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Identity and Openness after the Vatican Council—Tension of Dialogue

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1. Let me begin these random thoughts by setting a few limits at the very outset: these thoughts are shared, not in the detached cool mode of a research scholar working out a thesis on dialogue, nor in the line of a spectator watching the whole scene of dialogue from outside. Such a cool, detached analysis may produce valid results. But, for me involved as I am in this encounter of religions for over ten years, any thought shared here, any question raised here will have its source in dialogue expressions. These experiences in inter-religious or, to use a term of R. Pannikar "intra-religious dialogue,"¹ range from personal friendships through the philosophical dialogues carried on for fourteen years to the deepest spiritual fellowships in the "live-together" sessions, joint meditation-satsang sessions etc. Hence the paper is not a study on the Vatican Council documents on dialogue between religions. Rather, the post-Vatican Indian scene of dialogue is fresh in my mind as I sit down to write this paper.

Another limit: The approach that I set in this paper—you are entitled to take another approach—may be qualified as more philosophical than theological, though the distinction may not be that clear and marked out. A biblical scholar or a theologian may ask other questions and seek answers for questions raised in their own field of inquiry.

2. To take off, let me refer to a very fruitful spiritual fellowship that we, around forty Christians involved directly in dialogue-work in different parts of the country, organised recently in Shivanandashram or the Divine Life Society, in Rishikesh, together with the inmates of the Ashram. This fellowship of the swamijis and of the Christians committed to the pilgrimage of dialogue brought home to us the fact of different levels and kinds of dialogue that are being carried on in India. Among the Christian participants there were persons—directors of dialogue groups and centres—who shared with us their experiences in the very well-organised dialogue programmes; there were also

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¹ R. Panikkar: *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, Paulist Press, New York.

the shared experiences of a sister living a life of insertion, of being there, of presence only, with no projects or organised programmes and that of a carpenter priest who moves with his utensils in the streets and villages of Varanasi in dialogue with the fellow-carpenters, presenting to us the spirit of Blessed Charles of the desert.

Identity and Openness

3. During the deeply personal shared-reflection-moments, there were two that brought to sharp focus the predicament of a Christian partner involved in dialogue. Monsignor Rossano, the secretary of the Vatican Secretariat for World Religions, in his sharing said that a Christian engaged in dialogue has a two-fold task: (i) to be faithful to his own heritage and identity; (ii) to be open to the other spiritual traditions. In his opinion, any dialogue that compromises with either of these and thus resolves the tension, if any, by a short cut will destroy the spirit of true dialogue. Swami Chidanandaji, the President of the Ashram, in his shared reflections referred to the points raised by Rossano and said that what attracts and draws in, and elicits spontaneous reciprocal flow of openness from the Hindu and Muslim partners in dialogue is the attempt at openness from the part of the Christians. Swamiji pointed to that very Christian-Hindu fellowship as the concrete example of mutual openness.

But the tension is there! This tension was dramatically brought out there in Rishikesh by one of the lay Christian participants. He told me half-way through the live-in of Rishikesh that he was very much disturbed by this dialogue as it was being conducted in that Hindu Ashram. To be more specific, though it was not said in so many words, he felt that his identity was being threatened by this very dialogue. There is no move here to pass judgement on him, nor is there any attempt to question his sincerity. To me this Christian partner represents many a Christian—if not the majority of Christians—if they are called upon to take part in similar dialogues. They may find these dialogues threaten their own Christian identity, their own self-understanding.

4. For many Christians the call to dialogue still remains meaningless, something unattended to, a strange voice. They live along with, juxtaposed with, other religionists. The Council documents have clearly stated that God is at work in the different religions;² that these religions are not merely human attempts at finding answers to the basic questions of mankind; that these religions are salutary in themselves;³ that they contain seeds of the word and rays of the divine light etc.⁴ All these assertions are yet to be digested, incorporated, to be converted into action and life,

² G.S. 12.

³ A.G. 3.

⁴ A.G. 4.

to be made one whole with their own unexposed self-understandings. This is a gigantic task.

