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Perspectives of Asian Theologies

Abstract: As Asia is a constellation of multiple religious movements, the article, while providing an explanation from theological perspective for the plurality of religions and theologies, highlights the autonomous character of each religious tradition with its own belief structures and truth propositions, constituting a unique worldview and affirming its own identity. Nevertheless, it is necessary that every religious tradition participates in the interreligious dialogue in order to create a humanitarian world where peace and harmony prevails at all times in spite of the forces of violence and animosity battering the social fabric. There is also the possibility of initiating a movement towards Asian Christian Theology which should emerge from grass root level through the process of theological dialogue and inculturation.
Key words: Communitarian Absolutes; Asian Theology; Asian Christian Theology; Interreligious Dialogue; Plurality.

1. *On what occasion did you encounter Raúl Fornet-Betancourt?*

Having been invited to participate in a Conference in Mexico by Missio-MWI, through the intervention of Dr. Ram Adhar Mall, another great proponent of Intercultural Philosophy in Germany, I landed there in 1995, which gave me an opportunity to have the first encounter with Raúl Fornet-Betancourt. It was also an occasion for me to meet for the first time Prof. Raimundo Panikkar who had a room adjacent to mine in our board. To my luck, I could attend eight International Conferences on Intercultural Philosophy without break and also some other meetings like the one on the Curriculum of Philosophy and Theology - all planned and organised by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt. It is he who published all my papers presented in all these Conferences. He also gave me the responsibility to organise the fourth Congress on Intercultural Philosophy in our centre "Shanthi Sadhana" in Bangalore, India. It was a privilege to associate with Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, who was very punctual in all communications and prompt in arranging meticulously all practical details. My lack of familiarity with Spanish language has to be regretted, due to which I was just a mute observer to all the debates and arguments hotly discussed in most of the Conferences. Little German I knew was the only medium of communication between the two of us. Nevertheless, Raúl Fornet-Betancourt was an Intercultural person at heart, who could appreciate all languages, cultures and usages.

Rightly therefore Joseph Estermann affirms that "…he not only talks about interculturality, but tries to put it into practice again and again." Let me provide a concrete example. During the Fourth Congress held in Bangalore, I arranged visits to a Hindu Temple cum Seminary, Muslim Mosque cum Seminary, Sikh *Gurudwara* etc., in

order to complement theoretical positions with practical experiences. In the Hindu Seminary the candidates undergoing training there wanted to recite Vedas in Sanskrit. I wanted the participants to know how the Vedas from tenth century B.C. have been transmitted *orally* without changing even a syllable (this is because of the belief that any failure in the recitation of the mantra would make the entire sacrifice invalid!). I gave them 15 minutes and they began their recitation and went on and on, so much so, some of the participants were becoming restless as many of them were seated on the floor. I looked at Fornet-Betancourt whether he would give me a sign to intervene and stop the recitation. But I observed him seated on the floor totally absorbed in listening to Vedic mantras. The recitation stopped only after 45 minutes!! I can strongly vouch for the fact that Raúl Fornet-Betancourt not only argues and provides theoretical standpoints to affirm intercultural philosophy, but also remains open towards intercultural practices.

2. *What are the characteristics of his work by which you are most impressed*?

The characteristic that impressed me most in Raúl Fornet-Betancourt is his relentless commitment to create a non-discriminative, liberated, humanized world. It appeared to me as if he is waging a war to affirm, explain and to propagate a humanized world *sans* discrimination, asymmetry, exploitation, violence, and hegemony founded on political, social, cultural, economic, moral, epistemological and rational grounds. His *Weltanschauung* implies an equity of opportunities: existential and epistemological, ethical and religious, social and political, economic and mercantile to all humans globally, in the realms of both being and doing. For this there is an urgent need to de-construct hegemonic cultural constellations, and de-philosophise the violence ridden epistemologies. Hence his insistence on the co-existence and correlation between plurality of cultures and epistemologies in a spirit of intercultural mutuality under contextualized space and time.

Plurality of Cultures means affirmation of two points: no culture need to be considered as superior to the other in itself (*per se*). A particular culture might have had better historical possibilities and must have grasped the available opportunities more effectively and prudently resulting in a better growth materially, academically and socially; but this does not mean that it should claim superiority over another Culture which did not have opportunities of growth or has simply failed to develop due to lacunae internal or external. On the other hand, lending a helping hand through dialogue and understanding would create a better atmosphere for the humanisation of the world.

Secondly, hegemonic attitudes contradict the plurality of cultures. The so called superior cultures, with claims for superior epistemologies and mercantile cum industrial techniques have invariably captured power and used it to lord it over the so called weaker cultures. Big fish eating the small fish is a phenomenon that can never be wiped out from the face of the earth. This being the case, plurality is a difficult proposition;

plurality means respect for the equality, rights and privileges of all cultures. It means each culture has right to affirm its own identity, its linguistic and religious autonomy as well as to live without interference its own worldview.

Plurality and humanisation according to Raúl Fornet-Betancourt are interrelated and very compatible. One leads to the other, one supports the other and one without the other results in a dehumanised world, a world of hatred, violence, exploitation, oppression and asymmetry. We would like to highlight these two points while explicating the perspectives of Asian theologies.

How de-construction and de-philosophising is connected to interculturality? Through a critique of one's own standpoint and a hermeneutical openness towards the "otherness of the other". He subjects the hegemonic western colonial and neo-colonial attitudes to a radical criticism and questions the universality of the epistemological claims of Northern philosophy while affirming validity of hitherto prejudicially negated epistemological claims, trends and positions of the South.

All this does not mean that Raúl Fornet-Betancourt is a new messiah engaged in establishing a new kingdom, but one can notice some messianic characteristics in his life orientations that impel us to appreciate his indomitable will in pursuit of his mission. If we admit that every philosopher is a prophet in his own way, Raúl is also one in some unique way, as I see traits of prophetic charism visible in his engagements as a person with a well delineated vision of reality.

