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I. FIFTY YEARS OF HINDU-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE FOLLOWING NOSTRA AETATE

- Archbishop Felix Machado, Chairman, FABC-OEIA

The short but articulated document, *Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, has brought about an important and significant change in the attitudes of Christians towards other religious traditions and their respective followers. With the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* the Catholic Church officially proposed for the first time in history a positive, constructive and fraternal dialogue with the followers of other religions of the world: "In her task of fostering unity and love among men, and even among nations, the Church gives primary consideration in this document to what human beings have in common and to what promotes fellowship among them" (NA 1). The objectives of *Nostra Aetate* are not to enter into polemic and create a debate between religions; through dialogue the Church wishes to enter into the very depth of the life of all people.

Since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* Christian initiatives have multiplied in order to promote dialogue among religions. The term interreligious dialogue has become well accepted in the Christian circles. But deeper reading of *Nostra Aetate* will show us that the declaration motivates, encourages and guides Catholics to enter into "relationship" with the followers of other religions (NA 1). I submit, therefore, that the expression, "interreligious dialogue" does not adequately and correctly communicate what the Church intends through *Nostra Aetate*. Because the call launched by *Nostra Aetate* to Catholics is not that they engage in a purely cerebral discussion with some followers of other religions, thus limiting interreligious relations to a few select experts.

The Church wishes to create a climate of cordiality and trust between Christians and followers of other religions so that all people may be able to dissipate mutual prejudice and ignorance, and establish fruitful contact among them in order to collaborate on questions of common concerns. *Nostra Aetate* invites Catholics to build bonds of friendships across religious boundaries. Friendship signifies openness. To be closed in on oneself or exclusiveness is contradictory to the spirit of friendship. When there exists 'relationship' the partners in dialogue can begin to share deeper concerns with regard to our respective religious life. Experience teaches us that when there are

bonds of friendship one begins to feel at ease to talk about common concerns and shared responsibilities.

Spelling out the teaching of *Nostra Aetate*, the Church appeals to Christians: "That they may be able to give this witness to Christ fruitfully, (Christians) ought to be joined to the people of their time by esteem and love, and acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of people among whom they live...They ought to know well the religious and cultural traditions of others, happy to discover and ready to respect the seeds of the Word which are hidden in them...as Christ himself,... so also His disciples should know the people among whom they live and should establish contact with them, to learn by patient and sincere dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth. At the same time, let them try to illuminate these treasures with the light of the gospel, to set them free, and to bring them under the dominion of God their Saviour" (Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions, Dialogue and Mission*, Vatican, 1984, n.27).

Nostra Aetate and Hinduism

Hinduism is the first religious tradition which is mentioned by *Nostra Aetate*. This is what is stated in *Nostra Aetate* regarding the ancient religious tradition, a collective denomination for diverse socio-religio-ethno-cultural groups, known by Hindus themselves as "sanatana dharma": "Men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through unspent fruitfulness of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek release from the anguish of our condition through ascetical practices and deep meditation or a loving trusting flight towards God" (NA 2).

The declaration selects certain key elements of Hinduism without attempting the impossible task of describing in short space the complex nature of Hinduism. The key elements of Hinduism, mentioned by *Nostra Aetate* are: 1. contemplation of the divine mystery, 2. its expression through myths, 3. its search through philosophical inquiry, 4. seeking release from anguish through ascetical practices, 5. trust in and love of God. It is good to remember also that in its brief text on Hinduism, *Nostra Aetate* speaks exclusively of fundamental differences and does not directly mention any possible similarity Christianity could have with Hinduism. Moreover, the text refers only to classical Hinduism. This is perhaps because popular

Hinduism is seen as idolatry, error and superstition, while philosophical Hinduism is looked upon as containing ideas on a level with Western philosophical and religious concepts.

Efforts towards understanding Hindus

It is also important to remember that every religion must be approached, not as a monolithic block but as a complex and diversified reality. It is necessary to take into account its historical, socio-cultural context and its actual existence. This is true above all with regard to Hinduism, which is a generic name and is used, mostly by non-Hindus, to describe many *sampradayas* (religio-socio-ethno-cultural traditions) of Indic origin. These *sampradayas* have evolved through centuries and each has its own specific identity. A question has often been asked, "who is really a Hindu?" On July 2, 1995 the Supreme Court of India quoted B.G. Tilak's definition of what makes one a Hindu, referring to it as an adequate and satisfactory formula: "Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and the realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshipped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion".

Hindus boastfully admit that their religious tradition has neither a founder, nor a central authority, nor a common creed, nor a dogmatic teaching which has to be accepted by every Hindu. There are no dogmatic affirmations, for example, concerning the nature of God in Hinduism. The ideal of life (definitive liberation) is never felt to depend on the existence or non-existence of God, or on whether there is one God or many¹. However, one could speak of a distinct Hindu identity and it can be found in a common inspiration and source, namely, belief in the *Vedas* (which contain eternal and infallible truths), in the *karma-sansara* (cycle of birth-rebirth and transmigration of life), observances of *varnashrama dharma* (caste-system) and in *moksha* or *mukti* (definitive liberation).

Developed in the span of 4000 years Hinduism has gone through internal as well as external evolutions. The earliest period of Hinduism is marked by cosmocentrism. At the centre of the quest are fundamental questions about the origin, purpose and the ultimate goal of life. Natural forces are seen at work, dynamically affecting

¹ One of the most ancient texts in Hinduism reads: "The Absolute is Unity, which is seen in its diversity by Sages", *Rg Veda*, I.164,46

human life and they are eventually identified as 'divinities'. An attempt is made to express the inexpressible mysteries of life, the phenomenon which gives rise to innumerable myths. In an attempt to relate with the 'outer world' rituals are created.

Then follows the second period which can be said to focus on theocentrism. Here the centre of attraction moves from the human beings to speculative ideas about the divinities in the outer world. Life is experienced as a network of relationships between the human beings, natural forces and divinities. The quintessence of life is identified as 'ritual' (yajna) which is itself seen related to the great cosmic and primordial 'sacrifice'. The society is thus ordered around the 'ritual' in which concepts of 'purity' and 'impurity' begin to dominate. Consequently, a social system emerges and those considered 'pure', because of their function which is directly related to the ritual, dominate the 'impure', because of their function concerning the duties pertaining to ordinary life. In this period hymns are composed in order to serve in the performance of elaborate rituals.

As a counter-movement to excessive 'ritualism' the attention again turns to the human beings. The third period therefore could be said to focus on anthropocentrism. The person achieves certain inner religious maturity. In this period the core of the tradition moves from externals (rituals) to deep interiorisation (contemplation). Going beyond external layers of the human person reflection is made on its essence (atman). In their search for the Absolute (brahman), which is experienced more and more in its unity, profound philosophical reflection is in progress during this period. The Absolute is spoken of with distinction as *nirguna*² (without attributes) and *saguna*³ (with

² "All this, whatever moves in this moving universe, is permeated and inhabited by Brahman, enveloped by Brahman" (Isha Upanishad I). Nothing is prior to or beyond Brahman (Satpatha Brahmana X,3,5,10-11). Brahman is neither "this" nor "that"; it is only the unlimited. The quest for Brahman can never be the quest for an object; rather, it is the quest for the origin of the questioner himself or herself; It is not an object of vision, speech, thought or worship (Kena Upanishad I,1-9).

³ The one Brahman is conceived and symbolised according to divine functions as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (the Trimurti). Within the great tradition of Hinduism are four main living sub-traditions (sampradayas): Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shakta and Smarta. The differences among these are based upon conceptions and worship of the central name, form, symbols, liturgies, mythologies and theologies of the one God, Lord and the Highest Person, as Vishnu, Shiva, Shaksti (the Divine Mother), etc. Smartas worship several personal manifestations of

attributes). The *nirguna* is the higher or unmanifest aspect of the reality, whereas the *saguna* is considered the lower or manifest aspect of reality. However, it is necessary to repeat that the absolute as such is not divided or separated. It is seen as unity⁴.

Synthesis is achieved in reaching equilibrium between the attention paid towards the divine and towards the human. We could call this the fourth period. It is in this evolutionary phase of Hinduism that the Absolute is approached and worshipped as personal deity. There is rich reflection in this period on the way the human person may achieve perfect union of atman with brahman and the triple marga (way) is proposed which is composed of karma (commitment to action), jnana (mystical knowledge) and bhakti (loving submission). Without losing its pure essence the divinity is spoken of as present and pervasive in all that exists (avatar), animating the person from within and leading everyone to achieve his/her final liberation.

This leads Hinduism to evolve also into a popular religiosity. However, there does not lack second philosophical reflection in this period. Consequently, elaborate speculative thought gives birth to 'saddarsanas' (six philosophical systems). The indivisible absolute, the personal God, is spoken of as 'noumenal' (satya) and 'phenomenal' (nama-rupa) or according to its spiritual (paramartha) and practical (vyvaharika) implications. This period also produced great commentators who interpreted different Hindu religious texts.

The present day Hinduism is struggling for its self-understanding. Shaken up by its encounter, particularly with Islam first and then with Christianity⁵, Hindus have been trying to come to grips with the

the Supreme reality and philosophically emphasize the ultimate identity experience of the individual self with the Supreme Self, which is also Brahman.

⁴ "Ekam eva advitiya" (One without a second), Chandoyogya Upanishad, VI,1,1). According to H.T. Colbrooks, "The real doctrine of the whole of the Indian scriptures is the unity of the deity. Hindu theology as enunciated in the Vedas and even in the Puranas is thought to declare the unity of the godhead and therefore to be consistent with monotheism. The real Hinduism has decidedly monotheistic leanings". Essays on History, Literature and Religions of Ancient India (1837) New Delhi: Cosmos Publications, 1977, p.196

⁵ K.A. Steenbrink writes: "Hinduism has experienced an inferiority complex during the last seven hundred and fifty years. From 1200-1750 larger parts of India were dominated by Muslim rulers, while the legacy of the Mughal emperors was taken over by the British for a period of two centuries. Hinduism experienced a long period of stagnation, not only in the Muslim period, but also during the confrontation with Western arrogance and superiority.

understanding of the ancient dharma in the actual context. Confused by sentiments of self-assertion, on the one hand, and temptation to seize political power, on the other hand, some Hindus appear to be obsessed by Hindutva ideology⁶. Some even speak of this period as crisis in the evolution of Hinduism⁷.

The westerners sometimes had short flirtations with a selection of ideas from India, but more often considered Hinduism as a non-religion, a vague, unstructured and enigmatic pattern of fighting sects and conflicting doctrines, a religion without proper dogmatics or organisation. In the process of growing self-consciousness (the more positive equivalent of fundamentalism), the fight around the Babri-masjid (Mosque in Ayodhya, North India) became the symbol for the place of Hinduism in the new India. The demolition of the mosque might in fact be seen as a national ritual cleansing". ("Lamentation over Ayodhya : The Embarrassment of Indian Christians amidst Growing Interreligious Conflict in their Country" in *Exchange*, Leiden/Utrecht, vol. 22, 1993, p. 266)

⁶ Hindutva or Hinduity or Hinduness is a word coined by V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966) who discussed an idea of modern Hindu nationalism during the British colonial period. According to him the fundamental elements of Hinduism are territory, race and religion. On the basis of this he propounded a theory that Buddhists or Sikhs could be considered Hindus but no Muslims or Christians. He contends by saying that Hindus were the original indigenous people of India and constituted one single nation (rastra). Hindus constitute not only a nation, but also a race (jati) with a common origin and blood. Savarkar defined Hindus as those who consider India their holy land (punyabhumi) and the land of their ancestors (matribhumi or pitrubhumi). One of the important distinctions made by Savarkar is between Hinduism and Hindutva (Hinduiety or Hinduness). In his understanding, Hinduism refers only to religious beliefs and practices. It comprises only a small part of the totality of Hindutva which refers to historical, racial and cultural factors constituting the Hindu nation. It is the unifying socio-cultural background of all Hindus. For Savarkar Muslims and Christians are essentially alien communities in India. V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva*, Published by S.R. Date, Puna 1942 (1922), p.9.

⁷ Pratap Bhanu Mehta writes: "In fact, the crisis of Hinduism is signified by the fact that so much of contemporary Hindu identity is vested in this narrative" (i.e. a narrative of victimhood. Hindutva for many who have internalised this narrative, represents a coming to grips with history, an assertion of the will that finally put Hindus in charge of their own destiny, invulnerable to take over or corrosion by outside forces). Mehta further writes: "Increasingly, being a Hindu is coming to be identified with participation in the creation of a communal identity that can now fully, and often furiously, discharge its role in history. It is an identity constituted by a sense of injury, a sense of always having been on the losing side, a sense of innocent victimhood. Much of the understanding of history that sustains this sense of injury is simplistic if not false. But of greater import is the fact that Hindu identity, in so many ways, is coming to rest upon a sense of resentment. It can no longer define itself by its achievements, the vitality of its thought and the creativity of its aspirations". "The Crisis within Hinduism" in *The Hindu*, March 23, 2002.

What can motivate Christians to engage in dialogue with Hindus?

A sense of spiritual, sacred and divine pervades life of any Hindu believer in general. Hindus manifest curiosity to learn from those who declare to have had experience (anubhava) of the divine. Hindu tradition speaks of God who is intimately close to persons (ista devata), transcendent and Absolute (brahman), *deus absconditus* or hidden whose divinity lies obscured by the distorting veils of mundane existence only to burst forth on occasion in all splendour and power (ishvara), personal friend (krishna in the Bhagavad Gita), omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, benevolent, blissful, imperishable, self-revelatory, self-illuminating, greater than whatever is predicated of Him (neti-neti), without form (nirvishesha) and without limitation (nirupadhita). The honest and sincere search for the Absolute on the part of the Hindu can be a starting point for Hindu-Christian dialogue.

Many Hindus seem to be ready to pay any cost to achieve experience of the union with the divine. On the part of a number of Hindus a desire to come closer to the divine mystery - in whatever way the individual finds best - is evident when they willingly undertake practices of mortification and asceticism. They are not only sages (rishis) and renouncers (swamis) but also common and ordinary people, to some degree, practice honestly self-discipline in view of spiritual satisfaction.

The Hindu *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) is centred on the quest for real 'I' or 'self' (atman) of every person. It is a discovery by the person of the inner self which often remains obscured by the external self. By descending to the depths of one's inner self one lives authentic life because the true self, in contrast with the illusory self (which is elevated and glorified), is distinct from that which is identified with one's ego (body, colour, weight, height, shape, name, form, etc.). The 'I' of each person has no independent existence of its own. It is entirely dependent on the 'I' of the 'satyasa satyam' (the Absolute). The 'I' of each person, when awakened, and the Absolute are but a single 'I' as such.

The Hindu tradition has, in the course of time, made available to its followers different methods and techniques to sustain them in contemplation, meditation and prayer in order to awaken in them the real 'I'.

A sense of integral spiritual life can be generally observed among practising Hindus. Hindu tradition also teaches its followers to live a balance between active (karma-marga), intellectual (jnana-marga) and emotional (bhakti-marga) aspects of life. Examples of this spirituality could be found in persons such as Mahatma Gandhi.

Efforts to promote Hindu-Christian Encounter

One can speak of Hindu-Christian dialogue pointing to the initiative coming sometimes from Christians and sometimes from Hindus. It is also possible to speak of Hindu-Christian encounter at the official, institutional level (mainly from the Christian side)⁸ or at the individual level. One can further speak of Hindu-Christian encounter at a particular period in history as both religious traditions, especially Hinduism, have undergone significant evolution. Efforts in Hindu-Christian dialogue have been both direct and indirect, organised, systematic and spontaneous, haphazard and coincidental⁹.

Many Christians find their dialogue on doctrinal level with Hinduism very attractive. But as there is no common epistemological agreement

⁸ As early as 1966 the Vatican has made efforts to develop the Church's bi-lateral relationship with Hinduism, not so much by entering into formal dialogue with Hindus but, by trying to understand the Hindu world through the exploration of its ideas (philosophy), beliefs, ways of worship, etc. The very first study was published by the first President (H.E. Cardinal Paolo Marella) of the Secretariat for Non-Christians: *For a Dialogue with Hinduism* (Editrice Ancora, Milano-Roma). It is a collection of articles by Christian scholars on Hinduism. Divided into three chapters with an extensive bibliography and an appendix the study presents Vedism and Classical Hinduism, Modern Hinduism and an appeal for true dialogue between Christians and Hindus. The appendix deals with relationship of Hinduism with other religions. In one of its periodic publications (cf. *Bulletin* 3, December 1966) a reflection is presented on Brahminism, religion which dates back to an era before the promise made to Abraham, before the Covenant of Sinai, before the New Covenant. The *dharma* (Hinduism) boasts of being a religion without the limits of time and therefore has a tendency to look down upon religions, such as Christianity, which are founded on historical events. The many values contained in the ancient dharma are seen by Christians as 'stepping stones' which the Divine Providence has established in view of the 'nations' coming to the fullness of the Revelation.

