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## Viewpoints: Why Dialogue With Hindus?

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Professor K. Swaminathan wrote: Like Swami Vivekananda, Gandhiji, Ramana Maharishi and the Paramacharya of Kanchi, earnest Christian leaders like Dom Bede Griffiths and Swami Abishiktananda are trying to make all believers in a Higher Power understand, experience and practise their mother-religions better and more fruitfully. In this endeavour Christians here try to communicate the eternal message of Jesus through symbols and modes of worship familiar to Indians. Dom Bede Griffiths also participating in the debate wrote: "There are many different religions in India and many different sects in Hinduism, each with their own distinctive ritual and doctrine, yet sharing a common cultural tradition. It is hoped that by sharing in this common cultural tradition the Christian Churches also may be able to enter the mainstream of Indian Life, bearing their own distinctive witness to the truth, and working together with other religious communities for the good of the country as a whole. It is an urgent need that the different religions of the world should learn to co-operate with one another and not to be a source of division and conflict, as is so often the case. This seems the only way forward for humanity today".

Dialogue then, is a means of achieving inter-religious peace and understanding which is a great need of the world today, not the peace of mere coexistence, not the negative peace of non-alignment but a positive step towards accomplishing God's will for all men of every race and clime and culture. It is not easy: it often does stop at platitudes and generalisations which may be a cover for intellectual cowardice. But positively it reflects the great hunger and thirst of all peoples for establishing a world community in which all forms of injustice can be conquered, suspicions removed, and mutual respect leading to real love, can flourish.

### Why Dialogue With Hindus?

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The Christians of India like the Christians all over the world are a minority amidst "the nations" or peoples other than Christians. Christians in India have the unique privilege of living with a very God conscious people—the Hindus. One cannot help but admire the simple piety of the millions who recently went for a holy dip to Varanasi. The faith, the sincerity and the utter devotion of the devotees are often beyond the understanding of those who believe that a true devotee should express his faith differently, the way Jesus said,

"God is a spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." Symbolic rituals to such devotees are unnecessary and superfluous. Yet a close and in-depth study of Hinduism and Christianity however soon reveals that Christianity is in no way alien to Indian philosophy but a fulfilment or a simpler revelation of sublime Hindu thought and ideals. The elevation of the masses and the recognition of all people as brothers are basic and fundamental to the Christian faith. When the Secular Government and Hindu philosophers speak of these concepts, that they are the reconciling influence of Christianity sown in India, centuries ago, is forgotten. It is therefore essential that there is dialogue between the peoples of the religions of India, to understand each other, to respect each other and to learn from each other.

A pioneer of Hindu Reform movement Raja Ram Mohan Roy found that his religion, the most tolerant of all religions sadly lacked the great virtue of love for one's neighbour. He wrote "The consequence of my long and uninterrupted search into religious truth has been that I found the doctrines of Christ more conducive to inculcate moral principles and better adapted to rational beings than any other that has come to my knowledge". Mahatma Gandhi called "Jesus" the Prince of all Satyagrahis. Few who have read the works of Rabindranath Tagore can fail to see his profound and lofty faith, so akin to Christian thought, and embracing all humanity.

To transform Christian attitudes and to teach followers of Christianity humility and understanding of Hinduism, a greater insight into the sublime heights reached by those stalwarts of Hindu faith is absolutely necessary. The Hindu concept of renunciation of submission, of poverty and austerity is very much a part of the way of life taught and lived by Jesus himself. How different is the life and lifestyle of the princes and leaders of the Christian Church today! The Son of Man had no place to lay His head!

It is only through dialogue and comparative study that the Hindu and the Christian can understand each other's faith. The Christian faith has to be divested of the Western trappings for the Hindu to understand the in-depth philosophy of Christianity. This is the reason why the Church today is keen on inter-cultural liturgies and forms of worship understandable to our Hindu brethren. "Indianising" of Christianity is often looked at doubtfully by many Christians and Hindus alike. The former considers Indianisation as diluting of the faith itself

or compromising, and the latter as a way of proselytising or subtle evangelism. Dialogue is the only way the members of the two faiths can comfortably live with each other in sympathy and harmony and most of all with tolerance of each other's beliefs and faith.