3. *And what makes his work so important for your continent from theological perspective?*

The answer to the question "from theological perspective", is not evident to me in so far as I know Fornet-Betancourt, but it can be inferred as theology and philosophy are disciplines not alien to each other, rather they are correlated in their methodology, curriculum and objectives. I can with confidence affirm from his strongly expressed views on intercultural philosophy that he shall never demote intercultural theological engagements. Even though Fornet-Betancourt is a philosopher by vocation, profession and in praxis, what he articulated explicitly in his philosophical debates can *mutatis mutandis* be translated into theological discourse.

3.1. *Perspectives of Asian Theologies.*

At the very outset a clarification with the term "Asian Theologies", namely, the use of the plural "theologies" is necessary in order to understand the perspective of this article. We do not think Raúl Fornet-Betancourt is so much interested to speak about a particular culture just to present it as a "paradigm" for all other cultures. Analogically, he would not favour to speak of one single "theological tradition", just to present it as a

supreme model with the privilege of "the chosen one",[1] for all others. Asia is a land of diversities very specially in theological perspectives. Hence it is quite in keeping with our approach to speak of plurality, diversity, difference and uniqueness of each religion and its theological tradition in Asia. Hence we speak of Asian Theologies[2].

3.2. *The Question of Plurality*[3]

Asian continent is "multi-religious", meaning different world religions co-exist in correlation and constant mutual interaction in this continent. It is a common sight that along a lane of few houses, i.e., within a given neighbourhood, families professing faith in different religions live together for centuries and interact daily sharing their life world. Hence the articles of plurality elucidated by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt can inspire to build up a theological perspective which integrates the question of plurality of Religions in Asia. Should the plurality, whether philosophical (epistemological), social, cultural, political or religious, be rejected, contradicted, ignored or to be accepted, asserted and if possible to be integrated within one's own world view, is a question that we need to inquire. Regarding the plurality of religions in Asia, most important point is to respect the autonomy of each religious tradition, with all the rights of the believing community to practice and propagate its faith. If not, there cannot be a true and positive intercultural or interreligious interaction and authentic dialogue. The consequences of unilateral standpoint are visible all over the world for all of us to see and experience. Why there is so much of fanaticism, fundamentalism, terrorism, violence and hatred in the world? Ultimately all theologies and all intercultural interactions should aim at building a humanitarian world as envisaged and propagated by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt so that this planet becomes a secure, safe and sound place for all persons to live with sufficient space to express their being, realise their goals and attain their ideals in life.

The treatment of our short study would propose three points:
- An explanation for "Plurality of Religions and Theologies" in Asia.
- Interreligious or Interfaith Dialogue and Universal Sister/Brotherhood, aimed at creating a more humanitarian world culminating in harmony and peace among all religions.
- Prolegomenon to Asian Christian Theology and its characteristics.

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[1] Raimundo Panikkar, "Chosenness and Universality: Can Christians Claim Both?" *Cross Currents*, Ed. By William Birmingham, New York: 1989, 305-327.

[2] The Term "Asian Theologies" is applicable to all Asian Religions. As an example we can quote the different Asian Christian Theological schools which emerged as a response to the clarion call given by The International Missionary Council in Jerusalem in 1930 to develop indigenous theologies. We thus have the schools of Syncretistic theology, Accommodation Theology, Situational or Contextual Theology in Asia. Ref. http://mb-soft.com/believe/txo/asian.html .

[3] Cf. Raymond Panikkar, "Philosophical Pluralism and the Plurality of Religions", in *Religious Pluralism and Truth*, edited by Thomas Dean, Delhi: 1997, 33-43; Harold Coward, "Religious Pluralism and the Future of Religions", *ibid.,* 45-63; Jacques Dupuis, *Religious Pluralism*. Anand, Gujarat: 2001, 386-390; Michael Amaladoss, *Beyond Dialogue*, Bangalore: 2008, 234-238.

That Asia is a home for several world religions is a well known fact: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism and Islam are the religions professed by a vast majority of population and then there are other religions with lesser following in Asia like Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism and the like.

To begin with, let us just clarify what do we mean by plurality of religious traditions and what are the characteristics that make a religion autonomous. For a particular religion its autonomous character is a primary postulate, namely, it assumes freedom to affirm an absolutistic worldview (*Weltanschauung*) with its own belief structures, moral code and cultic practices. These elements bind the followers with cords that cannot be broken and tie them into a believing community. On the one hand the truth propositions or beliefs of a religion are binding to all the members of the community and on the other they are accepted as such unconditionally, freely and wholeheartedly by the entire believing community. The truth expressed by the truth-propositions is considered as "absolute" by them and hence they could be characterised as "absolute communitarian truths" within the worldview of the religious tradition. If a particular member rejects the beliefs or the truth-propositions or questions them, then s/he is said to lose faith and s/he becomes an outsider. To the extent the belief is wholehearted, they become convictions of life – the "subjective absolutes" for the individual. The "communitarian absolutes" along with the "subjective absolutes" or "existential absolutes" gives a religious tradition its autonomous character and showers on it the claim to be a unique religion with its own identity.

3.2.1. *The Ground of Religious Plurality*

Why there are so many religions? Where is their source? From where they have emerged in the history of mankind? Has the science of religions an answer so that we can have an adequate explanation for the existence of variety of religions on this earth? Secondly, why every religious tradition claims autonomy? Why it distinguishes itself from other religious traditions and affirms its uniqueness and its own identity?