⁹ According to R. Panikkar, "one can speak of four distinct phases in Hindu-Christian dialogue, namely, 1. The period in which Hindus were the dominant power, 2. The period in which Christians had the power although they were not in the majority, 3. The present phase in which dialogue is understood as predominantly doctrinal, and 4. On the threshold of the breakthrough in which both traditions are challenged". "The Ongoing Dialogue" in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue, Perspectives and Encounters*, Ed. Harold Coward, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989, pp. xv-xvii.

between Hindus and Christians, dialogue of truth not only becomes difficult but even a dangerous proposition, especially from the Christian side. Hindus tend to judge a religion (e.g. Christian faith) by using the measure of practice (experience of the Divine mystery, as well as moral virtues) of its followers. It is necessary therefore that the new attitude of dialogue with Hindus should not replace the 'combative apologetic' of the past by an 'apologetic of insufficiency'.

As mentioned above Hinduism, in general, admits the necessity of the Supreme Being. What is emphasised is the interior experience of the Supreme Being. Human person may know something of the nature of this Supreme Being but human intelligence cannot, by its finitude, come to the precise notion of the Supreme Being. Therefore all efforts to know God are *a priori* inadequate. Distinction is made between empirical and transcendental order of truth. Hindu-Christian dialogue becomes even more enigmatic when Hindus claim to have *avatar* and *trimurti* in their tradition¹⁰.

An attempt is made, mainly on the Protestant Christian side, to dialogue with Hindus concerning the person and function of Christ in Hinduism (many eminent Hindus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of whom continued to remain Hindus, developed their own Christology) and in Hindu-Christian theology¹¹. Christ has played a significant role in Indian Renaissance movement¹². Without ignoring important obstacles to overcome in Hindu-Christian dialogue, particularly with regard to the mystery of Jesus Christ, we must affirm that this dialogue started more than a century and half ago and it raises certain fundamental questions: validity of a purely personal experience of Christ; what about the necessary affinity with

¹⁰ cf. Secretariat for Non-Christians, Vatican, *Bulletin*, 5, June 1967

¹¹ cf. *Ibid.*, 18, 1971/3.

¹² The beginning of British Rule in India in the second half of the Eighteenth century created a process of socio-political, economic and cultural changes. These changes led to a deep transformation specially in the feudal Hindu society affecting its socio-cultural, religious and philosophical tradition. This phenomenon of transformation has been called Indian Renaissance or Hindu Renaissance which extends roughly from Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) to S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975). The word renaissance is used because many saw in it an analogy between what took place in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and what had happened in Europe some hundred years earlier when various forces of change broke down the medieval European world order and ushered in the beginning of a new era of modernity.

the more metaphysical doctrine of Calcedon concerning the nature and person of Christ? It is necessary that the Christians take Hindu sensitivity seriously into account just as Hindus must understand the true nature of the person of Christ. The presentation of the proper identity of Christianity should be simple and approachable, without any overtones of superiority: open to the values of its surroundings, so inclined to ritual, to mysticism, to prayer and to communion with the Divine. By common conviction, the monastic life deserves particular attention.

The Vatican has been encouraging the local Churches to enter into dialogue with Hindus. The two-fold approach has been suggested: 1) to prepare the Catholics to meet their neighbours who are followers of other religions, to appreciate their values, to offer collaboration, to give and receive, and join hands together to promote peace in the world, 2) to make contact with the representatives of different religious traditions of the world, to remove prejudices which divide people, to strike out hatred, to promote social unity, harmony and liberation. A Hindu-Christian seminar was held from 24-25 February 1973 in Benares. More than forty persons took part. The Hindu participants were mainly professors from the Universities of Benares and Allahabad. Papers were read and discussed on topics that were useful for better understanding of each other's religion. But at the end it was felt that the dialogue had to be conducted in a different manner. It was suggested that more time be spent in prayer and sharing¹³.

Over the years since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* such questions as the following have been asked by Christians: "In dialogue with Hindus, what does the Church hear from them about herself?" The call to encounter Hindus, as launched by the Second Vatican Council, has now moved from the 'joy of mutual encounter' to a frank, honest, face-to-face and challenging but enriching discussion. Hindus feel free to speak openly about what they think of Christians, and this permits the Church to see itself through the eyes of others, to overcome its limits and to correct its faults. It is thought necessary and urgent to have a Christian appreciation and evaluation of Hinduism in order to continue the evangelising mission of the Church. It is sometimes observed that if some segments of the Church are subject to the temptation of relativising its fundamental identity, other segments -

¹³ Cf. *Bulletin* 22, 1973/1.

including both clergy and laity - are bound up in exclusivism, in polemics, in 'having nothing in common with' and even in aggressiveness. The Christian presence in Hindu places such as Rishikesh where half a million pilgrims come every day and where hundreds of *gurus* (teachers) *sadhus* (renunciates) and thousands of *swamis* (holy men) live has proved positive for the Church's dialogue with Hinduism. In several cases Christians provide the unifying link between Muslims and Hindus.

The Office on Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has also given ample attention to Hindu-Christian dialogue. In a series of meetings promoted by this office reflection was made on the situation of Christian-Hindu Dialogue in Asia (Madras, November 1982). Again a similar reflection took place in New Delhi in 1995.

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican has instituted a scholarship fund, "*Nostra Aetate*". Persons, who belong to other religious traditions and who desire to study some aspect of Christianity or Christian Theology in Rome for a semester, can apply in order to obtain this scholarship. It is important that Christians encourage competent Hindus, particularly those who have been engaged in dialogue with Christians, to avail of this benefit. Unfortunately, not many Hindus are able to avail of this opportunity because the travelling expenses have to be covered by the beneficiary

Difficulties faced in Hindu-Christian Relations

The resurgence of Brahminism and the higher castes, through various new movements and groups, is evident in India. Some of these movements are described as highly politically motivated. Planned and systematic attacks on Christians and hate campaign against the Church in recent years by some extremist Hindus have created difficulties for Hindu-Christian dialogue. However, the Church, both Catholic (Episcopal Conferences) and Protestant (National Council of Churches), in India has offered readiness to dialogue also with the extremist groups of Hindus. It is heartening to know that an appreciative work is done in this direction. It must be admitted that some Christian extremists often provoke tension among Hindus by their aggressive preaching, distributing anti-hindu literature and by making unkind remarks about Hinduism in general.

In Hindu-Christian dialogue, in particular, there is a tendency to dwell on apparent analogies, the result of which is often facile

irenicism. We cannot forget that dialogue between religions is not an exercise in superficial compromise; the goal of a fruitful interreligious dialogue¹⁴ is not to search for the least common denominator in order to arrive at a common agreement at any cost. We would do no service to anyone if we were to close our eyes to the essential differences which our respective traditions represent. Of course, without allowing our differences to provoke tension and conflict, we must make every effort to overcome our differences.

Some distinctions might have to be made. For instance, there may be, on the one hand, *minor differences* which can indeed be overcome if we examine them carefully, and are ready to reformulate what we hold in a way acceptable to the other. There are, on the other hand, *essential differences* which can never be overcome. What I am going to say now applies to this latter.

Differences need not be perceived as a threat. They are, in fact, an occasion for mutual enrichment. It is important therefore in dialogue to clarify, understand and articulate differences, in order to respect the integrity of the other and have our own integrity respected. Given the right attitude, far from being obstacles and hindrances, differences can also become occasions for engaging in deeper and more creative dialogue.

Differences thus should not be eliminated but they are to be transcended. Differences manifest and assert one's true identity. Each and every human person, no matter to which religious tradition she or he may belong, is unique and rightly demands respect. Different religious traditions teach different doctrines; different religious traditions also understand apparently same words, images and ideas in different ways. Rambachan¹⁵ states: There is a tendency to evade this issue by unfairly stereotyping both Hinduism and Christianity, namely, to say that the basis for the Hindu tradition is mystical experience (*anubhava*) and not doctrine, as if doctrinal claims have not been important in Hinduism, and that the mystical experience of God

¹⁴ One of the 'goals' of Hindu-Christian dialogue for me, as a Catholic Christian, is to study the main texts of Hinduism in their historical development, to study them, so far as is possible, from inside, and having so studied them to try to correlate them with aspects of Catholic Christianity which are of importance to me.

¹⁵ Anantanada Rambachan, Keynote Address in *Current Dialogue*, 31, Dec.1 1997, WCC, Geneva.

has not been a significant feature of the Christian life.¹⁶ Allowing the other to speak and making ourselves available to listen, to understand and to learn to respect the other is important in dialogue. In genuine friendship all partners are equal. But the religions to which they belong cannot be said to be one and the same thing. Moreover the teachings of each religion need to be understood according to its own conformity. Consequently, we need not come to conclusions which are valid for the people of all religions.

In Hindu tradition, for instance, the symbol of food is of paramount importance: "*Annam para Brahman*", food is our life, teaches the *Rig Veda*. It is said in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* that, "From food indeed are creatures born. All living things that dwell on the earth, by food in truth do they live and into it they finally pass. For truly food is the first of all beings and therefore it is called the universal remedy. Those who worship Brahman as food assuredly obtain all the food they need. For truly food is the first of all beings and therefore it is called the universal remedy. From food are all things born, by food, when born, do they grow and develop. Food is eaten by beings and itself eats beings. Because of that its name is food" (III,1-2;6-10).

Jesus publicly declared himself as the bread of life: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst...This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6: 35,50-51).

Both Hindu tradition and the Christian faith hold that food is a sacred symbol. Both religious traditions worship the symbol of food as divine. Yet, quite obviously there is a radical difference in the way this is taught, understood and practised by the believers of each tradition.

Another example could be that of the Hindu belief in *avatara* and the Christian faith in the mystery of Incarnation. The *Bhagavad Gita* introduces the concept of *avatara* by saying, "*Yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati, Bharata, abhyutthanam adharmasya tada'tmanam srjamy aham. Paritranaya sadhunam vinasaya ca dushkratam dharmasamsthapan'arthaya sambhavami yuge yuge*" [For whenever the law of

¹⁶ Cf. also, A. Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Authority of the Vedas*, Honolulu University Press, 1994).

righteousness withers away and lawlessness arises, then do I generate Myself (on earth). For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers, for the setting up of the law of righteousness I come into being age after age] (IV, 7-8).

St John, the Evangelist, introduces the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus in the following words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men... the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God;... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (1:1-5, 9-12, 14).

The above quoted texts from the two traditions obviously have some points in common¹⁷. However, to conclude that they mean the same thing for all, or that they are understood in the same way by the two traditions, would not be correct. The point I am making is that the partners in Hindu-Christian dialogue often uncritically dwell on the apparent common points without going deeper into the radical

¹⁷ R.C. Zaehner, who was a practising Roman Catholic, suggests that the instinct of the 'Catholic Principle' "must always be to include and absorb whatever is not directly opposed to the teaching of Christ as interpreted by the Catholic tradition. The Catholic Principle can be summed up in Christ's words: 'Anyone who is not against you is for you' (Luke 9:50)", *Concordant Discord*, p.12. He further states that the 'unspent fruitfulness of the (Hindu myths)', as affirmed by the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate*, "contain(s) at its very centre the belief in an incarnate God. Surely this is, for a Christian, a matter of the deepest significance, for where else in the history of religion do we find a belief in God made man except in Christianity itself? To the Jews the very idea was intolerable, and Jesus' claim to be the Son of God was, for the Jews of his time, utter blasphemy, and Caiphas only symbolized the general feeling by rending his clothes. No Hindu of the time of Christ would have dreamt of doing so, and the difficulty with which Christian missionaries have all along been faced has been not so much that their assertion that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, was considered blasphemous or even incredible as that they should be so naive as to suppose that he was the *only* incarnation of God. To the Hindus this looked rather like a narrow provincialism. Yet in their acceptance of the possibility of divine incarnation they stood and stand much nearer to Christianity than the Old Testament ever did or than Islam was to do". p. 14

differences which both religious traditions imply¹⁸. Not only does this hinder mutual enrichment and raise obstacles in respecting the 'otherness' of the other, but it also leads people to engage in harmful actions which destroy the harmonious fabric of a peaceful society¹⁹.

Let me take another example from the current Hindu-Christian context. The followers of the respective religious traditions, come across the word, 'conversion' or "*parivartan*". Hindu tradition generally speaks of the entire life as a *sadhana* or conversion to God: "Sense, mind and soul, they say, are the places where it (desire) lurks; through these it smothers wisdom, fooling the embodied (self)" [Bhagavad Gita, 3,40]. The Bhagavad Gita recommends conversion, i.e. a disciplined process of integration through which *atman* returns to its natural state where birth and death are a sheer impossibility and which is the 'fixed' state of *Brahman*. The Bhagavad Gita admonishes: "Therefore, restrain the senses first: strike down this evil thing!...(BG

¹⁸ At the Hindu-Christian Seminar which was jointly organized by K.J. Somaiya Bharatiya Sanskriti Peetham and the Focolare Movement and held in Rome from 15-19 June 2002, Prof. Shubhada Joshi, for example, argued that there are no real differences among religions except those that the human person has created. She feels that there are those obvious differences, i.e. external (rituals, festivals), etc. She also feels that in society in general people of different religions always speak about differences only. Dr S.K. Somaiya at that seminar interpreted several ancient Hindu texts, such as, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, *lokasangraha*, *aa no bhadra kratavo yantu vishvatah*, *ekam sad viprah bahuda vadanti*, etc., to show that there are no real differences among religions. He even quoted a biblical text, "that which God has joined, let no man put asunder", to show that God desires unity and not separation.

¹⁹ R.C. Zaehner strongly criticises his predecessor, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Oxford University Spalding Chair of Eastern Religions and Ethics, who, according to Zaehner, posited his own form of Vedantin Monism – the theory that Reality is one and that all multiplicity is therefore to some extent illusory, being no more than appearance – as the ultimate Truth, and that all the religions were thus simply empirical paths leading towards this same Truth. Zaehner continues saying that "such a position can, of course, be substantiated by carefully selected quotations from other religious systems and the philosophies allied to them, but such support (if you can call it support) will then be 'apparent, verbal, and therefore fictitious', for it leaves wholly out of account the core and centre of the non-Indian religions from the scriptures of which these quotations are violently wrenched. This method I still find 'damnable' – to be rejected, that is, since, in the long run, it leads not to understanding harmony, and friendship, but to misunderstanding, discord, and a friendship which, however sincere it may appear to be, is ultimately valueless because it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding: it is based on a lie". R.C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord*, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 7.

3,41)". The Katha Upanishad speaks of conversion as a hierarchical model: "Higher than the senses is the mind, higher than the mind the soul, higher than the soul is *atman*, the great, higher than (this) great is the 'Unmanifest' and higher than this Unmanifest the Person (*Purusha*) pervading all, untraceable (KU, 6,7-8).

"In Biblical language and that of the Christian tradition, conversion is the humble and penitent return of the heart to God in the desire to submit one's life more generously to Him"²⁰. The Greek word for conversion in the New Testament is *metanoia*, i.e. a change of heart. God constantly invites the sinner, every human person, to this conversion.

We need to examine carefully the relation between *dharma-parivartan* (conversion) and *dharma-antar* (change from one religion to another). The two are distinct but related, at least from the point of view of Christianity. The Church accepts the possibility of change of religion. The Church believes that in obedience to one's own conscience a person is free to choose religion because it (*dharma-antar*) can be part of the process of conversion (*dharma parivartan*) of which we have spoken above. "In this process of conversion the decision may be made to leave one's previous spiritual or religious situation in order to direct oneself towards another...Sincere dialogue implies...respect for the free decision of persons taken according to the dictates of their conscience"²¹. This is why the Church proposes 'religious freedom' which constitutes the very heart of human rights. The Catholic Church officially declares: "The human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others"²². The Canon Law of the Catholic Church also stipulates, "It is never lawful to induce men by force to embrace the Catholic faith against their conscience" (Can. 748 §2). This is a guarantee on the part of the Catholic Church against any

²⁰ PCID, *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions*, Vatican, 1984, n. 37.

²¹ PCID and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, Vatican, 1991, n. 41.

²² The Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, n. 2; cf also, John Paul II, *To Leaders of Various Religions in New Delhi* on 7th November 1999.

misgiving, misinterpretation or misunderstanding concerning the much discussed theme of conversion in Hindu-Christian dialogue and, should stand as check against any abuse²³.

Prospectives for future Hindu-Christian Dialogue

A formal exchange between Universities with Hindu and Catholic identity on the academic level can be very useful for Hindu-Christian dialogue. On the occasion of the 375th Anniversary of the foundation of the Pontifical Urban University in Rome Pope John Paul II sent the following message: "... looking toward the future, my wish would be that the Urban University be distinguished among the Roman universities for the special attention it shows to the cultures of the peoples and the great world religions, starting with Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, and, consequently would carefully examine the problem of interreligious dialogue with its theological, Christological and ecclesiastical implications"²⁴. To follow up this proposal an official representative was sent by the Urban University to participate in the Fifth Christian-Hindu Seminar which was held in Mumbai from 15-18 December 2003. I am informed that an exchange between the teaching faculties of the two institutions will soon take place.

Mutual respect and friendship also with Hindus needs to be cultivated, widened and deepened. But this cannot be done by ignoring essential differences which exist between Christianity and Hinduism. Differences need to be accepted in a spirit of humility and hope. They should not be taken as threats to or obstacles in a fruitful dialogue. When they are considered threats or obstacles they often are either totally ignored or superficial efforts are made to search for compromise.

