detachment and an ascetic approach to life, encouraging people to realise the value of 'being more', rather than 'having more'.

While the western imperial nations were much concerned about the revolutions for independence by Asian peoples soon after the Second World War, the late Dr Nampara, the then President of Tokyo University, a leading educationalist and a Christian leader of the non-church tradition in Japan, warned the West about its pre-occupation with *revolutionary* Asia while not paying enough attention to the *renaissance* already taking place in Asia. In my view, he was emphasising the necessity to take seriously the resurgence of traditional value systems which had undergirded culture and society in Asian lands.

The inter-religious encounter in the new context is not between a dominant Christianity and other religious traditions which are insecure and on the verge of disappearing. The colonial conquest did not influence, for example, the committed Buddhist to succumb to the onslaught of the 'Christian' West on his traditional thought and practice. On the contrary, the often unspoken feeling of a well-versed Buddhist in his encounter with a newly arrived and comparatively young Christian missionary was communicated in the form of a question:

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Does he know anything about the wisdom of the Buddha? Has he studied the canonical scriptures and does he realise that for each of the canonical books there are yet eight types of exegetical works? Would he have the audacity to come and tell our people what the truth is, if he had understood the *Dhamma* contained in these scriptures?

With such thoughts, the dialogue as far as the Buddhist partner is concerned could be based more on an amused tolerance, rather than in terms of a serious exchange as the Christian seeks to present the message he has brought. The Buddhist would also feel that his religion has to be propagated as an antidote to the secularism and materialism of the modernisation process being brought from the west.

As many members of western societies came into direct and personal contacts in their own neighbourhoods with the exotic and inscrutable east, they became disillusioned about the need to support the missionary outreach of the church across the continents and oceans. Being 'Christian' due to tradition, these members of western societies were quite ignorant about the content of the Christian life and message, and had serious questions about it. Many possibly were motivated the other way round. If they had the opportunity or means to travel abroad, it was to get to know and learn about these exotic oriental systems, rather than entertaining any thoughts about sharing or proclaiming the Christian message among these distant nations. Some responsible Christian leaders challenged the members of the younger generations by asking if the Christian mission was for them already a lost cause! It was also suggested that members of congregations and parishes who traditionally had contributed toward the missionary enterprise and even some mission executives had lost their nerve about the continuing validity of cross-continental missionary expansion of the church. After all, there were now churches established in these nations across the world, and were there not also some leaders from these churches who were calling for a radical reappraisal of the traditional system of mission? Further, in terms of numbers, it was becoming increasingly true that there were more Christians in the regions of the world outside the traditional Christian areas.

The uncertainty about the validity of Christian mission, a new awareness about the life and practices of other religious communities, the impact of the reverse mission thrust of these religious systems on the younger generations in the west - all reinforced the signs of the times, providing telling hints about the setting of inter-religious encounter.

### Ambiguity of Inter-Religious Relations

Religion itself is ambiguous. There is a multiplicity of religious traditions, and there is diversity within each tradition. Moreover, each tradition is going through stages of change, evolution or development. After contact with other religious systems as we move to become a global village, there are re-statements of old truths or even re-conceptualisation of traditional tenets. Religion may be defined in terms of beliefs, practices and values, but can also be analyzed as an historical and sociological phenomenon. There is the need to recognise *the gap* between classical formulations of these systems and the actual ways in which convictions are held and lives are lived. Francis Wayland, the President of Brown University, who compiled the memoirs of Adoniram Judson, alumnus of the institution and pioneer missionary to Burma, noted that (Thera-vada) Buddhism 'in its moral precepts is remarkable for purity. So far as relations between man and man are concerned, it is in many respects similar to the mosaic law ..... The scheme is sustained by a system of morals of the most exemplary

kind, such as may cause a blush of shame in many a Christian who feels his higher privileges while he considers the inferiority of his practice ..... Travellers assure us that the Buddhist priests are never seen to turn their heads or even look upon the offering made to them. It were well if the ecclesiastics of many other countries derived instruction from their example.' In spite of this, Burma at one time ranked quite high among the nations as having a very high rate of homicide.