Without denying the fact that there could be a variety of answers to the above questions from different perspectives, we for our purpose state that from our theological perspective the source of a religion is to be traced in the possibility of human-divine encounter. Human consciousness is a complex and complicated phenomenon, for, on the one hand, human beings have a sense of scientific or noetic consciousness, ethical consciousness, aesthetic consciousness and religious consciousness; and on the other, they can know that they can develop their consciousness and make it sharp, acute and sensitive. All the sciences have developed enormously, making scientific consciousness most prominent of all. Similarly, the understanding of aesthetic, moral and religious consciousness had perceivable growth in the history of humankind. For us what is important here is the sense of religious consciousness, which means that human beings have a pre-reflective awareness of the Divine and the Holy and also a capacity to

develop it and make it more intensive and explicit. All the religious seekers and sages in the history of humankind have sought to experience the Divine through enhancing the capacities imbedded in their religious consciousness. As the seeker opens himself to the Divine, s/he makes her/himself amenable to the self -manifestation of the Divine. This self manifestation is sometimes characterised as mystical experience, in which the seeker claims a direct encounter with the Divine, may be a glimpse into the Divine consciousness resulting in the transformation of her/his own self consciousness.

This experience of the Divine is unique to each one and in reality it cannot be transmitted or imposed on the other. But one can make the other to evoke the same experience by helping her/him to create conditions, so that s/he too can make the experience of the Divine for her/himself. Since the experience made by a person is unique, it is also different in each case. What one experiences is not the whole of the Divine Reality but only a glimpse or just an insight into the Truth of the Divine Reality, called "faith" or "religious experience" or "God-experience". It is an unfathomable, indescribable experience, characterised by Rudolf Otto as "tremendous" (*tremendum*) and "fascinating" (*fascinosum*)[4]. This can truly be a moment of "enlightenment" (*Kairos, jivanmukta, nirvana, kaivalya*), a moment to obtain an intuition into the nature of the Divine. This experience can be lasting, inspiring, transformative, giving rise to the dawn of a new vision, a new awareness and of a new mission.

We said, that this experience in itself is ineffable, incommunicable, inexpressible, and non transferable. For that matter no experience is factually communicable. One cannot communicate the pain s/he feels in her/his body, but s/he can only communicate through crying, yelling etc., that s/he is experiencing intense pain in her/his body. Only the body language gives a glimpse into the experience of pain undergone by the patient.

But throughout the history of humankind all sages and saints have attempted to communicate their experience to others. When they did it, they could do it within the categories of conceptual schemes of their thinking and within the cultural context of their existence. The apophatic way of "not this not that" (*neti neti*)[5] is very important here; then there is the analogical, metaphorical, symbolic and also the positive way of speaking about the Divine. In doing this each religious tradition gets rooted in a culture that becomes an integral component of the belief-systems. The original experience of the Divine is sometimes called, "faith", and truth-statements formulated in a particular conceptual categories are called "beliefs". As the experience of the Divine is unique in each case, the faith content too will be different in each case. The faith filters down into beliefs and truth propositions giving rise to a particular religious tradition. The different religious traditions or world religions are nothing but the expressions in particular cultural and historical contexts of the *different* human-Divine encounters had by sages,

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[4] Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, Breslau: 1917; *The Idea of the Holy*. Trans. John W. Harvey. Oxford: 1923; 2nd ed., 1950.
[5] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 2, 3, 6; 3,9,26; 4,2, 4; 4,4,22; 4.5.15; In Christian Tradition this is called *via negativa*. Cf. Beatrice Bruteau, "Global Spirituality and the Integration of East and West", Cross Currents, ed. By William Birmingham, New York: 1989, 201f.

religious founders and reformers. We can assert that the different religious experiences are the hall mark of plurality of religions as they explain why one religion is different from the other.

The self manifestation of the Holy certainly is the Ground of our all religious experience and it is characterised as the Being, the One, the Holy, the Transcendent, the Absolute and the Ultimate Reality. Can we ask whether all religious experiences or human-Divine encounters point at the same Absolute or Ultimate Reality? Is what we call the Divine or Holy, ultimately the same for all those who have experienced it. Is it the One? In other words, do all religions admit an Ultimate Reality, the Ground of Being, the Absolute?[6] Though almost all the religions admit the Divine, the Holy, but all do not characterise it in the same way – as it transcends all categories of thought and speech. The apophatism is to be recognised as quite natural as the Absolute can only be expressed negatively as "not this not that", *"neti neti"* (Upanishads). But religions also refer to it in positive names, as God, Yahweh, Allah, Brahman, Nirvana/ Tathatha, Tao[7], etc. Rightly therefore the Vedas declare that the "One Being, the sages call it by different names"[8] (*ekam sat, viprā bahudā vadanti).* Faced by Polytheism, the Vedic believer wanted to give expression to his faith that ultimately the devotee worships and believes in only one God.

The question of Truth being a bone of contention among the religions, we need to clarify at this point that there is ultimately one Ultimate Truth, the Absolute Truth, the Absolute and Eternal Existent. The Divine Encounter of the seekers makes them possible to have some intuitive experience of this Truth partially to the extent of their limited potentiality. All religions nevertheless have the right to claim Absolute Truth as the Ultimate Reality[9]. When they affirm what they believe is absolutely true, they actually express their Faith in the Ultimate Ground of their being and not the total knowledge of the Absolute Truth in itself. Hence the truth propositions or belief statements are nothing but the conceptualised and linguistically expressed formulations of their faith content or the limited experience of the Absolute Truth. Moreover, they are all limited to the community of believers and can rightly be called as "communitarian absolutes". They are "absolutely true" only for the believers of a particular religious tradition as they have to accept them unconditionally. When they personalise these

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[6] At least there is congruence among the prophetic religions on this point: "Hear , O Israel, The Lord our God is One Lord" Deut. 6:4; ref. also Is 45:5; Is 43: 11; MK 12:29-30; Mt. 22:37-38; Quran affirms same doctrine: "Our God and your God, is One" Surah 29:46; "There is no God but one (*illa ana)*" Surah 16:2; 21:14; In Vedanta tradition we have the expression "One-without-a – second" to refer to the Ultimate Reality: "ekam eva advitiyam" Chandogya Upanishad 6, 2 , 2; Brahman is said to also called "Supreme Being" " satyasya satyam" Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 2, 1, 20; In Buddhism we have the concepts like Nirvana, Sunyata, Tathata; similarly the concept of Tao in Chinese Religions; Cf. John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion: The Challenge of other Religions, Oxford: 1989, 293-95, 375-376.