²³ We must distinguish between "witness" and "proselytism". While the former means simply and boldly living one's own religious life in an authentic, consistent and uncompromising manner, the latter is an activity that intends to divide or draw members from another religious tradition by covert or overt methods of force. Proselytism includes exploitation of the need or weakness or the lack of education of those to whom witness is offered. It is particularly improper to make 'unjust or uncharitable' reference to the beliefs and practices of other religious communities (cf. *The Challenge of Proselytism and the Calling of Common Witness*, Joint Working Group between World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, www.wcc-coe.org).

²⁴ Vatican, 29 November 2002.

Followers of Hinduism, under its various forms, comprise the third largest population in the religious world (circa 800 million). Over the years efforts are being made to get it organised, often with a Hindutva ideology. Hinduism is thriving through many movements which are spread throughout the world and which are well organised with the help of powerful financial security. Discernment is needed to see which of these movements offer constructive growth of Hinduism in order for Christians to engage in dialogue with their leaders. One can also observe, on the part of some movements, an aggressive propaganda made to preserve and make, especially the Brahmanic Hinduism, grow and flourish in countries of Hindu immigrants. The silent majority of Hindus is being swayed in favour of extremism by a systematic hate campaign against all religions, but especially against Christianity. The Church must make her appeal to dialogue an urgent and a credible proposition.

II. "IN OUR TIME" DIALOGUE IN ASIA WITH BUDDHISM

- Fr. Indunil Kodithuwakku K, *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*

Introduction

According to the report of the Pew Research Centre in 2012, there are about 488 million Buddhists worldwide, representing 7% of the world's total population as of 2010. The three major branches of Buddhism are *Mahayana*, *Theravada* and *Vajrayana*. The *Theravada* school is the dominant form of Buddhism in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand whereas *Mahayana* Buddhism is today dominant in China, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. *Vajrayana* Buddhism is concentrated in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia. Half (50%) of the world's Buddhists live in one country, China. The largest Buddhist populations outside China are in Thailand (13%), Japan (9%), Burma (Myanmar) (8%), Sri Lanka (3%), Vietnam (3%), Cambodia (3%), South Korea (2%), India (2%) and Malaysia (1%). The following seven countries have Buddhist majorities: Cambodia, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Laos and Mongolia. (*The Pew Research Center, December 18, 2012*)

The evolution of the Church's modern missionary activity in Asia can roughly be divided into three periods namely;

1. The period of Expansion or colonialism (1492-1945);
2. The period of distrust to incipient dialogue and subsequent solidarity and cooperation (1945-1989) with the decolonization of Asia (1945-1970);
3. The period of Globalization (1989-) characterized by a period of solidarity in some countries and in some other countries, a period of bitterness and suspicion (1990s) as well as a period of violent and bitter hostilities (2000-).

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will sketch the historical development of the Buddhist and Christian encounter in Asia under the above-mentioned three periods namely colonialism, decolonization and globalization. The second part will examine the challenges and prospects for future Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Part I

The historical development of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue

The period of Expansion or colonialism (1492-1945)

After the visit of Pope Francis to Sri Lanka, the journalist, Christoph Schmidt posed to Pope the following question: Holy Father, [...] Would you be so kind as to tell us something about your visit to the Buddhist temple yesterday, [...] Are you impressed by that religion? We know that Christian missionaries believed right up to the Twentieth Century that Buddhism was a fraud, a diabolical religion. Third, what relevance does Buddhism have for the future of Asia?" Any study regarding the Buddhist-Christian encounter in Asia is incomplete without the history of colonial mission. During the pre-colonial era, Buddhism played a major role in some Asian countries shaping Buddhist civilization. Besides, as a legitimator of political power, it enjoyed the royal patronage as the state religion in many countries. Yet, colonial powers deprived Buddhism of its traditional support causing a serious organizational and spiritual decline. Furthermore, any analysis of Buddhism in Asia ought to pay attention to its relationship to ethnicity and nationalism. The colonialism with its military force and missionary aggression in Buddhist lands provoked an upsurge of ethno-religious nationalism in some countries coining *rata-jâthiya-âgama* (country-nation-religion). The indigenous

revivalism, unfortunately, sought to reaffirm the traditional Buddhist identity of the pre-colonial era, excluding the newly developed identities of the colonial period including Christian identity. Accordingly, some Buddhists even today perceive the Christians not only non-Buddhists, but also as alien. *Ecclesia in Asia* seems to affirm it: "Jesus is often perceived as foreign to Asia" (EA n.20). "(in Asia) where Christianity is still too often seen as foreign" (EA n.21), "the church in many places was still considered as foreign to Asia, and indeed was often associated in people's minds with the colonial power" (EA n.9). Let us examine below the Buddhist-Christian confrontation during the colonial period.

The first book on catechism, (The essentials of the teachings of the Lord) written in 1790s but continued to be used by the Korean Church until 1932, contained eight chapters on Buddhism, each one a refutation of a key Buddhist doctrine. "The people who serve Buddha, even if they say they practiced virtues for their whole life, how will they escape the Lord's hell and punishment?" (Diaz, Hector, *A Korean Theology*, 1986). American Protestant missionary Clark, criticized the *Hwadu* - meditation used extensively in Korean Zen traditions - as follows: "They are given simply as aids to getting a grip on one's mind, to fix it intently upon something until by auto-intoxication or self-hypnotism the mind becomes absolutely quiescent and without desire" (Charles Allen Clark, *Religions of Old, Korea*, 1961 , 84). Christianity arrived in Japan in 1549. The Jesuits used debate as a means for their mission in addition to preaching. The basic principle of their debates was victory or defeat: if Jesuits prevailed, they expected Buddhists to convert to Christianity, and if the Buddhists gained victory, they expected that the state authorities would expel the foreign intruders. Thus, the debates were mostly hostile. Therefore, Buddhists portrayed Christianity as an "evil teaching" and perceived Christian mission as an aggressive invasion (Notto R. Thelle, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854-1899*, 1987, p. 38). Yet, with first Buddhist-Christian Conference in 1896 things began to change gradually.

In Myanmar, the British (1824-1948) abolished the monarchy, and dismantled the traditional patterns of the Buddhist community and monastery education, which contributed to disintegrate their social,

cultural and political system. Burmese Buddhists accused the Christian mission of being a part of the colonial movement. The relationship was further polarized with the birth of the nationalist movement. The nationalists looked upon Christian converts as pro-British and pro-western. In China, Karl Luwig Reichelt (1887-1952) in 1920, founded in Shekow, the "Christian Brotherhood among China's Buddhists". Reichelt developed Wan Seui Tong (hall for pilgrims) where enquirers and pilgrims could stay in friendship and mutual learning. He had discerned the Spirit of God at work in Buddhism and believed that he had found in Mahayana Buddhism the Cosmic Christ of John's Gospel. James de Alwis (1823-1898) in Sri Lanka attempted to re-create of Ceylonese society by the principles of Buddhist tolerance and Christian equality. He was active as a public lecturer on Buddhist literature, recognising the high morality and inspiration of Buddhism while still declaring the superiority of Christianity.

The revival of Buddhism gradually led to the growth of national consciousness and the recovery of national pride against the resistance to colonialism and the spread of Christianity. The nationalists attempted to revive Buddhism and to make it relevant to modern nation state. Accordingly, Buddhists began to study Christian teachings in order to improve their anti-Christian polemics, "Buddhist "Bible" in Japan, "Buddhist Catechism" (1881) in Sri Lanka, Buddhist schools came into being in competition with Christians.

The Period of distrust to Incipient dialogue and cooperation (1945-1989) with the decolonization of Asia

In the post-independent period, Buddhistization emerged as a marker of identity and a tool of political mobilization in some Buddhist countries. With the loss of the colonial patronage, the Christian privileged minority now became defensive. The process of nationalisation, decolonisation, and the politicization of the sangha or Buddhist monks reflected on the Church positively and negatively. It contributed to expedite the process of inculturation of the Church and promotion of interreligious dialogue proposed by the Vatican Council II. On the other hand, the nationalization of mission schools, hospitals and expulsion of missionaries were a great blow to Christian Church. The political shift - from colonialism to decolonization - and

theological *aggiornamento* of the Vatican Council II paved the way for a new Buddhist-Christian relationship.

In Sri Lanka, the Methodist pastor Lynn de Silva (1919-82) initiated the "Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue" and the Journal of Dialogue in 1963. He aimed "To develop a hermeneutics that could make the gospel comprehensible to Buddhists on the basis of Buddhist categories." (Whalen Lai - Michael von Bruck, *Buddhism and Christianity*, p.52). D.T. Niles (1908-1970) pointed out that Christian faith can be expressed in a Buddhist mould by using such terms as *amicca, dukka, samsara, Samadhi, panna and arahat*. Aloysius Peris SJ (1934-) emphasizes the importance of a core-to-core dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism on the basis of liberative knowledge, or gnosis of Buddhism and redemptive love, or agape of Christianity. Organizations and centres emerged dedicating themselves to Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

In September 1965, Rissho Kosei-kai's founder, Nikkyo Niwano, was the first Buddhist leader to be invited to the Second Vatican Council and subsequently he met Pope Paul VI. Academic dialogue among philosophers of religion and some theologians started in 1960s in Japan. Kyoto school of philosophy in 1960s, National Christian Council Study Centre, in 1961, Fr. Joseph Spae C.I.C.M (1913-1989) established "The Oriens Institute for Religious Research in 1961 in Tokyo, the Institute for Oriental Religions, Sophia University, in Tokyo in 1969 and the first director Fr. Heinrich Dumoulin (1905-1995), SJ, was one of the leading experts on Zen- Buddhism in his time and accepted the practice of *Zazen* (literally "seated meditation"; in general it can be regarded as a means of insight into the nature of existence) as a possible way of meditation for Christians. The Nazan Institute for Religion and Culture in 1975, the Shinmei-zan monastery in 1987, the East-West Spiritual Exchange - an inter-monastic exchange program in 1973, the Religious Summit Meeting on Mt. Hiei, initiated by Tendai Buddhists in 1987, all these contributed to foster Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Japan as well as other parts of the world.

Nostra Aetate in 1965 notes "Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by

which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination” (n. 2). It further points out “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (n. 2)

Yves Raguin (1912-1998) established the Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies in Taipei in 1966. The contribution of Fr. Albert Poulet-Mathis (1927-2010) to dialogue in Taiwan is also commendable. In 1968 the Buddhist University of Bangkok asked the Church to appoint a Professor of Christian Religion. Ngo Dinh Diem became the prime minister of South Vietnam in 1954 and in 1960s; he carried out an anti-Buddhist campaign. By the late 1960s, there were more calls for Catholics to go back to their national roots and to accept themselves as Catholic Vietnamese. In 1963, the fourteenth Dalai Lama wrote “Concord between religions is no utopia. It is possible, and under present world conditions it is extraordinarily important. [...] For this reason, followers of every religion should know something about other religions (as quoted in Whalen Lai - *Michael von Bruck, Buddhism and Christianity*, p14). Thomas Merton in 1967 rejected and refuted stereotypes of Buddhism as quietistic, atheistic, and world denying. He pointed out the distortion of considering Buddhism as “selfish” when the whole aim of Buddhism is to “overcome that attachment to individual self-affirmation and survival which is the source of every woe (*Mystics and Zen Master*, 1967, 8).

The Assisi Event in 1986, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious dialogue, the Focolare Movement, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference, World Council of Churches, Episcopal Commissions for Interreligious Dialogue, the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace, Sant’Egidio, and other Buddhist movements have played a great role to iron out fear and distrust and to foster friendship among Buddhists and Christians in Asia.

The period of Globalization (1989-)

The era of globalization is characterized by a period of solidarity in some countries, and still in some other countries a period of bitterness and suspicion (1990s) and subsequently leading to a period of violent and bitter hostilities (2000-).

A period of bitterness and suspicion (1990s) and a period of violent and bitter hostilities (2000-)

In recent decades, religio-political parties, and religious rhetoric have become dominant features of the political scenes of some countries where Buddhism is the majority. With the process of globalization, in addition to the socio-economic and cultural expansion, the evangelical expansion was also widely felt in some Buddhist countries. The aggressive evangelical proselytism has contributed to reopen the old colonial memories of conversion which in turn has led to the revitalization of Buddhist culture like in colonial era, giving birth to a militant Buddhist nationalism threatening the work of those who have painstakingly worked to heal past animosities.

In 1993, I was able to attend a meeting organized by Buddhists against so-called “unethical conversion” or “forced conversion” in Sri Lanka. Its salient features can be summed up as follows. a) A conspiracy to eliminate Buddhism from this island is in progress; b) Christian sects execute this. They convert poor Buddhists by giving them material rewards; c) Many of these sects hoodwink the poor and the ignorant by their so-call healing powers. Do not get trapped to these deceivers. If the sickness can be cured through prayers, why should we have hospitals and doctors? Do not believe their hocus-pocus; d) The need of the day is to rally round the temples against these anti-Buddhist forces and conserve the 2500-year-old Buddhism and its culture; e) The politicians are interested in neither Buddhism nor its culture; f) Finally, map out a programme to look after the poor in your villages who are the victims of these Christian sects.

At the same time, Pope John Paul II’s views on Buddhism in his book “Crossing the Threshold of Hope” in 1994 created a tension in some countries. The controversy came to a climax on the threshold of the papal visit to Sri Lanka in 1995. The Church highlighted that the misunderstanding was caused by the translation error. Nevertheless,

Buddhists interpreted the negative view of Buddhism was rooted partly in simple misunderstanding, and partly in deliberate distortion aimed at justifying the evangelical ambitions of the Christian missions.

Cardinal Arinze (PCID), in his inaugural address at the first Buddhist-Christian Colloquium in 1995, Taiwan referred to the *Crossing of the Threshold of Hope*. "There arose in a short time lively comments and reactions, sometimes rather polemical, from some Buddhists or scholars of Buddhism including some Christians." (*Pro Dialogue, Bulletin* 90 (1995/3), 221-222). Due to these developments with historical wounds and suspicions, some Buddhists still see inter-religious dialogue as another method of conversion. Fr. Marco Tin Win of Myanmar notes that "Every time we talked with Buddhists and monks about the interreligious dialogue, they misunderstood it with the word "debate" or "preaching one's religion". Adding fuel to fire, even today, Christian fundamentalists consider Buddhist temples as places under the sway of Satan.

Upsurge of Ethno-religious nationalism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar affects the peaceful coexistence of religions. A movement led by nationalist Buddhist monks known as 969 in Myanmar has the slogan "Without discipline, we'll lose our religion and our race, we might even lose our country." *Bodu Bala Sena* (the Buddhist Power Force) since 2012 seeks the enforcement of Buddhist predominance in Sri Lanka with campaigns against the country's minority Muslim and Christian communities. These movements articulate existential insecurities of the Buddhist majority to identify the religious and ethnic minorities as the culprits of their problems. They use Face book, blogs, and other forms of social media to disseminate their ideas.

A period of solidarity

In recent decades, especially Christians and Buddhists have learned that they ought to put aside their philosophical and theological differences and share the way they express their religious convictions, especially in regard to issues of peace, justice, the sanctity of life, and ecological crisis. Accordingly, this new openness has ushered a new era of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Korea, Japan, Taiwan especially with new Buddhist denominations. The new Korean Buddhist order,

Won Buddhism and socially engaged Buddhism in Taiwan, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Cambodia have also fostered collaboration between Buddhists and Christians. In Japan Tendai, Zen Rinzai, Jodo, Jodo Shinshu, Nichiren Shu, Zen Soto, Hosso Shu, Rissho Kosei-kai and Myochikai are actively involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue locally and internationally.

In Thailand in the 1980s a Buddhist-Christian group met regularly in Chiang Mai. Seri Phonghit, Catholic, has contributed to the work of both the Thai interreligious Commission for Development and the International Network of Socially Engaged Buddhists.

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

During last fifty years, the PCID has been involved in dialogue and collaboration with Buddhists throughout the world. The first formal Buddhist-Christian Colloquium was held at the Fokuangshan Buddhist Monastery in Taiwan, in 1995 with the general theme: *Buddhism and Christianity, Convergence and Divergence*. The second, in 1998, at a Catholic monastery of India under the theme "*Word and Silence in Buddhist Christian Traditions*". The third in Tokyo, Japan in 2002 at the Headquarters of Rissho Kosei-kai with the theme: "*Sangha in Buddhism and Church in Christianity*". The fourth, "*Inner Peace, Peace among Peoples*" in Rome, in 2013. The fifth Colloquium "*Buddhists and Christians Together Fostering Fraternity*" at Bodh Gaya" in February this year. The Vesakh message sent from this Dicastery since 1995 has been contributing to foster the dialogue of friendship among Buddhists and Christians. Nostra Aetate Foundation Scholarship offered some Buddhist monks the possibility to study in Rome.

