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Risks and Means of Interreligious Dialogue in Community

There is certainly a dialogical paradigm shift taking place in Christianity, in the era of oikumené *(which is of course still going on), so it could also be rightly called the era of dialogue. In a radically secularised world, we are seriously challenged to evaluate and rethink our prejudicial picture of our real 'enemy' or of our main threat.*

The person who is not against us might well be with us. We should not neglect the enormous impact that interreligious dialogue will have and has already had on our understanding of ourselves as Christians. We can no longer speak as if the others were not listening.

I. Importance: What is at Stake?

Christian theology has profited greatly from the various secular theories on dialogue, but at the same time the theory of dialogue developed in the ecumenical movement has reached a unique effectiveness, which can also be meaningful for other fields of human thought.

Strangely enough, it seems that the methodology of interreligious dialogue is much more elaborated than that of ecumenical (interdenominational) dialogue; scientific literature deals much deeper with the theory of interreligious dialogue than ecumenical dialogue. One of the reasons for this can be that although ecumenical dialogue started much earlier, it was not operating under the name *dialogue*. In the beginning it did not use the method of dialogue either, but rather of comparison: the early ecumenical movement concentrated on comparative studies of different theories and theologies. And when the reflection on dialogue itself began, the term gradually became used primarily for interreligious encounter, while reflection on the method of the ecumenical thought was going on under other terms.

Here we deal with the interreligious (or, as some call it, interfaith) area of theology, concentrating especially on dialogues that take place in or originate from the circles of *Genève* and *Rome* (the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Vatican), especially as it has been cultivated in the sub-unit on dialogue in the World Council of Churches (since 1971) and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID, since 1964, previously called Secretariat for non-Christians). We do not try here to focus on actual or current results and developments of bilateral or multilateral dialogues, but on methods and background theories used in present dialogues.

We build heavily and seriously on the contribution of different "third world" theologians (as they call themselves), especially of Asian origin, from India and Sri Lanka, most of all Stanley J. SAMARTHA and Wesley S. ARIARAJAH. The reason for this is that most of the people of other living faiths live in Asia (including the Middle East); so the Christian Church in Asia is inevitably called to be the leading force in interreligious dialogue. Indeed, for example India as a country has a long record of religious tolerance unparalleled in human history.[1] And certainly, "a person who knows only one's own religion knows no religion."[2]

Our Christian theology concerning people of other living faiths needs to be reread, revised and re-evaluated. Our fundamental experience in this respect was that the very same persons, who are already dialogical in their method of ecumenical thinking, could not fail to be dialogical in the interreligious field. Hence the term *wider ecumenism*[3] was created. Some speak about ecumenism *ad intra* (towards ourselves) and ecumenism *ad extra* (towards the others)[4],

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1 SAMARTHA Stanley J. quotes this insight from MENENZES George in SAMARTHA Stanley J., *Partners in Community: Some Reflections on Hindu–Christian Relations Today*. In SAMARTHA Stanley J., *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Interreligious Relationships*. Genève, 1981. 130.; and Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research 1980/2.; and Voices from the Third World 1985/4. 47.

2 ARIARAJAH S. Wesley quotes the statement of WEBER Max, in an interview made with him by KALDAWI-KILLINGBACK Muna, *Searching for Interfaith Dialogue: An Interview with Reverend S. Wesley ARIARAJAH*. Common Concern, 1997/6. www.worldywca-org.ac.psiweb.com/common_concern/june1997/int_dialogue.html.

3 ARIARAJAH S. Wesley stands for the term to be used in ARIARAJAH S. Wesley, *Wider Ecumenism: A Threat or a Promise?* The Ecumenical Review 1998/3. 321–328.

4 KÜNG Hans is one of the authors who have evaluated the development of the ecumenical movement and also of the journal *Concilium* in the previous twenty years: KÜNG Hans, *Twenty Years of*

or about *planetary ecumenism*[5]. But if we started to use these terms for wider purposes, we would not have a term for the ecumenical movement itself. It could also water down the specific and unique purposes of ecumenical dialogue.