[7] These are homeomorphic way of expressing the same reality, namely, they function homologously within the respective religion and culture. Raimundo Panikkar, Intra-Religious Dialogue, Bangalore: 1984, 70ff.

[8] Rig Vea 1, 64, 46. Concretely in our case it means "one God, many Religions/Theologies". The statement upholds diversity and plurality of perspectives in theological thinking.

[9] Amaladoss*, op. cit.,* 239-241.

truth-statements as soteriological and bear witness to them – even to the extent of martyrdom – they become their "existential absolutes" or "subjective absolutes", absolutes which constitute their faith to which they commit themselves wholeheartedly and with all their being.

The meaning of plurality therefore is grounded in the unique character of the experience of the Divine in each case by the founder of that religion or by the community to which God manifested or revealed himself as a response to their striving to have religious experience. This is the faith of the community. This faith is transmitted from generation to generation and in the process gets systematised in terms of doctrines, moral codes and cultic practices. When faith is expressed in a particular language it receives a linguistic mantle and when it gets rooted in a culture it obtains cultural garb. It gets particularised and gradually becomes autonomous reality within a definite worldview. All this explains the pedagogy of plurality of religions.

What are the conclusions we can draw up from our explanation of plurality of religious traditions? We would like to formulate three important conclusions: (i) Every Religious tradition has its right to affirm: its identity based on its primordial encounter with the Divine, its beliefs or truth-propositions, its freedom to formulate them in the form of doctrines, teach them, propagate them and create internal institutions to interpret them. (ii) no one who is not a member of the community of believers has the right to interfere, condemn or pass value judgements on their belief systems and practices. On the other hand, every religion has the right to be recognised and respected by others. (iii) Any coercion, force or violence exerted from outside to forbid or intimidate the believers from practicing their religion can be considered as unlawful and unethical.

A metaphor from the sports world could offer us an insight into the plurality of religions. Different games can be compared to different religions. If one desires to be a global icon of the game, s/he should engage in it whole heartedly, with total commitment focussing all the energies towards mastering the game. It demands regular practice, perfect knowledge of all the rules and norms, willingness and determination to observe all of them meticulously etc. etc. The game can be compared to the religion one follows and the players are the believers. The believers should be committed to the religious doctrines and the practices to become good religious persons accepted by the community. S/He should manifest that through the observance of all the laws and norms of the particular religion and concentrate her/himself to intensify her/his religious experience.

A player, though expert in one game, need not ignore or reject the others. He can take interest in other games, be a good spectator or even sometime play and participate in the game in order to show fellowship with the other players. Similar is the case in religions. Through study and dialogue believers can show interest in religions other than theirs by showing respect, recognition, appreciating the good in them and by relating freely with people who belong to them. This sort of understanding we promote between different religions.

We would like to make a distinction between plurality and pluralism. When plurality gives greater scope for interreligious interactions, pluralism promotes building of borders around each religion providing scope for fundamentalism and relativism. Pluralism can lead to the affirmation of the identities to the extent of either exclusivism or inclusivism. Pluralism can also become competitive, each one claiming, "my religion is the only true religion".[10]

The concept of plurality posits no fixed borders between the religions; it gives scope to remain open to other religions, admits that each religion is "different", encouraging interaction and dialogue between them. It finds no difficulty to respect, recognise and accept the identities and autonomy of other religions. It takes the attitude "live and let live".

3.3. *The Exercise of De-theologisation in Religious Traditions*

De-theologisation is a need for all religious traditions and to be considered as a process of renewal and purification as well as contextualisation of its theologies remaining always open to the world and also to the aspirations, needs and existential exigencies of believers. It can be seen from two different perspectives, *ad intra* and *ad extra.*

De-theologisation *ad intra* can be delineated as:
- A sincere striving to recapture the original experience of the human-Divine encounter and attempting to renew constantly the faith observances and teachings, having read the signs of the times.
- Basing on the above to make attempts to reinterpret the scriptures and restate the belief statements, moral codes and cultic practices.
- To transmit the spiritual heritage of the religious tradition from generation to generation and for this purpose to respond to the historical exigencies and living conditions of the community of believers.

Secondly, de-theologisation *ad extra*, means the openness of a particular tradition to other religions traditions, its correlation and collaboration and appreciation of the people of other faiths as co-pilgrims marching towards the same goal. For this all religious traditions need a sense of humility to accept its own limitations and inadequacies to comprehend the Absolute in its totality and accept it as a Mystery just to be contemplated. This should give rise to an understanding that a particular religious tradition cannot grasp the entire plan of salvation for the entire humanity envisaged by the Divine Mystery. No religious tradition can claim absolute knowledge about the Absolute, nor can it claim to be in possession of the Absolute Truth in itself. The salvation of humanity is in the hand of God and it is his prerogative. No religious tradition can claim that it is in possession of the full plan of God to save humanity. Each

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[10] Amaladoss, *op. cit.*, 193-244.

religious tradition remains in total indebtedness to the Supreme Mystery which has revealed its plan of salvation in accordance with the divine will to it, but never in a perfect manner. Acknowledging this each religious tradition should collaborate and cooperate with other traditions to build up a humanity where peace and harmony prevails so that the different religious traditions do not exist as rivals but each attempts to probe into the inscrutable Divine Mystery and responds to the revelation granted to each religious tradition within the historical and cultural exigencies.

