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On Sharing Religious Experience

Possibilities of Interfaith Mutuality

edited by

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Part III *Common Themes and Problems*

Sharing Religious Experience in Hindu—Christian Encounter

Michael von Brück

Experience is participation in an event and as such is culturally conditioned. In the process of maturing everybody encounters his/her tradition, shaping and changing it in the process. The process of adapting to other traditions forms part of the cultural development of every culture. Assimilation, contrast, drawing borders, or synthesis are different types of development within this process. Different fields of identity should be distinguished in this process, and these are significant for the question of sharing in the respective identity of any 'other' person, be it social, emotional, or personal identity. This article analyzes different areas of identity and sharing in Hindu–Christian encounter and on the theoretical basis of such types concludes that there are singular cases of sharing in the emotional, personal, and even the social identity of an other person. This is not, however, tantamount to a *communicatio in sacris* between Hindus and Christians due to the persisting differences in social identity between the two groups. This circumstance can change, however, particularly in social action groups who share a common task, albeit on the basis of different religious backgrounds, thereby creating a common social and emotional identity as a basis for genuine religious sharing.

It is quite likely that in every paper at this conference the question of the definition and meaning of the term 'religious experience' will be raised. That is the reason that I shall indicate in the first section of this article the sense in which the term religious experience will be used. Second, I will identify certain areas of religious experience in Hinduism. The third section deals with the problem of sharing religious experiences within Hindu–Christian encounter. Observations and clarifications in this field may eventually contribute to the general question raised at this symposium.

1 Religious Experience

Experience is participation in an event and as such is not necessarily accompanied by conscious observation. Hence, observation and experience are to be distinguished. This distinction prompts us to ask how we can determine what a religious event capable of producing religious experience actually is. There is obviously no universally acknowledged scheme of

classification which could indicate the significance of all phenomena studied under the term 'religion.' It is obviously "not something one can see" (Smart, 3). Rather, one can take note only of its manifestations or interpretations. Geographical, historical, sociological, and linguistic systems provide different sets of parameters which enable us to observe certain selected phenomena. The very complex and ever changing situations of encounter and participation, however, cannot be adequately understood within such parameters. This raises a basic epistemological problem not limited to phenomena which are termed religious.

What we call religion is dependent on our cultural conditioning. As is well known, the term 'religion' is itself not a universal one. What the Hindu tradition calls *dharma* is by no means identical with the object of study called religion in the Latin epistemological tradition. Comparing these structures of language and systems of thought enables us to discern the limitations of any system of. thought. In addition, we can become aware of the assumptions on which any possible structuring system depends, even though these do not form part of the system itself. Any system is thus an open one. Such openness is precisely what we could call the methodological point of intersection in comparative religious studies. The consequence is that religious —and for that matter any linguistic or cultural— encounter is always creating both new religious forms as well as new structures of religious meaning and interpretation. There is no way to write a 'history of religious experience,' as Ninian Smart attempts (Smart, Preface), but only a history of its ever changing interpretations. There can never be a hermeneutic framework providing us with unequivocal data that we can share in a hermeneutic community of scholars or of religious practitioners; what does exist, however, is the hermeneutical process that moulds and changes that which is shared as well as those who are sharing it in the very process. In fact those who share and what is shared are inseparable.

We could perhaps make the following distinction:

1) Encounter *with* a religious event within a rather stable framework of tradition, such as when a Hindu or Christian is confronted by his/her own tradition. The language, symbols, and non-verbal and verbal forms of interaction are pre-shaped by the community in which this encounter takes place. In early childhood religious or national stereotypes already provide a frame of reference which exists prior to the formation of any concepts as well as prior to any experiences of our own that might alter such stereotypes. The possibility that an individual find order in a complex world seems predicated on the presence of such an ordering structure (Adler). In other words, preconceptions and predispositions as well as prejudices are basic and inescapable epistemological factors which need to be further studied by social psychology. (Tajfel)

Still, any confrontation with a religious event is itself a religious event which not only accrues to the tradition, but which, in some sense and to some degree, changes the very framework of perceiving a tradition. Since there is no tradition outside the event(s) of participating in this tradition, the tradition itself will be altered by the event of participating in it. The degree of alteration is dependent on various circumstances that account for relative differences in a tradition's stability, and in rethinking, reforming, revolutionizing, etc., the tradition.