Part II

Challenges and Prospects for future Buddhist-Christian dialogue

As we saw above Buddhist-Christian encounter has gone through from confrontation to dialogue, from enemies to friends. At present, neighbourly relations are good and there is mutual recognition and expressions of distain have vanished in most places. Yet, recently, in some countries mutual respect and solidarity has receded to bitterness and suspicion. Therefore, the future Buddhist-Christian dialogue needs to pay attention to the following aspects:

1. Christian mission through witnessing of Christian faith offers salvation for all humankind. Yet, it has been indivisibly linked to the colonial history of Europe and North America which has left deep wounds in the Buddhist world. Still, in some places, Buddhists see Christians with the bitter historical experiences. An honest analysis of the historical and political offences committed by each religion is needed to overcome this bitter history.
2. The advancing Christian fundamentalism and so called “unethical conversion” revitalize ethno-Buddhist fundamentalism. On other hand, Buddhist identity in some Theravada lands, has so far failed to adopt an inclusive national identity in place of ethno-religious identity.
3. Interreligious dialogue is integral to the evangelizing mission. Thus, the theme of mission cannot be pushed aside due to dialogue and/or hostilities. The Church in Asia has a duty to narrate the story of Jesus. Terry C. Muck reports “As a graduate student at Northwestern University, I studied with a great Buddhist scholar from Sri Lanka, Walpola Rahula. [...] I asked him one day at lunch, “Have you read the Bible? “I have read the gospels” he replied. What did you think?” I asked. “When I read the story of Jesus I cried. He was a great, great man.” (Buddhists Talk About Jesus/ Christians Talk About Buddha eds., Rita M. Gross- Terry C. Muck, p. 153).
4. How do we share the Jesus story? With humility and respect, without triumphalist and exclusivist language. This following anecdote throws much light on this issue. A Christian fundamentalist asked the Buddhist participants who had come for an exchange programme with some other Christians: “did you meet the Lord Jesus Christ, King of heaven and earth.” The reply was: “No, we haven’t met the Lord Jesus Christ, but we enjoy the company of many of his followers, whom we love very much.”
5. Ecumenical dialogue and cooperation need to go hand in hand with interreligious dialogue. The document, Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct can help Christians to overcome mission related provocative issues.
6. The gap of dialogue between leaders of both religions and the ordinary followers is another impediment. The majority of

- believers, both Christians and Buddhists, have been educated for centuries in diametrically opposed direction. Besides, both Christians and Buddhists have insufficient knowledge of each other's religion. Theologically, dialogue is not yet understood as part of mission. Opposition to dialogue, lack of enthusiasm, the desire to maintain the status quo, fear of losing identity, misunderstanding of syncretism further weaken the dialogue.
7. The issue of various Buddhist schools and Christian denominations and doctrinal differences from one another is also an obstacle to dialogue. Hence, need of ecumenical dialogue.
 8. During the latter part of colonialism, foreign missionaries mastered the local religions and paved the way for dialogue. Are the native church leaders zealously committed for dialogue and some with specialized knowledge of Buddhism? Interreligious Affairs FIRA V: Interreligious Dialogue in Religious Education 2004 notes "The religious education offered by the Church does not seem to prepare its members for the task of dialogue. These even tend to be too Church-centred and focused primarily on Christian doctrines, oftentimes to the exclusion of any understanding or appreciation of other religions" (For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol. 4, p. 199).
 9. Buddhist-Christian dialogue still tends to be dominated by scholars and religious leaders with little participation of women and lay people. Besides, it needs to be examined how far the outcomes of formal encounters reach the grassroots levels. There is evidence that some participants in formal meetings show a double standard namely "locally closed but globally open" approach.
 10. Multiple religious belonging, multi-religious families, multi-religious prayer events, Christian taking up Buddhist meditation as well as the affirmation "I remain Christian but Buddha has become part of me", "Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian" bring forth hard questions to the dialogue table which require deeper theological reflections.
 11. Wars, conflicts, poverty, ecological crisis, modernization in industrial society with loss of roots, individualization, and loss of identity create a fertile ground for Buddhist and Christians to socially engage through dialogue. Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders 2015 notes "We also welcome and

support the climate change statements of other religious traditions. These include Pope Francis's encyclical earlier this year, *Laudato Si'*."

12. The need to continue the old theological project of rethinking new ways of presenting Jesus Christ as well as new ways of being Church in Asia. *Ecclesia in Asia* suggests images of Jesus which would be intelligible to Asian mind and cultures (n. 20).

Conclusion

Dialogues in the last decades had led to visible results despite all difficulties caused by historical baggage. The Holy Father's universal prayer intention for November is: "That we may be open to personal encounter and dialogue with all, even those whose convictions differ from our own". About two weeks ago I read the news "Catholic and Protestant leaders are praying for the speedy recovery of a prominent Buddhist monk and civil rights activists who fought against corruption in public life in Sri Lanka" (UCAnews.com, November 6, 2015). Waking on the footsteps of the forerunners of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, through respect and friendship, let us contribute to a culture of encounter and co-existence!

Inter-monastic dialogue and cooperation occurred in 8th century is an example of friendship among Buddhists and Christians. The famous Buddhist missionary, Prajna, from northern India had arrived at the Chinese capital in 782. He was asked to translate the Buddhist sutras he had brought with him. Prajna did not understand the Chinese language at that time so he sought help from a Persian Nestorian monk-bishop and missionary scholar Ching-ching (Adam) of the monastery of Ta-ts'in with the translation. It is said that the two missionaries had translated seven volumes. (Cf. Yoshiro P. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, p.113).

III. NOSTRA AETATE AFTER 50 YEARS: A REFLECTION ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

- Fr. J.B. Heru Prakosa, SJ

Context

It is a great honor for me to be present here among the scholars and leaders of the Church in the commemoration of the 50th year of *Nostra Aetate*. I would like to express my deepest gratitude for this invitation.

I am aware of my limitation; it will be impossible for me to be able to share with you my reflection on the topic as expected, because my knowledge on the Christian-Muslim relation in Asia after 50 years of *Nostra Aetate* - that is to say in Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Middle East and other parts of Asia - is indeed very insufficient. The reflection that I would like to share with you here departs from my experience as an Indonesian who lives in a country that becomes home to the world's largest Muslim population.

Concerns: Lights and Shadows

There is no doubt that, after 50 years, *Nostra Aetate* has been increasingly recognized. Perhaps what is formulated in *Nostra Aetate* including its background has not been known well, for example regarding the fact that the declaration was simply to be about the Catholic Church and the Jews and then only later, due to the development of the situation in Middle East, it also speaks about other faiths. Nevertheless the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* has certainly resonated widely, as it can be clearly identified for example from the common perception among Muslims that Catholics now acknowledge 'salvation outside the Church', an understanding that can refer back - for us who are familiar with the subject matter of *Nostra Aetate* - to the article 2: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these (other) religions".

Nostra Aetate has confirmed us to build dialogue with Muslims. Due to its spirit, the Catholic Church of Indonesia, for example, proudly stated²⁵:

We should not be brought into a negative sentiment that can destroy other ethnic groups or religions... The death of a young Muslim,²⁶ while protecting the parishioners of a church in East Java, last Christmas (i.e. 2000), is a proof and memory as well as strength that can encourage us to keep building harmony among all believers. As such, the manifestation of the Catholic faith will cover the willingness to nurture true brotherhood and sisterhood, as a way to build a true way of proceeding, mutual support and attention for those who come from various groups, including those who have different religious background. This is, indeed, the manifestation of our Catholic trustworthiness to Jesus' teaching on love, namely to make a pilgrimage together with our Muslim fellows on the way to God!

Nostra Aetate has a sense of prophetic imperatives to Catholics for promoting the spiritual values of other religions, including Islam. It also inspires a more humble yet creative way to speak with integrity of what God has revealed to human beings. Without ignoring the substantial differences between Catholic and the other faiths, *Nostra Aetate* gives attention more to the things that all believers have in common. Since its declaration, many people coming from various religious backgrounds come to see *Nostra Aetate* as a *magna carta* for dialogue and encounter, including with Muslims. On this point, some Muslim scholars and leaders in 2007 launched of *A Common Word between Us and You* as an ongoing initiative to help foster Muslim-Christian relations on mutual theological grounds. As such, *A Common*

²⁵ Cf. *The Pastoral Letter of Easter 2001*, issued by the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia.

²⁶ His name was Riyanto. An interesting statement can be found on him in the Liturgical Calendar of a diocese in Spain: '*MÁRTIR MUSULMÁN: El gesto heroico de Riyanto, un joven musulmán Indonesia, que dio su vida por salvar la de otros conciudadanos católicos, sucedió en la pequeña aldea de Mojokerto, en la parte oriental de la isla de Java*'.

Word, according to Dan Madigan, can be regarded as a kind of response to *Nostra Aetate*²⁷:

One might read their letter (i.e. A Common Word) as a first collective Muslim response to *Nostra Aetate*, a response that agrees to adopt the same approach as the Council: the bracketing of differences in order to affirm common beliefs, and an appeal to work together for justice and peace in the world.

The lights of *Nostra Aetate* brighten up and open up the horizon of ideas about the importance of a constructive dialogue with Muslims. It can be seen in both local and global scope with a dramatic increase in university admissions related to Islamic studies, interreligious forums and initiatives to support for a religious as well as cross-cultural encounter. Countless Catholics now try to develop their faith not only by deepening their own religious tradition but also by studying the texts of other religions, including Islam. The spirit of *Nostra Aetate* also resonates among the religious orders. There are at least 2 religious orders or congregations - namely the family of the Vincentians (in 2011) and the Dominicans (in 2014) - that held a general meeting at the level of Asia for giving a special attention to Christian-Muslim relation. Likewise, the Passionists and the Ursulines are preparing to organize such kind of meeting in the year 2016. All those show us the attempts that are made to respond the urgent call for giving a priority in an apostolate related to Islam.

Yet the lights that shine and brighten around us after 50 years of the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* go along with the shadows. Those come up partly because of a certain group among Muslims. A category made by a number of scholars shows us that there are certain groups on Muslim figures or leaders, such as: the rationalists, the neo-modernists, the activists for social-economic transformation, the formalists influenced by Wahhabism, the substantivists, the indigenists, the fundamentalists or the radicalists. It is the last group aforementioned that has created black shadows. We heard news coming from a Malaysian appeals court which has just affirmed that non-Muslims must not use the word 'Allah' when referring to God in

²⁷ www.acommonword.com/response-from-daniel-madigan-sj-the-vaticans-commission-for-religious-relations-with-muslims/.

any public context. We also heard acts of genocide, cruel treatment and sectarian violence against religious minorities that have been carried out by certain militants, like the group of Islamic State (IS) or Boko Haram or Al-Shabab. It has indeed brought us to a difficult situation. The statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi says that 'the answer to terrorism cannot be a military response'²⁸ whereas a message written by Cardinal Louis Sako in October 22, 2015, states ²⁹:

[A]n international coalition must be formed with Arab and Muslim countries under a UN Mandate to take serious military action aimed at liberating the areas occupied by terrorist groups and restoring political and economic stability, security, and good neighbourly relations.

All those kinds of intolerance, extremism and terrorism can cause a sense of Islamophobia that have finally diminished the chance to cultivate and disseminate the culture of dialogue in the context of Christian-Muslim relation as promoted by *Nostra Aetate*.

About 54 years before the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, a Turkish Muslim scholar named Said Nursi (1877-1960) addressed a big crowd of 10,000 Muslims to encourage Christian-Muslim relation at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. About 90 years later, in May 5, 2001, at the same location, the late Pope John Paul II also said: "Today, in a world that is increasingly complex and interdependent, there is a need for a new spirit of dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. Together we acknowledge the one indivisible God, the Creator of all that exists. Together we must proclaim to the world that the name of the one God is 'a name of peace and a summons to peace!'"³⁰ Tragically, Syria is now very far from being able to be called in a peaceful situation.

²⁸ www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/tomasi-eng.

²⁹ www.oasiscenter.eu/articles/christians-in-the-muslim-world/2015/10/22/against-the-culture-of-confessionalism-a-message-from-cardinal-sako.

³⁰ Cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, 55. www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010505_president-syria.html.

The growth of fundamentalist movements has been provoked by a passionate concern to return to the foundation of religion combined with a struggle against any modern secular culture and the conflict of interests. In fact, the danger of fundamentalism can be found in any religion, including in Christianity.³¹ An example for it was the incident of Tolikara in Papua, Indonesia, when a group of people believed to be members of the Christian belonging to the denomination of Evangelical Church in Indonesia attacked Muslims who were performing the *Idul Fitri* prayers on Friday, July 17, 2015.

What is more problematical for us is well described in the result of the survey conducted in 2008 by the Center for Islamic and Society Studies at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Indonesia. The survey involving 500 teachers of Islamic religious education throughout Java shows that most teachers in the public and private schools in Java, Indonesia, oppose pluralism. The center director concluded³²:

Only 3 percent of the teachers said they felt it was their duty to produce tolerant students..... Moderation and pluralism are only embraced by their elites.

In addition, 67.4 % of the respondents say that they feel more Muslim than Indonesian, and 61.1 % reject a new Islamic sect. Citizenship is therefore overshadowed and surpassed by religious identity. The survey also indicates that we seem to be relatively ready to live in coexistence with others from different culture or ethnicity, but have difficulty to associate with others from different religious background. The problem becomes more complicated due to the fact that people coming from the same community of believers can now struggle against each other. Intra-religious hostility has thus increased. Although coming from the same community of believers, some will think that their religious doctrines are more 'pure' or 'orthodox' than

³¹ Cf. "The Address of John Paul II to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions", in the Basilica of Saint Francis, October 27, 1986.

³² Abdul Khalik, "Most Islamic Studies Teachers Oppose Pluralism, Survey Finds" in *The Jakarta Post*, November 26, 2008. www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/11/26/most-islamic-studies-teachers-oppose-pluralism-survey-finds.html.

their brethren's. This altogether can bring into question the status of inter-religious dialogue in general and Christian-Muslim relation in particular.

Challenges and Opportunities

“An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 250). This must be also suitable for Christian-Muslim relation. In this matter, we find some areas in which we are challenged today.

The first is in the area of theological reflection. Our encounter with our sisters and brothers coming from other faiths including Islam will stimulate us to build a reflection of faith that corresponds to the process and actual dynamism in accordance with the context we live in. The Church of Latin America, within her context, has developed Liberation Theology. The context of Asia is characterized with religious plurality. Is it possible then for the Church of Asia to take religious plurality as a *locus theologicus* for building a contextual Theology? In fact, it corresponds to the message of FABC³³:

Therefore we commit ourselves to take every opportunity to make Jesus Christ and his message known in a way that is acceptable to Asians, presenting him to them with an Asian face using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols!

What has developed in Indonesian Islam offers some lessons to learn. In my opinion, Islam has spread out widely in Indonesia because of certain reasons, one of which is related to the fact that Islamic mystical way corresponds to the world-view of Indonesia. This is clearly shown by the attempt made by the Muslim *wali*-s in Java who taught Islam by taking into consideration local wisdoms.

In addition, contextual theology is helpful to prevent the danger of falling into puritanism. The fact that some problems related to Christian-Muslim relation came from Christian communities, as found in the case of Tolikara, we also need to pay attention to intra-religious dialogue. Dealing with the unprejudiced and tolerant fellows coming

³³ Cf. AMSALI (Tagaytay): 2; APMC (Hong Kong): 14.

from a different religious background can be easier than dealing with the narrow-minded fellows from the same religious background. It is really our challenge; we need to develop a kind of faith reflection in accordance with the context of a plural society.

The second is in the area of spirituality and *sapiential* knowledge. Religious pluralism must be viewed not merely as a part of factual reality. It is indeed part of God's divine grace for us. We are all pilgrims setting out to find God in human hearts. Interreligious dialogue as a pilgrimage across religious boundaries, including Christian-Muslim relation, can be part of our journey to find the presence of God. The narrative story as written in the Gospel of Matthew 25:31-46 shows us that His presence can be found among those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, mistreated, etc.³⁴ He is thus present among any person, regardless his or her circumstances, including his or her religious background. "God's word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 179). In sum, our Muslim sisters and brothers we encounter in our daily life in our real circumstance can serve as a means for God to address something to us, as well as a means for us to encounter Him.

The lives of Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) and Louis Massignon (1883-1962) give us testimony that their faiths came to life again after their encounter with the people coming from other religious traditions. They had courage to witness how their faith 'had risen from the death' through their encounter with a number of Muslims. Indeed, their witness of life shows us a spirituality of *kenosis*, about which a statement of FABC says³⁵:

In close dialogue with the religious cultures of Asia, the Church would be able to rediscover its pristine dynamism which demands a radical emptying (*kenosis*) in its thought patterns, ritual forms and community structures....!

³⁴ In fact, the narrative story in the Gospel of Matthew 25: 31-46 corresponds to the Islamic Prophetic Tradition stated in the *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 2001: No. 4661 & 1172.

³⁵ FEISA I (Pattaya): 7.5.1.

In nurturing the spirituality of *kenosis* one can hold the belief that the Church respects everything that has been brought about by the Holy Spirit which 'blows where it wills' (John 3: 8). It is in fact through the work of the Holy Spirit that Jesus' disciples experienced transformational changes. We remember for example a passage about Peter who was so convinced that he finally could say, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (Acts 10: 34-35).

The third is in the area of the way of proceeding. People meet not primarily as religious communities but as individual human beings, as citizens of a particular society. Dialogue of life and dialogue of action flourish as people get to know and appreciate their neighbours. The postcolonial context is characterized by pluralism with solidarity or coincidence of responsibilities. Believers are invited to 'evaluate' faith not only from the understanding of the doctrinal teachings and belief systems, or from the observance of the rules and rituals, but also from the implementation of social praxis. We face today some problems related to poverty, environmental devastation, mining, corruption, arms trading, terrorism and the matters related to migrants or refugees. Violence in the name of religion is inseparable from injustice and thus also from poverty and socio-economic gap; war involving different religious communities can give rise to weapon or arms trade, something that can be a trigger for corruption. Inter-religious dialogue, including Christian-Muslim relation, has to deal with a way to address such issues, however complex and tiring they may be, in a collaborative and civil manner.

