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# Book Review: "India and Europe. An Essay in Understanding"

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Church-institution, etc. Hence the diverse forms of religion and culture are but different types of manifestations of God and consequently, a great respect for the mystery of God's action in each religion and culture is demanded. The Trinitarian experience of Ignatius is but an example of how God relates to the plurality of persons, freedoms and relationships.

Lastly the Mission is to meet the challenge of doing justice in the context of exploitation and oppression. The author outlines briefly the new awareness among those involved in the cause of the poor, taking into account the supportive economic and political structures in society.

While it is imperative to fight against economic inequality, etc. the writer points out the basic option of Ignatius for poverty in his contemplation on the "Two Standards" where he relates economics and spirituality by linking riches to honour and poverty to humiliations. This exercise is not merely a parable but a paradigm as well that shapes man's attitudes and actions. The application of the principle of "tantum-quantum" is pertinent here. Incidentally the Ignatian rules for Distribution of Alms with an attitude of detachment and the rules in the matter of food as a means of selfcontrol confirm his basic option. What Ignatius said about freeing oneself from detachment could be interpreted today as also freeing oneself from all sinful structures.

The author says that we need to approach liberation in a holistic manner. Economic inequality is but one of the many forms of injustice in the world, other forms being offences against human dignity, real equality and community, etc. The optimistic note is that already our ideas are changing from an individualistic towards a more holistic perspective.

In such a context Dr. Amaladoss pictures the Mission of the Church/Religion as a prophetic Force, criticising what is evil, inspiring what is good and guiding towards the Kingdom. In the process it has to explore strategies, ideologies and political movements.

The book ends with a chapter on the relevance of the church today in the modern world. Here it may be useful to point out three things: the nature, the focus and the manner of involvement of the church. The church should be a dynamic movement with the principle of Incarnation basically operating in it. There is reason for saying this. The church wants to be ever new and at the same time work out ways and means for stability. In this process it faces a number of problems. In such a precarious situation Ignatian insights would be useful. The attitude of

Ignatius is seen in the Rules for conforming with the Church. It might seem onesided and narrow when taken out of context but when seen in the total perspective of the Spiritual Exercises, where one seeks the will of God throughout, it is a much needed help to see one's own special mission. The instructions given with regard to making a good election also helps him find the will of God and make the choice freely. For Ignatius there is no conflict between the Church's directives, God's call and the charism of the individual.

But still Dr. Amaladoss would stress that the Church must keep a delicate balance between unity and pluri-formism and the Church's directives must be inspired by the new and changing world-context. The Church's involvement should be directed towards the common good, going beyond its structural and ideological limitations.

Being a third world theologian Dr. Amaladoss is familiar with the Asian and, more particularly, the Indian scene with all its pluri-cultural and religious forms and the pressing problems like poverty, oppression and exploitation. Although the Mission concerns the whole world and calls for global activity, the book provides enough challenges to both Activists and Spiritualists.

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Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe. An Essay in Understanding*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988, pp. xi + 604.

Halbfass' objective is to discuss the "philosophical dialogue" between India and Europe from the days of the antiquity up to the present era, thus excluding the most recent developments. One hopes that Halbfass is planning to write a supplementary volume dealing with the evolvments of the 20th century and their implications upon this dialogue. The present study is divided into three parts. The first one is devoted to Europe's image of India and its reception of Indian thought. The second part deals with India's response to the challenge posed by Europe's interest in India; and the third part contains "illustrations and reflections".

The bulk of the book is descriptive. From the early days of ancient Greek thinkers up to 19th century European philosophers, Halbfass describes the major traits of Europe's reception of Indian thought. In great detail and with scholarly thoroughness the prominent ideas of each

thinker and era are described whereby the question, what constitutes "true philosophy" is at the centre of Europe's rejection of Indian thought. Indian thought seems to the Europeans burdened with legends, myths, and superstitions. Therefore Oriental thought in general, but Indian thought in particular, can only be considered to be a precursor of "true" philosophizing as it was developed by the Greeks, as Hegel has argued. This ethnocentric depreciation of Indian thought accounts, according to Halbfass, for the fact that very few, if any, philosophy departments incorporated a treatment of Indian thought in their academic curricula.

By contrast, India showed little interest in reacting to the economic, military, and philosophical intrusion of its territory by occidental powers. If we were to rely on Indian sources solely, we hardly could guess that Alexander the Great's campaign had ever happened. Halbfass sees India's drive for reflecting upon occidental philosophy rooted in the global "westernization" which has spread a largely uniform thinking across the world. Thus it becomes questionable whether one can call such an imbalanced communication a dialogue which by definition presupposes two equal partners engaging in an exchange of mutually relevant and interesting ideas. It seems that the interaction between the two civilizations was stifled for both being enmeshed in ethnocentric and patriarchal thinking, although of opposite nature: India closing itself off in xenophobic traditionalism, and Europe subjecting other continents to its own way of thinking which it considers to be of global relevance (with a few exceptions such as German romanticism). While the Indian tradition has a paramount tendency to include alien systems of thought into the lower levels of its own, Europe discredited them on accounts that they did not meet the criteria defined by its own systems. Inclusivism and exclusivism are diametrically juxtaposed and constitute the parameters for the economy of this communication.