As far as we are concerned, we do not use these mentioned terms, because we see in the ecumenical endeavour above all the movement for the visible unity and integrity of the Church of Jesus Christ. Thus, we suggest using the common term *dialogue* for both ecumenical and interreligious fields. This term encompasses both of these territories; it underlines well their commonalties, but leaves sufficient ground to emphasize their differences as well.

As far as interreligious dialogue is concerned, this field of theologising is rather unknown for most Christian thinkers, or at least many of us already have our good old theories to handle the other belief systems. At the threshold of the third millennium, some say that we have to realise that the world will never be totally Christian, and Christianity will always remain a relative minority, only one – even though maybe the largest – parcel in the religious scene of the Globe. This honest admission would not mean giving up our Christian hope, but it would be the humble and at the same time realistic acceptance of a fact of our life and world. And then we have to rethink the nature of our mission to bring the Good News to the whole inhabited Earth.

II. Dynamics, For and Against
1. Aims and Levels of Encounter

Pope PAUL VI's major encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (ES, issued in 1964) sees dialogue as the way (spirit or method) to exercise the entire mission of the Church of Jesus Christ in today's world. Dialogue permeates and characterizes all the different forms of ecclesial activity: presence, evangelism, inculturation and witness.[6]

Ecumenical Theology: What for? In BRAND Paul – SCHILLEBEECKX OP Edward – WEILER Anton (eds.), *Twenty Years of Concilium: Retrospect and Prospect*. Concilium 1983/10. 52.

5 This term, *planetary ecumenism*, by GEFFRÉ Claude might be too wide, but nevertheless in its dimensions it is certainly the largest we have ever met in the scientific literature in GEFFRÉ Claude, *Toward a Hermeneutics of Interreligious Dialogue*. In JEANROND Werner G. – RIKE Jennifer L., *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*. New York, 1991. 263.

6 These four main ecclesial activities are evaluated in ZAGO Marcello, *The Spirituality of Dialogue*. Pro Dialogo 1999/2. 233.

The plurality of religions can be seen as a consequence of the richness of creation and the manifold grace of God.[7] Based on this assumption, we can enlist many models as aims for interreligious dialogue. For example, the unity of the human family, the harmony among the religions, or the spirituality of dialogue.[8] *Integration* (as opposed to syncretism) is the interaction of diverse traditions or identities living in harmony, where the different traditions enrich each other without really losing their identity.[9]

These models function on at least three levels. First, on the existential level of *coexistence*, the basic purpose of interreligious dialogue is most of all to eliminate all religious prejudices and religious intolerance, as well as to remove misunderstandings. Second, on the more theoretical level of *convivence*, the aim of interreligious dialogue is especially the convergence, even fusion of (transcendental) horizons, mutual understanding as well as the appreciation of each other. Convivence happens through open exchange of witness, of experience, through cross-questioning and listening to each other. When it leads to *mutual understanding*, *respect* and *cooperation,*[10] then we witness together to faith, love and hope. Third, on the practical level of *cooperation*, the goal focuses on working together, locating and serving common tasks for the sake of humanity as a whole, as well as for the fullness of the environment and creation.

The final goal and purpose of interreligious dialogue is of course reflection and *reception*, which leads to an enduring, productively shaped and reconciled difference, to a kind of new self-understanding. We are called to discover as many values, experiences and dimensions of the divine mystery as possible, some of which may be better developed in other religions for cultural, historical or providential reasons.[11] Our aim is to accumulate spiritual values and to serve our neighbours

in strengthening the good and fighting against sin, contributing to solutions, cooperating in the promotion of consciousness and perfection. [12]

2. Risks in our Endeavour

By taking a closer look at the history of Christian thinking, concentrating on the topic of interreligious dialogue, we can distinguish between three eminent dangers, which have been often cited by persons opposing or questioning the process or theory of dialogue. These three important and very influential dangers may be called the three classical fears.

A. Three Classical Fears (and some others)

The first one of the three classical fears is the real danger of *compromising the uniqueness* of Jesus Christ in the plan of salvation of all humanity. The second fear is *syncretism*, and we will deal with it in a separate sub-chapter. The third danger or fear is not so much a doctrinal or dogmatic one, as are the previous two. This fear rather has some very practical consequences: when engaging in any kind of dialogue, Christian women and men usually *lose the urgency of missionary mandate* or vocation.[13] We may add two more minor dangers to the enlisted three classical fears: first, the fear of *absorption*; and second, the danger of *losing our sense of the universal Church* of Jesus Christ.