2) Encounter *between* religious events from different sets of meaning (expressed in different languages, cultural patterns, hermeneutical approaches to meaning, etc.), for instance, encounter between Christian and Hindu individuals or groups. It is obvious that this is a secondary event of participation, since such an event creates an experience that is unprecedented in any of the traditions concerned considered alone. Such encounter thus creates a new experience influenced by far more complex symbols, religious content, and structures of meaning.

The difficulty which is thus introduced is that the religious subject forms part of a network of cultural relations which is not shared universally, as Geertz and others have shown. Interreligious encounter also establishes a different basis for the structures of experience. It alters such pre-established notions as the person, group, individual time, social time, etc.

Since the formation of group mentality and stereotypes ('we' as opposed to 'they') occurs in early childhood at the age of six or seven, religious experience and social identity form a close-knit unity. Taking a discovery by social psychology into consideration makes the situation even more complex. Humans tend to perceive their own group in a differentiated way, whereas strangers are perceived as 'they' and tend not to be perceived as individuals with their individual experiences (Tajfel, 175ff.). Prejudices can be intensified by actual encounter, since perceptions might seem to accord with preconceived ideas, and this in turn influences the experience of sharing the religion of a different social group.

The question of this symposium is whether such encounter, participation, and experience belong to the second type of encounter, or, put differently, whether sharing the religious experience of other groups is possible. The simple answer is that such sharing has always been going on where different cultures have met and have translated one set of meanings into an other language, etc. The history of humankind, as far as we know, is largely an interplay between what we have just termed the first and second levels of encounter and human experience. An inevitable conflict between the two, however, ensues due to the problems posed by *identity*. The question today seems rather to be whether we can become somewhat more conscious of what actually happens during such

encounter. Can we outline such factors as the anthropological, psychological, epistemological, and hermeneutical implications of encounter in a way that would diminish the potential for conflict to a minimum and would optimally increase the potential for creative new religious configurations, mutual enrichment, and intensification of purpose and meaning?

Present day experimental studies (Bochner, 5-44) teach that there are at least four different patterns for types of behaviour in a cross-cultural situation, changing one's own cultural/religious identity built by social conditioning: assimilation, contrast, drawing borders, and synthesis. Not all the factors are adequately understood, nor the complex configurations that determine which type of behaviour ensues. The observations I shall present in § 2 and 3 are, consequently, not yet sufficiently comprehensive to construct a theoretical framework.

A 'religious group' is here called a religious group because a group of people feel they are a religious group. I would like to suggest characterizing religious experience as participation in any event in which a wholeness is realized that gives identity and orientation in the search for meaning by an individual and/or a group. Since the whole integrates all aspects of individual, social, and transcendental relations, it is always beyond any actual empirical realization inasmuch as it encompasses all *possibilities* and not just actualities. Since all the possibilities are not known, however, religious experience is not closed, limited, or fixed. According to our definition, the experience of wholeness is participation in wholeness. If this participation is intensified and leads to a transformation of one's identity such that one's individual identity becomes at least partially identical with the identity of the whole, then we can speak of *mystical experience:* It is the experience of unification based on unifying awareness. (von Brück 1987a, 251ff.)

This would imply that we can speak of collective religious experiences when, for instance, a tribe participates collectively in an act of meaning that embraces the whole (such as sacrifice). In contrast, mystical experience is always the experience of an individual who *overcomes* his/her socially conditioned individual identity through an act of participation in ultimate integration. In this respect mystical experiences may be *structurally* very similar across different cultures and different periods, but psychologically the experiences differ inasmuch as they depend on what there is to overcome through such integration, viz., the multiformity of individuals and circumstances as reflected by a tradition.

Participating in another's mystical experience is therefore impossible, just as it is impossible to participate in the experience of someone eating an apple. I may eat the other half of the same apple if given a chance, but my experience will probably be different. In fact, there is no way of

knowing whether I taste the same 'flavour' as someone else or not — it depends on my sensory apparatus and on incidental circumstances. In the case of the apple, however, as well as in the case of religious experiences, one can share one's interpretation or personalization of this experience, expressing joy, discomfort, or whatever. The result of different experiences may be similar among different individuals but the experience is never identical. This holds true for any relatively stable religious identity (though it is also subject to modification in the end) possessed by differing individual subjects.