In his conclusive remarks, unassumingly placed in the appendix, Halbfass again points at Hegel as the occidental thinker who articulated the superiority of Europe's "philosophy" over Indian "thought", a viewpoint reiterated, with some modifications, by Husserl. He ends the discussion by referring to Heidegger who saw in the global "Europeanization" the phenomenological context within which future communication between Occident and Orient has to happen. Although reference is made to transcending "Orient" and "Occident," alter-

native views emerging for instance in the recent writings of leading physicists and psycho-analysts of the West who suggested to overcome the binary opposition of "clarity of Greek autonomous thinking" vs. "befogged mythic superstitions of the Orient" are discarded by Halbfass as "syndrom". Halbfass seems to be encapsulated in a form of thinking built upon ancient assumptions of irreconcilable oppositions structured in a hierarchical fashion. Such attitude precludes a more inspiring and holistic vision of interwovenness and interdependence of systems of thought originating from different cultural contexts. Thus the conservative thinking of the author leads to the conclusion that because of the Europeanization of the earth "ancient Indian thought, in its unassimilable, non-actulizable, yet intensely meaningful distance and otherness, is not obsolete." If that were true then the meaningfulness of Indian thought serves the sole purpose of re-affirming the Occident as "subject" and cementing India in the role of the "other" in distant "objectification", thus excluding it from the dynamic and live context of human existence in all its cultural diversity. Such thinking continues the marginalization of non-European civilizations, thereby increasing the already existing gap between the "West" and the "rest of the world".

This critique should however not obscure the fact that, if the reader is comfortable with Halbfass' conservative methodological approach, the book is a comprehensive description of the mutual perceptions of India and Europe as developed up to the 20th century. Whether it constitutes "an essay in understanding" as the title promised needs to be questioned.

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## VIEWPOINTS

### The Value of Inter-Faith Dialogue

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The purpose of inter-faith dialogue is evidently not to arrive at or achieve a common set of beliefs giving up for the sake of unity one's own religion's cherished doctrines. Its aim is not to accomplish a merger, as of two political parties or groups, nor to arrive at the lowest measure of agreement in religious beliefs. If the participants in a dialogue are only "light half-believers in a casual creed who never deeply loved or deeply felt" their dialogue will remain at only a superficial level. The paradox therefore in such meetings, is that

those who dialogue must be persons of deep conviction and personal commitment to their faith and yet are eager to keep their minds open to beliefs and traditions other than their own, ready to learn from them and to fill up gaps in their own religious experience and knowledge. It is obvious therefore that it is wrong to expect short-term "results" from the dialogue process. In this world of division at every level of life and particularly at the level of religion it is first of all necessary to bring people together of different persuasions and strong convictions. It is necessary not only to *speak* about the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man but in fact *act* our belief in all our interpersonal relationships at every level of life especially the religious level. When at this level we truly begin to deal with all our brothers and sisters as equally with us children of the same Father, then and only then genuine dialogue can begin.

I make these reflections in the light of some experience of inter-faith dialogue over the years. It is true that not all participants in a dialogue necessarily come with an open mind. Often they attend the dialogue meetings more or less under moral pressure from friends or some times also in a spirit of ordinary intellectual curiosity to see what it is all about. But if one meeting leads to another and they continue to come, then things begin to happen however slowly but surely. The very fact that every dialogue begins with a few moments of (silent or vocal) prayer makes one realise that in prayer made together somehow a spirit of union of hearts is born often imperceptibly. And God's grace begins to build on that. For nothing is more certain than this: that God's salvific will regarding his children is universal. St. Peter after integrating Cornelius the Roman Centurion into the Christian Community "opened his mouth and said: Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears Him and does what is right, is acceptable to Him." (Acts 10, 34-5)

The perception of God's will however is not the same in every individual nor the awareness of "what is right". Hence different views on the objectivity of religious truth. Even the voice of conscience, Kant's "categorical imperative" does not speak in the same manner or with the same effectiveness in every human heart. Many are the barriers to hearing "the still small voice; erected by environment, in-built traditional attitudes in the human consciousness, cultivated prejudices, weakness of the will to follow the light of the intellect. Intellectual conviction about what is the will of God does

not necessarily imply the conversion of the personal will to Him and His behest. And there is also the problem of varieties of religious experience which often run only on parallel lines. Advaitins claim that the experience of oneness with the Eternal Brahman is the ultimate truth: every other experience only leads to the realisation of this non-duality. A rapid view of different religions and convictions makes one almost fall into despair: will it ever be possible to reach unity? The disparities and differences seem to be so great that genuine union looks impossible of achievement.

And yet there is in all of us an irrepressible longing to come together. There is in people of all religions today a deep desire to understand one another and to realise not only notionally but in daily life and practice that whatever be the differences that divide and disrupt the human family, we must act towards one another as brothers and sisters and make an effort to analyse our differences and narrow the areas of dissent. That very effort, when sincerely undertaken, produces a climate of goodwill which is the basic disposition for all attempt at dialogue.

As member of a dialogue group at Tiruchy from its very beginnings I have seen significant changes in attitudes coming over us. There were Muslims and Hindus, Christians of different denominations and at least one who called himself an agnostic and atheist. We used to begin with moments of silence and some oral and vocal prayer or bhajan. When sharp differences in belief came to the surface, explanations were asked for and given. We discovered that often we meant the same thing using different terms. A certain climate of mutual understanding began to grow. Long established prejudices and inhibitions began slowly to be corroded. And thus gradually a fellowship started to grow. Dialogue groups of this kind can be legitimately described as oases in a desert of mutual unspoken misunderstandings. They are the beginning of a deeper communication at a truly religious level at which common prayer is possible. And the rest is in the hands of God whose will is that all His children should recognize their common roots.

There was recently a debate in the *Indian Express* in the form of letters to the Editor on the question of some Christian leaders adopting Hindu symbols and forms of ritual for conveying the Christian message, an attempt at what has come to be called "inculturation". I shall quote from two of the correspondents who put this question of inculturation in the larger context of Hindu-Christian Dialogue.