Yet religion can only be understood from within. The sacred, transcendent and infinite cannot be subjected to rational analysis. Any such attempt must be looked upon as not only impious but vain. The late D. T. Niles referred to religion as man's approach to God's mystery. Each goes his or her own way to God and tries to find God without finding one's brother or sister (the fellow human being). But because God loves the world, He has provided for one centre and one act of acknowledgement. He has involved the seekers in a common finding rather than in a common search. But people can be farthest from the goal of all religion, namely God himself, at the point of their religious life. Religion can also be the sphere of irreligion: consider the wars, conflicts and riots undertaken in the name of religions. Karl Barth went so far as to describe religion as the concern of godless man seeking the way of self-redemption. As such, religion was unbelief itself! We need to take these insights into account as we consider the matter of inter-religious relations.

### Some Asian Concerns

Three decades ago, when the Asian Ecumenical body, then known as the East Asian Christian Conference, was inaugurated during an assembly convened at Kuala Lumpur for some thirty-seven and a half million Christians in sixteen countries of the region, one of the concerns arising out of that gathering was about witnessing Christ to the people of other living religious traditions in Asia. It was suggested that there should be a departure from the type of approach the world missionary conference at Tambaram enunciated in 1938 regarding non-Christian religious systems. The Assembly at Kuala Lumpur emphasised that the approach should be in terms of *people* of other religious traditions, rather than these traditions or systems as such. Religion, as indicated earlier, cannot be pinned down to one interpretation of what it is. It is more than concepts and rituals. It involves symbols, music, art, meditation, silence, etc., but Christian mission goes beyond all this in its concern for *people* as they seek to live by their faith-understanding.

A later statement from the inter-faith dialogue secretariat of EACC contains insights of importance not only to members of Asian churches but also to all Christians everywhere. It was already recognised then that we were moving into an age of significantly wider contact and dialogue between persons of different traditions and ideologies. It said:

The pressures of our pluralistic societies make necessary a deeper understanding of our relationship to these other persons and of how that relationship may truly be understood in the purpose of God. A purely negative assessment of these traditions is not true to our growing experience of these systems and ideologies.

1. 'The contemporary situation in [our relations] with them confronts us Christians with many fundamental questions which go to the very roots of our response to God in Christ and how we are to understand biblically God's purpose of love for the world and the mission of the Church. It is our opinion that our varied church

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bodies and theological institutions need seriously to struggle with these problems before our fellow Christians are engulfed in [relations] for which they are not prepared either intellectually or spiritually.

2. This is largely a matter of human relations, of openness on our part towards others, their lives, their joys, and sufferings. Such meeting in depth between persons, as all subjects of common concern and responsibility (e.g. development, justice, peace, integrity of creation) is an integral part of our [inter-action] with such persons, even when, as is often the case, it is not explicitly concerned with 'religious' matters.

3. Jesus Christ, Lord and man of history as of the cosmos, can never be brought in or added to human cultural and spiritual life. It need, therefore, cause no surprise that we may discern His presence everywhere, prior to that moment towards which we look forward eagerly when people will recognise His presence. This discernment of Christ's work since history began in all our societies and spiritual 'worlds' awaits a sensitiveness to the Spirit to which we need to give more serious attention in our churches and Christian communities.

4. We recognise that this coming of age of wide [relations] causes anxiety among many Christians, not excluding ourselves, lest we should deny our loyalty to Christ and undermine the unique character of the gospel. It is this very uneasiness which underlines for us the urgency for Christian thinkers and persons of prayer to tackle the central questions related to Christ's work in the world of men, the place of the church in relation to the fulfilment of God's purpose for mankind and the duty and joy of the mission of the church in a pluralistic world.

Serious dialogue and relations with people of other religious traditions, far from being an invitation to betray Christ and His lordship, demands a radical conversion to Christ and life in Christ which we as Christians have hardly yet begun to experience. Such openness is a challenge to live from the Source, from Christ Himself, a deeper life of relationship with our cosmic yet personal Lord.