2 Hindu Religious Experience

I shall now proceed to identify areas or levels of religious experience within Hinduism which constitute events of sharing religious experience within that culture and which might be relevant to Hindu–Christian encounter. Since experience as an act of participation in an event involves the entire life-long process of forming a person's identity, I will outline these areas according to three aspects of identity: *social identity, emotional identity,* and *personal identity.* I will advance an argument for adopting this sequence shortly.

The background paper to this conference states that "the essence of religion is the personal faith-experience" (Vroom, 1). This assertion is, however, very much the question. It might be true for highly personalized cultures and religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, but is questionable with regard to tribal religions and many forms of Hinduism. In Advaita Vedānta and other self-conscious *darśanas,* of course, as well as in *bhakti-*movements that occur, for instance, within Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, a personal experience of a form of consciousness which is pervaded by God-consciousness or which has been totally transformed by the experience of identity with the One occupies a central position. Yet the village religion of tribal and lower caste Hindus as well as many 'higher' forms of Hinduism consist rather more in a collective integration into the harmony of the universe, as expressed in the term *dharma.* This harmony consists in the appropriate interplay of different forces, qualities *(guṇas),* and hierarchical structures on the cosmic, social, and personal levels. What is distinct remains nonetheless distinct, but the equilibrium of all is *dharma.* (Manusmṛti XII, 24-51; I, 102, *et al.*; Mahadevan, 54ff.) It is not so much the individual experience or the experience of the individual as such that counts but rather the collective awareness of being in tune with the specific pattern of cosmic and social events which is experienced by this specific tribe, clan, or village. This is often overlooked when highly individualized specialists with Hindu or Christian backgrounds meet in a neutral location detached from the actual live background to the experi-

ences discussed. Our point of departure must, therefore, be closer to this more basic area of encounter.

1) The cultic community centred around sacrifice *(yajña)* has always been the central religious and social framework for Vedic religion (Ṛgveda I, 164, 35). This group constitutes a more or less coherent basis for a *social identity* that distinguishes those who participate from others who do not. Since performing these rituals means sharing in the cosmic order, such a group is imbued with a cosmic dimension, realizing and enhancing the universal *dharma* throughout the whole of reality, including, of course, the caste-order, which is the very representation of the creational order (Ṛgveda X, 90; Manusmṛti I, 31), and certainly not a mere social contrivance to which religion confers legitimacy. In this context, religious experience *is* to *live* the *dharma* according to the cosmic order as specified by the Vedas and the *dharmaśāstras*. Sacrifice as participation in the universal act of God's creation most certainly represents a universal symbol. Yet in actual Hindu history, sacrifice always has the specific meaning of fulfilling *this dharma* for *these* people, and this applies equally to other traditions. As a salvific act, it is concrete, mediated by a particular group sharing in a specific tradition. (Chethimattam, 175ff.)

To share this experience would imply sharing their life, becoming a caste-Hindu, offspring of ancestors who have also been participants in the village's community. It is obvious that this is impossible, and that a Christian cannot, by definition, share this aspect or level of religious experience. One could perhaps share in the ritual but once cannot share in the experience which is the social identity of a particular group. For the sojourning Christian who participates in such ritual the experience would be a different one than for the villager. On the other hand, there may well be a longing on the part of Hinduism to communicate by means of the (Christian) Eucharist (Panikkar 1964, 211). But in what sense? In so far as the Eucharist signifies the universal sacrifice that allows human beings to resonate to the cosmotheandric reality (Panikkar), no problem arises. But what if the scope of such sharing also encompasses a different religion with other value systems, social structures, and political ambitions? This is hardly conceivable. Yet the notion of sharing religious experience cannot simply treat the two aspects as separate lest such sharing remain an academic enterprise.

It bears repeating that the level of the sacrificing community is a basic level of religious experience for religion rooted in the Vedas, despite the fact that it was somewhat transformed at a later time. In later times, it is true, it was not *yajña* but *pūjā* that was central. *Pūjā* is much more personalized than *yajña,* in many cases amounting to exclusive meditation, especially in such elements as concentration, invitation of the Godhead, and participation in God which approaches a certain measure of deifica-

tion, all in a community that seeks its identity in this transformative way (Rao, 582ff.; Vandana, 106ff.). Nevertheless, the rhythm of *pūjā*, the festive calendar of processions, pilgrimages, etc., still retain their original function of exemplifying and reenacting the basic *dharma* of a specific community.