We may compare this system of the three classical fears with, for example, that from the *Muslim* world and culture, where there may be at least four main objections to dialogue with Christianity.[14] Some may think that interreligious dialogue is highly inappropriate for Muslim believers, since it only covers uneven power relations and hides non-avowed purposes, hidden tasks and agendas. Second, others may object to this kind of dialogue, because it revives dormant or caduceus controversies. Third, there may be people who see in dialogue a compromise or betrayal of truth. Fourth and finally, some

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7 KUTTIANIMATTATHIL SDB Jose quotes the *Guidelines for Interreligious Dialogue* (1989) in KUTTIANI-MATTATHIL SDB Jose, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: A Critical Study of the Indian Christian Attempts since the Second Vatican Council*. Bangalore, 1995. 158.

8 These six main modes and ways of interreligious dialogue are enlisted in GONÇALVES Teresa Osório, *Interreligious Encounter: Dialogue and the Search for Unity*. Pro Dialogo 1997/3. 387–393.; and The Ecumenical Review 2000/4. 466–470.

9 DEVANANDA Yohan defines syncretism in this way, and deals with syncretism in opposition to the notion and understanding of integration in DEVANANDA Yohan, *Understanding Conversion in the Context of Dialogue*. The Ecumenical Review, 1992/4. 433.

10 ZABOLOTSKY Nicholas A. enlists the five marks in ZABOLOTSKY Nicholas A., *Dialogue in Community: Initial Points and Conditions*. In SAMARTHA Stanley J., *Faith in the Midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community*. Genève, 1977. 59–73.

11 KUTTIANIMATTATHIL SDB Jose quotes the *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* in KUTTIANIMATTATHIL SDB Jose, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: A Critical Study of the Indian Christian Attempts since the Second Vatican Council*. Bangalore, 1995. 590.

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12 As a special case, for the (Two-)Third(s) World, interreligious dialogue contributes significantly to the building up of a genuine Third World-awareness and culture. PIERIS SJ Aloysius approaches the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue from this angle in PIERIS SJ Aloysius, *Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions: An Asian Paradigm*. In *A Rainbow in an Unjust World: Voices from the Third World*. 1992/2. 176–188.

13 ARIARAJAH S. Wesley enlists these three main classical fears in ARIARAJAH S. Wesley, *Dialogue or Mission: Can the Tension Be Resolved?* In ARIARAJAH S. Wesley, *Not without my Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations*. Genève, 1999. 102.

14 MITRI Tarek speaks about these objections in MITRI Tarek, *Reflections on Confrontation and Dialogue*. Studies in Interreligious Dialogue 1999/1. 83.

may see in interreligious dialogue only a more sophisticated form of mission and evangelisation. That is why the transparency of motives is so important in dialogue.[15]

There are two classical forms of religious hatred and intolerance.[16] The *Semitic* (Judeo-Christian-Muslim) form claims that differences must either be converted, or totally destroyed and eliminated. The *Hindu* form, on the other hand, claims that all differences and varieties are simply accidents of history, culture and geography; the true eternal religion embraces and absorbs all of them.

B. Eclectic Mixture or too Narrow Frame

Let us concentrate now on the second of the classical fears, *syncretism*, which is a way of handling religious ideas. It may appear in many forms, constituting a specific obstacle to interreligious dialogue. It is usually defined as a peculiar form of eclecticism, consisting of the uncritical and non-discerning mixture of elements from different religions without a centre, focal point or integrating principle.[17] Or let us see another definition, roughly in the same line: "Syncretism is conscious or unconscious human attempt to create a new religion, composed of elements taken from different religions."[18]

Syncretism may also be described in another way: as the deliberate addition to one's own creed of whatever is regarded as valuable and profound from the doctrines of other contemporary creeds.[19] In other words, syncretism is a mixture of various elements, which tend to remain apart and which conflict or pull in different directions, resulting many times in domination, disharmony and confusion. Thus the transcendent unity of religions, the unification under the label of a new religion, the meta-religion or global spirituality would be dubious aims for interreligious dialogue.