Archbishop Simon Pimento of Bombay in his inaugural address at the Catholic Bishops Conference, put forward very strongly the need for inculturation. He said, "for as long as the people of India do not feel Christianity as part of their own flesh and blood, their own soul (and they do not, even after centuries of the Churches presence in the country) they will not be disposed to accept it. Hence the integration of faith and culture in its complexity and variety is a great challenge to us in India."

Outstanding Christians like De Nobili and C.F. Andrews saw the need of more than dialogue. It was their deep understanding of the need for accepting the culture of the people of India which made them acceptable, honoured and revered by the Hindu millions who knew them—Gopal Krishna Gokale founded the Servants of Indian Society on the lines of the Society of Jesus and the Mahatma conducted a Bible Study Course in the Gujarat National College—thus accepting from another faith, that which is its essence is true acceptance and more valuable to the human soul than just dialogue.

Few Christians can explain the profound significance of the last Supper as did Keshab Chandra Sen, a Hindu of the 19th Century. Jesus said, "He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him". To many this sentence sounds absurd. Several people including Christians have talked of the Mass and the Holy Communion as a cannibalistic ritual. K.C. Sen's understanding is truly sublime, (not only profound, but the most logical). He writes "How could men eat Christ and drink his blood? This was possible in one sense only. In the sense of spiritual identification. That indeed is Christ's mission. He wanted his followers to eat him and assimilate him to their hearts and incorporate him into their very being."

Jesus Christ said "I have not come to destroy but to fulfill"—Therefore from the point of view of the Christian, in order to stress the common humanity of the Community of Man, and because Jesus came to bring peace and goodwill to all mankind, dialogue with those of other faiths is very important and should be very much a part of the programme and mission of the Church. However, as M.M. Thomas says "No Religion or culture could prepare man for an acceptance of

the Gospel of Christ. Only Christ and His spirit operating through the preaching of Gospel produces the preparation and leads men to accept Christ". Christ to be relevant and to be acceptable should be presented to the Hindu as he was an Asiatic human being who lived in an Asian country and who preached a way of life easily understandable to the Asian mind.

**The Ongoing Dialogue \***  
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Dialogue is more than a flippant or merely well-intentioned conversation. And the Hindu Christian Dialogue, in the present state of affairs, demands both a deep experience of one's own tradition and a sufficient knowledge of the other one. We do not begin anew. This dialogue is not of yesterday. It requires a certain knowledge of what has already happened. The history of this Encounter has a loaded karma.

Some twelve million Hindus live today in the West and their number is multiplying. Not all of them are "orthodox" Hindus. Yet the archetypes still come from the Indic traditions. An increasing number of Westerners also have close ties with the Indic subcontinent. Not all of them are "orthodox" Christians. Yet the archetypes still come from the Christian tradition. The mutual interactions are inevitable. Understanding among people belonging to those two religions is imperative for peace in the world. And the way is neither isolation nor competition but dialogue. It should be clear here that Hinduism is not reducible to orthodox versions of it. Religions today, as in times gone by, are living entities. They are moving and changing realities—labels notwithstanding. Only from the outside we have a static view of a religion. If we consciously and sincerely live a religious faith we experience at the same time the freedom to transform it precisely by living it. The Hindu Christian Dialogue of the present cannot be limited to discussing frozen doctrines of the past. And yet the past is still effective in the present. We cannot neglect it.

Dialogue, to begin with, has to be *duo-logue*. There have to be two *logoi*, two languages encountering each other, so as to overcome the danger of a double monologue. One has to know the language of the other, even if one has to learn it precisely from the other, and often in the same exercise of the dialogue. Dialogue engages the intellect, the *logos*. The academic study of religion is not a luxury.

At the same time, it has to be *dia-logue* i.e., a piercing of the *logos*, an overcoming of the mere intellectual level, a going *through* the intellect into an encounter of the whole person. It has to proceed from the praxis and discover the symbolic power of action.

