

Christianity and Other Faiths: Emerging Theological and Missiological Discussions in the Context of Asian Plurality

by

The Rev. Dr. Daniel S. Thiagarajah
Executive Secretary for Faith, Mission & Unity
Christian Conference of Asia (CCA)
thiaga@cca.org.hk

Asia's Reality of Plurality

The world in which we live today is pluralistic in every aspect. Asia stands out as a distinct and unique manifestation of pluralism. If we look at the Asian spectrum, Asia is a colourful mosaic of Religions, Cultures, Languages, Ethnicities, Ideologies, Philosophies, Races, Tribes etc., Hence, Plurality is one of Asia's richest resources. It is the very nature of reality. One has to realize that plurality is something given and that he or she must find creative ways to deal with it and live within that context. However, this plurality very often leads to rivalries and enmities. They turn out to be competitive with one another thus destroying the true design of human relations. Therefore, plurality tends to be a challenging one.

According to Raimundo Pannikar,

Pluralism is today a human existential problem, which raises acute questions about how we are going to live our lives in the midst of so many options. Pluralism is no longer just the old school book question about the One-and-the-Many; it has become the concrete day-to-day dilemma occasioned by the encounter of mutually incompatible worldviews and philosophies. Today we face pluralism as the very practical question of planetary co-existence.¹

Pannikar makes it very clear that we have to deal with the reality of pluralism. The problem with pluralism arises when one particular component/aspect of plurality tries to dominate society by denying the legitimacy of others as irrelevant.

Mission Trends in Asia

In a book published by the World Council of Churches, *Not Without My Neighbor: Issues in Interfaith Dialogue*,² its author Dr Wesley Ariarajah offers a profound introduction to the key issues that arise when the churches enter into conversation with the People of Other Faiths.

The Church, it is said, does not justify the existence of mission. Rather, the mission of God (*missio Dei*) justifies the existence of the church, which is called to participate in the movement of God's turning toward God's People. As such, the mission of the church takes a fresh leap forward. Any God-Talk that claims to be authentically Asian must pay attention to the complexities of the Asian situation where we are called to live, proclaim and celebrate our faith. Theologizing can never be done in a vacuum. It has to be always done in relation to the actual life-situation. Therefore, the mission of the church, while it is basically *missio Dei*, it has to be necessarily Mission in Context.

An important fact of the Asian Continent is that it is a place where the Christians are a minority and the majority belongs to either diverse faiths or secular ideologies. Any mission activity cannot be insensitive to the tremendous contribution the Other Faiths have made and are still making to the shaping of Asian culture. We have come to a point where we cannot theologize apart from making relevant connections with the Religions among which we are placed. While it is encouraging that a number of churches are beginning to take note of this important fact, many still continue to focus purely on numerical growth of the church thus ignoring the harmony of Asian society.

As Pannikar says the problem of pluralism is the problem of the other. Quite often we are made to think that the 'Other' can intimidate or threaten us. The very presence of the 'Other' calls us for self-understanding of who we are or what we are! The question is whether, the churches are not perhaps, able to overcome their fear of the 'Other's strangeness.' The churches are called to develop a genuine sensitivity, an understanding and a liking for 'diversity,' rather than complaining about them. It is quite pertinence to quote what the French philosopher Simone Weil has said in her *Diaries*, "The opposite must be also true."³ What Simone Weil tried to say was that how a flat, one-dimensional way of thinking could miss the reality of life and hence, the truth! We have to learn to appreciate 'The otherness of the other.' Mission is possible only when we are able to delight in the distinctiveness of the other.

Historically speaking, the mission activities of Christians, especially of the early missionaries to many parts of Asia were comprised of 'over against' attitudes. The basic problem has to do with the way the 'imperative to proclaim the Gospel' has been understood in the context of colonialism, where there had been a distortion of power relations. Several assumptions made about Other Faiths and Cultures have affected the way the imperative was interpreted. For example, the assumptions such as, that the other faith traditions are devoid of revelatory impulses; that they were in error; that they need to be replaced by the Christian tradition; that there is no continuity between them and the Gospel message etc., But, when we try to develop paradigms 'in relation to the other,' we also begin to learn something quite different and new. Openness and mutual learning are solicited. What Wilfred Cantwell Smith said is noteworthy:

We have something to learn from them. By knowing other cultures, we can come to know our culture better, and can make it better we recognize that the we/they business is today outgrown; we are all in this together, and can learn from each other. "We" now means "us human beings" in our diversity and yet in our overriding humanity, even community. We are all heirs now of many cultures, and we face the future together: our common future, multi-cultural.⁴

However, it has to be admitted that conflicts do occur at a point when the 'Other' appears to be so different and mutually exclusive. The reason is that differences are seen as threatening realities. In a pluralistic world, one has to be enlightened about the position other than his or her own. This ambiguity will be overcome when one understands difference as 'otherness.'

What is envisaged is that of a 'Spatial Perspective,' where space permits or allows different standpoints to be one comprehensive whole in which each and everyone has its and his/her place. Here, one complements the other in the spirit of *koinonia*. This is the real spirit of 'Dialogue.' It is an attempt to help/understand/accept 'the other' in its/his/her

'otherness.' This process (dialogue) will make people 'at home' with 'plurality' and help develop an appreciation for 'diversity.' In other words, dialogue is basically, building community of conversation of heart and mind. In this light what Raimundo Pannikar had said is worth observing.

Pluralism means existential acceptance of the other as the other i.e., without being able to understand or co-opt him. Pluralism is humble, only knows that I or we may not possess the whole truth and does not pass judgement as to whether the other may also be right or, as it may turn out, wrong.⁵

Dialogue - Difficulties and Possibilities

Dr Ariarajah deals with "Five Movements" through which the dialogue concern has gone in the recent past, especially in the Ecumenical Circles. These may be summed up as the concept of dialogue itself, the search for 'community' with neighbours of other faiths, adequate foundations for that new relationship, the pastoral issues that need attention in this context and the impact of the rising secular, technological and global culture on all the religions and religious life. He says that these five phases/dimensions are, in fact, inter-related, the first of them being the concept of dialogue itself.⁶

Pluralism calls us to a ministry of 'connectedness.' Hence, it is important to deal with the issues that connect us with one another. Dialogue, I believe, does this great contribution of connecting people with one another in a caring and sharing fellowship. However, right from the beginning, people have expressed "fears" in getting involved in dialogue. They feared that dialogue with people of Other Faiths might lead to a betrayal of Christian mission. Three fundamental reasons have been given as to why dialogue or dialogical relationships with People of Other Faiths is not valid or advisable. Dr Ariarajah calls these as "the three classical fears of the missionary movement." They are, the fear of compromising the uniqueness of Christ; the fear of losing the 'urgency of world mission'; and the fear of acknowledging the 'salvific significance in the religious life of our neighbors'.⁷

When analyzing the hesitation and reluctance of those who have negative views of dialogue, Stanley J. Samartha identifies two obvious reasons. One is the fear of syncretism and the other is the assumption that that any recognition of the presence of God or Christ or the Spirit in the lives of other faiths leads to the danger of relativism.⁸ While Hendrik Kraemer called syncretism as "illegitimate mingling of different religious elements"⁹, Samartha described it as "an uncritical mixture of elements from different religions without a center or integrating principle."¹⁰ It is quite telling that the proponents of this view put forward certain basic affirmations they are supposed to make always, of which at least three can be easily identified viz., the mandate given in the 'Great Commission' as recorded in Matthew 28; the belief that Christ is the 'only way' to salvation and the jubilant confidence that 'every knee would bow and every tongue confess' that Jesus Christ is Lord.

If one goes into the analysis of Kraemer's reaction to dialogue not only through his writing but also what he vehemently argued at the International Missionary Council (IMC) at Tambaram, India in 1938, it may be evident that he was, in fact, reacting to what had already been said in the previous International Missionary Council at Jerusalem in 1928. The latter Council attempted to focus on the spiritual values of other religious traditions. It had called for a joint struggle of Christians and other religions against secularism.

