



OUR BIBLICAL FAITH AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

- Our theological understanding of religious plurality begins with our faith in the one God who created all things, living God present and active in all creation from the beginning. The Bible testifies to God as God of all nations and peoples whose love and compassion includes all humankind.
- People everywhere, at all times witness to their encounters with the Living God.
- They speak of both seeking and of having found salvation or wholeness or enlightenment or divine guidance or rest or liberation.
- For us Christian, our testimony is that salvation is through Christ. At the same time, we acknowledge and affirm that God is at work among all people and nations - any wisdom, insight, knowledge, understanding, love and holiness that is found among us is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Also God is with them as they struggle, along with us, for justice and liberation.
- 'The Spirit of God is at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected. In entering into dialogue with others, therefore, Christians seek to discern the unsearchable riches of Christ and the way God deals with humanity' (Mission and Evangelism).
- The one God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has not left Himself without witness, anywhere (Act 14:17).

RENEWED CHRISTOLOGY

In Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word the entire human family has been united to God in an irrevocable bond and covenant. The saving presence of God's activity in all creation and human history comes to its focal point in the event of Christ.

In Jesus' words and action, in His proclamation, in His ministry of healing and service, God was establishing God's reign on earth, a sovereign rule whose presence and power cannot be limited to any one community or culture. The attitudes of Jesus

as >He reached out to those beyond the house of Israel testify to this universal reign. He spoke with the woman of Samaria, affirming all who would worship God in Spirit and truth (Jn. 4:7-24). He marvelled at the faith of the centurion, acknowledging that He had not found such faith in all Israel (Mt. 8:5-11). For the sake of a Syro-Phoenician woman and in response to her faith. He performed a miracle of healing (Mt. 15:21-28).

But while it appears that the saving power of the reign of God made present in <Jesus during <his earthly ministry was in some sense limited (Mt. 10:23), through the event of His death and resurrection, the paschal mystery itself, these limits were transcended. The cross and the resurrection disclose for us the universal dimension of the saving mystery of God.

Saving mystery is available to those outside the fold of Christ (Jn. 10:16) in ways we cannot understand as they live faithful and truthful lives in their concrete circumstances and in the framework of the religious traditions which guide and inspire them.

We also learn that the activity of the Holy Spirit as beyond our definitions, descriptions and limitations as “the wind blows where it wills” (Jn. 3:8).

It is within the realm of the Spirit that we are able to interpret the truth and goodness of other religions and distinguish the “things that differ” so that our “love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment” (Phil 1:9-10). The Holy Spirit, the Interpreter of Christ and of our own Scriptures (Jn. 14:26) will lead us to understand afresh the deposit of the faith already given to us and into fresh and unexpected discovery of new wisdom and insights.

EXCLUSIVE BIBLICAL TEXTS AND DIALOGUE

Even as Vatican II has unambiguously pronounced that inter-religious dialogue is an essential part of being Christian and that the Church’s involvement with other religions is mandatory, many Catholics continue to harbour a distrust of other religions as well as a distrust of activities of interreligious dialogue. Moreover, some even out rightly condemn interreligious dialogue as compromising on the Christian faith and see it as not serving the Christian cause.

“Whoever does not believe has already been condemned because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (Jn 3:18).

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6).

“There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given by the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12).

These seemingly exclusive texts pose a problem to interreligious dialogue. Theologians tried to provide various interpretations (suggests plausible way of looking at) of these Biblical texts.

THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT

It is important to realise that the biblical texts quoted above are but just a few verses within an entire Bible of many thousands of verses. It is thus dangerous to develop a whole theology or missiology on the basis of just a few verses. They have always to be taken in the context of what the entire Bible is saying.

For example, other parts of the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed more as a teacher, a healer of the sick, one who forgives sinners, one who eats with the outcasts, one who welcomes the poor and one who is exemplary in love and compassion.

Jesus of the Bible and the God he preached do not look as if he would condemn people to eternal hellfire just for not knowing the name of Jesus.