The two extremes of harmony-thinking and conflict-thinking are

syncretism and fundamentalism. In both of these cases the human mind tries to cope somehow with cultural pluralism, while refusing in principle the mental effort of exploring the value of converging perspectives or common elements. *Fundamentalism* in a pre-modern way harshly simplifies the interpretation of texts and facts, and judges negatively everything that does not enter into one's own narrow frame of set values and ideas; thus it is at the same time apologetic and aggressive.

Syncretism, on the other hand, in a late modern or postmodern way throws the frame away, thus freeing itself from discerning, evaluating and judging: it remains resting in a plurality of ideas which have no relation whatsoever to one another. Syncretism is therefore closely connected to *relativism* as well, which may be defined as the uncritical and non-discerning acceptance of several absolutes, without recognising any criterion to judge between them.[20]

In general, the rhetorical forms of accusations towards interreligious dialogue, but aimed rather at syncretism are usually accompanied by the use of pejorative terms: by such expressions as assimilation, absorption, betrayal, or simply compromise. But after all, religions are not at all merely fortresses or purely castles to be defended when they are attacked. Religious traditions are rather fresh wellsprings for the nourishment of all human life.

Syncretism, synthesis and symbiosis are three mutually interconnected terms. The first, syncretism, as we have seen already in the previous paragraphs, is a haphazard and risky mixing of religions. Meanwhile, *synthesis*, on the other hand, is the creation of a *tertium quid* (a third party) out of two or more source religions, and in this process the destruction of the identity and integrity of each component religion occurs. *Symbiosis*, finally, is a conversion and metanoia in basic interreligious human communities, to the common heritage of all religions (the Golden Rule and the Beatitudes) and to the specificity of one's own religion at the same time.[21]

In any case, we are not larger than our traditions. We can transform and reread our traditions, but we are not able to rule or overcome them, as we cannot overcome the need for breathing either. Believers who think or practice in a syncretistic way pretend that they are above

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15 KUTTIANIMATTATHIL SDB Jose speaks about this transparency in KUTTIANIMATTATHIL SDB Jose, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: A Critical Study of the Indian Christian Attempts since the Second Vatican Council*. Bangalore, 1995. 108–109.

16 NILES D. Preman informs us about the two forms of religious intolerance in NILES D. Preman, *How Ecumenical must the Ecumenical Movement be? The Challenge of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) to the Ecumenical Movement*. The Ecumenical Review 1991/4. 457.

17 SAMARTHA Stanley J. quotes the well-known definition in SAMARTHA Stanley J., *The Holy Spirit and People of Other Faiths*. The Ecumenical Review 1990/3–4. 255.

18 The definition is from the booklet *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. Genève, 1979.

19 DEVANANDAN Paul David sets up this definition in DEVANANDAN Paul David, *The Christian Attitude and Approach to non-Christian Religions*. International Review of Missions 1952/2. 178.

20 ROEST CROLLIUS SJ Ary A. deals with the two contrasting concepts of thinking in ROEST CROLLIUS SJ Ary A., *Harmony and Conflict*. Bulletin (Pro Dialogo) 1992/3. 376.

21 In a quite inventive way, PIERIS SJ Aloysius has found these three terms to cope with in PIERIS SJ Aloysius, *Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions: An Asian Paradigm*. In *A Rainbow in an Unjust World: Voices from the Third World*. 1992/2. 188.

or outside their traditions. But they are mistaken: in fact, mixing is largely misunderstanding and misjudgement.

The Jesuit priest, Mariasusai DHAVAMONY SJ, enlists five important *syncretistic types* in history,[22] and he proves that not all of them are to be rejected. Of these five basic forms probably the last one is the most dangerous. First of all, there is the process from polydemonism to polytheism in many parts of the world. Second, there is also the mutual and natural interaction between cultures and religions, when they meet and coexist. Third, we find different tendencies to subordinate the various gods and goddesses to One Supreme God, as well as to order the different divine myths, tales and legends under one main group of myths.