This actually means the shedding off of the superiority of "faith-complex", lurking within the tradition. In the metaphor of games explained above, we see there is no objective criterion to determine the hierarchy of their superiority. The players play the game they have chosen to the best of their ability and commit themselves to it. The believers live their own religious faith to the best of their ability and commit themselves to it. There is no neutral point from where one can judge superiority of one religion over the other.

 If any religion confesses that their theological perspectives hinder them to participate in the interreligious dialogue, then that religion should de-theologise itself, so that it divests itself of all theological obstacles to interreligious dialogue, and actively engages to create a humanised world. This isolation is a mark of fundamentalistic mind set, which can prove very pernicious to humankind. If the religions fail to de-theologise themselves, there will be only conflicts and violence in the world[11]. Religions too will become the cause of destruction and annihilation. Instead of propagating peace and harmony they will propagate only hatred and vengeance.

3.4. *Interreligious Dialogue[12] and Creation of a Humanised World*

To create a humanised world, bereft of all violence and discriminations, has been a prominent concern of Raúl Fornet-Betancourt in all his academic as well as other endeavours. Intercultural Interactions very specially the international congresses and the publications of all the papers presented during the congresses are to be seen from this perspective. Religions are all rooted in the culture in which they emerged. The religious experience is given concrete expression always within a culture. Culture remains inseparable from conceptualisation process of the religious experience which in itself transcends all conceptualisations. We approach Interreligious Dialogue from this perspective.

If each religion is autonomous entity with its own absolutes then why there should be interaction among them and how this interaction can be realised? Religious

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[11] Vincent Gabriel Furtado, "Intercultural Conflicts from Asian Perspectives", in *Intercultural Philosophy from Indian Perspective*, Bangalore: 2004, 25-48.
[12] Henry O'Thomson (Ed.), *World Religions in Dialogue*. Delhi. 1993; Raimon Panikkar, *Intra Religious Dialogue*, Bangalore: 1984; Dupuis, *op. cit.*, 360-84. Robert Schreiter, "Theology, Culture, and Dialogue in a New Millennium", in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 13 (2003), 30-40.

consciousness as we delineated is one dimension of the human consciousness, along with others like scientific, ethical and aesthetic. Human life is to be seen in a holistic perspective, and intercultural and interreligious interactions too are to be seen as partial dimensions of the existence of human beings. No man is an island. Social interactions are integral part of human existence. Being in the world is also being with. The other is given to us primordially. Human engagement in the world is connected with the human affairs, which include social, political, cultural, academic and cultural.

The Religious experience, if genuine, can only promote humanisation of the world. Having experienced the Divine, every believer is sent forth in to the world to rebuild and recreate the human world, through human interactions. We deal with two dimensions of Interreligious Dialogue: the practical and the theological. The practical dialogue creates an atmosphere for discussion on more complex issues connected with theological discourse. It is not necessary to elaborate the global phenomenon of dialogue in every aspect of human activity in the contemporary world. Regarding interreligious dialogue we have the succinct expression of Hans Küng which summarises its significance in establishing a human world where peace should reign supreme at all times:

There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

There ca be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

There can be no dialogue between the religions without research into theological foundations.[13]

We believe that practical dialogue can go a long way in establishing peace among the nations and also among the religions, which in turn can give a fillip to theological dialogue.

3.4.1. *Practical Dialogue and Humanization*

The purpose of all interreligious dialogue is humanisation or creation of a more human world, where the ties of universal of sister/brotherhood are strengthened and deepened in an atmosphere of peace and freedom. Believers come together to fulfil their task to enrich life on earth and make it meaningful for everybody. There is no other force that can do it efficaciously but the believers fired with the teachings of the sages and founders of religions. No founder has ever preached to hate one another; mutual love, collaboration, concern, care and understanding are the primary teachings of all religious scriptures. Humanisation means creating a human world where every one is a good neighbour, every one feels accepted, respected, forgiven, and appreciated.[14]

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[13] Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, London: 1991, 105.
[14] S. Devaraj, "M.M. Thomas - A New Humanity at the Encounter of Religions and Secular Ideologies", in *Spirituality of Dialogue*, ed. by. Augustine Thottakara, Bangalore: 1994, 159-168.

Such dialogue can start through what Habermas calls, "communicative praxis"[15], namely, making our relationships more intense at all practical levels of daily life, so that the persons with whom we live no longer remain as strangers but become my good neighbours. Present day society is becoming more and more pluralistic with people of different cultures and religions forming "neighbourhoods" resulting in more and more interactions in daily affairs like travels, work environments, encounters in business and marketing. These unorganized, spontaneous interactions, considered as "life dialogue" could be made goal oriented through the formation of "base human communities". What should be the incentive for people to come together purposefully? The incentive could be to form "neighbourhood communities"[16] where each one not only "lives" as a neighbour of the other, but intentionally feels and interacts as a neighbour to the other. This could be made possible through common sharing. What will they share or what could make the ball rolling? What one eager to share is his own human experience and the most significant human experience in each one's life is the experience of "suffering" in its various forms: ill-health, pain, oppression, exploitation, injustice, rejection, discrimination etc. When people come together to "share" the stories of their own experiences of suffering in the context of a listening partner, there should certainly be formation of closer ties of friendship resulting in mutual concern and care.

The second step in the process of "communicative praxis" is discovering "solutions" to the situations that bring about suffering. The religion can certainly have a role to play here. Every religion claims to liberate humanity from its plight of suffering; every religion attempts to alleviate human experience of pain through its own "soteriology". No one can deny the fact of a "soteriological core" in any world religion. The proximate goal of dialogue at this level is to work out strategies that will bring about liberation from human sufferings. These stories of soteriology shared by the partners of dialogue need not be in agreement with each other, they may even contradict one another. But that should not matter for the effectiveness of dialogue and building up deeper relationships.