As part of the attempt to help the various Christian communities, the commission for dialogue is organising in the different local communities courses on inter-religious dialogue along with shared sessions on values in a fast changing world, ending with multi-religious prayer sessions. In December 1981 alone three such courses and multi-religious prayer and panel sessions were organised in Patna, Amravathi and Puri. In all these courses we hear these questions from very earnest Christians: What is the need of mission, of evangelisation if dialogue flows from the faith of the Christian in "God's saving presence in the religious traditions of mankind" and is the "expression of the firm hope of their fulfilment in Christ"?⁵ Is membership in the Church bypassed? They raise—in an atmosphere of seeking exposure—questions on the prophethood of Muhammed, on the uniqueness of Christ, on salvation outside the Church, on the Church and the Kingdom of God. Oft repeated are the questions: Is dialogue aimed at making a Hindu a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim? What is the motive of this dialogue? These questions flow from a situation of exposure, of openness to other faiths. In the intra-religious dialogue-experiences, they hear the Hindu and Muslim partners sitting near to them witnessing to their prayer-meditation experiences, all the time swimming deeper into their own heritage. Often these Christians are satisfied with an answer on these lines: in becoming a better Hindu they are closing in on Christ; also that we are caught in a language-confusion, taking for granted—unquestioned—that a better Hindu is less a Christian! Or, is it unchristian to make an ordinary Hindu a better Hindu, an atheist Hindu a believer Hindu?

4.1. In a context of dialogue-exposure, the issue of salvation outside the Church along with the relevance of mission and the meaning of mission today gain new dimensions. Mission appears not merely as a response to an external call or command to proclaim the Gospel in order to baptize but so expands as to include the whole range of the Christian existence and operation aimed at the birth of the whole man, free from all kinds of alienation. Thus understood evangelisation in its range includes the movement seeking spiritual fellowship with those of other faiths as fellow-pilgrims.

Conflicting Pictures

5. A Christian partner in a dialogue is caught almost unawares in a conflict situation, of choice between the different pictures of self-understanding. This conflict situation is a direct sequence to the efforts made to put into effect the call to dialogue, given by

⁵ *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, C.B.C.I. Dialogue Commission, K.C.M. Press, Cochin.

the Council, echoed again and again here in India in a series of national and international seminars that took dialogue seriously.

In an unexposed, self-enclosed, situation our Christian partner was quite happy in picturing himself as belonging to a club of privileged people, to a salvation club, of being a member of a community where he finds salvation; he sees that it is his duty to invite others to join this group, an invitation that goes out to others seen and pictured as outsiders, so that they are sure of their salvation too. The expression natural to this Christian is that of a language of *having* full faith, the whole truth, of self-sufficiency. One of the responses that I received to my letter inviting a zealous priest to the Rishikesh experience was a flat, frank "no," because he considered dialogue to be a "waste of time," when there is such a positive response to his mission work. Another young priest who took much trouble to attend a course on dialogue in Orissa had this very personal difficulty: how to reconcile this positive approach called for in dialogue with that of comparison and of showing that "my house is better than that of yours"—his spontaneous "mission" language! This rich man's attitude towards one's own religion may show a benevolent face, granting to others some truths and values. From this stand, he may move to another picture in which he will see himself as belonging to his community or fellowship formed around Christ and of seeing other fellowships as different circles drawn around his own fellowship circle. All these other circles, thus seen, are at different distances from the same Christ and from his own community, the Church. I am tempted to say that many among us are moving towards this picture of self-understanding from that of seeing other fellowships as outside. True, this is more open, more tolerant, for the exposure context of dialogue. But will this picture be sufficient for joining in the one-dialogue-pilgrimage with those of other faiths? Can a Christian with this picture of self-understanding become an *equal* partner in the one cry of *Saranam*? Will the rich man's language and the pilgrim's language go together?

5.1. Atomic Structure

Another picture is being tried to express the new understanding that the Christian gets of himself in the dialogue experience. This picture too is deficient in bringing out certain aspects of his own existence. Here he sees himself as belonging to a community of fellowship, a dynamic movement around Christ. What about the other fellowships of Islam, of Hinduism etc.? They too are seen as movements around the same Christ. But the movements of the different fellowships are cutting across, mutually inclusive, forming an atomic structure, around the same nucleus. Perhaps this atomic structure of mutually inclusive movements may go a long way to help Christians to situate the partners in dialogue in the encounter of religious experiences.

Does this picture explain the uniqueness of Christianity? The Christian who should never compromise his own uniqueness is also

conscious of the uniqueness that is claimed by his partners in dialogue for their own fellowship and the experience enshrined in them. This picture that the Christian-in-dialogue is tempted to pick up may not be able to produce an understanding of the uniqueness of the Christian economy in a triumphalistic, in a possessive language.

5.2. Church—Kingdom of God

This picture, or rather the dialogue fellowships, is raising afresh the question of the precise relationship between the Church and Kingdom of God. What conflicts with true openness is not so much faithfulness to the Church-community experience as the mistaken understanding of one's own community as a finished product, as a closed system, no more *feeling the need* of another fellowship *religiously*.

