



Editorial - Imaginary and Inter-faith dialogue

Editorial - Imaginário e Diálogo Inter-religioso

Michael Amaladoss, S.J.*

There are two ways of trying to understand the meaning and significance of inter-faith dialogue. One way is to adopt an *a priori*, abstract approach that starts with definitions in a conceptual-rational language. One focuses on the issue of truth –which is the true religion? Such an approach gets caught up in either-or dichotomies. Another way is to start with experience. It is more concrete. Its approach to non-material realities is not conceptual and logical, but experiential and symbolic. We deal, not with ideas, but images. Our approach is not ‘either-or’, ‘but both-and’. We experience the richness and complexity of life. The dialogue is no longer between faiths or religions, but believers. Believers tend to be less precise and more complex.

Recently I was talking to a Hindu friend during the lunch break at a seminar which was dealing with peace and reconciliation between peoples, including their religions. Tension and violence between religious believers is a fact in many parts of the world. And yet, it is not always so everywhere and at all times in practice. A realization of this will bring before our minds different imageries. My friend was talking about a region of the city of Chennai where there were a big temple and a mosque not very far from each other. On Fridays, when the Muslims went to the

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* Director, Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, Chennai, India. Country of Origin: India. E-mail: michamal@gmail.com

mosque for special prayers, there will be Hindus waiting outside the mosque for them to come after their prayer, asking them to breathe on them. The Muslims were thought to be very devout and one-pointed, focusing on God, during their prayer. Their breath was considered holy, with healing properties. So the Hindus with any illnesses will stand outside the mosque asking the Muslims coming out of it to breathe on them so that they may be healed. This is, for me, a very meaningful, experiential image of interreligious encounter. This can, of course, be theologically explored. Such events are not rare.

In the same city, there is a chapel dedicated to St. Antony of Padua considered a powerful miracle worker by the people. Every Tuesday people will be lining up from 6.00 am to 8.00 pm, with flowers or other gifts in hand, to request his intercession for physical or spiritual healing or other favours – success in exams or competitions or job interviews – or to offer gifts in thanksgiving for favours received. One look at the line will show that there are not only Christians, but also Hindus and Muslims there. Some of them may be weekly visitors. Similar lines can be seen in another church in the city dedicated to Mary, our Lady of good health, every Saturday. Such practices can be found in other similar sanctuaries all over the country. These are other images of interreligious encounter.

Hindus all over India do visit the tombs of Muslim Sufi saints, honouring them and exploring their intercession. Such tombs in Ajmer, Delhi and Nagore are well known. Some Hindu groups may have special rights of participation in Christian and Muslim festivals. There is a thin line between a social privilege and a religious right. Christians, in general, are more reserved in these matters. But they are known to frequent ritual specialists of other religions for healings and exorcisms. The Muslim shamans are said to be powerful against evil spirits. The parents of a sick child may go to a doctor, to the Church and to a shaman in quest of healing.

What do these images tell us? Whatever be the discourses, precisions and reservations of the theologians, the divine is beyond ordinary religious structures and rituals. People, without abandoning their religious identity, are open to encounter the divine also through the images and rituals of the other religions, especially when it is seen as answering their special needs. Theologians may have problems in working out the implications of such practices. But the traditional formula *lex orandi, lex credendi* is worth recalling on such occasions. An openness seems possible without losing or mixing up identities. Fundamentalists in all religions are today opposing such practices. But they are not, obviously, our criteria in making judgments in these matters.

The Eastern Tradition

If we look at Indian history such an interreligious openness seems traditional. Already a thousand years before the Common Era (BCE) the *Rig Veda* said: “Being is one; the sages call it by various names” (1.164.46) Names need not mean simply words, but images through which different people express their God experiences. The Katha Upanishad says: “There is one Ruler, the Spirit that is in all things, who transcends, who transforms his own into many.” (5) So the Absolute can be encountered in various forms. Ashoka was a Buddhist emperor of the 3rd century BCE. In one of his rock-cut edicts, he says:

King Priyadarsi honours men of all faiths... The faiths of others all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others... Therefore concord alone is commendable” (NIKAN; McKEON, 1959, p. 49-50, Edict XII).

He had a special minister to look after the welfare of the monks, who would have been Hindu, Buddhist and Jain in his time. In the 3rd century ACE, the Bhagavad Gita said: “In whatever way men approach me, in the same way they receive their reward.” (4:11).

Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273), a Muslim Sufi poet said:

Ways of worshiping are not to be ranked as better or worse than one another. Hindus do Hindu things. The Dravidian Muslims in India do what they do. It is all praise and it is all right... (ARMSTRONGS, 1999, p. 278-279).