Fourth and probably most importantly, the previous history of each religion and tradition may well be an amalgam of diverse forms and modes, all of which it tried to approximate to its own form. Finally, the kind of syncretism which is considered inadmissible by most Christians is that which implies a systematic attempt to combine, blend and reconcile harmonious or even conflicting religious elements in a new synthesis. This last option, though, would almost certainly lead to religious and ideological relativism, indicating a rather misleading implication, according to which all religions would be equally valid and profound.

A kind of positive understanding of "syncretism" in scientific literature is when a religious tradition is enriched by the influence of another tradition. But in this case there is an integrating principle that makes a real difference. D. C. MULDER enlists four main *syncretistic waves* in the Judeo-Christian world in history.[23] The first one of these syncretistic waves happened in the last century before the Exile of Israel. The second one was the powerful Roman Empire itself, whose wave culminated in the reign of IULIANUS Apostata – the apostate, who denounced and left his own Christian religion for the sake of paganism.

The third syncretistic wave broke over the whole of Europe around the middle of the eighteenth century. This wave was grounded and then prepared by the Renaissance, as well as the Enlightenment. The fourth wave is the one in which most of us live nowadays. This wave is nourished by the science of comparative religion, among other

factors. The result of these four syncretistic waves is that Christianity in a way can be called a syncretistic religion. Or as Raimundo PANNIKAR summarised it: "Christianity is, sociologically speaking, certainly one religion: it is ancient paganism, or (…) the complex Hebrew, Hellenic, Græco-Latin, Celtic, Gothic and modern religion converted to Jesus Christ with more or less success."[24]

This raises the important question of whether we are content and happy if some of our doctrines, spiritualities, ethical and moral principles interpenetrate other religions, or whether we are ready to condemn these phenomena as syncretism as well. The answer to this question can disclose our possible inequal attitudes and approaches towards the others. Incompleteness and insecurity will certainly remain true characteristics of any authentic dialogue, where we indeed take risks in our endeavour, for example between legitimate openness and illegitimate syncretism.[25]

III. Various Means
1. Seeking and Serving the Truth

It is often not the ontological but the existential or personal truth that urges and compels us to seriously engage in interreligious dialogue. We may discover the face and faith of God in others when we encounter face-to-face their spirituality, way of thinking, morality and quality of life. To approach the epistemological truth (that which can be clearly shown to be not false to the satisfaction of all concerned) is not exactly a direct aim of dialogue, although indirectly it may and should be always present.

The way of dialogue is intrinsic to many religions, especially in Asia, because of some common features. In the Asian part of the world, the wholeness of life and the well-being of a person are intimately related to the well-being of all. Truth is understood as a mystery, transcending all that humans can grasp. Since there is practically no end to what can be learned, there can be no meaningful claim to the exclusive possession of truth.[26]

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22 His very valuable article is the following: DHAVAMONY SJ Mariasusai, *Towards a Theology of Dialogue in Interreligious Ritual Participation*. Bulletin (Pro Dialogo) 1990/3. 302.

23 His article is the following: MULDER D. C., *"No other Gods" – "No other Name"*. The Ecumenical Review 1986/2. 209–215.

24 SAMARTHA Stanley J. quotes PANNIKAR Raimundo in the following chapter: SAMARTHA Stanley J., *Religious Pluralism and the Quest for Human Community*. In SAMARTHA Stanley J., *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Interreligious Relationships*. Genève, 1981. 28.; and in NELSON J. Robert – BRILL E. J. (eds.), *The Unity of Humankind in the Perspective of Christian Faith: Essays in Honour of Willem Adolf VISSER'T HOOFT on his Seventieth Birthday*. Leiden, 1971.

25 OTT Heinrich speaks about these limits and borders of dialogue in OTT Heinrich, *The Horizons of Understanding and Interpretative Possibilities*. In SAMARTHA Stanley J. (ed.), *Faith in the midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community*. Genève, 1977. 85–89.

26 ARIARAJAH S. Wesley enlists these common characteristics in ARIARAJAH S. Wesley, *Pluralism*

Stanley J. SAMARTHA phrased beautifully his insight on exclusivity: "An exclusive claim is like a bit of rock in a handful of peanuts: it may break a few teeth, but will never provide nourishment to the body."[27] Although interreligious polemics is a "heuristic tool of very great power",[28] religion is above all a way of life, and not an argumentative system. Attitudes and conduct in this respect are more important than beliefs.