In an increasing globalized world with multi-religious communities becoming more usual, it will become increasingly clear to us that a feeling of self-sufficiency among the communities of believer is no longer a viable option. All believers, regardless their religious backgrounds, are encouraged to collaborate one another to deal with various social, economical, cultural and political problems for the common good (*bonum commune*). During my participation in the assembly of AMAN (Asian Muslim Action Network) in Kuala Lumpur last June 2015, and also in some other workshops or conferences, I heard myself from my Muslim fellows that they suffer a

lot due to ‘terrorism’, because it directly or indirectly has affected the ‘credibility’ of Islam. They do not hesitate to make self-criticism and invite anyone who has good will to make collaboration for combating violence in the name of religion.

So far, we tend to start conducting something with our own effort, and then offer it for those who are in need of it. The challenge now is how we can work to involve the others in the process of helping each other. We need to work together with anyone who has good will in the promotion of common human and spiritual values, such as freedom and justice, love and service. An effort has been made, for example, by Australian government that has sponsored the launch of the National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies – a joint partnership between Melbourne University, Griffith University and the University of Western Sydney to teach Islamic studies. The similar thing takes place in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where a joint academic institution for interreligious dialogue – under the name ‘Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies’ (ICRS) for the Doctorate Program and ‘Centre for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies’ (CRCS) for the Master Program – was founded in 2000 as a consortium of three universities, namely the State University of Gadjah Mada, the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga and the Christian University of Duta Wacana.

In a plural society with Christian and Muslim elements, it is very sensitive to do a social work without collaboration. The accusation of practicing a hidden agenda labeled as ‘Christianization’ or ‘Islamization’ is very common among the people. Here is an example. The community where I live called ‘Ignatius House of Studies’ has an institution of social work for the homeless and the street children. It is run by our scholastics as a part of extra-curricular activity. A program that is set up here is a class session for the kids. We notice that, for a long time, when the class session was conducted by the scholastics, accompanied by some Christian university students, somehow the parents hardly gave permission for their kids to attend the class. But after the parents saw that, among those conducting the class session, there were some university students wearing a veil, the situation changed. Since then, the number of the kids attending the class has been multiplied.

We are sometimes trapped by our expectation that our attempt to involve others through collaboration always receives support from all. Perhaps, some groups will not support it. Islam is not monolithic. We do not need to have pretension that we can 'embrace' all groups with all their approaches. We should be aware that there are various groups in each community of believers; and they may have different opinions. We need to understand the limit of our efforts, and have courage to make a concrete decision, with all its risks, and be aware of the consequences related to the decision we make.

In the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, Christian-Muslim relation should be handled in a way that covers a curative approach – such as conflict resolution and peace building in Mindanao, Moluccas, Poso – and a preventive one. It is in relation to the approach aforementioned that a communication forum like Asian Journey plays an important role. In addition, a program for preparing the activists, especially the youths, to have courage in entering into the dialogue with Muslims is significant as well. In fact, in my experience through an intra-curricular program of class sessions and an extra-curricular program such as APTEP (Asia-Pacific Theological Encounter Program) – namely a one-month training with an immersion in a Muslim community – I can notice that the process of encounter follows some stages.

1. Encountering a new religious tradition, especially Islam, is indeed uneasy. It seems clear that, as found in any case, *tabula rasa* does not exist here. Thus one cannot escape from certain prejudices.
2. The absence of the *tabula rasa* in relation to Islam is in fact accompanied with the presence of a double-standard attitude. One finds somehow a tendency to see the things in Christianity from the perspective of 'what ought to be' and to judge what are found in Islam from the perspective of 'what is'.
3. Through an encounter with Islam, one is put into challenge. He or she can experience a kind of shock, because the world-view, forms of thought, theological language, symbol and ritual of Islam is somehow different with what he or she has in mind. He or she can experience an internal tension, a mixture of fascination and repulsion.

4. Through a process of internal tension, one is brought either into a total rejection or into an invitation to know more on Islam.
5. One can be aware that new knowledge on Islam can make his or her horizon wider; it can also bring him or her to the new values of which he or she might not be aware before.
6. One can realize that a process of encounter with Islam will challenge him or her to deepen his or her own faith. In light of John Dunne's concept of 'passing over' and 'coming back', he or she, in fact, experiences a mutual enrichment and a mutual transformation.

Closing Remarks

I would like to finish my presentation by quoting an Indonesian saying related to the culture of Minangkabau in West Sumatra. Perhaps, it can be translated into English as follows:

Go wander ... so you know how it feels to miss and where to go home

Go wander ... and you'd know the reason to come back

Go wander ... so you know how precious to be home

One more time, go wander ...

And you'd know why you have to go home and you'd know whom you're going to miss

In the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, a journey or pilgrimage across religious boundaries, especially into the field of Islam, can be a part of the challenge 'to go to the frontiers'. We are here challenged to be courageous 'to go wander' beyond our comfort zone. Our courage to enter into the process of 'wandering' in 'the journey of pilgrimage by dealing with Islam' will not be without benefits, for it can enrich us with new insights to both our faith and our religious tradition.

IV. Dialogue in Asia with Ethnic (Traditional) Religions

- Mr. Sunthorn Wongjomporn, Caritas-Chiang Mai Research and Training Center for Religio-Cultural Community

This short paper is about the ethnic/indigenous traditional religions specifically, the ethnic/indigenous people in northern Thailand which I have been working with them.

There are 9 groups of ethnic groups who are living in northern Thailand such as Lawa, Karen, Mhong, Lahu, Mean, Lizu, Thin, Tai, Malbri, Khamu with total number of the 9 groups is estimated about one million people, each group has their own belief system and culture practices.

Before going to detail of the sharing, let me begin by defining some terms used by scholars. In this short paper, I would like to refer to Leonardo N. Mercado, SVD (2000) who stated that the following terms are incorrect:

Primitive or archaic religions, according to him, the primitive assumes that the indigenous peoples are at the bottom of the ladder of cultural evolution. They are considered as backward, having no sophistication of modern technology, believing in superstition etc. They are living in a remote area and isolated from the outside world. The healer was called shaman. They are faithful to the voice of the spirit guides and they communicate with the spirit through the rituals. Presently, the shaman is called a traditional healer.

The second set of term use is *polytheism*. It means that believing in many gods is also inaccurate because most indigenous peoples believe in a supreme god who is above the lower deities. Another term is *animism* (coined by E.B Tylor; 1871) in his work "*Primitive culture.*" He claimed that all savages belong to lower races who believe that all objects and animals have a soul (anima). He said that for those who practiced animism the soul resembles vapors or shadows which can transmigrate from person to person, from the dead to the living, into plants, animals and inanimate objects. But now this is considered incorrect, therefore, the scholars trend to avoid using the term animism.

The third set of terms use is *Cosmic religion trend* or *primal religion*. It is the earliest religion of humankind (Harold Turner...). Cosmic religion is more understandable and more acceptable because the indigenous worldview of religion is interconnectedness and live close to nature. They are considered as the ecological people of the world. Primal religion denotes the claim that it is the earliest religion of human kind. (Mercado N. Leonardo P. 12; 2000).The Vatican statements use the term: *traditional religions*, we, therefore use the term *traditional religion*, here in the sense of primal religions.

The difference between institutional religion and traditional religion

Basically, indigenous religions do not constitute a world religion in the same way as others. But indigenous traditions are aware of the integral and whole relationship of symbolic and material life (material world and spirit world).

It is observed that the traditional religions have no set of written dogmas, have no scriptures, no structure or hierarchy and also some traditional religious leaders do not have a liturgical uniform or even formal religious organization, but believe in myths, such as creation myths, proverbs, storytelling, legends, folklore, custom and codes of conduct which handed down from generation to generation.

Religion for the ethnic/indigenous people is not based on dogmas, but real life itself. As mentioned by Cardinal Julius R. Darmatmaja (1998:9) that, for Asia people the expression of religion practices through personal experience more than through academics. The credibility of the evangelizer lies in his/her being a wo/man of God more than a scholar; in being a person who lives simply but with depth; a spiritual person rather than an expert in the field of development.

Relationship with Catholic Church

Please allow me to share my own experience with the traditional leaders and I myself was born in the traditional family and my father was a socio-traditional religious leader who had played his role in conducting the community ritual. He had no specific uniform and power structure like other institutional religions. The indigenous traditional religious leaders automatically derived their power from the Absolute Being or from their ancestors. But they do not have absolute power to monopolize ritual practices.

The head of each individual family performed their own ritual within their families without the presence of the socio-traditional religious leader. After all families finished family ritual, then, the traditional religious leader would conduct the community ritual later. This is in accordance with Anthony R. Walker is called "decentralization of religious power and he called it "mini-theo-cracy".

The traditional believers strictly follow codes of conduct among the ethnic peoples and live their life witness through the practice of hospitality to other people around. For example, I met many people

who are traditional believers in the remote area, but one among them is a Karen family who is a traditional believer whose house is situated at the middle of the way between the village and the small town. Every day there were visitors who travelled from the villages to the town and from the town to the villages and stayed overnight at this house, regardless of who they are: civil or government servant, the sick people, the catechists and the catholic priests. The head of the family is always a good host and gave warm welcome to all visitors. Each month he used a whole sack of rice to feed his visitors. However, he is willing to do more than this, for he has said many times, he is happy helping other people. So, for this example, when we looking at his behavior, we can say that this family is living the values of gospel in his daily life and he is witnessing Jesus Christ through his welcoming and taking care of his visitors.

In my involvement with traditional believers, I did not see any serious conflict among them and also among different religions. This might be due to the following elements I observed:

Firstly, traditional believers have no concept of conversion. Each group has their own way of practicing their belief and have a sense of respect for other different faiths. Therefore, there is no competition or propagation of their faith for conversion among themselves or between other different religions.

Secondly, in the early days of mission work even before Vatican II, some missionaries who have been working with the indigenous peoples in the north of Thailand and in southern China have initiated a sense of encouragement and considered themselves as accompaniment with the local traditional believers in their hard time of life as stated by Fr. Saint Guily that *“Rejoiced in such indigenous traditions as being those of a people who, like his own Basques, could become Christians but still express their joy of life through the ways of their ancestors, as well as Fr. Oxibar “these ancestral traditions would flower still more gracefully” under the protection of new religion (Christianity) and “through his presence and his prayers” (Anthony Walker 2003).* Therefore, in this case, it showed that the missionaries realized that God is operative in traditional religions of the indigenous peoples.

Thirdly, due to a paradigm shift in the mission of the Church especially among the indigenous peoples of Asia in a conference of FABC (1995) “Evangelization among the Indigenous Peoples of Asia” stated that “Over the centuries God has been speaking to indigenous

peoples through their cultures and beliefs". Most importantly, for the indigenous traditional believers the "sincere practice of what is good in their own religious tradition and by following the dictates of their conscience and being a good person is the positive response to the Absolute Being (God's will.)

According to Fung (2014.129), the mission of the Church of Asia begins with life or the lived experience of everyday interaction with the traditional believers in the community. The Church of Asia engages in triple dialogue which involve four aspects, the dialogue of life, the dialogue of religious experience, the dialogue of theological exchange and the dialogue of action.

This new paradigm, helps the traditional believers appreciate their own cultures and beliefs, since in the past, they were often accused of idolatrous and satanic practices and their members were called people living in "darkness and far from God". The provision of education and protection of indigenous cultural values which stands in danger of being lost, however this missionary work precisely defends and helps them to transmit their values for the coming generation.

Based on these deepen understanding and appreciation of the Church of their traditional values, worldviews, beliefs will help in fostering a richer exchange and relationship between indigenous traditional believers and the Church more effectively in the future.

From my experience working among indigenous communities through dialogue of action in addressing a basic common problem of the community namely the implementation of community "rice merit network" is considered as a common activity of the community in order to build good relationships with traditional believers and strengthening basic ecclesial community (BEC) among the Catholics community and gradually leading to a basic human community (BHC), eventually, will move to the building of communion of communities. This activity corresponds to the belief and way of life of the people who have rice at the core of their life. Therefore, this community rice merit network helps the villagers understand, accept and respect the differences of other believers.

Currently, climate change is crucial issue at the global level and it is the most pressing challenge facing humanity today. There is a need to incorporate all sectors of society to be aware that we need one another in order to work together. This work will help open new ways for the

protection of the natural environment of indigenous communities and their cultures.

The encyclical *Laudato Si* (143), calls for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems, favoring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of the people. Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past, it is also and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment (LS 143). In this sense, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions (LS 146).

It is also clear as stated by Posey and Dutfield (1997) that, the ecological crisis which emerged by unsustainable development, cannot be solved by science and technology alone, since the roots of the unsustainability are largely the lack of the religious and spiritual dimension, the remedy must also be essentially religious or spiritual. Schell (1983) also encourages us to be convinced that Creation-Centered Spirituality or religious traditions represent the appropriate spiritual paradigm for wisdom and the survival of the earth in our times.

The above statements become a common concern of the community especially the indigenous community because the indigenous people will be the most vulnerable groups affected by climate change. The church needs to play the leading role to organize a campaign of education and the building of an environment conservation network through different activities such as forest ordination (Buddhist way), watershed and water thanksgiving (Traditional way) and the celebration of mass in the forest or in the fields etc., in order to sacralizing nature or return the sacredness to nature. This activity is considering as interreligious dialogue in action.

Therefore, based on the basic beliefs and cultural values of the indigenous people, the Church together with traditional religious leaders as well as Buddhist monks could build a network of environmental conservation in order to protect and manage the communities natural resources in a proper way for future sustainability through multi-level collaboration with the engagement of each other and each religion.

It can be argued that the future of emergent discourse on sacred sustainability is in establishing its interreligious dialogue foundations

so that all the religions are involved in the culture of sustainability of creation (Fung, SJ 2013: the Sacredness of Nature and Sustainable life).

Believing in the power of the spirits

Based on the holistic beliefs and worldviews as mentioned above, the ethnic or indigenous peoples live their life in harmony with nature. They have no sense or concept of violence or control over nature and over people. For example; in 1985, there were 9 indigenous communities negotiated with a mining company in their watershed area. They tried very hard to stop the mining company by using different non-violent strategies, but were never successful. Eventually, all the traditional religious leaders from 9 communities gathered together to discuss about the final strategy that is asking for support from the Absolute Being (Ta Thi Ta Tau) or the creator. The ritual was conducted by all traditional religious leaders together with the villagers from 9 communities. The ritual was performed at the watershed near the mine. One year later, the mining company gave up the concession because the workers left the work (company) and the surprising thing that happened was that the mineral being mined in that area disappeared. The villagers believed that the Absolute Being (Ta Hti Ta Tau) had hidden the mineral.

In this case, the traditional leaders did not use the strategy of conflict or confrontation, but through a peaceful means based on their belief that everything has a spirit and the spirit will protect and take care of its creatures. But in case they did something wrong to destroy the nature, or to harm any fellow human being, the reconciliation ritual would be performed because, the traditional ritual practice, which is believed to be a way to help make a connecting relationship between human beings and nature, with the supernatural, as well as with other human beings.

As most of ethnic peoples are farmers, their lives depend totally on nature or on our natural resources, like the land, the forest and the water, which are significant elements of the life support system. For them, nature is thought of in spiritual forms. Nature spirits are respected and revered. Therefore, rituals are carried out to apologize and to thank or appease the nature spirits. Rituals coincide with agricultural cycles and life cycles. According Professor Yos (2003), rituals practices are the basis of moral control in determining various criteria and prohibitions that determine the rules of resource use,

social relationship between humans, between humans and the supernatural, and between humans and natural environment.

Believing that through facing crucial common issues at all levels especially at the community level, the villagers are seeking solutions through the process of group formations, organizations and network building, such as rice merit network, environmental conservation network etc., as central regardless of race, religion, class, status, that puts emphasis on searching for future sustainability of the community in all aspects. In their process of struggling together they have discovered a common commitment in people belonging to different faiths and cultures which are considered as a source of power and strength to support a common struggle in their respective communities.

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V. INTER-RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE IN ASIA

- Astrid Lobo Gajiwala

1. Inter-religious Marriage, an FABC Concern

Inter-religious marriages are not a new concern for the Asian bishops. They are an obvious one given the pluralistic context of Asia and the Asian bishops' consistent efforts to understand, learn from, and add meaning to the lives of their people. Thus, nine years ago, in May 2006, the FABC Office for Theological Concerns (OTC) organised the Bishops' Institute of Theological Animation (BITA) III, a special Theological Colloquium of Asian bishops on the theme "Inter-Faith Marriages in the Pluralistic Context of Asia".³⁶ This Colloquium which took place in Hong Kong sought to reconcile the reality of inter-faith marriages in Asia with the Asian bishops' long standing commitment to a "threefold dialogue with the poor, with the cultures and with religions", and lay the foundation for a pastoral praxis which responds to the challenges posed by inter-faith families.³⁷ At its conclusion, the participant bishops requested the OTC to go deeper into the theological, and especially the pastoral, aspects of inter-faith marriages, and this resulted in another paper published in 2009 which reflected in the light of Vatican II and its aftermath, keeping in mind the renewed perspectives of ecclesiology, mission, dialogue and inculturation in the Church.³⁸

³⁶ This theme was proposed through a survey conducted among 25 bishops who participated in the VIII Plenary Assembly of the FABC held two years earlier (August 2004) in Daejeon, Korea, which focused on "*The Asian Family Towards a Culture of Integral Life*". At the Colloquium Bishop Francisco Claver, S.J. approached the subject from a sociological/anthropological standpoint; Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR, looked at inter-faith marriages in the Catholic tradition including events that led to its prohibition, and opened a discussion on the sacramentality of inter-faith marriages; and Clarence Devadass, SID, proposed a pastoral response to the challenges of interfaith marriages within the context of the 1983 Code of Canon Law. FABC Papers No. 118, *Inter-Faith Marriages in the Pluralistic Context of Asia: Challenges, Theological Reflections and Pastoral Approaches*, Bishops' Institute of Theological Animation (BITA) III and FABC Office of Theological Concerns, 2006.