FAITH LANGUAGE IS LOVE LANGUAGE

Does this mean, then that the exclusive Biblical texts be regarded as irrelevant? They are integral part of our faith tradition and our belief systems. However, it is important to remember that they are statements of faith about Jesus by Christians. Therefore, they cannot be used as judgements upon other religions. They hold enormous significance for Christian people but cannot be imposed on peoples of other religions. It is “faith language” which most of the religions have these texts using exclusivist and absolutist language.

SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST

“We ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God” offers to every person the possibility of salvation (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22). Just as the Christian would like the Buddhist to respect her / his faith claim, it is therefore important that the Christian also respects the Buddhist’s faith claim.

INCLUSIVE BIBLICAL TEXTS AND DIALOGUE

THE GOOD NEWS

Explore what Luke has to say at the beginning of the Galilean Ministry of Jesus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Lk 4:18). It is a salvation from all that is “not good,” meaning all that is bad, oppressive, alienating, unjust and impoverishing to humanity. Thus, this liberating salvation is the Good News which the Christian is invited to live and to preach.

A ten point programme of what this Good News of Christianity is as follows:

1. LOVE IS OF GOD

Christianity is about loving, because love is of God (1Jn 4:7), we also must love one another (1Jn. 4:11). God’s love can only be reciprocated through our love for others. As John says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1Jn 4:20).

2. LOVE OF NEIGHBOUR

Our love for others must be not short of our love for ourselves. In summarising the entire Jewish Law, with its 613 commandments, Jesus identified the greatest commandment as ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This came as no surprise as it was a direct quote of Deuteronomy 6:5 However, it was the second part to this new commandment, taken from Leviticus 19:18, which caused the surprise: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ Thus, the demands of Christianity is high. Not only must the Christian love others, the

Christian's love for others must be as much as it is for her / himself. Christianity's emphasis, therefore, is about self-gift, self-donation and about loving until it hurts.

3. OPTION FOR THE POOR

The Gospel are unequivocal in portraying Jesus as having a preferential option for the poor and marginalised and those discriminated against in his time. These were the tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick, the lepers, the outcasts and those who were religiously discriminated against and oppressed. Thus, while a Christian's love is for everyone, the poor are especially the beneficiaries of this love. And in celebrating the Eucharist, the disciple of Christ is reminded that if one gets to eat and drink until he gets drunk while others starve, then one `will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord` (1 Cor 11:21,27).

4. VOLUNTARY POVERTY

As an expression of one's love for the poor, the Christian accepts voluntary poverty so that the forced poverty of the poor can be reduced. John the Baptist, in preparing the people for the coming of the messiah, invited them to share of their possessions: `Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none` (Lk 3:11). Lazarus, who was a victim of forced poverty, would not have had to go hungry if the rich man was willing to accept voluntary poverty so that Lazar need not only hope for the `scraps that fell from the rich man's table` (Lk 16:21). The rich young man who wanted to gain eternal life was told by Jesus, `If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven` (Mt. 19:21).

5. MOVED WITH COMPASSION

The Christian's response to the poor is always based on a sense of compassion and sensitivity to the needs of the people. Jesus was portrayed in the Gospels as having moved around from town to town in order to heal the sick and give sight to the blind. It was compassion which moved him into action. It was his concern for the people's welfare that motivated him to reach out. Often when he encountered people who needed help, `his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned` (Mt 9:21).

6. OUTSIDERS AS NEIGHBOURS

The Christian's neighbour is not necessarily another Christian/ The parable of the Good Samaritan is explicit about this. Jesus in reply to the lawyer's question, related the story of the Samaritan traveller, a social and religious outsider, who was 'moved with compassion' to help a robbery victim. It was this Samaritan outsider who became neighbour to the victim. Thus, Christianity's injunction 'to love your neighbour' has to extend to persons of all religions. And a fundamental prerequisite of love is respect. Thus, Christians who cannot respect the religion and God of their neighbours show no love to them.

7. DO TO OTHERS AS YOU WANT DONE TO YOU

The Golden Rule of 'do to others as you would have them do to you' (Lk 6:31) is taken seriously in Christianity. Christians who pass judgements on other religions as false and evil invite judgements by others upon themselves and their religions. Also, just as Christians would like to be respected and not be disturbed in their faith in Jesus, it is imperative that Christians too must respect and not disturb the faiths, beliefs and convictions of peoples of their religions.