True religion or religious truth should be defined in terms of compassion, nonviolence, self-giving, universal love and the rejection of material acquisition,[29] since peace in the inner self and peace in the universe are closely interrelated goals. The greatest and ultimate expressions and manifestations of spirituality and God-relatedness in most of the Asian religious traditions are the virtues of detachment, renunciation and selflessness.[30]

The fundamental paradox of a commitment or identity comes from the fact that most of the human ways of thinking are usually not able to cope with the psychological problem of absoluteness and relativity. The question is that if we experienced a truth as absolute or absolutely right for us, how can we be faithful to this truth by claiming its relative significance: "If all religions are 'true', dialogue is hardly necessary. If only one religion is 'true', dialogue is impossible."[31]

The *relative absoluteness* already existing in the vocabulary of theology seems nonsense for many believers, or a betrayal of the faith. On the other hand, the various claimers of relative absoluteness feel the absolute, and hence the rather exclusive claims a kind of idolatry or blasphemy. In any case, we absolutely do not possess the truth, but the Truth possesses us. Our perspectivic (and as such, culturally conditioned), parabolic (interpretative) and provisional (self-corrective) theology needs to be recognised as such in our midst.[32]

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and Harmony. Current Dialogue 1993/25. 17–18.

27 One of the extraordinary abilities of SAMARTHA Stanley J. is that he usually finds the most expressive symbols for what he wants to say: SAMARTHA Stanley J., *Mission in a Religiously Plural World: Looking beyond Tambaram (1938)*. International Review of Mission 1988/3. 320.

28 GRIFFITHS Paul J. makes this important remark concerning interreligious dialogues in his article: GRIFFITHS Paul J., *Why we need Interreligious Polemics*. First Things 1994/6–7. 35.; and www.first-things.com/ftissues/ft9406/articles/griffith.html.

29 ARIARAJAH S. Wesley enlists the requirements of a true religion in ARIARAJAH S. Wesley, *Hindu Spirituality: An Invitation to Dialogue?* The Ecumenical Review 1986/1. 77.

30 ARIARAJAH S. Wesley uses especially Hindu spirituality in India as a *pars pro toto* (a part instead of the whole) example to introduce the whole Asian spirituality in ARIARAJAH S. Wesley, *Hindu Spirituality: An Invitation to Dialogue?* The Ecumenical Review 1986/1. 77.

31 This wise insight is from SAMARTHA Stanley J., *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals: Introducing a Discussion*. The Ecumenical Review 1973/2. 140.

32 In his review on WILES Maurice's book on interreligious dialogue, LIPNER Julius quotes these

Our vocabularies and language games bind us to our many times rigid and petrified ways of thinking. In dialogue, we are strongly challenged to be responsible for our language, especially for our absolute claims. The Truth can be imagined as absolute, but a truth-claim should never be imagined as such. In dialogue, we should play the real rules of the game, and we should not dream about another game or just pretend to play the same game. Fortunately enough, persons who do have a sense of situations will never use the same sentences in face-to-face encounters with their neighbours as they would use, for example, in the text of a treaty or legal statement. There is only one ultimate reality, and nothing in the world is of absolute nature, not even our ideas and concepts of God: therefore, we are challenged to use rather than misuse the very name of God in our dialogue.[33]

2. Language and Communication

Among the most significant obstacles to authentic dialogue is the problem of language.[34] We are damned and cursed to feel and carry the special burden of the Babel event: the wide field of misunderstandings created simply by the variety of languages and their dialects. But the Pentecostal event and experience has elevated and changed this curse once and for all, and has given it another significant meaning. As a consequence of it, the message of God has found its way to every people.

Similarly, as a result of the ideals of the Reformation, the Holy Bible has now been translated into almost all written vernacular languages. The curse of Babel remains always a challenge: a task and purpose to find and express God in our language, our mother tongue as well; and at the same time, to regard the different national and religious languages as sources of inexhaustible mutual enrichment. After all, the language of the Bible is not intended to be monological at all, and the Holy Scripture calls for our existential answer.

We can no longer understand God's Self-revelation as totally indubitable, plenary and whose interpretation is fully infallible,

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three terms in his article: LIPNER Julius, *Maurice Wiles: Christian Theology and Interreligious Dialogue*. The Ecumenical Review 1993/2. 238–239.