³⁷ Op. Cit. FABC Papers No. 118.

³⁸ FABC Papers No. 127, *A Few Theological and Pastoral Perspectives of Inter-faith Marriages*, Edited by Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR, February 2009.

2. Situating this Paper

For me, a Catholic woman with three children, who has struggled painfully through, grown strong in, and been forever transformed by an inter-faith marriage relationship with a Hindu for the past 27 years, these initiatives of the Asian bishops are signs of great hope and joy. I see them as evidence of a sincere desire to extend the gospel imperative of 'love' across the boundaries of creed, and to draw in those who have been marginalised by Church law and practice, by assuring them of pastoral care.

My standing here before you to make this presentation on behalf of inter-faith families, in the context of *Nostra Aetate*, is another cause for celebration. Not just because it is a personal privilege (which it is), but because it symbolises a giant leap in the thinking of the Asian bishops. By giving inter-faith marriages space in this Conference you have changed the lens through which they are viewed. From "problematic marriages" you have now provided scope for them to be seen as potential "centres of inter-religious dialogue" and shifted the focus in the church's care of the catholic party from preservation of faith, to mutual enrichment of faith and understanding.

Until now interreligious dialogue in the mission and life of the Church has been largely confined to the experts, restricted to academic discussions, inter-faith prayer services and limited interactions that do not pose a threat or challenge to one's closely held religious beliefs and practices. The daily, ongoing, intimate, interreligious dialogue lived in the context of marriage has been largely ignored or overshadowed by the challenges these marriages pose to Canon law and traditional ministry. Yet, inter-religious dialogue is at the heart of these marriages affecting the unity of the couple, the family, and sometimes even the unity of the self.

My paper therefore will take as its starting point the experience of inter-religious couples in the Indian context with special reference to Catholic-Hindu marriages, and show how they live the call of *Nostra Aetate* (NA) to dialogue and collaborate with people of other religions, "with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life" so as to "recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual

and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found in each other” (NA 2)³⁹. I will then draw attention to the dynamic interaction between inter-faith families and our pluralistic Asian reality, emphasizing how mutual understanding within the family can be affected by and affect the religious temper of humankind, with the potential to preserve and promote “social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” (NA 3). Finally, I will suggest a paradigm shift which I believe is necessary if Catholics in interfaith families are to be acknowledged and welcomed as partners in inter-religious dialogue, and I will make recommendations towards implementing this paradigm shift.

3. Dialogue of life⁴⁰

Inter religious dialogue is at its most intimate in an interfaith family. There is nothing theoretical about the dialogue – everything is personal. There is no room for superficial acceptance of rituals when you are called upon to be the key performer. During the *Diwali* festival for instance, the eldest *bahu* (daughter-in-law) is expected to perform the *Laxmi puja* for the welfare of the entire household. It is an honour and responsibility. How can one refuse? Similarly when it comes to praying together there is no possibility of lip service, for one is creating a lifetime habit of family prayer. Tolerance itself becomes a bad word suggesting superiority in a relationship that is all about mutuality. Living together is more than just a weekend retreat, it is a life time of adjustment.

When different religions are involved, even simple everyday matters become issues for negotiation. The celebration of festivals for example, which are normally times when families come together, can be seen as a threat to one’s religious identity. Simple gestures like the ‘sign of the cross’ or the ‘*Jai, Shri Krishna*’ greeting that for most believers are

³⁹ NA: *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, proclaimed by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI, on October 28, 1965.

⁴⁰ Parts of this section are taken from my article *Living the Tension: The Inter-faith Family in Dialogue*, in “Re-imagining Marriage and Family in Asia: Asian Christian Women’s Perspectives”, Chapter 3, Editors, Sharon A. Bong & Pushpa Joseph, FMM, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Malaysia, 2008.

unthinking reflexes, can elicit hesitation and questions. Even a meal calls for adaptation if God is to be made present.

Since the Church does not provide any help, and any advice it offers is geared towards self preservation. I had to find my own answers to these challenges by tuning to the Spirit. A good starting point was the sessions on Hinduism conducted by Bishop Felix Machado which my husband Kalpesh and I attended before we got married.⁴¹ They rid me of some of my ignorance and prejudice towards Hinduism, and at the same time made Kalpesh realise that there were professors of Theology in the Church who not only had a deep knowledge of Hinduism but also a deep respect for it. The second major step we took was deciding in our first year of our marriage to reflect on the *Bhagavad Gita* and the New Testament, using commentaries as aids. We did this every morning at the breakfast table and it helped us to get deeper insights into our own scriptures and a basic understanding of each other's faiths, and as we did, we were challenged to surmount the religious hurdle of naming God. It was easier for Kalpesh than for me until I moved from a narrow Christocentric faith to one that was more Theocentric. After all, as Kalpesh pointed out, "Jesus too, did not define God. He just expressed, exuded, manifested God (John 1:18). Nowhere from him could (one) get any form or name of God, except the relationship 'Father'."

As I abandoned myself to this new experience I began to catch a glimpse of the God who is above any one religion. Hinduism affirmed my yearning for a Mother God who had been denied to me for so long. I could finally see my "Father" God with all the woman attributes of the Eternal "Ma" (Mother). Hinduism also put me in contact with the Universal God whose revelation cannot be bound between the two covers of a book;⁴² the Cosmic Divinity, the Inexpressible (*Anirdeshyam*) that links the past, the present and the future;⁴³ and the God of Creation that unites the human and the earth.

⁴¹ These sessions were part of the "Diploma in Theology for the Laity" conducted by professors of St. Pius X College, Mumbai.

⁴² *Liberating the Unlimited*, Kalpesh Gajiwala, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 1990, reprinted in *The Month*, April 1993.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Interestingly, my understanding of Christ too was enriched. So for instance, I always saw Jesus' statement: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) as an affirmation of his divinity and the Church's teaching on the Trinity. When Kalpesh read this statement however, it took on a slightly different meaning especially since he linked it to John 5:19: "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing." For him, by this admission Jesus not only affirmed that he was "ONE with the Supreme Divinity - God", but he also showed "his utter humility (by) projecting himself as a mere extension of God...(He also showed) the absolute confidence of a fully enlightened being in whom duality ceased to exist."⁴⁴ Through Kalpesh's eyes the crucifixion too took on an expanded meaning. 'Jesus died for our sins' was for me, a key element. The crucifixion was all about "sacrifice" and God's love for God's people. Then suddenly there was Kalpesh inspired and moved by this God-being who had totally surrendered to the will of the Divine. For him, the crucifixion was all about "surrender" and Jesus' love for God.⁴⁵

I am not alone in this experience. In preparation for the 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the Family I had assembled eight women to share their stories and reflect on their experiences as members, partners and nurturers of interfaith families,⁴⁶ and all these women expressed a desire to know more about the religion of their spouse so that they could find a meeting ground and enrich their relationship.⁴⁷ Some shared the ways in which they worshipped together and evolved a common spirituality, while others talked of how they worshipped separately but with a consciousness of the spouse's religious affiliation. One woman said, "Sometimes I feel my Hindu husband is more "Christian" in his values and way of life than I. I am

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Errol D'Lima et al., Report of Meeting of Women in Interfaith Families, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Volume 78, No. 12, December 2014, 898-917.

⁴⁷ According to the C.B.C.I. *Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue*, "the very reality of the (interfaith) marriage will demand that the children receive a basic instruction in the other religion, so that they may respect and appreciate it (No. 109)... Common prayer life should be an agreed element of the family life pattern. Prayers can be composed in such a way that they harmonise with the values of each tradition (No. 110)".

ashamed to call myself a Catholic in the background of my husband's faith." One day she saw him meditating, and when she asked him, "Whom do you pray to?" he answered, "I pray to God and I also pray to Christ". Another woman honestly admitted that before marriage she was an indifferent Catholic with limited knowledge, but after marriage she was forced to learn more to answer the questions of her husband. "I came to the realisation that to know Jesus is to love him. This would not have happened if I had married a Catholic," she testified.

When it came to the religious upbringing of our children things were a bit more complex. Many interfaith couples would like to bring up children in two religions because it does not alienate any parent.⁴⁸ Kalpesh and I were no different. We wanted them to be free to truly enjoy the richness of both religions by searching for the Spirit within, undefined by religion, in what I call a journey of "in-spiriting". It had taken me years of searching, helped by enlightened theologians, to get out of the boundaries imposed by the Church, and I wanted my children to begin from where I had reached, not from where I had started.

Introducing our children to the God of many names was therefore a special joy. They learnt Sanskrit prayers along with the 'Hail Mary' and 'Our Father'. Together we created rituals that have meaning for us as a family – the *Dassera puja* for instance, as well as the blessing of the house. For me the challenge was to make Christ alive to them outside Church structures. My example had to bear the scrutiny of questioning minds that have roots in more than one belief system. And by my words and actions I had to prepare them to recognise and answer the Master's call which may come in unexpected ways.

But I had to do this against the background of Kalpesh's fear that I would "brainwash" our children and put them in the Christian straightjacket. While he loves Christ, he wanted his children to be free of the restrictions imposed by the Church. For him, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me"

⁴⁸ Reflections on Interreligious Marriage, A Joint Study Document, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City & World Council of Churches, office on Inter-religious Relations, Geneva, Nos. 56 & 57.

(John 14:6) was a call from Jesus to get the ultimate experience of God, not to join the Church, and Jesus was “that finite door taking one into the Infinity beyond”. Separating Christ from the Church however, raised some crucial questions for me. How essential was the Church to my faith in Christ? If I curbed my Christian spirit for fear of offending my husband would I not be depriving my children of a precious part of me? Must I match his neglect with mine, or challenge him to do his bit?⁴⁹

Another question I had to face was: “Won’t you confuse your children?” Interestingly it was a question posed only by Catholics, never Hindus, perhaps because they are used to living with the One God in Many Forms. My children have always been comfortable with, and even enjoyed, their “double belonging”. “I am Hindu and Catholic,” they learnt to say without hesitation or apology. I believe it is because from the start we taught them that religion was not an end in itself and that all religions were merely pathways to the Divine; that faith was a gift that is not earned but given (Ephesians 2:8), thanks to the generosity of the Divine (Acts 10:44-47); that God existed from the beginning of all time and before all religions (John 1:1-4); that every religion had a purpose in God’s plan of salvation and it would be arrogance on the part of small, insignificant human beings to make a value judgement on which religion, book or prophet was better; that the immensity of God could not be contained in one single religion but every religion offered the Divine Grace to live with the Mystery of God, and a glimpse of the vastness that is God; that in the end what mattered was not which religion one professed - even to Jesus it did not matter (Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 9:49, 50; Matthew 25:31-46) - but how sincere one was in seeking and doing the will of God (Matthew 25:31-46).

This religious upbringing however often caused problems for the children. I remember Gayatri as a 12 year old being upset because her catechism teacher, a religious nun, said that when we are baptised we become children of God. “Does that mean I am not a child of God?”

⁴⁹ The Challenge of being different, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Interchurch Families, Journal of the Association of Interchurch Families. <http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/journal/pdf/1998V06N02Summer.pdf> Accessed 10 November 2015.

she asked me with tears in her eyes. Then there was Ashutosh as an 8 year old attending his “*Rakhi* sister” Pria’s First Holy Communion service. She too was the daughter of an interfaith marriage. I was wondering if anything was making sense to him when suddenly he took objection to the constant reference to “today is a special day because Jesus is entering your hearts for the first time”. “Jesus enters our hearts for the first time when we are born” he said to me. “Today Jesus is entering their hearts for the first time *in Church*”. Later he expanded his views. “When we are tiny babies in our mummies stomachs, even before we can grow up in our mummies stomachs, God is with us. That means Jesus is already there.” I thought that was pretty sound theology.⁵⁰

Now that my three children are adults it is time to ask myself, “Have I succeeded in their religious upbringing?” I don’t know; mainly because I don’t know how to define “success”. I guess the first question the Church will ask is “Are they baptised?” Gayatri my eldest daughter, now 26, chose to get baptized the year she turned 21 because she felt that being a Catholic is part of her identity, and she wanted to be able to step into a Church with the knowledge that it was not just a beautiful monument, but a spiritual place that was a part of her legacy. She wanted to be able to partake of the Eucharist as an insider, not a “spectator” “How can you truly be part of Mass if you don’t receive communion?” she said to me. Sadly, this was the same girl who was refused communion on her 25th birthday because she forgot to say “Amen” and then admitted when questioned by the priest while she was still standing in the communion queue, that she had not been to confession. I wonder how many would have been left to approach the table of the Lord if the priest had asked that question to all in the queue. Gayatri wept that day and I did too, and Ashutosh my son, was filled with rage at the insensitivity and arrogance of this ‘guardian’ of the Eucharist. Would Jesus who welcomed all those who came to him with hunger for the living bread (Mark 2:13-17), have turned her away? Thankfully, there are priests who like Jesus seek to

⁵⁰ It brings into focus our belief that life begins from conception, that we are temples of God created in the image and likeness of God and that Jesus is God. Of course it also put the sacraments in a different perspective so that the traditional approach - “you must receive communion as often as possible to be close to Jesus” - would obviously no longer suffice.

include rather than exclude, like my Jesuit friend who welcomed to the Eucharist, not just Gayatri, but also my Assamese house worker who had been denied access because she had married a Hindu outside the Church.

Ashutosh got baptized at 17 because he needed official proof of his Christian commitment to get into college on the Catholic quota. Letters from his school Principal and parish priest confirming that he attended Sunday Mass regularly, Catechism classes in school, Sunday school and confirmation class in the parish, and sang in the school choir at Mass, were not enough. The college needed a baptism certificate. Ashutosh's response was pragmatic, "I have considered myself Catholic all my life. Even my friends thought I was Catholic. The college wants a piece of paper, give it to them.... I went to Church more often than so many of the Catholics who got in on the Catholic quota. But so what?" Kalpesh watched from the sidelines merely observing, "So, in the end they got what they wanted." For me this was another crisis point. I felt defeated seeing all the years of hard won catechesis lost over a technical issue. In my son's eyes the Church was diminished, and for me the questions linger: Can one belong to the Church without being baptized? Is not baptism of desire a valid form of baptism? Is the Church a Club with membership rules or is it a community of believers who keep alive the Good News embodied in Jesus Christ? Are our well run institutions being subtly used to proselytize?

My second child Nivedita, now 24, is not baptized. She loves her "double identity because it gives her the power of choice, the ability to think for (herself) and the gift of being introduced to different faces of God." "Why should I say 'No' to any?" she asks. "I would never push myself into a box because that would be denying a whole part of me....I am my own person and that's all I choose to be." Ironically she is the one who received the Catechism prize three years in a row, causing the mother of one of her Hindu friends to ask me why she was not nominated for the post of Catholic leader!

The Godmothers of both my children are women in interfaith marriages who have been close to my children and who are committed Catholics. It was a deliberate choice as I wanted someone who would understand their 'double belonging'.

“Do your children go regularly to Church?” would I suppose be the next test question. And the answer is “No”. They go when they feel the need for peace and quiet, when they are troubled, when they want to offer thanksgiving, when they feel nostalgic about days past, or just to keep me happy at Christmas and Easter. Gayatri loves the sense of community that belonging to a Church gives her, but it is something she has also experienced when growing up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Many of their Catholic friends don’t go to Church anymore, they tell me. So does this have to do with their “double belonging” or is it a peculiarity of this digital generation? I don’t know.

Do they believe in God? Yes, although they have varied ways of expressing this belief. None of them like to be called religious, although all of them claim a spiritual identity. Ashutosh has done a 360° turn. “At first I used to love religion,” he says, but now he is openly critical of “religious” people because he believes they are defined by “politics, corruption, greed for money and blood”. Religion for him is all about hierarchy, terrorism and categorizing people to create one more front to fight from. Gayatri believes that religious people “lose out on being good human beings because they’re so busy trying to be good Christians/ Hindus/ Muslims / whatever, living within the boundaries of their rules.” Nivedita adds another perspective. “Religious people have forgotten to think anymore. My friends don’t question. They just follow the rituals,” she says. This respect for “questioning” is something Gayatri values too. She calls it “the best spiritual gift that my parents could give me”. Perhaps it has its roots in the words of married theologian Josantony Joseph who long ago taught me that “The path to holiness is paved with questions”.

