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A Modern Hindu Concept of Inter-religious Dialogue*

By

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Dialogue has become a fashionable word in the theological circles for quite some time now. However, there is a need to review what has been achieved so far. If it is significant, we should then review how much religious tension has been reduced so far. If it is not much, why has there been no progress. In this note I will deal with the issues relating to Hindu-Christian dialogue. I am using Christianity only as a reference point, and the issues raised do have a wider context as well.

As far as Hindu-Christian dialogue is concerned, I am of the opinion that there has been hardly any progress all these years. Many academics and theologians have been involved in the exercise so far. The whole literature, over a long period of time, seems to follow a familiar pattern – a discussion on the theory of the dialogue, what should be included in a dialogue, who should and should not be involved in a dialogue, and ends with a lament that there is so very little progress. The problem, according to me, is that the dialogue does not even consider a need to discuss what is the basic difference between Hinduism and Christianity, and an inquiry into whether these come in the way of communal harmony. A dialogue is really not necessary if we are to discuss only what is similar between the two systems.

To explain my perspective in the matter, I will use the article '*The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue*' by *Klaus Klostermaier*.¹ The reason why I have chosen to use the

* This lecture was delivered at the *Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main* on 27th of October 2004.

writings of *Klostermaier* is because I believe that he has a special place in this dialogue. He was in India in the 1960s as a member of Catholic order, which is known to be hostile towards Hinduism. He has also spent two years at Vrindavan, famous as one of the important places associated with Lord Krishna. He is no longer a member of the order, and presently teaches at the University of Manitoba in Canada. He also writes extensively on Hinduism, and his book *A Survey of Hinduism*² is a standard textbook in the American universities. It is one of the few books that presents Hinduism in a sympathetic manner. He has also come out with two more important books, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*³ and *A Short Introduction of Hinduism*.⁴

The first quote that I will use is as follows:

*Celebrations and affirmations of dialogue notwithstanding, there seem to be few new ideas; there seems to be little progress. I may be wrong. But let me report one little anecdote, which I find telling. One of the handful of Hindu scholars who had shown an interest in Hindu-Christian over the past decades read a very good address at the 1986 Interfaith Seminar in Tambaram/Madras. The thoughts sounded somewhat familiar to me. When checking up I found that it was word by word the same address the same scholar had delivered at the WCC Interfaith Meeting in 1970 in Ajaltoun/Lebanon, at which I also happened to be present.*⁵

This anecdote confirms what I have said that there is no progress. Probably the best definition of a dialogue that I have come across is as follows:

*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.*⁶

To discuss the differences is not an easy thing to do. But not to do it means that we are sweeping the causes of dissonance under the carpet. We will not even begin to solve the problems faced by the society. *Klostermaier* says:

*The institutional crisis is more radical than the crisis in individual lives. I believe that Christianity as a contemporary institution cannot (and should not) establish its legitimacy on the words of Jesus, nor Hinduism on the word of the Veda. Both institutions must seek legitimacy for their present and future structures from elsewhere and develop along lines for which there are no clear instructions in the documents they refer to.*⁷

There is a great deal of merit in this statement. The word of Jesus, or of the Vedas, can be, and has been, interpreted in more than one ways. The word may have been relevant at a particular time in a particular environment. And what if the two words in

¹ Klostermaier's article is part of the book *Hindu-Christian Dialogue - Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. by Harold Coward, Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass 1993

² *A Survey of Hinduism*, Albany N.Y: State University of New York Press 1989

³ *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Oxford (U.K.): Oneworld Books 1998

⁴ *A Short Introduction to Hinduism*, Oxford (U.K.): Oneworld Books 1998

⁵ 'The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue', *Hindu-Christian Dialogue - Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. by Harold Coward, Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass 1993, p. 265

⁶ Gladys Ambat, 'Why Dialogue with Hindus?', *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*, Volume 2, 1989, p. 9

⁷ 'The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue', *Hindu-Christian Dialogue - Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. by Harold Coward, Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass 1993, p. 266

the same text has different meaning? In this context, what Mahatma Gandhi has to say becomes relevant:

*My belief in the Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired ... I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense.*⁸

The criterion to be followed is whether a set of proposition meets the test of morality as we understand it today. If it is in the scriptures, then it is fine. If it is not, then morality has to score over scriptures. A continuous inquiry in an essential part of keeping a system dynamically relevant for the present needs of the society.