33 We intend to use a text of fundamental importance as a basis and guideline for our dealing with this issue. This is a masterpiece of its kind, and we built heavily on this article of BASSET Jean-Claude, *Decalogue of Dialogue*. Current Dialogue 1992/23. 35–39.

34 A special aspect of the language and communication problem, namely the difficulty of *evangelism*, is dealt with in SMART James D.'s article on conversion: SMART James D., *The Language Problem in Evangelism*. The Ecumenical Review 1969/3. 238–244.

but rather as one which is ineffable, apophatic and fundamentally infinite. Some understand religions as dialects of the same language, with the important difference of course that in real life religions do not have the equivalent of a shared and standard language.[35] In the Christian realm, however, the ecumenical movement can be seen as an attempt to join to create and recognise a language understandable to all.

The important change in our religious vocabulary is detectable for example in the numerous Roman Catholic official documents concerning the topic of interreligious dialogue with people of other faiths. *Nostra Ætate* (NÆ, published in 1964) used "non-Christian religions", while *The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions* (published in 1984) addressed, as it is in the title, the "followers of other religions". Later, *Redemptoris Missio* (RM, published in 1991) conferred to "sisters and brothers of other religions". The oppositional use of *we* and *they* will be immediately broken in the presence of God, before Whom we all stand. This paradigm shift appearing in our attitude towards the other living faiths and religions proved to be somehow the crossing of a theological Rubicon – so much so that some may call it a liberation theology of religions.

We should be aware of the fact that religions are far closer to arts, especially *literature*, than to (natural) sciences. If we tried to bind religions to the truth-expectations of natural sciences, the religions would loose their poetic, metaphoric and symbolic dimension, which is probably their most important one. The question at this point is whether any kind of literary work can be right and true. Literary works indeed may be responsible for the symbolic reality they try to depict and describe, as well as create.

And, not least, literature can be testified to, since the role of literature is, for example according to the German poet Rainer Maria RILKE (1875–1926), to call us to change our lives; thus reaching a kind of conversion experience or *metanoia* through it. Both literary works and religions are (human or divine) narratives, which in a way are responsible for the reader. They call us to receive and accept their various truths, esteeming them by their relation to the symbolic reality, and by their authentic testimonies and witnesses. Those who are unable to enjoy the experience of catharsis, the feeling of being cleansed by a narrative, rob themselves in a certain sense. What God has cleansed forever, we must not call common.

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35 IISAKA Yoshiaki uses dialect as one of the parallels for dialogue in IISAKA Yoshiaki, *Dialogue, Dialect, Dialectic and Diakonia*. Bulletin (Pro Dialogo) 1992/2. 187–188.

IV. Dialogue Leads to Community

Finally, we may refer to five aspects of the notion of an interreligious (or multireligious) community: these are our common humanity, our increasing contemporary human interrelatedness, the just interdependence of free people, the communion of saints, and the Reign of God.

But there are at least six impediments that block us from seeking this community: these are naivety concerning our historical situation, theological naivety, lack of sense for transcendence, the triumphalist witness, the divided religions themselves and the fear of controversy inside the religions.[36]

The important points to consider here are the self-understanding of the religions or traditions, and the self-understanding of the people of living faiths. The identity of a religion is the sum of various historical, doctrinal, geographical, cultural, spiritual, legal, sociological and psychological dimensions.[37]

The components in the identity of a given religion are mostly the institutional territory, the intellectual dimension, and the life of piety, liturgy and spirituality.[38] We need to be aware also of the plurality of each other's self-understanding, not regarding the other religions as monolithic and uniform blocs.[39]

There are at least two kinds of *exclusiveness* in the religious realm. The exclusiveness of commitment belongs to the centre of any faith; the exclusiveness of possession, however, petrifies revelation and tries to monopolize truth.[40]

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36 DESCHNER John talks about these five different dimensions of community in one of his important articles: DESCHNER John, *Aspects of* Community *as Christians could Understand it in Dialogue with People of other Faiths and Ideologies*. In SAMARTHA Stanley J. (ed.), *Faith in the midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community*. Genève, 1977. 39–47.