6. Who Are You Jesus ?

In the play "Jesus Christ Superstar," the question is raised: Who are you Jesus? The drama seems to end with the question unanswered. From the dialogue experience the question is repeatedly raised as to who this Jesus is. I hear around me the language of some Christian partners in dialogue who prefer to speak of the Christ as the Centre, as the One, as the Centre of everything, the Cave of everything, as the Depth of us all. Those who are more in tune with the non-dualistic groups of Hindu partners in dialogue are inclined to use this language. A Christian used to his home prayer where Jesus is at the centre finds himself in a dialogue experience using words and symbols that may have suggestive value for his fellow-seekers. The Hindu and Muslim partners too make a similar effort. Songs of Tagore, the prayers of St Francis of Assisi, of Cardinal Newman, devotional hymns from the Hindu saints, from Kabir are used in these group prayers. One who is used to call God Father may prefer to call him the creator, the merciful, to produce a similar echo among his Muslim brothers joining in the dialogue of prayer. Is this a sign of compromising one's own self-identity? Is it not true that in order to be faithful to the mystery revealed in Jesus Christ and to make this mystery relevant and meaningful to his fellow pilgrims—as demanded in the dialogue situation—a Christian may have to die to a particular kind of Christ-language and seek other languages? Will it be unfaithfulness to the uniqueness of his own Christian economy if he uses for the time being other languages that bring home to himself and to others the unexposed aspects of the same mystery?

The attempt here is not to propose one meta-historical Christ or a cosmic Christ, of a Christ of mystery as opposed to the Christ of history. Without trespassing the limits that I have set myself, let me confess that such languages are not that necessary to explain the dialogue experience. Maybe others may find such parlance useful. I am tempted to say that, from an exposure

context of dialogue, the Jesus of Nazareth, of history, alone is capable of making the Christian open out in fellowship, of giving meaning to him, to this moment of person to person encounter in the language of *being* rather than that of the possessive language of *having* referred to earlier. For a Christian, Jesus Christ can never be side-tracked in a spiritual fellowship with other believers of different faiths. This doesn't mean that this faithfulness consists in ending all the prayers in the name of Jesus. Sometimes the faithfulness to the Jesus of Nazareth will demand from the Christian a death to a particular language, to a particular symbol, to which he was used in his own particular fellowship.

7. The Ghost of Syncretism

There are many unresolved questions arising from the dialogue scene.⁶ One of them is that of syncretism. Often the "fear of syncretism" is exaggerated by those who watch dialogue from outside. They see this syncretism as a possible danger. In the life situation of dialogue, where mutual osmosis happens, syncretism is not a danger of the kind that it is often feared to be.

To mention one more unresolved question for our own study: granting that any proclamation of Good News has to be dialogical, granting that proclamation should aim at the conversion of the partner in dialogue, and granting that this conversion should find natural expression in visible membership in the fellowship—the question is raised: How will a Christian resolve the tension of his commitment to *missio* proper with that kind of dialogue that we have described above as the expression of hope, as a spiritual fellowship in a pilgrimage? Personally I am not at all happy with any attempt to make true inter-religious or intra-religious dialogue a "means" or a "method," or a "technique" of proclamation aimed at conversion. The sincerity of the Christian partner is in question. Not only that. As an expression of hope, as a flow of "faith" as distinct from belief,⁷ this dialogue activity needs no other justification.⁸ An exposure context, be it in prayer experience, be it in shared reflections, brings a Christian face to face with persons for whom Christ may be the Lord of their own lives. Still, this his fellow traveller will opt to remain outside the Christian fellowship. I have come across a few very sincere persons of this category in these dialogue journeys. How will a Christian relate himself to these persons? The issue is raised as the question of non-baptised Christians,⁹ though I am not happy

⁶ The Church in India Seminar of Bangalore 1969; Asian Theol. Consultation, Nagpur, 1971; Consultation on Evangelisation, Patna 1974.

⁷ R. Panikkar, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.

⁸ J. Pathrapankal (ed.), *Service and Salvation*, TPI, Bangalore, 1973..

⁹ Herbert Hofer (ed.), *Debate on Mission: Issues from the Indian Context*, Gurukul, Madras, 1979, pp. 353 ff.

with the use of the word. Still the Christian community has to face this problem.

7.1. To end these thoughts, let me add a note of caution. It was not my intention to leave the impression that dialogue exposure creates a situation of tension, and of tension only. Anyone who has gone through any meaningful dialogue programme will give eloquent witness to the fact of joy and peace, of entering into a new fellowship, of freedom, of becoming present to another before that Presence which surpasses all his hitherto uttered words, of becoming pilgrims in the pilgrimage from isolation into communion.