Klostermaier has this to say about the interaction between science and spirituality:

*The secular, science-based modern culture of the West has become the background to contemporary intellectual life almost everywhere - or is fast becoming so. Hindu-Christian dialogue of the future may not only have to take place in the awareness of this situation, but it may have to incorporate it into its agenda.*⁹

There are, of course, some things that will clash between spirituality and science. Some are not of any special concern. For example, in the telling of a story, there are some embellishments that are added to keep the attention of the audience. But, there are others which have to stand the test of rationality. It would be unacceptable to say that because untouchability is mentioned in the Vedas, its present fossilised form is to be continued. Just as it would be unacceptable to say that the earth is flat because it is alluded to in the Bible.

Klostermaier warns about the following two tendencies which are not conducive to a good dialogue:

*I cannot help feeling that denominational Christianity has narrowed down what was meant to be a universal spirituality to a sectarian doctrine, and that something similar has happened in sectarian Hinduism.*¹⁰

There is a strong trend in present-day Christian theology to replace systematic thinking and philosophical engagement by story and narrative, to dismiss the intellectual approach to religion as irrelevant and to cultivate only its emotional and pragmatic sides. This trend may be both symptom of a lack of intellectual substance and a cause for an erosion of cerebral content of Christianity. I see a similar trend also in some of the contemporary movements in Hinduism. What is gratifying is that the movements in Hinduism are more an exception than a rule.

Apart from the differences in the two philosophies, *Klostermaier* suggests the following be also discussed:

⁸ *Young India*, October 6, 1921.

⁹ 'The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue', *Hindu-Christian Dialogue - Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. by Harold Coward, Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass 1993, p. 267

¹⁰ 'The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue', *Hindu-Christian Dialogue - Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. by Harold Coward, Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass 1993, p. 268

Western Christian missionaries often carried tension and dissension into India and separated not only Indian Christians from their Hindu neighbours but also brought about a split within Indian Christianity. Part of Hindu-Christian dialogue in India must be devoted to the healing of old wounds, the expression of regret over what has happened in the past, and the admission that Christians have grievously misunderstood and misrepresented Hinduism.¹¹

Healing of old wounds starts with an acceptance that there are wounds to be healed. Here, there is no intention of asking the present generation of Christians to pay any restitution of any type. The acknowledgement of the wounds implies a promise that such things will not be happen again in the future. It is also a distancing away from the harmful practices of the past. Negation of history sends a signal that the dialogue is not between two equals, and also implies that the present generation of Hindus should meekly accept the vandalism that their ancestors have had to suffer.

This situation is no longer tenable, considering the much greater awareness of the issues involved, particularly amongst the Hindus. *Raimundo Panikkar*, a Christian theologian, observed:

The first lesson history makes us aware of is that all our disquisitions are dependent on a temporal factor - that is, on historical circumstances. Were it not for the fact of the political decolonisation of the world, we would not be speaking the way we are today. Dialogue has not sprung out of pure speculation. Praxis conditions theory. Yet it is also wisdom to make a virtue out of necessity.¹²

Finally, a dialogue should be undertaken with an intention of understanding each other better. At the end, the participants can conclude that there is an agreement to disagree. However, if this has consequences in terms of adverse communal harmony, then the same has to be factored in the consideration. A dialogue is not necessarily to get the other side to accept one's own position. In this case, the following statement of Cardinal Francis *Arinze*, quoted by *Klostermaier* in his article, will come in the way:

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, made man, is our saviour ... He ascended to heaven but not before he had carefully prepared his apostles to bring salvation to all men, of all times, in all places ... Interreligious dialogue would be unnecessary if all men believed in Jesus Christ and practiced only the religion which he established.¹³

Klostermaier pointed out that this can evoke a response from the Hindus that if every one believed in Lord Ram, then a dialogue becomes unnecessary. My opinion is that Christians are not willing to accept a position which does not accord Christ the exclusive position, with all the other gods being history. The clergy, at least, will not

¹¹ 'The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue', *Hindu-Christian Dialogue - Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. by Harold Coward, Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass 1993, p. 269

¹² 'The Jordan, the Tiber, the Ganges', *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness - Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, John Hick and Paul F Knitter (eds), Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books 1994, p 96.