The next step of practical dialogue could be to engage in some concrete action plan which will alleviate the sufferings and bring about some experience of liberation to partners of dialogue in particular and to humanity in general. Wonderful are the welfare programmes organized by the different religions all over the world. But hardly any attempt has been made where leaders of different religious traditions coming together to plan a common venture of the nature of social service of any hue. The practical dialogue should in future produce fruits through humanitarian engagements by the representatives of different religions. Ultimately the religions could play a supreme role in wiping out from the face of this earth all the causes which generate violence, hatred,

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[15] George Warnke, "Communicative Rationality and Cultural Values", in Stephen K. White, *Habermas,* Cambridge: 1995, 120-142; Donald Moon, "Practical Discourse and communicative ethics", *ibid.* 143-165; cf. also Mary Ann Stenger, "Gadamer's Hermeneutics as a Model for Cross-Cultural Understanding and Truth in Religion", in *Religious Pluralism and Truth,* edited by Thomas Dean, Delhi: 1997, 151-170.
[16] M.D. Thomas, "Dialogue of Religions – A Field of Approach", *Kristu Jyothi,* Vol.18, No. 4 (Dec. 2002), 352 f.

oppression, exploitation and inequality. They can attenuate the sufferings of humankind making this planet more human where interrelationships become *de facto* cordial. All this is possible if through dialogue we build up mutual trust and confidence.

The effects of "practical" or "life"-dialogue could be multifarious: it can break down the artificial wall of suspicion and hostility that separates one religious community from another. It can demythologize the religious stereotypes through which we attribute our vague mental impressions and prejudices to a whole group of people. It can open new channels of communication at personal and group levels resulting gradually in the elimination of unexamined religious stereotypes. Practical dialogue finally can prepare people socially and psychologically to relate with one another as friends. The ties of friendships could become stronger through deeper and deeper levels of sharing making dialogue as the most effective media not only for resolving conflicts but also for building up strong "neighbourhood communities" where people come together to share, to discuss matters of concern and even to pray.

What can really obstruct dialogue is the tendency to pass value judgements regarding the belief systems, truth proposals and practices of other religions. Certainly the doctrinal foundation of each religion might be subjected to critical examination but passing of value judgements should be carefully avoided. This is because every religion has the right to formulate and defend its beliefs; secondly, the basic assumptions of one religion cannot be easily interpreted from the standpoint of another. Evaluative judgements are prone to misunderstanding and can lead to sterile controversy and thus hamper dialogue.

3.4.2. *Theological Dialogue*

The Theological Dialogue is an outcome of practical dialogue that attempts sincerely to get the first hand experience of the belief structure of other religions. "It should be initiated with courage and sincerity, with the greatest freedom and with reverence"[17] What could be the purpose of such a dialogue? There could be three-fold goals for it: (i) a sincere effort by partners of dialogue "to purify their knowledge of religions other than their own from all prejudices, misunderstandings, and distortions";[18] (ii) a combined effort of persons belonging to different systems of belief to arrive at a working consensus on conceptions of transcendental and human values, (iii) to discover complementarities and overlapping in the belief structures of different religions through scientific and critical comparative studies which can promote peace and harmony through better interreligious understanding.[19]

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[17] *S.U. Humanae Personae Dignitatem,* 28, 1968, II.1.
[18] Dupuis, *op. cit.*, 358-384.
[19] Cf. Joseph Moelleur, "Troeltsch, Comparative Theology and the conversation with Hinduism; Toward a comparative Systematic Theology", in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 11 (2001) 2, 133- 47; Hendrick M. Vroom, "Keith Ward's Comparative Christian Systematic Theology", in *Studies in Interreligious Dialouge*, 11(2001) 1, 93-99; Alfred De Souza, *op. cit.*, 21; Bruteau, *op. cit.*, 193-215.

The dialogue at this level is an intellectual discussion among the experts regarding the fundamental issues of religious beliefs and a rigorous analysis of the religious convictions held by the representatives of different religions. Such a theological dialogue presupposes a certain openness and receptivity to the religious beliefs and practices characteristic of religions other than one's own. If the dialogue is conducted in an atmosphere of mutual trust, it will have a paradoxical effect: it can deepen one's own faith and commitment and can also make one understand the differentiation which separates one religion from the other. It can also give rise to a change of attitude toward the beliefs and practices of other religions. This implies that representatives of various religions, without denying their religious affiliations and denominational loyalties, should be able through theological discussion, to relate to each other in non-sectarian terms. The practical and theological types of dialogue are analytically different but empirically closely related, each of them performing complementary function, but both proceeding simultaneously.

One question needs to be answered, namely, the nature of religious belief is such that it demands a total commitment from its adherents. Can this fact of wholehearted commitment to one particular world-view be a hindrance to theological dialogue? Such a commitment need not necessarily be an obstruction for dialogue if dialogue partners entertain desire to understand the other and also to be understood by the other. On the other hand, such a commitment could even be considered as a precondition for theological dialogue in the sense that it can make sharing more genuine coming out of deeper convictions[20].

Finally, we need to stress that the theological dialogue has its inherent shortcomings and limitations. The Communitarian Absolutes we elaborated above are non-transferable from one worldview to another worldview. The truth statements or beliefs of one religious tradition are meaningful only in so far one can accept the faith content of the tradition. The belief in Transmigration among the Asian religions and the belief in the Resurrection in the Christian tradition, for example, can never be changed or transferred from one tradition to the other. Dialogue can help to understand what the Transmigration *means* in Asian religions and what Resurrection *means* in Christianity. The purpose of dialogue here is only to understand the other and to be understood by the other. This highlights the principle of plurality of religions and the autonomy of belief structures.