The dialogue comes from the heart of the people, and is situated in the middle of life. The spinning wheel is the symbol of Gandhiji's challenge to technocracy and the way of saying that the Hindu Christian Dialogue has to proceed starting from both sides. Many present day dialogues set the stage according to the terms of one of the parties alone. To assume that Christocentrism, or Theocentrism can offer a basis, is as unsatisfactory as to presume that *apauruseyatva*, or *karman* are proper starting points. But there is a much more subtle danger for the fruitful and unbiased Dialogue: Modernity.

The modern kosmology (*sic*) assuming time is linear, history is paramount, individuality is the essence of Man (*sic*), democracy is an absolute, technocracy is neutral, social darwinism, and the like, cannot offer a fair platform for the Dialogue. The basis for the Dialogue cannot be the modern Western myth. As I have explained elsewhere we face here a Conflict of Kosmologies. Religions are not only doctrines. And even doctrines have roots in the respective myths which make the doctrines plausible. Modern Science has permeated to such an extent the modern world that makes it difficult not to take it as the basis of the Dialogue. Both Hinduism and Christianity have to come to grips with Modern Science, but it would not be fair to Hinduism to consider Modern Science as the neutral starting point. Modern Science is not Christianity but both share many common myths which are extraneous to the Hindu traditions. One can understand a certain Hindu resistance to an apparently neutral Dialogue based on the assumptions of a scientific kosmology.

In other words, a complete *dialogos* should be at the same time a *diamythos*. The respective *logoi* are bearers of meaning and life only within their respective *mythoi*. And it is by means of dialogue that we reach the myth of the other and create a climate of communication. The *mythos* belongs certainly to a *prologue* introducing the *dialogue*. The *mythos* is that which goes before the *logos* and makes it possible. The pro-logue, the foreword belongs to the *mythos*, the Unsaid because it is taken for granted. . .

How often have academics forgotten, if not despised, the spinning wheel! How often communal riots and cold wars have

persisted through the ages because people have forgotten, if not despised, to learn the language of the other! Language here means, of course, more than Hindi and spinning wheel, more than *khadi*.

\* \* \*

Kerala Christians, Francis Xavier, Akbar, British Raj, Hindu Renaissance and present day situations are described as the necessary background for what I have called the fourth phase of the Hindu Christian Dialogue.

The first phase could be described as the period in which Hindus were the dominating power. All too often the history of Kerala Christians has been judged from the perspective of the second phase. The second phase is that in which Christians had the power, although they were not the majority. All too often, also, the Hindu reactions to an overwhelming Christian domination has not been sufficiently underlined.

I am saying that the Hindu Christian Dialogue has never been a round table conference, nor a merely theoretical exercise in *brahmodya*. It is embedded in particular socio-political circumstances and takes place within a certain elusive myth.

The first phase was that of a tiny minority finding its own identity: Christians dialoguing with the Hindu majority in order to establish their own identity. No wonder that the dialogue was not one of great theological speculations, as it has been noted. It is the *Christian* dialogue with Hinduism.

The second phase re-inverses the roles. Demographically the Hindus were majority, of course, but the power was on the other side. Hinduism had to establish its identity, and awaken from an alleged slumber which had permitted, first the Muslim, and later the Christian conquests. The so-called Hindu renaissance is witness thereof. It is a *Hindu* dialogue with Christianity.

The third phase is the prevalent one today in religious and academic circles. It could only flourish after the colonial period. It is the Hindu-Christian Dialogue. Christians, to be sure, have taken most of the initiative, and it has been a predominantly Christian-Hindu Dialogue, but Hindu voices are also present and many of the Christians have adopted an unpartisan stance. It has been a predominantly doctrinal dialogue. Christian doctrines have been deepened, enlarged or perhaps also thinned for the sake of the Dialogue. Hindu doctrines have been awakened so as to show that there was also "science", "rationality", service of the neighbour, and the like in the Hindu lore. Comparative