2) The ascent of *bhakti*-movements and the personalization of religion, however, represents a counter tendency which displays relativity of the former pattern. The Bhagavadgītā (BG) is a case in point in connection with this transition. The story running through the Gītā —Kṛṣṇa's admonition to Arjuna who refuses to fight— suggests the narrative operates substantially on the level of the *dharma* and *svadharma* ideology which establishes social identity, whereas the teaching of *karma-yoga*, explained in the later chapters as being a complement to the central path of *bhakti*, focuses on an individualized *emotional identity*. All cultic action has both a cosmic as well as an emotional aspect, but the shift from *karman* as cultic act to *karman* as fulfilling one's *svadharma* diminishes the emphasis on the community and increases that placed on the individual. The social identity of the caste-person is no longer merely belonging to a particular caste by birth, but in *bhakti* proper thought and action according to *svadharma* confers perfection *(siddhi)* and oneness with God (BG XVIII, 41-45); the individual is asked here to express his love and oneness with God by dedicating everything to Him. *Emotional identity* is the main focus, summoning the individual's response rather than the tribe's. Various individuals may thus share a common *karma-yoga* and *bhakti* effort. This can give them a certain common social identity, even though their individual experience of *emotional identity* may differ. It is a striking phenomenon that such personalization as we encounter in *bhakti* at the same time produces a shift in emphasis away from the exclusive relation between a single teacher and his student toward a new group which accommodates people with dissimilar social identities. The *bhakti*-movements thus tend to transform secret transmission of religious experience to mutual sharing among groups which had formerly been separated by their cultic and social-religious identity. (Carman, 216ff.)

3) Actual God-realization, direct experience *(anubhāva)*, *brahmavidyā* or *jñāna* is the climax of religious experience for many Hindus, not just for those who follow the Vedāntic teachings. This form of contemplation has been compared to a *cosmic sabbath*, which is the crown of creation, something also to be found in biblical tradition, wherein all particular forms of experience and symbols come to abide in the completely unbroken light of a 'beyond.' (Sahi, 615)

On the basis of the concepts of *adhikāra* or *upāya* in Hinduism and Buddhism respectively, different philosophical tenets, concepts of reality, and forms of worship are accepted as preliminary stages which ultimately

reach full maturity in contemplation. A famous passage in the Gītā states: Which particular form such and such a devotee with faith wishes to worship, each to his own faith I confirm (BG VII, 21). This can be interpreted as referring to different images of God as well as to different stages in the personal assimilation of worship. Hinduism has what might be called a pedagogical tolerance. It is accepting with regard to all possible forms of worship, but *ātmajñāna* or *brahmavidyā* alone represent true sacrifice and the ultimate goal (Chethimattam, 182). *Personal identity* is attained in the actual experience of *mokṣa* or liberation, which is a liberation from ego, including the ego's fabric of consciousness which creates its identity in particular symbols, experiences, and interpretations, and such liberation could be termed *transpersonal realization*. The relationship between the personal and the transpersonal will not be elaborated in this context. (von Brück 1987a, 287ff.)

It is clear that aspects of social and emotional identity at this level play a much less important role, and this is the reason that the mystics from all religions can more easily share and understand each other than can religious people who have not attained this level of experience. This is not, however, tantamount to claiming that all mystical experiences are the same. It has been convincingly demonstrated that there is no way of knowing and comparing experiences apart from their respective interpretations (Katz 1978). Yet —and this point must not be ignored— mystics are aware of the permanent need to move beyond concepts and interpretations, including, of course, their own. This fosters an openness and readiness that is more accepting and receptive to sharing religious experience with others. At the same time, however, this is also the reason that mystics often encounter difficulties in explaining themselves to people from their own religious group who are not mystics. The boundaries in this case run not so much between different religions as between various types of religious people such as mystics and non-mystics across religious lines.