But there can be a deeper understanding of another religious tradition at the level of experience. Swami Abhishiktananda, a Christian French missionary (H. Le Saux) came to India and sought throughout his life the *advaitic* experience of Vedanta tradition, had achieved his goal and appropriated the experience of "I am Brahman" (aham Brahmasmi)[21], at the same time continued to be a Christian till the end of his life[22]. If

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[20] Cf. Abhishiktananda, Depth-Dimension of Dialogue" Vidyajyothi, 1981. 45 (1981), 202-221.
[21] *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1, 4, 10; The same experience is also expressed through the phrase "*tattvam asi*" "that thou art" *Chandogya Upanishad* 6. 8.7.

this experience could be explicated into Asian categories of thought, there could be the dawn of Asian Christian Theology sooner than later[23].

3.5. *Toward Asian Christian Theology*

Christianity was brought to Asia by Western Missionaries and it is just a minority among other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism. Shintoism etc., with 2.27% including the Christians in Philippines and only 1.47% if we exclude Philippine Christians[24]. As long as the colonial powers ruled Asian nations the Christians tacitly enjoyed a privileged position, but once they left, the indigenous governments took over the baton to rule the nations and they became suspicious of Christianity. Christians they declared have double allegiance, one to their religion whose sacred sanctuaries are abroad; and their allegiance to the nation is only secondary, hence the doubt regarding the patriotism of Christians. The strong example for this is to be seen in India, where V.D. Savarkar founded a movement called Hindutva to propagate cultural nationalism. He wrote:

"Christians and Muslims had potentially 'extraterritorial loyalties', as their 'holy lands were outside the territory of India, and they could not be counted as Hindus. …they could not be true Hindus, as they never would devote themselves fully to India because they had chosen to have another 'holy land'. If on the other hand, they gave up their 'alien' belief they could be admitted back in the Hindu fold as true Hindus"[25] .

Such being the attitude present almost in all the countries of Asia, the Christians in Asia have a challenging task of bringing about a radical mutation among compatriots in their attitude toward Christianity through authentic life witness and this is necessary for their very survival. The two important means for this are interreligious dialogue and inculturation; the latter is to be considered as an important component of the former as it should outgrow from the former if it is to be efficacious among compatriots and lasting. The interreligious dialogue, as we delineated above should become the life line of communication and should go on ceaselessly. The second means, namely, inculturation, demands further explanation.

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[22] Amaladoss, *op. cit.*, 146-148; Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaita Experience*, Delhi: 1984; *The Further Shore*, 2nd Ed. Delhi 1984.
[23] Dupuis, *op. cit.*, 268-278.
[24] S.J. Emmanuel, "Asian Churches for new Evangelization: Chances and Challenges", in *East Asian Pastoral Review,* 36 (1999), 252-275.
[25] V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva*, Bombay: 1969, 115; cf. also Thomas Bloom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, Oxford: 1999, 67 f.; Yvon Ambrose, "Hindutva's Real Agenda and Strategies", in *Hindutva, An Indian Christian Response,* Bangalore : 2002, 11- 102. Anderson W.K. and S.D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron, The Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, New Delhi: 1987; M.S. Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined,* Nagpur: 1947; M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, Bangalore : 1966.

It is evident that the Christians in Asia should with all seriousness continue the process of inculturation[26], begun so enthusiastically after the Vatican II[27] but then the initial euphoria visible aftermath of Vatican II is almost extinct. What may be the reasons? One important cause is the faulty pedagogy followed. Inculturation can never become successful if it is worked out by few theologians from the ivory-tower of isolation;[28] it should be initiated, on the other hand, from the grass root level as a movement from below with intense catechesis on culture and faith, explicating what the components of each are and what way the faith we profess and live can be implanted in any culture without losing its essence but making it more meaningful and intelligible to the adherents.

What is the pedagogy to be followed for inculturation? The first step should be a thorough catechesis of indigenous culture and faith simultaneously at every parish and every primary school level, starting from the very first standard and continuing up to adult catechesis. The indigenous cultural and religious symbols on the one hand and the adapted theological nomenclature on the other, should penetrate every Christian family, fully understanding their meaning from Christian perspective. Only then they could become part of the training of clergy and that of official doctrinal pronouncements and finally enter into the cultic practices.

An example of this can be seen in the history of religion; when Buddhism was transferred from India to China by the Buddhist Monks, the Buddhist doctrines were explained in terms of Chinese conceptual categories so that they become intelligible to people of China and readily acceptable to them. It gave rise to Chinese Theology of Buddhism at the end. Similar process should have been followed by the Missionaries when faith was brought to Asia in the 16th century but the Missionaries had identified Christianity with European (Graeco-Roman) culture and hence their endeavours were hardly successful to implant Christianity in Asia, on the contrary, even those who became Christians were westernised.

It means that the Christianity that we have in Asia is a westernised Christianity. Hence to think of Asian Theology, first of all, the Christians in Asia must de-westernise themselves[29]. This is easily said than done, as it is more difficult to undo something than to do it afresh. The process is doubly difficult because of all pervasive globalisation,

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[26] Jacques Dupuis, "Inculturation and Interreligious Dialobue in India Today" in *A Universal Faith? Peoples, Cultures, Religions, an d the Christ*, ed. C. Cornille and V. Neckebrouck, Louvain: 1992, 27-47.

[27] Cf. Also *Nostra Aetate* : 1 and 2; *Lumen Gentium* : 16; *Gaudium et Spes*: 22; *Ad Gentes* : 9 and 11; *Dignitatis Humanae*: 2 and 3; Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam,* (1964), no. 63; Dupuis, Religious Pluralism, 161-169; Ruokanen Miikanen, "The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council", in *Studies in Christian Mission*, Vol. 7, Leiden, New York: 1992; Sebastian Painadath, "Christ, Church and the Diversity of Religions." *Jeevadhara*, XXVIII, No. 165.

[28] The best example of failure in inculturation is the Indian Rite Mass, which was worked out by a few theologians integrating only the Sanksrit Sruti tradition, and introduced without providing time for incubation and without any grass root level catechesis.