8. WASH ONE ANOTHER'S FEET

Christianity is about service to others, just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. 'If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet' (Jn 13:13). Moreover, 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve' (Mt 20:28) and so the *raison d'être* of the Church's existence is service to humanity. In other words, the reason for being Christian is so one can be in active unselfish service to peoples, regardless of their religious affiliation. It is in this active and loving service that we truly 'drink the cup' which Jesus drank and are 'baptised with the baptism' which Jesus was baptised in. (cf. Mk 10:38).

9. SELF-EMPTYING

Christians are called to 'humbly regard others as more important than yourselves,' for Christ Jesus 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' (Phil 2:7). Thus, an essential part of being Christian is the ability for kenosis or self-

emptying, following after the footsteps of Jesus the Master. In a way the Church is called, therefore to shed her many external manifestations of wealth, greatness, power and glory in order to be of humble service to humanity. She will then no longer be powerful and so will no longer be able to control and dominate. But if her strength lies in the cross, then her weakness is her strength and she will continue to walk in discipleship in Jesus the crucified Lord.

10. TAKE AND EAT

There is nothing to fear if the Church adopts such a humble stance. She will lose nothing as everything she has is for the giving. In fact, she will be even happier knowing that she has been able to share with other religions as much as possible the spiritual wealth of her Christian tradition. Following the footsteps of her Master, the Church is willing to even become food and drink and `be eaten` by the other religions: `Take this all of you and eat it; this is my body, which is given up for you` (1Cor 11:24). It may happen that some other religions, by taking and learning from the Church might be strengthened and become more attractive and increase in membership. Yet the Church will be happy as she has been able to give of her body to be broken and shared.

SOME THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

- All major religions of the world believe that we owe our existence to the One God, who has created us all from Adam and Eve. This entails that we must respect each other and work together to protect God's creation, which is a gift of peace and love for all God's people.
- The mission of all the prophets had been to denounce evil in the society and thereby invite people to mend their ways and create peace and harmony in the society by establishing justice and equality among people. Christianity has shown openness to cooperate with all forces in the world in their commitment to humanity's struggle to overcome evil, disease and poverty and brings peace and comfort to humanity.

- Although all religions have their own specific expressions of revealed truth, there are certain theological foundations that are common to all. These can be used as the basis for theological reflection leading to joint efforts to promote a more just society.
- Christians believe in the oneness of God, who is the Creator of all people. In this affirmation of monotheism, God is proclaimed as Lord of the world, and hence of all people. Christians believe in a just and righteous God who has created the world for all people with respect for their own dignity, we must join forces to reject every type of discrimination, oppression and injustice whether based on sex, race, colour and religion.
- Sacred Scriptures reveal that the quality of a religious community depends on how it treats its most vulnerable viz. the orphans and widows. In a society where about one third of the children die before the age of six, the faithful are challenged to assure a better future for children and women.
- In most religions God has made the human person as his vice regent on earth so that human beings are called upon to cooperate with God to achieve freedom and prosperity of all human beings.
- Faith is not just a call to personal conversion, but a demand to be involved in social transformation. Regarding Jesus' radical teachings about the restructuring of society by restoring significance to the "nobodies", Albert Nolan writes: The Kingdom of God...will be a society in which there will be no prestige and no status, no division of people into inferior and superior. Everyone will be loved and respected, not because of his education or wealth or ancestry or authority or rank or virtue or other achievements, but because he / she like everybody else is a person.
- Jesus declared that his true family is composed not of his physical kin but of those who do God's will. Jesus' bond with his disciples provided a surrogate

family that transcended class, education, ethnic and gender divisions. This can have a great impact for our world at present. We feel that the emphasis on the Kingdom of God with its connotation of one Human family can help each nation and community to care for the interests of the greater human family rather than just looking at the interests of their own nation, ethnic group or religion.

PASCAL ROBERT OFM