3 Sharing Religious Experience in Hindu–Christian Encounter

The above analysis holds a number of consequences for the question of sharing religious experience in Hindu–Christian encounter.

1) It has been suggested that sharing religious experience between Hindus and Christians might be most easily accomplished at the level of mystical experience, as historical evidence seems to suggest. Nanak, a mystic, succeeded to some extent in unifying Muslims and Hindus, whereas Akbar, a politician, failed (John, 203ff.). As we can infer from the existence of the different levels of identity outlined above, however, the problem is much more complex.

Mystical experiences are shaped by interpretation, i. e., a distinctive religious tradition of language and meaning. Thus, many Christian mystics experience the union with the Divine in a specific way, co-suffering in the wounds and pains of Christ (Katz 1983, 14-16). The distinctive character of the experience cannot be shared by those who do not share the frame of meaning provided by the Christian story of the suffering Christ. Although one can ponder a general abstraction of mystical experience such as 'union with the Divine,' the flavour and emotional texture of such experience remains particular unless the partner in dialogue from a different religion crosses over to the comprehensive framework of meaning presupposed by the other religion. This usually happens only in the course of an extensive and protracted process of syncretism and integration. An example would be the integration of Neo-Platonism into Christianity, which is not just the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, but forms a whole chapter of history.

The mystic, furthermore, is the exception, and in most cases even the mystic belongs to a group that seeks social identity by differentiating itself from other groups. It has, nonetheless, been an undeniable experience in many Hindu–Christian encounters that silence and meditation and/or the contemplative reading of Holy Scriptures from various traditions enhances the *communio* of those assembled (von Brück 1987b). Though the mystical experience as such cannot be shared, those engaged in its interpretation and in expressing its repercussions in their lives and language tend to be tolerant, flexible, and open, realizing from their own experience that words and symbols cannot convey the full meaning of this experience. They are aware of the fact that language here is not descriptive but evocative. Those who see God in everything and are totally immersed in God-consciousness are free to disregard the differentiating symbols which portray a stratified social-religious order. It is far more important to a mystic to lead others to the actual experience than is agreement on interpretation.

That which distinguishes sharing between mystics from that between theologians is their basically different approach to religious epistemology. The mystic flourishes and remains within an experiential attitude. His experience as well as his sharing of that experience is an ongoing, never ending process. Certainty *(certitudo)* is an experiential aspect of the experience itself, and does not stand in need of support from security *(securitas)* which is purportedly founded on formulating conceptual or social limits.

The quest for experience is the common bond that shapes such encounters between mystics from Hindu or Christian or other backgrounds. They understand because they do not speak. They also tend, however, to live by themselves and do not try to form an interreligious

social community based solely on mystical experience. This is the reason that considerations regarding social and emotional identity are less important for this kind of encounter and sharing.

2) It is much more difficult to engage in sharing religious experiences which in some way involve the level of *emotional identity.* There is a difference in attitude between Hindus and Christians in this regard. Hindu society is accustomed to religious pluralism, Hinduism itself being a pluriformity of types of religious and ethical observances, philosophies, symbols, and rituals. As long as no violation of his/her *svadharma* is implied, a Hindu has no difficulty in participating in the religious rites of other communities, at least, not insofar as the four classic forms of religious life according to the *āgamas* are concerned, i. e., recitation of the names of God *(japa),* sacrifice *(yajña* or *homa),* meditation *(dhyāna),* and devotion to God who is worshipped in the form of an icon both at the temple and at home *(arcana).* Matters lie differently with respect to the rites of initiation *(saṁskāras),* since here a special form or manifestation of the Godhead is celebrated which requires celebrants to respond with specific duties which cannot be shared outside those who are initiated. Such groups are determined by caste and religious denomination (Manusmṛti II, 62; II, 65-66, *et al.).* Even though an individual has a particular affiliation with Vaiṣṇavism or Śaivism and perhaps with an even more specific *iṣṭadevatā,* for instance, there is general respect for other rituals, images, and forms of devotion that can be easily shared. The rituals and liturgies, with the exception of the initiation rites, are specific but not exclusive. Holy places may be visited by people who have a different religious affiliation, and Hindus are even permitted to visit Muslim and Christian sacred sites for the sake of receiving spiritual blessings. Thus, the tomb of the Ṣufi saint Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī in Ajmer/Rajastan is visited by Hindus as well as Muslims. In Southern India Christian festivals such as Good Friday processions, prayer meetings, etc., are visited by Christians as well as Hindus. Depending on the local political and religious atmosphere, such sharing can be rather uninhibited. Thus, it is reported that for lack of a Hindu priest in the village, a Christian priest was asked to celebrate a Hindu *pūjā.* The status of priest as a sacred person may well be more distinctive than the difference in religion (Puthanangady, 71). Hindus frequently request to participate in the Eucharist, and more recently even (Catholic) Christians have argued for admitting Hindus to the Eucharist, provided that they have truly long for it. The ensuing fellowship among participants has already developed into a kind of *communio.* (Puthanangady, 800)