Kraemer argued that 'the point of contact' could have to do only with the relationship between the Christian and other person, but not with other religions. Kraemer made a distinction between the monistic, naturalistic religions of self-realization and the prophetic religions of revelation. For him syncretism belongs to the first category. He firmly believed that prophetic religion of biblical realism does not show syncretistic and relativist trend. Therefore, he wrote, "The prophetic religion of biblical realism could not be mingled with naturalist and monistic religion."[11](#)

Kraemer was of the strong opinion that Christian religion is based primarily on revelation. He believed that God has revealed the Way and the Life and the Truth in Jesus Christ and wills that this should be known through the entire world. He said,

What is truth in religion is more urgent and more obscure than ever. This question is particularly urgent for Christianity, because it claims as its source and basis a divine revelation which at the same time is claimed to be the standard or reference for all truth and all religion.[12](#)

If we are ever to know what true and divinely willed religion is, we can do this only through God's revelation in Jesus Christ and through nothing else.[13](#)

We have to frankly admit that the exclusivist claims come chiefly from the Protestant circle. Even the prominent theologians like Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Emil Brunner were not exceptional. Emil Brunner's comment about other religions is,

Jesus Christ is both the Fulfillment of all religions and the Judgement of all religions. As the Fulfiler, He is the Truth, which these religions seek in vain. There is no phenomenon in the history of religion that does not point towards Him He is also the Judgement of all religions. Viewed in this light, all religious systems appear untrue, unbelieving and indeed godless.[14](#)

Paul Tillich found it possible to neglect other religions. Karl Barth held the view that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that is attested in Holy Scripture is the only guiding principle to which every theological concern is subject. It is quite interesting to note the witty but profound comment made by Bishop Sabapathy Kulandran, Bishop of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of India in Sri Lanka who himself was a participant at the World Mission Conference in Tambaram along with people like Kraemer in reaction to Karl Barth's dismissal of non-Christian religions.

D.T. Niles recalled that in his first meeting with Karl Barth in 1935, Barth said: 'Other religions are just unbelief.' Niles asked: 'How many Hindus, Dr Barth, have you met?' Barth answered: 'No one.' Niles said: 'How then do you know that Hinduism is unbelief?' Barth replied: 'A priori.' Niles concluded: 'I simply shook my head and smiled.'[15](#)

These show the exclusivistic claims in the Protestant Tradition. The International Congress on World Evangelization that gathered the evangelicals in the year 1974 made a statement on "The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ" in the following words. It may be of interest to see how often the word 'only' appears.

We affirm that there is only one Savior and only one Gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognize that all men have some knowledge of

God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue that implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved. All men are perishing because of sin, but God loves all men, not wishing that any should perish but that all should repent. Yet, those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God. To proclaim Jesus as 'the Savior of the World' is not to affirm that all men are either automatically or ultimately saved, still less to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ. Rather it is to proclaim God's love for a world of sinners and to invite all men to respond to him as Savior and Lord in the whole-hearted personal commitment of repentance and faith. Jesus Christ has been exalted above every other name; we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him Lord. (Gal. 1.6-9; Rom. 1.18-32; 1 Tim. 2.5,6; Acts 4.12; John 3.16-19; II Pet. 3.19; II Thess. 1.7-9; John 4.42; Matt. 11.28; Eph. 1.20,21; Phil. 2.9-11).[16](#)

Kraemer, in his later work,[17](#) tried to set aright what he thought to as a deficiency in his earlier book '*The Christian Message*.' He could acknowledge his negligence in not recognizing the awareness of God in non-Christian religions. However, to what extent it made any impact, is another question to ponder. Later, in the same book, Kraemer when trying to distinguish between syncretism and absorption, clearly expressed the exclusivist trend. He said that Christianity had absorbed many extraneous elements. However, it is by nature exclusive and immune to syncretistic spirit. Taking up elements which are contrary to the authentic soul of the absorbing religion has to be avoided. The remedy for such, as Kraemer sees, is none other than deeper delving into the Bible, which he calls 'a matter of faith in biblical realism'.[18](#)

Regarding the issue of dialogue, he says that one cannot enter into dialogue except with the conviction of the exclusivist claims of the biblical message. Therefore, he says, "This exclusiveness has nothing to do with religious arrogance, intolerance or dogmatic assertions."[19](#)

This view definitely holds the opinion that the true religion is Christ-centered and theology should be Christo-centric. All other religions are human strivings for the simple reason that they do not receive the unique revelation of God in Christ Jesus. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ, which is the only criterion to judge all religions. The common factor in the exclusivist approach is its appeal to Scripture for an unquestioned authority. There are quite a number of exclusive verses in the Bible which present Christ as unique and the only way to salvation. Some of them are sayings of Jesus himself. For example:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.[20](#)

Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'[21](#)

When Peter and John were brought before the High Priest following the healing of a man born lame, Peter witnessed to Christ in the following words:

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.[22](#)

On the nature of salvation Jesus is said to have brought, Paul says,

This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all- this was attested at the right time.[23](#)

Reading the Bible with New Eyes

These are lucid and unequivocal statements from the Bible to support the exclusivist position. These have to be examined carefully. We should not fall into the temptation of developing our theology or missiology on the basis of selective verses from the Bible. How do we then understand these sayings? Here comes the issue of 'Reading the Bible With New Eyes', a program organized by the Programme Area on "Faith, Mission and Unity" of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA-FMU). It is important to see a 'different witness to Jesus' and this will give a totally different picture than what is given when all these exclusive sayings are put together! We have to understand these sayings from the standpoint of 'language of faith.' Jesus, who touched and transformed the lives of others also became and remained the Christ of Faith. They have to be understood in the context of the faith commitment of the early Christian community. It is important to know that there is 'Christ of faith' to whom a very clear witness is given in the New Testament. These sayings derive their meaning in the context of faith. Therefore, they cannot have any meaning outside the community of faith.

The confessions given in exclusive overtone should not be made definitive. They have to be understood in the language of faith and love. They are not to be used to discredit other beliefs. The harmonious relationship and communion envisaged by God in God's creative acts are marred when we turn this language of faith and love into absolute truths. Here comes the question of "*Truth and Truth Claims*". The truth and our truth claims are not identical. What we are discussing are truth claims. But, truth in the absolute sense is beyond anyone's grasp. We have to recognize the different levels in which such language is used and/or the different standpoints from which these claims are made in order to have a proper understanding of these exclusive statements about Christ.

One more point to be taken note of before we delve into the next stage. The *sola scriptura* or 'scripture alone' principle of the Reformation does not in any way mean that the Bible can be read in isolation from what has happened and what is happening in the world. 'Sola' does not refer to 'isolation' but to a 'strong engagement.' This engagement reminds us of God's engagement with the world and humanity. God relates to the people in love and there can be no other way since love is the essence of God. God's love is unconditional. This is what the Bible speaks to us. It affirms God's loving relationship with humanbeings. We have to understand that the Bible does not authenticate itself. It is God speaking through the Bible that authenticates it!

The church also took an exclusive stance mainly on the basis of some of the exclusive biblical sayings mentioned above. The thought of non-Christian being an outsider was even institutionalized. Right from the time of the Church Fathers, this thought began to take shape. The axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, outside the church, no salvation, was formulated by Origen and Cyprian used it freely. This axiom began to play a decisive role in the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Boniface of the fourteenth century emphatically pronounced that outside the one Catholic Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins and he pontificated by saying, "Furthermore, we declare, say, define and proclaim to every creature that they, by necessity for salvation, are entirely subject to the Roman Pontiff."²⁴ Those who were considered to be outside of the church were issued a warning by the Council of Florence in 1442 with these words:

" Those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews and heretics and schismatics, cannot become participants in eternal life, but will depart into everlasting fire unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock."²⁵

The question that has to be dealt with is whether God is revealing Godself only in the Christ-Event. Those who take up the exclusivist verses from the Bible stick to this view so that Religious Pluralism appears to them as threatening reality to be rejected. Religious pluralism has to be considered as a reality to come to terms with. Even if they accept the universal salvific act of God in other faiths, they always add a qualifier to it to make the difference obvious. They find it difficult to get involved in a dialogical relationship with people of other faiths that God's purpose for the world and humanity could be realized. The attitude of making definitive blanket judgement about other faiths has to be shunned. How can one do that even without knowing or studying the other faiths? When a person says that people of other faiths are outside the salvific act of God, what kind of statement it could be? Such a person does not realize that such statement is not only a depiction of his/her attitude against the other person, but also and necessarily a statement about his/her God! The question is whether we are in mission because God has not revealed Godself to our neighbour or in spite and indeed because of it. The grace of God is available in all religions. God's grace and God's love are not exclusive claims of any one religion. It is tantamount to say that what is revealed in other faiths is not salvific and of no significance. It may be pertinent to quote what Kazoh Kitamori, the Japanese theologian said, "Jesus Christ is in pain in order to include those who are excluded."²⁶