[29] "Asians do have a right and a duty to question and challenge the validity, relevance and suitability of a theology formulated in Europe and imposed on Asia as the one and only theology", S. J. Emmanuel, *op. cit.*, 270.

due to which the western influence is seen in all aspects of life all over the world. The dress people wear, the music, the dance, the entertainment and even the architecture etc. have almost transcended the borders of indigenous cultures and taken a global hue. For example, when all in the assembly wear western dress, how can the celebrant of the holy rites wear indigenous dress, that too only within the precincts of the sanctuary, and call it inculturation?

Inculturation at the level of Theology poses still greater difficulties. Most of the theologians in Asia go to Europe for their higher studies and return fully impregnated with western categories of thought and even life style. How can they transform themselves to think in Eastern Categories and develop an Asian Theology? If Asian Christians are serious about developing Asian Christian Theology, they should then master the scriptures of Asian Religions in the original languages and transform their thinking patterns. Secondly, there cannot be much progress if it is done by a handful of theologians. All the theologians of every nation should come together and launch into the venture fully supported by the hierarchy and the results of their research should percolate and filter down to the grass root level of catechesis at the primary level of parishes and schools giving birth to a mass movement of Asian Christian Theology. For this we can only hope for the birth of future messiahs and visionaries who being fired by the zeal of the Gospel rush into a well thought of systematic project called, "Asian Christian Theology".

3.6. *Few Characteristics of Asian Christian Theology*

One can finally ask the question. "what should be the main characteristics of Asian Christian Theology?". We understand that a single person just cannot formulate and dictate the Characteristics of Asian Christian Theology, but it should a cumulative endeavour of all theologians and custodians of faith[30]. Nevertheless, to present a few stray ideas on this point just for reflection, we can enumerate the following characteristics for the consideration of the persons engaged in this task.

The Christianity being a global religion, the theological movements in various continents should be interconnected in their hermeneutical solidarity. The Asian Christian Theology can allow itself to be inspired by the methodological segments of Latin American and African theologies. Meanwhile the coherence in the proclamation of one Christian faith is to be emphasised, retaining and confirming its catholicity.

The Asian Christian Theology should be less androcentric, and to do this, it should orient itself towards eliminating gender asymmetry from the very beginning. It will not

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[30] Around eighty theologians came together in Seoul and formulated four guiding principles for the growth of Asian Christian Theology. (1) "The Bible, not theologians, is to speak in our theology. (2) Jesus Christ, the only incarnate Son of God, is unique. (3) Mission centred theology aiming to communicate the gospel to the lost is the best protection against syncretism. (4) Love should be the essential part of an Asian Theology." Cf. http://mb-soft.com/believe/txo/asian.html.

be an exaggeration if some label Asian Religions as more androcentric than others. As an instance we can cite the recent High Court verdict of Bombay dated 30th March 2016 which declared that the access to women into the temples is a human right issue and ordered them entry into the sacred precincts. This is only a legal position, but in practice women are not allowed to visit sometimes even the premises of sacred shrines in many places of worship in Asia. First of all, the interreligious dialogue should eventually create an attitude towards the elimination of all androcentrism in the Religions of Asia. Secondly, the Asian Christian Theology that we envisage should take into account this gender asymmetry in Asian Religions and create a new theology with firm scriptural foundations which promotes the welfare of both genders on equal equations.

The Asian Christian Theology should drink abundantly from the mystic springs of Asian Religions. Though Christian Tradition has a strong mystic and contemplative spirituality, the Christianity propagated by the western missionaries have not integrated this contemplative tradition in the living practices of Christian faith in Asia. They have taught us to "say prayers" and "sing hymns", but never taught the faithful how to practice silence or stay in a contemplative posture opening the heart to the Spirit of God. Hardly any Christian family devotes any time for meditation. It will not be an exaggeration if we say that Christian prayers are mostly an exercise in verbosity or a display of sheer noise. Silence and Contemplation appear to be the privilege of only monks in the monasteries and not that of Christian families. But Asian Religions have a strong family tradition of meditation. We observe family members of Asian Religions setting aside time for silence and meditation in a fixed posture to re-capture the original experience of human-Divine encounter. The emerging Asian Christian Theology should encourage and build up a tradition of silence and contemplation in the Christian families.

Much is spoken of already by many theologians regarding the praxis of emancipation and liberation as an integral part of Asian Christian Theology. This to be seen in the context of Catholic population: in India more than 50% of Catholic population is from Dalit tradition. They were baptised with the assurance that they will be freed from all exploitation from higher castes; they will be provided a real existential experience of the Christian sister/brotherhood and the like. But discrimination is far from absent even in Christian Churches, with assignment of separate seating arrangement for higher and lower castes during liturgy, spatial allocations according to the Caste hierarchy in the cemeteries, so forth and so on - to quote a few instances. The Asian Church should liberate itself from all these anti-Christian practices. The universal sister/brotherhood is the supreme doctrine of the Gospels inculcated in the spiritual heritage of the Christianity, but sometimes ignored and overlooked deliberately by the young Churches of Asia. A Christian Church that does not listen to the cry of the poor, the suffering, exploited and oppressed is *de facto* unchristian. No Christian Theology worth the name can emerge within Asia if it fails to strive hard to do away asymmetries and discriminations within its fold.

Asian Christian theology should finally be truly Asian in spirit and fact, which means it should integrate Asian cultures and socio-political and mercantile realities on the one hand and constantly remain open and porous to other Asian Religions. It should positively uphold the principles of plurality of religions delineated above and never be afraid to accept and integrate within its theological thinking what is good in them, so that Christian Theology of Asia grows and spreads its attractive wings in efficacy and influence not through any false propaganda and coercion but through the radiations of love that warms up the hearts of the believers of other faiths.