Though the ways are various, the goal is one. Do you not see that there are many roads to the Kaaba?... So if you consider the roads the variety is great and the divergence is infinite; but when you consider the goal, they are all of one accord and one. (NARS, 1977, p. 149).

In the Middle Ages, the poet Kabir (1440-1518) sang:

If God be within the mosque, then to whom does this world belong?
If Ram be within the image which you worship upon your pilgrimage, then
who is there to know what happens without?
Hari is in the East; Allah is in the West.
Look within your heart,
For there you will find both Karim and Ram;
All the men and women of the world are his living forms.
Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram (TAGORE, 2002, p. 55-56).

Modern India

Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), represents the modern Hindu approach.

God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole... God himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge... With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. (NIKHILANANDA, 1980. p. 39, 5, 124).

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) sings:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom does thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. (TAGORE, 1981, Gitanjali, 11).

A famous refrain of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) in his interreligious prayer meetings goes: “Chief of the house of Raghu, Lord Rama... Ishwar and Allah are your names too!” The last two names refer to Christianity and Hinduism. A Tamil poet, Subramania Bharathi (1882-1921) sang: “The one who revealed the mystery to the prophet Mohammed, the Father of Jesus – various believers imagine the Transcendent and praise it in various ways.”¹

Hinduism is not one religion, but a network of three major and many minor religious groups. One of the major groups speaks of ten manifestations or avatars of God, illustrating various aspects of God in various historical circumstances. At the same time, all agree that the Absolute Brahman is one, though it has many manifestations. So the Hindus accept the experience of pluralism in unity, each group affirming its specific identity. In such a context they are open to other religions as the celebrations of other manifestations of God to other peoples at other times. God has therefore many images/names, which do not pose a problem for them in an interreligious setting.

The Church in India

The Bishops in India seem sensitive to this perspective. Their *Guidelines for Interreligious Dialogue* says:

The plurality of religions is a consequence of the richness of creation itself and of the manifold grace of God. Though coming from the same source, peoples have perceived the universe and articulated their awareness of the Divine Mystery in manifold ways, and God has surely been present in these historical undertakings of his children. Such pluralism therefore is in no way to be deplored but rather acknowledged as itself a divine gift. (CBCI, 1989, n. 25, p. 29).

Religious pluralism is, therefore, not a problem, but a divine gift. That is why people engaged in dialogue today suggest that the pluralism of the images of

¹ Bharathi's *Poems*. (Chennai, 2004), p.218.

God should not merely tolerated, but accepted and celebrated. The Indian Bishops said on the occasion of the Asian Synod (1998):

In the light of the universal salvific will and design of God, so emphatically affirmed in the New Testament witness, the Indian Christological approach seeks to avoid negative and exclusivistic expressions. Christ is the sacrament, the definitive symbol of God's salvation for all humanity. This is what the salvific uniqueness and universality of Christ means in the Indian context. That, however, does not mean there cannot be other symbols, valid in their own ways, which the Christian sees as related to the definitive symbol, Jesus Christ. (PHAN, 2002, p. 22).

St. John Paul II had earlier (1990) said in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*:

It is true that the inchoate reality of the Kingdom can also be found beyond the confines of the Church among peoples everywhere, to the extent that they live "Gospel values" and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills (cf. Jn 3:8). JOHN PAUL II, 1990, n. 20).

So a pluralism of symbols or images is accepted, whatever may be their internal relationships.

An Indian Image

Another realization or insight is that such a pluralism is not merely at the level of words. The perspectives that the words represent are born out of spiritual experience and point to different ways to the Absolute. One of the favourite Indian images for religious pluralism is that, just as the various rivers lead us to the sea, the various religions lead us to God – the Sea of grace. The ways may be different, but the goal is the same. But the ways are not identical. They manifest different dimensions of the Absolute. Their images of the divine are not just repetitions of the same. They are convergent. This convergence is possible precisely through dialogue. It sometimes happens that some rivers meet each other and mingle with each other before they reach the sea. Many years ago I visited the Amazon near Manaus in Brazil. My companion took me along in a boat and showed me how two

rivers with waters of different colours were mixing together to continue on as one river. Can we image interreligious dialogue as a mixing of many rivers, mixing not only the colours but the many other riches that the waters carry along. They will all merge finally in the boundless ocean. I find this a better image of religious pluralism than the other image of many paths leading to the summit up the mountain.

An exploration of the various imageries that people use to describe their interreligious experience may be more interesting than more abstract rational-philosophical discussions.

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