The question my Church will probably never ask me is, “Are your children good human beings?” Yet for me that is the only valid question, the only one necessary to prepare them for that final judgement, so that the Master can say to them, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matthew 25:35, 36). So I take heart when Gayatri says to me, I have a “strong moral compass” and I witness her sensitivity to the rights of

the marginalised; or when Nivedita says to me, “I want to ultimately work in a job that has some social relevance”, or when Ashutosh is critical of global giants make money by preying on vulnerable people or businesses.

So what impact has the children’s baptism had on Kalpesh? Although we agreed to giving our children the freedom to choose, Kalpesh’s reaction has been negative. “I do not want my children to be manipulated and stifled by the Church, like you have been,” he said to me. He feels the Church has won, and that bothers him because he wants his children to grow in religious freedom. “The Catholic Church is an invisible prison,” he says. “Its bars cannot be seen because they are psychological.” For my part I am confident that our children having grown up in the Eastern worldview of ‘this *and* that’ will never forsake it for the Western one of ‘this *or* that’. They are long past the control of parents or the Church. They are discerning adults and I pray only that they may be open to the guidance of the Spirit who works in spite of us all, writing straight on crooked lines.

4. The Human Web⁵¹

I move now to the second part of my presentation, the inter-faith family and the wider community. In India we have a saying: When a couple gets married they don’t just marry each other, they marry a family. And so it is that the extended families are inevitably drawn into the inter-religious dialogue of the couple. This happens at many levels.

At the personal level soon after marriage I became conscious that for my Hindu family I was representative of all Christians. I was in fact, their window into the Catholic world – the way I worshipped, my views on religion, the way I interacted with them, ate, drank, clothed myself. At a deeper level I became the face of Christ and the Church. There was curiosity about my rituals, and interest in the teachings of Christ. Far from being a “minority” Christian, my efforts to

⁵¹ Most of these reflections have been published previously in the following articles:

The Challenge of Being Different: A Christian-Hindu Marriage, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Interchurch Families: Journal of the Association of Interchurch Families, Vol. 6 no. 2, Summer 1998, p. 14 & 15.

understand and “fit” into their world was met with equal respect. So for instance, when everyone was enjoying a relaxed Sunday, it would be my Hindu father-in-law who would remind me about going for Mass.

At the community level my deep involvement in the Church also called for interreligious dialogue. In the early days when the children were small and I had to go out for meetings like this he would look after our children along with his mother. All these 27 years he has dropped and picked me up from the airport at all odd hours when I go went on Church related trips. He has graciously accepted invitations to share on our interfaith marriage, rescheduling surgeries to accommodate meetings and seminars. Once when I was away for a CBCI meeting it was he who got the children ready for Sunday Mass and school despite their protests. Finally the children went for mass but decided to skip Sunday school. On the way back they met a friend of ours, another Hindu married to a Catholic. He was taking his daughter to Sunday school because his wife was away! He gathered my three and took them along. Two Hindu husbands ensuring that their children fulfil their Christian obligations in the absence of their Catholic wives. When I heard about it I laughed and said, “The power of inter-religious dialogue”. The men laughed harder and retorted, “The power of wives!”⁵²

It was a joke at the wives' expense of course, but hidden in it was a lesson: the key to evangelisation is loving relationship. It is a love that has made our spouses become in effect members of the body of Christ through their active collaboration in its mission. If we want the inter-faith family to be a medium for evangelisation therefore couples have to learn like St. Paul to put on love above all else (1Cor. 13:1-3) and allow the Spirit to blow how She wills. She never fails.

At the social level festivals and family celebrations are occasions for coming together to laugh, exchange news, discuss divisive politics and share spiritual experiences. We now have a “Lobo” whatsapp group of all my cousins and Kalpesh and my Hindu nephew are a part of it. Extended family too will call to wish me for Christmas and

⁵² Published in “Keeping the Law”, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, December 1999, Vol. 63 (12): 900-906.

Easter and even Good Friday! Achievements of any of us are celebrated by both sides of the family. Hindus and Christians, we have grown old together now, and our religious labels have faded. We are family.

The biggest catalysts in this transformation have been our children. At my nephew's first Holy Communion, Gayatri, just two and a half years old, drew her Hindu grandparents into the church, made a beeline for the cross, and ordered them to bow and say, "Jai-Jai." Who could refuse her magnetic charm? My mother who never allowed Kalpesh to step inside her home for the first year of our marriage, melted when Gayatri was born. Years later she gave us that same home, and in the unfathomable ways of the Spirit, it was Kalpesh who gently nursed her there as she lay bedridden during her final days.

Such stories were multiplied many times over by the women in our group.⁵³ A Catholic woman nursing her ailing Hindu mother-in-law; another reaching out to her estranged Parsee father-in-law; a Catholic mother gifting her rosary to her Hindu son-in-law on her death bed, saying to him, "you're not my son-in-law; you're my son", and he, treasuring this gift. These are triumphs of the Spirit that cannot be defined by religious branding.

Reaching this stage, however, has taken patience, dialogue, evolution over time, and a rootedness in the Spirit who knows no spiritual boundaries. We have been through our fights – misunderstandings, ego clashes, deep-seated prejudices – but we have emerged better human beings, more appreciative and respectful not just of what we hold in common, but of our differences. In the process our Christian identities have been strengthened, as we answer our Christian call to embrace the human person without conditions. Our worldview has shifted as we witness our partners' devotion to the Divine and recognise Christ in the universal values they espouse. The unity of the baptised has been expanded to include the unity of all God's children, and our rootedness in Christ has deepened to connect with the Word who was with God since the beginning (John 1:1). It is a worldview

⁵³ Challenging Families: Indian women speak from the margins, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Published in "Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table" Edited by the Catholic Women Speak Network, Paulist Press, New York / Mahwah, NJ, 2015.

that is a daily living out of the “missionary option” Pope Francis speaks of in *Evangelii Gaudium*, an “impulse” that is concerned not about self-preservation but about going forth “to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself” (27).

But all is not always peaceful, for just as relations in the inter-religious family can affect the wider community, so also can the outside world intrude into the private space of the home. As feminists have long taught, the personal is political. For me a turning point was the 1990’s when atrocities against Christians were on the rise. I had to make a conscious effort to dissociate myself from the demonizing of the Hindu community that was taking place. As a friend, also married to a Hindu, jokingly quipped at the time, “What’s it like sleeping with the enemy?” On the flip side I found myself being crucified for the Church’s past misdeeds and its present exclusive policies. The Church’s zeal to convert and take people, especially the vulnerable, away from the profound spiritual truths that are the foundation of *Sanatan Dharma* (Hinduism) is still a sore point for Kalpesh. He bristles at statements that proclaim the fullness of Truth in Christianity and only “seeds of truth” in other religions (*Ecclesia in Asia* 16)? “Why does one have to be a Catholic to worship Christ?” he also asks. “If I were to meet Jesus I would fall at his feet (*sashtang dandvat pranam*) for the Grace,” he says, “but I don’t feel the need to get baptised.”

Today, Hindu nationalism is a hot topic of discussion that has polarized the family. While Kalpesh abhors the violence of *Hindutva* supporters, he supports some of their agenda.⁵⁴ Underlying his defence of all things Hindu is a feeling of loss of an ancient wisdom and culture that has much to teach the world. For him this is what the church does with conversion, and while I argue with him I can also empathize with him, for I know well the strengths and flaws of this institution that is at the same time brilliant and ignorant, humble and

⁵⁴For Kalpesh the ban on cow slaughter is justified. My children and I however, translate it as a ban on eating beef and the violation of our personal right. He would like to identify all Indians as Hindus, citizens of a geographic location. The rest of the family sees this as an invalid qualification since “Hindu” is now a constitutionally accepted religion.

proud, other-oriented and exclusive, and blessed with the tremendous capacity to both nurture and destroy.

Interestingly despite his criticism of the rules of the Church, Kalpesh counts many women religious and priests, even a few bishops as friends. Never having studied in a Christian school or college, for him these Christians were his first and closest experience of the institutional Church. They brought Christ to us in meaningful discussions over a meal shared at home, but also in their infectious joy of loving Christ. Kalpesh has been inspired by their humility before the poor they serve and their courage to acknowledge the failings of the church and work for change. Within *this* Church we have not experienced religious labels, only the love due to human persons precious in the sight of God. It is this Church too that is responsible for the active support and collaboration of my Hindu husband in its mission, and it is this Church that continues to be a source of spiritual strength in our inter-faith marriage.

I have shared with you freely and honestly, risking your censure, because I believe that it is only when you understand the joys and sorrows of interfaith marriages that you will feel moved to make changes in the theological and pastoral understanding of the Church. Needless to say what I have shared has a specific context - marriage to a Hindu in India - and is a personalised account so cannot be generalised. However, I am sure that if the Church were to provide safe spaces for the voices of interfaith couples to be heard without judgement or criticism, it would hear many similar stories. Sadly the Church does not want to listen to them because the Church would rather they do not exist.⁵⁵ In the group of women I mentioned earlier there was one woman who wept after 46 years of marriage when she was recounting her story, and we wept with her. All the women spoke of “scars” made by “Mother” church not just on them, but on their children too. Some of the women were guarded in their sharing. Maybe they were afraid that the steps they took to build unity in their

⁵⁵ Parish guidelines for the celebration of marriages issued in Mumbai in 2012 note that “the Church has striven to protect its members by making laws against these marriages.” To obtain dispensation “The catholic party must acknowledge the potential danger to his or her faith and must declare his or her readiness to remove that danger.”

marriages would be judged by the others and found wanting. For me, the fact that they came at all for the meeting was a wonderful sign that they still wanted to retain a link with the Church. They listened more than they spoke, and I can only hope that they went away knowing that they were not alone in their pain and struggle, and that they too could be part of the movement to challenge the Church to be truly a mother.

5. Paradigm Shift

If interfaith families are to be accepted as partners in inter-religious dialogue a drastic paradigm shift is required in the way they are perceived by the Church.

A. Sign of the Times

The first step, I believe, is to recognise them as “signs of the times”. Whether the Church approves or not, interfaith marriages are here to stay. What’s more, they are on the increase, not just in Asia, but across the world, and no amount of censure or preventive measures will reverse this trend because it has its roots in our changing society.⁵⁶

The reasons for the increasing numbers in India are many, but the most obvious is the tiny minority that Catholics form, a mere 1.6% (17 million), in a population of 1.25 billion people.⁵⁷ In metros the increase in interfaith marriages is also linked in large part to the education of

⁵⁶ In Mumbai in the past 25 years the numbers have gone up from 10% to 20%. In some parts of India like the North East, they constitute 40-50% of the marriages celebrated in Church. Many of these couples do not even reach the Church, like my Assamese house worker. I only discovered her plight when a friend celebrated the Eucharist at home and at the time of communion she hesitantly revealed that her parish priest had told her she cannot receive communion because she and her Hindu husband were not married in Church. The Japanese bishops in their Response (15 January, 2014) to the Secretariat Questionnaire released prior to the Extraordinary Synod on the Family have cited a figure as high as 76%.

⁵⁷ According to the 2011 census, Christians of all denominations represent only 2.3 per cent (24 million) of the Indian population, amidst 80.5% (over 827 million) Hindus and 13.4% (138 million) Muslims. A similar demography in terms of Catholic minority status is prevalent in most Asian countries.

women and their entry into the workforce across all economic strata.⁵⁸ . Added to this is the overall distancing from religion and the porosity of today's families to social networks and the media which have opened youth up to the "other". Ironically the Church's own openness to other religions and insistence on inter-religious dialogue have also contributed to the breaking of time-honoured barriers.

These increasing numbers have become a matter of grave concern in India. In June last year (2014) the Syro-Malabar Catholic Archdiocese of Thrissur formed a committee to look into the matter. Its approach was largely pre-emptive.⁵⁹ A couple of months prior to this report, the Archdiocese Pastoral Council of Mumbai conducted a discussion on interfaith marriages. The outcome was largely negative emphasizing the dangers of inter-faith marriages.⁶⁰ One lone voice was raised in defence of the openness to other faiths that such families fostered, and another vaguely hinted to other possibilities if the partner was a "strong Catholic". Once again the measures proposed to deal with this phenomenon were largely preventive⁶¹ and even punitive, like not permitting the solemnisation of interfaith marriages in Church. A few pastoral recommendations were made such as marriage preparation

⁵⁸ Universities and workplaces provide multi-religious spaces that offer opportunities for intimate relationships across traditional boundaries, and many of these culminate in marriage. Migrant women who come in search of jobs, like simple house workers, frequently marry men whom they meet in the cities they have adopted as home. Armed with the confidence that comes from their earning power, these women, irrespective of their social status, are making their own decisions. While this phenomenon is currently most noticeable in Asia because of its multi-religious milieu, globalisation and increased mobility across geographic borders have resulted in similar increases in other parts of the world.

⁵⁹ 200 cases have been reported annually of Catholics, mostly women, marrying outside the Church. Suggestions to prevent these marriages included roping the young into Church activities, creating avenues for the eligible to meet, strengthening the teaching of catechism and sensitising parents and youth about the need to marry within the fold.

⁶⁰ These included religious intolerance, loss of family traditions and values, marital disputes over the practice of religion resulting in marital breakdown, problems with in-laws, guilt and fear of non-acceptance of the Church, and confusion and embarrassment of children because of their dual religious practice.

⁶¹ These included education on the sacrament of Matrimony, family prayer, faith formation and counselling on the pitfalls of interfaith marriages.

courses for interfaith couples, acceptance of the spouse of a different faith, and sensitive accompanying of these families.

While the pastoral approaches suggested may have value, it must be understood that their basic premise is tolerance. Being presented with a *fait accompli* the Church is making the best of a bad situation by reaching out with compassion and charitable benevolence. At a deeper level its initiatives are geared to help the Catholic partner in the practice of his/her faith, facilitate the baptism of the offspring, and if possible, also that of the spouse.⁶²

By recognising inter-faith marriages as a “sign of the times”, I am proposing that in these special circumstances we shift our focus from the baptised to the “community of all peoples” (NA 1) by deepening our “perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history” (NA 2). In Mathew’s gospel (16:1-4) Jesus challenges us to learn to discern the “signs of the times”. Pope John XXIII refers to this in *Humanae salutis* at the convocation of the Council (25 December 1961) and later elaborates on it in *Pacem in terris* (39-45). This phrase in fact occurs several times in Vatican II documents and indicates key movements of our times that are true signs of God’s presence and purpose (*Gaudium et spes* 11).⁶³ Importantly, recognising these “signs of the times” are not the sole prerogative of the teaching magisterium. *Gaudium et spes* calls the entire People of God, with the help of the Holy Spirit, “to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age,” and to judge them in the light of the gospel so that God’s voice can be revealed in our contemporary situation (GS 4 & 44).

⁶² Reflections on Interreligious Marriage, A joint Study Document, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City and World Council of Churches, Office of Inter-religious Relations, Geneva, 4th April 1997, No. 68.

⁶³ The Word in the third World: Divine Revelation in the Theology of Jean Marc Ela, Aloysius Pieris and Gustavo Gutierrez, by Philip Gibbs, Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, Roma 1996, p. 44-47. [https://books.google.co.in/books?id=iHKP0v_7iWcC&pg=PA44&lpg=PA44&dq=sign+of+the+times+in+Humanae+Salutis.&source=bl&ots=jaZkBUKag5&sig=ZWNuLX83KTCitocX1H4lLxHFzoo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAwovChMlu92\]6uX2yAIVgYuUCh1mhwyh#v=onepage&q=sign%20of%20the%20times%20in%20Humanae%20Salutis.&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?id=iHKP0v_7iWcC&pg=PA44&lpg=PA44&dq=sign+of+the+times+in+Humanae+Salutis.&source=bl&ots=jaZkBUKag5&sig=ZWNuLX83KTCitocX1H4lLxHFzoo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAwovChMlu92]6uX2yAIVgYuUCh1mhwyh#v=onepage&q=sign%20of%20the%20times%20in%20Humanae%20Salutis.&f=false)

Once we recognise interfaith marriages as “signs of the times” we can no longer dismiss them as accidents or aberrations but instead must search for their place in God’s plan of salvation. Even St. Paul acknowledges such a possibility when he advises the Corinthians not to divorce their unbelieving spouses. “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her husband.” He goes on to argue, “How do you know that you will not save your husband? Or how do you know that you will not save your wife?” (1 Corinthians 7:12-14, 16). To which, after 27 years of sharing the sacred space of a Hindu I would add, “How do you know that you will not save each other and bring peace to this divided world, so that together ‘nations will walk in His light’ (NA 1)?”

B. A Chosen People

Many Catholics in inter-faith marriages have already found the answer to my question and it forms the basis of my second proposal. Stop viewing Catholics in inter-faith marriages as “lost sheep” and look instead on their decision to live out an inter-religious marriage as a call to a special vocation. I firmly believe that our marriages are not just personal choices, but also responses to the call of the Spirit to participate in a purpose and plan that goes beyond our families. And I am not alone in thinking this way. One of the women in the group I mentioned earlier too shared something similar after twenty odd years of marriage to a Parsee. *“I sincerely feel that we are chosen to be in interfaith marriages. We have unique opportunities to spread the love of Christ. From our example people accept Christ,”* she said. Interestingly, in my very first article reflecting on my inter-faith marriage written in the first year of my marriage, I too had used the same word: “chosen”.⁶⁴

In these marriages the Catholic partners are called to be facilitators of grace, making Christ present outside the walls of the Church while at the same time keeping the church doors open for their non-baptized loved ones who moved by the Spirit, may come there looking for God

⁶⁴ ‘My Marriage is not a sacrament’, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, July 1989, Vol. 53 No. 7.