David Bosch, in his *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*,²⁷ talks about the shift from the 'mission of the church' to the 'mission of God' as a significant leap forward in the understanding of mission. The concept of *missio Dei*, though came into the parlance of the Ecumenical Movement in Willingen in 1952, actually emerged as a mission paradigm at the first meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) held in Mexico City in 1963. This paradigm shift helped many to put many things in perspective. Now, it began to be understood clearly that primary motive of mission is the love of God towards all of God's creation. Therefore, church is understood as an instrument in the hand of God to participate and fulfill God's own purpose for the world and humanity.

When analyzing the axis of the mission and message of Jesus, one will find that it was the Reign of God [*Besileia tou Theou*], as Jesus called. According to Dermot Lane,

Indeed, everything that Jesus says and does is inspired from beginning to end by his personal commitment to the coming Reign of God into the world. The controlling horizon of the mission and ministry of Jesus is the Kingdom of God. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus derive their meaning from the Announcement of the Kingdom of God.[28](#)

Jon Sobrino, in his 'Spirituality of Liberation: Toward A Political Holiness,' puts this fact in a lucid way when he says that Jesus did not simply preach 'God.' 'God' is not simply and absolutely Jesus' ultimate pole of reference.[29](#) What he said was that whenever Jesus referred to God, he was not speaking about a reality that, by itself, could be known or used as a criterion for judgement. There was something else that 'mediated' the absoluteness of God and so was identified with the divine absoluteness. This was not the church or the Kingdom of heaven. The reality of the Divine is not found primarily or ultimately either in heaven or in the church.[30](#) In his later writing, Jon Sobrino emphasizes this more forcefully;

The ultimate for Jesus is the Kingdom of God, that is, God not in relation to Godself but in relation to this Earth, to this history. For Jesus, as for any authentic Jewish prophet, God is a God-of, a God-for, a God-in, never a God-in-himself.[31](#)

Hence, the final reality for Jesus was not simply 'God' but 'the Reign of God.' The *Abba* whom Jesus proclaimed cannot be known or worshipped apart from the Reign of God [*Basileia tou Theou*]. It is important to be borne in mind that Jesus never attempted to give a definition of the Reign of God. Rather he spoke of it as 'this-worldly reality.' It is a reality that would change human society. If the church at one time defined the uniqueness of Christianity in the proclamation *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, today it is called to find it in the proclamation *extra mundum nulla salus*, that is, 'outside the world no salvation.' Hence what Juan Luis Segundo said is noteworthy:

Jesus' listeners understood one thing perfectly: while the force behind the Kingdom was for him the force of God, the reality of the Kingdom was something to be achieved on earth, so that society as a whole would reflect the will of God.[32](#)

Our task is to be co-partners with God in God's 'turning' (*shub*) in grace towards humanity. Ariarajah puts it succinctly when he says, "We need to move to a genuinely inclusive understanding of mission that places the loving, caring, judging and compassionate presence and mission of God in the heart of all human affairs, despite all its ambiguities."[33](#) God desired to have a dialogical relationship with humanity in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, whose life was always God-centered, God-dependent and God-ward. We are able to do this by way of dialogue, which is an activity related to the building of the 'Reign of God'. When dialogue ends, the forces of evil and darkness take hold of us. It is imperative to make a commitment to peace with justice by way of a common struggle towards a reconciled human community.

We will realize that the century that passed by was shaken and challenged by two important currents or movements viz., the liberation theology and the Christian response to the People of Other Living Faiths. This made us aware that the "suffering Other" and the "religious Other" belong together. In that process we were made to realize that we should move beyond the emphases on "Christocentrism" and "Theocentrism" to "Soteriocentrism." The soteriocentric understanding of the Reign of God makes us come

to grips with 'the character of God,' 'the ministry of Jesus,' and 'the mission of the church' being understood from the perspective of the blossoming new reality where the poor are vindicated and the marginalized, the wounded and the excluded are accepted and included.

Daniel S. Thiagarajah

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