Generally speaking, however, Christians encounter more difficulties in sharing religious experience with Hindus, especially rituals. This is partly due to the exclusivity of the traditional understanding of Christ, the history

of Christianity in India, etc., but there are additional obstacles as well. As a minority, Christians seems in need of justifying their existence and of establishing their identity by preserving and emphasizing a distinctive behaviour in cult as well as in ritual. 'Christian' symbols such as using candles, certain songs, the cross, etc., have often been adopted and absorbed by Hindus. What marks a Christian and establishes his/her identity is no longer simply a matter of one's own symbol but of deliberate non-participation in the world of Hindu symbols and rituals. A positive social identity is created through a negative emotional identity, such as not being a vegetarian or avoiding the vicinity of a temple, etc.

In the Christian Ashram movement, deliberate efforts have been made to integrate Hindu rituals into Christian liturgies. Not just readings from Hindu sacred scriptures, recitation of the names of God (japa), mantras for inviting the deity into the mūrti, fire symbolism (ārati), and observation of Hindu festivals (such as Onam in Kerala, Pongal all over Southern India, etc.), but the whole life style of the Hindu sannyāsin has been integrated. Yet this enculturation is not really an exchange of religious experience. Mantras may be used, but rarely will a Christian chant Oṁ namaḥ Śivāya, preferring Jesu namo, just as a Hindu chants the names of the Hindu gods and not La ilāha illā' llāh. Mystics in all religions, though transcending rituals and formalized concepts, nevertheless practise on the basis of the specific symbolism of their own tradition (Katz 1983, pp. 20ff.). Although general Hindu symbols such as Oṁ or the Gāyatrī are being used by these Christians, the very names of God that give these symbols an emotional flavour and which serve to identify them with a particular history are not shared. It is difficult to predict whether Indian Christians may eventually create a synthesis of Yahweh and Śiva just as Rudra and Śiva were synthesized hundreds of years ago.

Even in contemplative communities (as for instance in Shantivanam Ashram near Tiruchirapalli) Christians remain largely among themselves. Even after decades of indigenous Christian worship no real sharing of ritual between Hindus and Christians has been achieved, due to the enduring difference in social identity between the two groups. Where, on the other hand, such social identities do merge in common action for the improvement of social-economic conditions in India, new social groups emerge who show hardly any desire to share specific religious experiences from their respective backgrounds. For them the communio in social action itself is the symbol for the trans-religious dignity of every human being. Further pursuit of this would lead us prematurely to the third aspect.

Before elaborating the third aspect, it seems helpful to generalize the problem of sharing rituals on the basis of a very personal experience. While living in India to study Hinduism I developed a great interest in

participating in Christian liturgies that had become indigenous and had been saturated with traditional Hindu symbolism. This was all very meaningful, and the backdrop of Vedāntic symbols and language had contributed to a deeper Christian understanding of sacrifice in the Eucharist and to a more profound realization of the gradual divinization which takes place in a Christian life. Some Hindu friends, however, remained reluctant to rejoice in such rediscovery of Hindu rituals within a Christian environment precisely because the social identity of such a Christian group remained separate from the Hindu one. Although symbols do refer to a universal reality, they are also a means of identification and as such create group boundaries. Though we ought to distinguish between specific and archetypical symbols, it remains true even of universal symbols that they can create a relatively closed social-religious group within the intersubjective process of symbolization.