In spite of all these we are all agreed that the scandal of the cross will always be with us. While we do seek wider community with people of other religious traditions we do not think there will ever be a time in history when the tension will be resolved between belief in Jesus Christ and unbelief. It is a tension that divides the church from the world and it also goes through each Christian as each is unable to say that his or her faith in Jesus Christ is perfect .....

### **Inter-Religion Relations**

In the setting of Asia, where the majority of the populations adhere to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc., even the terminology originally suggested for this presentation

could be unhelpful. The term *encounter* carries images of contest and confrontation. Hence I have substituted the word *relations* for *encounter*. At the risk of oversimplification and recapitulation of what is generally known, we may say, for some Asian churches inter-religion relations have gone through three stages. In the early stages of Christian missionary expansion, some adherents of traditional religious traditions became convicted of the good news and came forward to accept Christ in the face of opposition and ostracism by their own families, relatives and community. Those who knew their previous religion thoroughly began to testify to either the weaknesses or falsity in the religion they had left and the strength and truth they had learned now in Christ. Learned converts even produced scholarly testimonies in a language verging on polemic. This inflamed leaders and scholars of the religious traditions concerned and the literary or personal encounters that resulted were all too often primarily polemical.

As the churches of the converts became more established and gained more self-confidence and as they sought to relate intelligibly to their compatriots of another persuasion, some indigenous Christian thinkers began to select possible points of contact between Christianity and the dominant religious traditions. There was also concern to discard the foreignness of Christianity and to express their faith in terms which might carry meaning within their non-Christian societies. The emphasis of 'discontinuity' between Christian faith and the nationally dominant religious systems was emphasised at that time. Presentation of Christianity as the crown or fulfilment of the varieties of religious search by the peoples of India, Burma, or as the case may be, was looked upon as being fraught with dangers of syncretism and compromise theologically speaking.

Asian Christians believed that a purely negative assessment of these traditions was not true to their growing experience of these systems. In the third and more recent stage, the inter-religious relations have been characterised by emphasis on person, neighbours or partners in such relations, rather than on doctrines and religion. When doctrines and teachings have to be analyzed, the creative inter-personal relations contribute toward inter-change and dialogue with openness and conscious attempts toward objectivity. D. T. Niles, in his early book *Eternal Life Now*, began with a quotation from the canonical books of Theravada Buddhism, using the words of the Buddha as given in *Kalama Sutta*:

Do not go merely by hearing or tradition, *not* by what has been handed down from olden times, *not* by rumors, *not* by mere reasoning and logical deduction, *not* by outward appearances, *not* by cherished opinions and speculation, *not* by mere possibilities and do *not* believe merely because I am your master. But when you yourselves have seen that a thing is evil and leads to harm and suffering then you should reject it. And when you see that a thing is good and blameless and leads to blessing and welfare, then you should do such a thing.

There is also the emphasis on inter-religious relations in pursuit of a common practical project or concern. Instead of one adherent just looking at the system of the other and vice-versa, amounting to something like a beauty contest involving mutual scrutiny of each other's religion, the two partners look away together at a common task to be fulfilled. As they tackle the common challenge together, whether it has to do with practical issues of justice, peace or community service, such often leads them to the sharing of the basis of each partner's concern, as each digs into the depth of his or her spiritual resources to respond to the common challenge they face

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together. In the villages inter-religious relations take place usually at ceremonies connected with the birth of a child, monastic novitiation, weddings and funerals. As neighbours belonging to different religious traditions congregate, inter-faith dialogue and sharing take place quite naturally on these occasions. Inter-religious relations contribute in such situations toward an understanding of what separates or unites them at the deepest possible level. Meaningful relations take place when partners are committed to their traditions and when what they believe to be true has meaning to them and provides the motivation for their lives.