(*Evangelii Gaudium*, 47); they are called to reconcile different journeys to the Divine by being open to the Truth whatever its source (Rigveda 1-89-i); and they are called to plant seeds of peace by spreading a love that is centred on the human person. *Nostra Aetate* draws attention to the higher consciousness of this love when it quotes the gospel of John: “Anyone who does not love, does not know God” (1 John 4:8). Extending this in the light of my experience I would dare to say that anyone who loves without boundaries will glimpse the God who is Unlimited.⁶⁵ As Kamini Sheth, an American Catholic married to a Gujarati Jain for some 40 odd years, observed: “*We have firsthand experience of the universality of God's love and ways. We have experienced the love of Jesus in a non-Christian person. We can testify to the spiritual treasure God has deposited for us in scriptures all over the world!*”⁶⁶

C. Mutual Trust

If such a deep exchange is to occur however, there must be mutual trust. For Hindus in India, one of the biggest obstacles to mutual trust is the fear of conversion. Even after 27 years of marriage this remains a sore point for my husband. He looks at missionary activity with suspicion, questioning whether its aim is “selfless service at the feet of the Lord” or an increase in numbers. I have heard other women share how difficult it is to get their husbands to attend Church programmes because their husbands are afraid that the ultimate aim is conversion. If only the Church would heed the advice of its Asian bishops who insist that “...for a deeper and fruitful dialogue, it is even necessary that each partner be firmly committed to his or her faith...(for)

⁶⁵ Op. cit. “Liberating the Unlimited” by Kalpesh Gajiwala.

⁶⁶ Kamini Sheth continues: “And we can reassure that exploration of this wealth only increases the personal value of our Word of God. We have explored non-Christian forms of prayer and expressions of worship and found our God there also. We know and are living examples of the fact that the inclusive perspective does not mean a diluted perspective, but rather a richer, more vibrant, living, loving, urgently relevant perspective. It does not mean a blurred identity, but rather, the increased light of the expanded view results in a sharper, more clearly defined image of ourselves and the world around us.... Above all we see unity - we no longer define ourselves by our differences from the world around us, but rather by our fundamental kinship with all the peoples of the world, in fact, with all creation.” Published in “Weaving the Human Web: Interfaith families as Basic Human Communities”, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, “Word & Worship”, Vol 34, Nos 3 & 4, March-April & May-June 2001 p. 119-127.

listening attentively with our heart to the personal commitment of faith and witness of the other partner ... (will) enrich us and make us grow in our faith, and help us reinterpret it.”⁶⁷ Unfortunately this is usually addressed to the Catholic spouse as a covert caution not to dilute or abandon the faith, and is rarely applied to the spouse of another faith who is still viewed as a “soul to be won over”.⁶⁸

D. Baptism by desire

The fourth prong in my proposed paradigm shift addresses the baptism of children. Bringing this up at the very starting point of the marriage only serves to drive a wedge between spouses, hampering the freedom of inter-religious dialogue. One woman in our group, offspring of a Catholic-Muslim marriage described it as “a sword dividing the family”. Her Muslim father kept his word and all the children were baptised, but his birth family severed all connection with him and he never saw them again. It is time that the Church stopped insisting on it as a *sine qua non* for inter-faith marriages.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) IV/7 (Tagaytay):10-11.

⁶⁸ Communities tend to see interreligious marriages as a means of increasing the Christian fold and the non-Catholic partner is seen solely as a potential convert. See Reflections on Interreligious Marriage, A Joint Study Document, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City & World Council of Churches, office on Inter-religious Relations, Geneva, No. 68.

⁶⁹ The instruction *Matrimonii sacramentum* of March 18, 1966 issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, however, shows respect for the conscience of the partner of another faith who is no longer positively bound to baptise and educate all the children in the Catholic religion. The legislation of *Matrimonia mixta* of March 31, 1970, only requires the Catholic partner “to make a sincere promise to do all in his/her power to have all the children baptised and educated in the Catholic Church.” All that is required are sincere efforts in the fulfilment of the promise. In the words used is an implicit acknowledgement of the lived reality wherein such efforts on the part of the Catholic partner may not always be successful due to factors beyond his/her control. Further, the norm “to do all in his/her power” must not be used in the sense of exerting pressure which could cause undue strain on the conjugal relationship, for “keeping peace and trust in the family is the most fundamental duty in every marriage” (C.B.C.I. *Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue*, No. 109). Rather, the sincerity, the attitude and the intention is more important for obtaining the dispensation than the actual raising of the children as Catholics. No moral certitude is needed that the children will actually be brought up in the Catholic faith (B.A. Siegle, *Marriage Today: A Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*,

Instead I propose we move the emphasis from baptism by water to baptism by desire.⁷⁰ For centuries the Church taught that baptism was necessary for salvation. In its attempts to explain the salvation of the unbaptised it therefore developed a theology that included baptism of desire so that, and I quote Pope Pius IX in 1863, those “sincerely observing the natural law and its precepts inscribed by God on all hearts and ready to obey God, (and) live honest lives ... are able to attain eternal life by the efficacious virtue of divine light and grace.” In more recent times, *Gaudium et spes* 22 and *Lumen Gentium* 16 acknowledge that all those who “sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience” can attain salvation (LG 16) for as Pope John Paul II points out in *Redemptor Hominis* “the Spirit of truth (operates) outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body” (6). BIRA II further explains that “God’s saving grace is not limited to members of the church, but is offered to every person...His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace” (BIRA II:12).

While baptism of desire is not a sacrament, when considering the necessity of the sacraments for salvation Peter Lombard (1160 AD), a scholastic theologian of the twelfth century,⁷¹ points out that, “God did not bind his power by the Sacraments.”⁷² In other words, God is not bound by the sacraments to draw people to heaven (Cf. Job 33:15-

N.Y., Alba House, 1979, p. 96). The Holy Office confirms this position: “For, the divine law, by which the parents are bound to the Catholic education of all their children, does not intend to bind them to what is impossible. And if they sincerely do what they can, they are not the cause of their children's deprivation of baptism and Catholic education. Therefore, though on the one hand the very serious obligation of the parents to educate their children as Catholics must be impressed upon the faithful and Catechumens, on the other hand, they must not be charged with a greater burden than God himself, the author of nature and of grace, has laid upon them....”(Sacra Congregatio Sanctio Officii, Reply to the Vicar Apostolic of the Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia, February 19, 1936).

⁷⁰ Report of Meeting of women in Interfaith families, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Errol D'Lima et al., Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, Vol.78, No.12, December 2014, p. 898-917.

⁷¹ Author of “Sentences”, a work that quickly became the principal theology text in the schools and universities from the High Middle Ages until the Counter Reformation.

⁷² Baptism and the Baptism of Desire by Raymond Taouk, <http://www.catholicapologetics.info/modernproblems/currenterrors/bapdesire.htm> accessed 12 November 2015.

18). St. Thomas Aquinas affirms the same when he points out that “it belongs to the excellence of Christ’s power, that He (Christ) could bestow the sacramental effect without conferring the exterior sacrament.”⁷³

In the light of the above the questions then are: If the Church no longer teaches that baptism is necessary for salvation, and that in fact the sacrament can even exist despite the absence of the visible dimension, why do we still place so much emphasis on the baptism of the children of inter-faith marriages? Why can we not recognise and respect the baptism of desire that is so often the fruit of the Catholic spouse’s efforts to “do all in his/her power” to baptise their children?

E. A choice for love

The next change I would like to suggest is to stop using baptism of the children as the defining criterion for Christian commitment of the Catholic party. Too often the inability to baptise children is seen as a choice *against* the Christian faith and the Church, when in reality it is a choice *for* a “vocation of love”.⁷⁴ Catholic wives particularly are well aware that excluding their partner from the religious upbringing of his children and giving them a different religious “label” would alienate him and hamper the “mutual gift of self” and “creative reciprocity” that are the basis of Christian conjugal love.⁷⁵ It would in fact, be a form of “individualism” that seeks the benefit of one without concern for the other⁷⁶. Such exclusion inevitably leads to overt or covert opposition.

But if the Catholics do make a choice for the unity of their marriage, frequently they have to face the censure of the community. Not only will the non-Christian partner be held responsible for leading a Christian astray, but according to the joint study document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches, “the Christian will be condemned for weakness and a lack of appreciation of the faith. The net result will be the ostracization

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ XIV Ordinary General Assembly, *Lineamenta*, no. 19.

⁷⁵ XIV Ordinary General Assembly, *Lineamenta*, nos. 8, 16.

⁷⁶ XIV Ordinary General Assembly, *Lineamenta*, no. 4.

of the couple. Even where this is not official or canonical, the couple may feel themselves to be criticised and unwelcome, and so will cut themselves off from the community” (68). How is it possible then to care for these families and foster the Christian upbringing of the children?

And yet pastors have an obligation to do so. Canon 1063 enjoins pastors to take care that their ecclesiastical communities help the “Christian faithful” to preserve their marriage in a “Christian spirit”. It does not exclude Christians in inter-religious marriages. Canon 1128 in fact refers specifically to disparity of cult marriages directing pastors to offer these baptised Catholics “spiritual help to fulfil their obligations” and “foster the unity of conjugal and family life”.

F. Letting go

My last point in the paradigm shift I propose is that the Church, like a good mother, must learn to let go in the Spirit. This is something all the women in the group had learnt to do. As Pope John Paul II reminded the Japanese Bishops during their *ad limina apostolorum* visit in 1985, “All evangelization depends on (the Spirit); the success of every endeavour is linked to (the Spirit’s) grace. ‘Techniques of evangelization are good, but even the most advanced ones could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit’” (7).⁷⁷ And so I would ask the Church to “accept the unruly freedom of the of the word” which inculturated in these families of double belonging “accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 22).

6. Summary

To summarize before I move to my recommendations:

Interfaith families provide a context for interfaith dialogue at every possible level – worship, culture and life. In these families the key principles of inter-religious dialogue – witness, proclamation, evangelization and inculturation – are lived daily.

⁷⁷ Address of Pope John Paul II to the bishops of Japan on their *Ad Limina Apostolorum* visit, Monday, 2 September 1985.

The human web these families weave through their familial relationships contribute to the building of the human family across religious divides.

If these marriages are to fulfill their potential however, a paradigm shift is required in the Church's understanding:

1. Recognize inter-faith marriages as a sign of the times, a reality that is here to stay. Acknowledge their place in God's plan of salvation.
2. Look on the couple's decision to live out an inter-faith marriage as a call to a special vocation.
3. Foster mutual trust by looking on the partner of a different faith as one who has also received the gift of faith, and not as a potential convert.
4. Develop the theology of baptism of desire and give it due importance.
5. Understand that the decision not to baptize children is not a choice against the Christian faith and the Church but a choice for the unity of the family.
6. Learn to trust and let go in the Spirit for She works in ways beyond our imagination.

7. Recommendations

Finally I come to a few recommendations towards implementing the paradigm shift I have proposed:

1. We need to realise first of all that interfaith marriages cannot be governed by the existing rules. The entire context is different. Where traditional marriage encourages a uniformity of worship, interfaith marriages have to make space for religious pluralism and work towards unity in diversity. We have to start therefore from the life experience of these couples and evolve new ways of experiencing Christ and the Church, so that they can deepen their faith even as they raise children within the context of 'double belonging'.
2. Before initiating pastoral programmes Church authorities need to become aware of where they stand. Are they really interested in bringing Christ to these families without strings attached, or is their goal still the baptism of the children and the possible conversion of the partner of another faith? Do they want interfaith

marriages to be prophecies that announce God's love for all humanity regardless of religious labels, or would they rather these marriages failed, so that they would act as deterrents to further such marriages?⁷⁸

3. Doctrine and Theology need to be reviewed and revised in the light of the challenges these marriages face and pose to the Church, and current teaching on evangelisation, inculturation and interreligious dialogue.
4. Laws and regulations must be reframed so that while the Catholic partner is made aware of her/his responsibility to bring up their children in the faith, the baptism of the children should not be insisted upon as an essential condition to the marriage.⁷⁹ The free state of the partners to make this decision must be respected.
5. Marriage liturgies, particularly the marriage vows⁸⁰ must be adapted so that they are more inclusive and respectful of the sacredness of the marriage that is not dependent on the faith of the couple. Norms for conducting the nuptial service must recognise the rights of both parties to a nuptial ceremony, as well as the social implications of these religious ceremonies which are the first steps in bringing two communities closer.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Op. Cit. Keeping the Law, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala.

⁷⁹ Although the Code of Canon Law had been revised in 1983 when I got married in 1988 I was asked to make the promise of the 1917 Code. Another woman I know who got married in 2003 was also asked to do so.

⁸⁰ The marriage liturgy is the same for Catholics as well as interfaith couples and includes a promise to "accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church" irrespective of whether there has been prior disagreement on this issue. The partner of another faith is also required to place a ring on his Catholic partner's finger as a sign of his love and fidelity "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". For Kalpesh and I who had been through a long process of discernment and dialogue and ultimately come to the decision that the children could make their own decision about baptism as adults, a decision that was accepted by the religious authorities, it came as a shock to be asked to make these vows, and I can't help wondering given the circumstances, if they are valid.

⁸¹ According to the Parish guidelines for the celebration of marriages issued in Mumbai in 2012, the priest is instructed "to be vested in a surplice and stole for the celebration (not a chasuble)" of the nuptial service. There are strict instructions that if the Eucharist is to follow "the texts of the Mass of the day or of Thanksgiving or various needs, but not the texts of the

6. Pastors must take seriously their role as Alter Christus, ever conscious that they are the gateways into the Church for these interreligious families and a vital link for the ongoing catechesis of the Catholic partner.
7. Pastoral practice must include accompanying interfaith families (Canon 1063) reverently,⁸² without judgement, censure, triumphalism or attempts at conversion, as they “evolve a faith that is inclusive and not exclusive, pluralist and not triumphalist, lived and not preached”.⁸³
8. Personalized pastoral programmes are required that instruct the couple about marriage in other religious traditions and the application of civil laws. Opportunities must be provided to meet couples in stable interfaith marriages (Canon 1064) and training in inter-religious dialogue must be provided to the Catholic partners “so that they can proclaim without proselytizing and welcome another’s Truth without feeling threatened.”⁸⁴
9. “Welcoming communities” must be fostered that will offer support to the couple, their children (whether baptised or not), and their families of birth, all of whom struggle with their complex situations.⁸⁵

Nuptial Mass (underlined in the original) should be used. Even the choir is cautioned to keep this in mind for the choice of the hymns.

⁸² “All families should, above all, be treated with respect and love and accompanied on their journey as Christ accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus.” In a particular way, the words of Pope Francis apply in these situations: “The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this ‘art of accompaniment’, which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting a closeness and compassion which, at the same time, heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 169)”. (45) Ref: XIV Ordinary General Assembly, “The Vocation And Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World” (*Lineamenta*), Vatican City, 2014, accessed 21 May 2015.

⁸³ Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, “Challenging Christian Families”, JIVAN: News and Views of Jesuits in India, January 2015, p. 19.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ “The Church assumes a valuable role in supporting families, starting with Christian Initiation, by being welcoming communities. More than ever, these communities today are to offer support to parents, in complex situations and everyday life, in their work of raising their children, accompanying children, adolescents and young people in their development through personalized pastoral programmes, capable of introducing them to the full meaning of life and encouraging them in their choices and responsibilities,

10. And finally pastors need to remove their sandals as they enter the sacred space (Ex 3:5) of these families and listen to what they have to teach the Church about “the dynamics of mercy and truth that meet in Christ” (Linneamenta 10), for theirs is a “culture of encounter” which recognizes “the Lord’s gratuitous work, (...) outside customary models” (Linneamenta Questions, Part I).

Beatitudes for Interfaith families (Mt 5:3-12)

- *Astrid Lobo Gajiwala*

Published in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* Vol. 62 (10): Oct 1998 p. 790.

1. Blessed are the interfaith spouses who aware of the limits of their individual spiritual experience are open to the God-experience of their partners who belong to another religion; they shall reign with God.
2. Blessed are the interfaith families who mourn because there is no room for them in the religious traditions and families of their birth; they shall be comforted.
3. Blessed are the interfaith couples who in humility risk the darkness of moving with the Spirit; they shall inherit the Earth.
4. Blessed are the interfaith couples who hunger and thirst for a communion that respects and is enriched by the unique spiritual gifts each partner brings; they shall be satisfied.
5. Blessed are the merciful interfaith couples who through the pain of their exclusion labour to bring about the inclusive “Kingdom” of God; they shall know mercy.
6. Blessed are the interfaith parents who dare to teach their children to centre themselves on the “I AM” who goes beyond all human boundaries and limitations; they shall see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers who offer support to interfaith couples and celebrate God's gift of love to them, as part of

lived in the light of the Gospel” (60). Ref: XIV Ordinary General Assembly, “The Vocation And Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World” (Lineamenta), Vatican City, 2014, accessed 21 May 2015.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141209_lineamenta-xiv-assembly_en.ml

reconciling the whole world to God; they shall be called daughters and sons of God.

8. Blessed are interfaith spouses when they insult you and persecute you and utter all kinds of slander against you because you have married a person of another religion; on you God's favour rests. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted.

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