Some time later I had the opportunity to share a Zen-Buddhist Vesak ritual at Shasta Abbey in Northern California. Rather to my surprise, I felt uncomfortable when some of the well-known English Christmas carols were sung by the (excellent!) Buddhist choir — the text had been changed. The texts now narrated the story of the Buddha's birth and life. Although I have no major intellectual difficulty relating the Buddha and Buddhist experience to Christ and the Christian experience as being complementary, *emotionally* I felt discomfort precisely because my early childhood religious socialization was connected to those Christmas carols. This was a unique experience, drawing out a social-religious identity which is prior to any conceptualization and possible comparison to other religious experiences. Since cult, liturgies, and the whole ritualistic aspect of religion is normally learnt by the child in a more or less exclusive socialization process which is dependent on a specific family situation, the values thus created obtain a unique importance to each individual. Such values may be so basic that they may present difficulties in translating them into a different social-religious context. This probably constitutes the reason that religious people all over the world are hesitant about effortlessly sharing their rituals and liturgies with outsiders — they represent the very intimate tokens of emotional identity for a specific social context. Unless there is a genuine modification in *social identity,* the sharing of rituals between Hindus and Christians may be unacceptable to major portions of these religious groups.

3) Despite a strong tendency towards separation and antagonism between different religious groups in India, there is also growing communication, due to urbanization, migration, and other economic-political factors. Poverty and social misery provide one of the main sources for social conflicts and communal violence. The question of social identity cannot, therefore, be raised only in the context of the past, i. e., traditional

religious identities such as Hindu or Christian, but ought to be raised in terms of the present and future, i. e., the crisis of India's social reality and the survival of all human beings in the face of economic and environmental crisis as well as the general crisis of values. Motivation for creating an awareness of a new humankind is by all means to be nurtured, and in that context, Hinduism, with its rich cosmic symbolism and its dedication to harmony with mother earth, and the Christian sense for social justice certainly form good candidates for meaningful dialogue.

Mere repetition of sacred symbolism is insufficient, however. A cardinal ritual such as pilgrimage forms a fitting example. First, many of the Hindu *yatras* possess cosmic symbolism, culminating in the participation in the divine power at a special place which is consecrated as *axis mundi* during a particular rite. Second, pilgrimages are often non-sectarian in design, including both Śaivaits, Vaiṣṇavas, as well as others (Vaidyanathan, 72). Third, they help in surpassing social boundaries, since caste discriminations are often overcome. A case in point is the famous pilgrimage to Lord Ayyapan at Sabarimala which attracts millions of devotees every year. Even Christians have been known to participate in this pilgrimage, as well as in others. To the extent that such dynamics are at play, pilgrimage serves as an example of a ritual that does not seem bound by religious borderlines. Social limits are eliminated only temporarily, however. It can be shown that pilgrimage depend on a specific static social structure and even serve to stabilize social organization precisely through such merely temporal transgression of the social order (Arockiadoss, 655f.). What is more, such pilgrimages tend to underscore and reinforce existing group identities. Even such examples of ritual remain particular and exclusive. This is not remarkable, since all religious symbols serve to unify and differentiate society at one and the same time, creating social group identities.

Communication in the actual everyday social praxis of various people is required if *communicatio in sacris* is taken seriously. All ways of sharing ritual or of intellectual dialogue are secondary and can do no more than interpret the actual sharing occurring between social-religious groups. Otherwise sharing religious experience remains an isolated matter. On the other hand, it has been correctly observed that there can be no common *social identity* on the part of a cooperating social unity (such as the Indian nation) without sharing each other's sacred traditions lest the *communio* be reduced to mere intellectual communication (Panikkar 1973, pp. 65). Unless the urgent need for human solidarity is truly felt as a common concern, any participation in the other's rituals will not be very meaningful and perhaps even disturbing. A real 'mutation' in human consciousness needs to occur (Panikkar 1988, 230), but such mutations are successful only under circumstances of extreme environmental pressure.

In other words, unless the urgency, danger, and fragility of the human situation is felt by major portions of the various religious groups, any sharing in the well-springs of other religions can take place only among a few selected and mostly intellectual participants engaged in dialogue in artificial situations. Such dialogue is occasioned by countless conferences in India, and it is certainly enriching and perhaps forms a testing ground. Nevertheless, such dialogue does not yet amount to *communicatio in sacris* between Hinduism and Christianity.

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