¹³ 'The Future of Hindu-Christian Dialogue', *Hindu-Christian Dialogue - Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. by Harold Coward, Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass 1993, p 267

even accept a position of Christ being bestowed with the highest position in the pantheon of gods. For them, there can be no other god. It would be impossible to have a dialogue on this basis.

The prospects for a dialogue between Hindus and Christians would appear to be bleak. Can anything be done to retrieve the situation? I personally do not see this possible unless the Christians give up their exclusivist position, skip the inclusivist step, and go straight to pluralism. Of course, this strikes at the root of Christianity and its hierarchy, and would be resisted in more ways than one.

What about the agree-to-disagree position? To deal with this, one has to see if there are going to be any adverse consequences. There are some faiths like Judaism and Zoroastrianism who believe in an exclusive path towards salvation, and yet have been able to survive harmoniously with the Hindus. This has happened because they do not believe in converting others to their own faith. If the exclusivist position is coupled with an aggressive proselytisation programme, then there is a problem. Such a programme has always created social and communal tensions, and has led to major hostile reactions from the target community. Those undertaking the proselytisation programmes, too, react strongly when their own folks are poached, even when there is a spiritual conversion.

Will Christians agree not to convert? If they do not agree for at least this much, then there is no hope for either a dialogue or living in harmony. At the same time, Christians must understand that by agreeing they are not doing Hindus any favour. It is a human thing to do, and if they do not do so, then their intent becomes suspect.

On the Christian side, one does wonder how many amongst the laity really believe the exclusivity that is promoted by the church. The attendance to the churches of all denomination is low and falling. Hence, today when Hindus go to Christian countries they rarely, if ever, get called as heathens and face exhortations that if they do not believe in Christ they will burn in hell. In India, the Christian community is too small in most parts of the country, and much of the sting of the anti-Hindu propaganda has gone due to the situation in the home countries.

On the Hindu side, there is a laid back attitude, and abuses against it are laughed off most of the time. Often, Hindus ask what is wrong if institution like the Missionaries of Charity convert when they are providing succour to the poor. Essentially, a Hindu finds it difficult to talk bad about others. However, many are now wondering how long will the abuses continue and how long it should be tolerated.

So one has to accept that there is an underlying tension in the relationship between the two communities. This is aggravated when those, whose biological ancestors are Hindus, are also in the campaign of calumny, along with their spiritual masters. These tensions manifest in various ways, sometimes with violence, and it is desirable that they are not allowed to fester in the way it is happening at the moment. Dialogue is one way to reduce the tension. But, an effective dialogue is one between two equal parties. And unless this situation comes into being, the tensions will continue.

Stages of a dialogue

So let me suggest four stages of a dialogue.

The primary objective of the dialogue is to find out if there are differences between two positions. If there are none, then there is only a discussion which ends with saying that there no differences.

If there are differences, then the next step is to discuss if they create any tensions between the two contending parties. If the answer is no, then once again the discussion ends. This is an agree-to-disagree position.

If the differences are threatening, the dialogue then becomes how to reconcile the two positions. If reconciled, then the discussion ends at this point.

If they cannot be reconciled, then there is a problem, and the dialogue moves to the stage to decide what to do next, given that we live in a civil society.

Conclusion

Let me reiterate the definition of a dialogue that I had mentioned above, namely:

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.¹⁴

Even a dialogue of what is common will remove suspicions, if there are any. A dialogue is also a way of ensuring that one's way of thinking does not become fossilised, but is in a state of dynamic improvements. Hinduism has been enriched by its interaction with various faiths, philosophies and civilisations. In this way it has been able to take advantage of the thinking done by others, and there was no need to reinvent the wheel, so to say.

A dialogue is not with an intention to necessarily negate one's thinking. Nor is it with an intention of forcing guilt on the present generation for the actions of their ancestors. However, one needs to understand that thinking and values change over a period of time, and what was an accepted wisdom at one time may no longer have this status. Hence, to ignore the differences, if there are any, would ensure that the tensions, real or imagined, caused by the differences cause will not be dealt with.

¹⁴ Gladys Ambat, 'Why Dialogue with Hindus?', *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*, Volume 2, 1989, p. 9