37 BIRMELÉ André enlists and analyses these different dimensions and factors, which contribute to a certain denominations' identity in his article dealing especially with the Roman Catholic self-understanding: BIRMELÉ André, *Roman Catholic Identity as Seen by a Partner in the Ecumenical Dialogue*. In PROVOST James – WALF Knut (eds.), *Roman Catholic Identity*. Concilium 1994/5. 118.

38 The opinions of NEWMAN John Henry and of HÜGEL Friedrich VON are quoted and analyzed in TRACY David, *Roman Catholic Identity amidst the Ecumenical Dialogues*. In PROVOST James – WALF Knut (eds.), *Roman Catholic Identity*. Concilium 1994/5. 109.

39 MITRI Tarek warns us of this danger in MITRI Tarek, *Reflections on Christian–Muslim Dialogue*. Unpublished lecture from 1999.

40 This twofold classification of exclusiveness, i.e. committed and possessive, is the idea and invention of SAMARTHA Stanley J., *The Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism*. In SAMARTHA Stanley J., *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Interreligious Relationships*. Genève, 1981. 96.; and in ANDERSON Gerald – STRANSKY Thomas (eds.), *Consultation on Jesus Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism: Richmond, Virginia, October 24–27, 1979*. New York, 1980.

If we look at the identities of people involved in a given religion, we may trace an uneasy history of alliance between uncertainty and commitment.[41] It seems that in the current situation of religious pluralism, personal commitment now has to learn to live with a certain awareness of uncertainty. Otherwise it could be the absoluteness and intransigence of our beliefs rather than their truth that will be the main "spiritual" attraction.

In these situations, safety slowly becomes a substitute to adventure.[42] "Commitment has no limiting boundaries: it has only roots. The deeper the roots the more the freedom to spread and to grow without being blown over."[43] The interplay between openness[44] and religious commitment[45] or absolute and definitive fidelity[46] may rightly be described also as a creative tension between the virtues of dialogability and steadfastness.[47]

These are some of the basic dialectical methodological principles of dialogue. The religious attitude and spirituality that these create is the one of holy dissatisfaction, harmoniously balanced with active patience.

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41 SANDYS-WUNSCH John dedicates a whole treaty to the dialectical game of the two opposing, but at the same time complementary terms in SANDYS-WUNSCH John, *The Uneasy Alliance between Uncertainty and Commitment*. Theology 1997/4. 334–340.

42 SAMARTHA Stanley J. warns us of these kinds of dangers present in a blind commitment in SAMARTHA Stanley J., *A Pause for Reflection*. In SAMARTHA Stanley J. (ed.), *Faith in the midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community*. Genève, 1977. 13.

43 ARIARAJAH S. Wesley has surely found the proper and apt symbol to depict and show the true and profound nature of commitment in his article: ARIARAJAH S. Wesley, *The Understanding and Practice of Dialogue: Its Nature, Purpose and Variations*. In SAMARTHA Stanley J. (ed.), *Faith in the midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community*. Genève, 1977. 56.

44 WILES Maurice includes these terms even in the title of one of his articles: WILES Maurice, *Belief, Openness and Religious Commitment*. Theology 1998/3. 163–171.

45 JENKINS David deals with the problem of their complementarity almost thirty years earlier, but also even in his title: JENKINS David, *Commitment and Openness: A Theological Reflection*. International Review of Mission 1970/4. 404–413.

46 The Jesuit monk, DHAVAMONY SJ Mariasusai summarizes ROSSANO Pietro's theological thoughts on interreligious dialogue in DHAVAMONY SJ Mariasusai, *Monsignore Pietro ROSSANO's Contribution to the Theology of Religions*. Bulletin (Pro Dialogo) 1991/3. 365–370.

47 KÜNG Hans was the one, who provided these two terms with this opposition and complementarity in the title of one of his articles: KÜNG Hans, *Dialogability and Steadfastness: On two Complementary Virtues*. In JEANROND Werner G. – RIKE Jennifer L., *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David TRACY and the Hermeneutics of Religion*. New York, 1991. 237–249.

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ZAGO Marcello, *The Spirituality of Dialogue*. Pro Dialogo 1999/2. 233–246.

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