Viewpoints: Why Dialogue With Hindus?

Gladys Ambat

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1021

The Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies is a publication of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.
Professor K. Swaminathan wrote: Like Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi, Ramana Maharishi and the Paramaharya of Kanchi, earnest Christian leaders like Dom Bede Griffiths and Swami Abhishiktananda 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?
Gladyas Ambat
Madras, India

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 Rammohun 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 Satyagrahas. 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 indelphlology 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 Gujarati 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
Asian human being who lived in an Asian
country and who preached a way of life
easily understandable to the Asian mind.

The Ongoing Dialogue

Raimundo Panikkar
University of California
Santa Barbara, U.S.A.

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
depth 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 mul-
tiplying. 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 impera-
tive 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 dia-
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 logoi.
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 Christo-
centrism, or Theocentrism can offer a
basis, is as unsatisfactory as to presume
that aparavasya, or karma 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 Dia-
logue 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 prologue, 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 Hindu 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 suf-
Ficiently 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 pre-
dominantly 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