### Some paradigms

*An ashram and a sadhu:* Travelling by bus on long laps continuously in Travancore, South India, to visit universities, I became quite exhausted and ill. It was arranged for me to rest at an *ashram* under the care of a respected Christian *sadhu*. I had heard about Sadhu Sundar Singh who lived at the turn of the century. He knew Bhagavad Sita by heart and was influenced much by his Hindu mother to respect all religious traditions. Attending a mission school, he fiercely rejected Christianity. His struggle to find the true God led him to the verge of committing suicide. As stated in his life story, he became a Christian after having a vision of Christ. He lived the life of a *Sadhu* and Christian *Ashrams* came to be set up as places where people can go for rest and reflection for meditation and community service. Until one has set foot in the *Ashram* compound and talked at length with the *Sadhu* in saffron clothes, a wanderer may not realise the place was part of a Christian attempt to express Christian obedience in the midst of Hindu culture and to provide open opportunities for inter-religious relations. The few days I spent at that Ashram in Travancore remain in my memory as an enrichment of my Christian life. For me it was the introduction to an adventure of faith involving informed and imaginative commitment to explore forms and channels of Christian obedience and witness in a Hindu environment. There was the Christian witness available and there was space for exploration by the visitor or partner who then might not see the Christian as an aggressive go-getter, seeking to impose on the thought and experience of the partner in inter-religious relationship.

*Solidarity in service:* While the image of the *Ashram* and the *Sadhu* in the countryside of India emphasises identification as critical for intelligible relationship with persons living in the setting of Hinduism, reflection on the life and labours of Dr Kagawa in Japan underlies for me the image of one who sat in solidarity and service among the marginalised people in Japan of his time. He brought the good news of the *agape* of God descending to be among the prostitutes and the publicans that their distorted loyalties to false value systems might be transformed according to the redemptive purpose of God in Christ. In the mind and feelings of adherents of dominant Asian religious traditions, Christianity is associated with western expansionism and triumphalism. As Kosuke Koyama had indicated in his theological reflections in northern Thailand, the image of the outreach of the church vis-à-vis people of other religious commitment is that of marching forces acting out of a crusading spirit and not of a community having the crucified mind. For these people, the cross is associated with a banner of conquest, rather than that which depicts the self-emptying love of God who became a suffering servant to be crucified for the redemption of the world. For those at the receiving end of the church's outreach, there is sometimes an impression that the church has connections with power, wealth and influence. In a presentation many years ago a Christian student worker asked a question which still rings in my ears. He asked: 'Are we proclaiming

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in the world a Christ, risen no doubt, but on whose palms and feet there are no more nail prints and on whose side there is no more the spear mark?"

**Paradigm of the cross: 'Ti-lakhana' of the Buddhists and the Kenosis of Christ:**

At a consultation, held at Holy Cross College, which adjoins the Rangoon University campus, some years ago, the late Lynn de Silva of Sri Lanka shared his meditation on the crucified Christ, which struck me as particularly meaningful in a culture influenced so much by Theravada Buddhism. *Ti-lakhana*, one of the basic Buddhist teachings about life is readily acknowledged by all in countries where Buddhism and its values form common terms of reference even for topics of daily conversation. According to this doctrine, all beings in this world are characterised by three signs: *Anicca*, *Dukkha* and *Anatta* (impermanence, suffering and non-entity). All beings are transient or *impermanent*. They are born and they pass away. Secondly, the characteristic of all beings is *suffering*. All beings are born in *pain* and subsequently age-ing, disease and death take hold of their lives. Thirdly, all beings are fleeting embodiments of aggregates which in the last analysis cannot claim to have any entity. All beings are basically non-entities. There is no place for pride or egoism. Lynn de Silva, in his remarkable exegesis of the christological hymn in Philippians 2, reflected on how Christ, even though he was equal with God and eternal, entered time and took upon himself the transitory human nature, the characteristic of impermanence. Further, he who enjoyed perfection, peace, joy and glory underwent the ultimate suffering, suffering unto death on the cross and became the embodiment of *dukkha* itself. Thirdly, he who fills all in all and in whom all fullness dwells, emptied himself and became *anatta*, a non-entity reaching the depth of *Kenosis*. When I heard that exposition, I was struck by the freshness and intelligibility of the message, as well as the depth of communication in a setting of our relationship with those of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The incarnation of Christ became so much more meaningful or creative for inter-religious reflection and relationship. For the Buddhists who are often admonished to be on the watch for the wiles and desires of self, even the oft-referred to simple interpretation of the cross with its horizontal bar crossing out the *vertical* one which can be seen as representing self, immediately prompts appreciation for deeper meditation on the symbolism and meaning of the cross.

Emilio Castro, reporting as general secretary to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches earlier last year, said: 'The outstretched arms of the cross are perhaps the best symbol of God's attitude towards all human kind, the offering of God's self in an attitude of total powerlessness and from there ..... appealing, inviting to a free decision ..... The witness we owe to the other is the witness to God's love made manifest in Jesus Christ ..... to which I can testify only in a loving relationship which implies acceptance of my neighbour and co-responsibility for the whole human predicament.....'. In this sense, the paradigm of the cross, after being initially an offence and a shock, can in His purpose often lead to inter-religious relations in depth.

### Some concluding points to ponder

Pluralistic societies in our global village impinge on our lives whether we are prepared or not. We have made reference to some paradigms for inter-religious relations involving experiments in *identification*, committed life in *solidarity and service*, and *intelligible communication*. Such a presentation does not exhaust all the possibilities. There is something we need to underline. It was said that the IMC meeting of 1947 at Whitby, instead of asking whether pre-conditions for mission and



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points of contact were present in the world, asked whether they were present in the church. The important point that needs underlining in relations between Christians and persons of different religious systems has more to do with the cultivation of a correct attitude on the part of the Christians than with the search for points of contact in their systems and setting. We need to repent for our past attitudes of arrogance, disrespect, unconcern or ignorance, and even hostility.

The 1989 San Antonio meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches testified: 'We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ. At the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God.' We need the courage to follow wherever He and His truth may lead us, even beyond the truth-boundaries we can presently recognise. He has created all things and though He has suffered all nations in times past to walk in their own ways he has not left Himself without witness. Where there are traces of truth and light, such inevitably must have as their source the true light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world. In Him everything in heaven and on earth was created ..... the whole universe has been created through Him and for Him ..... and all things are held together in Him ..... and in the dispensation of the fullness of times He will gather together in one all things in Christ.'

The church has often spoken of the uniqueness of Christ. More recently, reference has been made to the *finality* in Christ. God will sum up all things in Him. There is nothing outside His rule and in Him all things cohere. We cannot claim to exhaust the implications of these affirmations and our understanding of the nature of Him in whom God will sum up all things. Paul speaks of his strivings and he counts himself not to have apprehended or to have attained. But he said he followed after, if that he might apprehend that for which also he was apprehended of Christ Jesus. By God's grace we may be granted to declare Him to whom others relate as the yet unknown, and we ourselves come to catch new visions of His manifold providence and presence in the rich heritage of our neighbours. In our zeal to define the uniqueness of Christ others may conclude, and we ourselves (through His revelation to catch the stature of our Lord) come to realise, that 'our' Christ had been too small! John Baillie, the Scottish theologian, translated the formula of Cyprian: 'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus' as 'the man who keeps to himself cannot be made whole'. The message I get from this is not that of a closed circle but of relationships and outgoing fellowship.

It is edifying to listen to Paul Tillich and Alan Richardson, with our theme in mind. The former said, 'no one, not even one who believes, and not even the church, can boast of the truth just as no one can boast of love. Orthodoxy is intellectual pharisaism.' The latter goes on to say: 'Pride of intellect is as blinding in the pursuit of truth as pride of virtue is deadly in the pursuit of righteousness ..... one's knowledge of God is a mediated knowledge and the Mediator is Christ the Word .....' (who became flesh)! If inter-religious relations are to be considered with *dialogue* in mind, we need to remember also that it has to be in terms of the Word made flesh. Dialogue must be a dialogue *of life*, with the paradigm of the cross determining its manner and content.

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