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By Embracing diversity and inclusivity.
A Christian Perspectives
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1. We live in a smaller and more interconnected world. At the same time, we live in a context in which radically different worldviews coexist, albeit in a relatively peaceful manner. Pluralism, religiosity and secularism determine the form and content of the way we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). It is undeniable that the land we live in is home to a wide range of religious traditions, and the people who inhabit it have never been more aware of the true extent of this diversity.

2. Nevertheless, the question of how one should interpret religious plurality and deal with it is a significant challenge for the religions themselves. Each of the major religions exhibits a multitude of approaches to religious diversity, both in terms of doctrine and practice. In light of the aforementioned considerations, it becomes evident that concepts like naturalism, exclusivity, inclusivity and plurality serve to emphasise the disparate evaluation and interpretation of the coexistence of different faiths.

3. Christianity fully recognises the diversity evident in both creation and the religions that form part of it, and fully accepts inclusivity and coexistence as a way of being and living among others. This perspective was articulated, for instance, by the Catholic Bishop Conference of India in 1989: “The plurality of religions is a consequence of the richness of creation itself and of the manifold grace of God. Though all coming from the same Source, peoples have perceived the universe and articulated their awareness of the Divine Mystery in manifold ways, and God has surely been present in these historical undertakings of his children. Such pluralism therefore is in no way to be deplored but rather acknowledged as itself a divine Gift”.

4. Previously in 1965, the Second Vatican Council in the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* looked more carefully into religions and recognised in them the capacity to respond: “to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, ... deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? ... What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?” (NA 1). In particular, *Nostra Aetate* sees Hinduism and the Dharmic religions as the prism through which: “Men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a *flight to God with love and trust.*” (NA2). Moreover, *Nostra Aetate* states at the end of n. 2 that the Catholic Church recognises the presence of “true and holy elements in religions” and “respects the practice and doctrine” which, although different from her own, reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Likewise, the *Adu Dhabi Document* written and signed by Pope Francis along with the imam of Al-Azhar in 2019, states in a paragraph about human freedom that religious plurality is willed by God. “The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings ... This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derive. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept.”

5. Once it has been established that plurality and inclusivism represent the two categories that inform the relationship between Christianity and other religions, the only viable method for progress is that of dialogue, as Paul VI has declared in *Ecclesia Suam* (ES 78). From a Christian perspective, reflections on the *spiritual category of dialogue among faiths* have been articulated with great insight and depth. They could be summarised in three key questions: a) Why are religions in dialogue? b) How they are in dialogue. c) Where and in which direction they are moving.

6. *Why?* The meeting of religions responds to a "basic need". It is natural and inevitable because it concerns our very life. It is the human encounter that makes the encounter between religions something vital, so much so that all the great religions are more or less the fruits of these encounters. What would Christianity be without its deep dialogue with its Jewish, Greek and Roman roots, or Hinduism without its ability to harmonise all the different traditions that animate it? Think again of Buddhism and its Hindu matrix, or of Islam and its pre-Islamic, Jewish and Christian seeds.

If this was true in the past, today's world landscape makes the meeting of cultures and religions not only natural but indispensable. This happens on three levels:

- a. *From a personal perspective*, human beings are not isolated individuals but rather a set of relationships. These relationships require dialogue, which cannot be limited to social and economic issues, which though important in themselves, must address the ultimate questions of human existence. Human consciousness and its awareness evolve, as do religions.
- b. *At the level of religious traditions*, while religions as institutions frequently emerged and defined themselves in opposition to other religious experiences, they are now increasingly acknowledging that no single tradition possesses the capacity to fully address the profound mysteries that reside within the human heart. To respond to their own authentic identity, it is essential for these traditions to exercise mutual openness, or risk becoming isolated and lose vitality.
- c. *At the socio-historical level*, human beings, whether believers or non-believers, cannot live without an authentic spirituality that connects them to the whole of cosmic and social reality and at the same time safeguards their freedom. As someone has written, "all cultures and all religions now need each other in order to remain faithful to the best of themselves".

7. *How.* Let us now pose the question of what the ideal interreligious dialogue should look like and what characteristics it should possess. We could use the metrics of the two triplets to recall the Trinitarian atmosphere, the Chinese *I Ching*, or even the Hindu *trieka*.

1. *Divine Initiative (Divine)*. This means three things.

- a) The *whole* supernatural relationship that God has taken the initiative to establish with humanity can be depicted as an uninterrupted dialogue. As the opening of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us: 'God, who had already spoken in ancient times many times and in various ways to the fathers through the prophets, has spoken to us in these last days through the Son' (Heb 1:1-2).
- b) The dialogue of salvation begins with God, since 'He first loved us' (1 John 4-10); so it is up to us to take the initiative, without waiting for the call and without being hindered by the logic of reciprocity.
- c) Moreover, the fullness of the truth received in Jesus Christ does not assure Christians that they have fully understood this truth, nor that they live it to the full. For us Christians, truth is ultimately not something we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. It is a never-ending process. (cf. DA 49). God is 'that than which nothing greater can be thought,' recalls Anselm of Aosta.

2. *Openness*. Openness is the very essence of dialogue. This has three implications.

- a) Dialogue must involve all men and all ideologies, philosophies and religions; that is, it must be capable of connecting with the whole and with each one, because the dialogue of salvation concerns everyone, without any discrimination.
- b) Dialogue must be 'without limits and without calculation' (ES 76), because it does not depend on the merits of those involved or on the expected results. The *Bhagavadgita*, the great classic of Visnuite Hinduism, speaks in this regard of salvific action (*niskama marga*), since one must act in the world without worrying about the results of the action, gratuitously. It is, after all, about open dialogue between people who care about the fundamental questions of reality. It is no coincidence that genuine dialogue between religions nowadays focuses much more often on justice, peace and care for creation than on *nirvana* or God.

c) The dialogue must remain open and accessible to all participants. The objective of this process cannot be unanimity or homologation, given that the Real itself is plural. Truth is a relational concept; if we were to attempt to depict it, it would not correspond with the singularity of the spherical form, but rather with the multiplicity of facets observed in a polyhedron.

3. *Narrative*. Interreligious dialogue is the encounter of two languages, two narratives, two people. This also has three aspects:

a) Each person carries with him not only his own thoughts but the weight and dignity of his own tradition and that of his interlocutor. We cannot imagine the other and meet him if we do not know him, if we do not try to have some insight into his religious world. It would be dangerous to stop at the caricature of the other -- the knowledge of the other must instead be participatory, empathic, loving.

b) Interreligious dialogue requires encounter. It is not a monologue. Encounter means that one enters into dialogue aware of the truth of which one is the bearer but is vulnerable to the truth of one's interlocutor. Wanting to understand the other and being eager to be understood by the other are two realities that walk together.

c) Each dialogue has its own language. The language of the Hindu-Christian encounter will thus differ from the language of the Jain-Christian dialogue, and this in turn will differ from the Jewish-Christian or the Islamic-Jewish dialogue. Religions are not the same, they are not like goods that satisfy the same need. Religions remain qualitatively different, and it is precisely this diversity, a source of mutual religious enrichment, that dialogue seeks to preserve and emphasise.

4. *Desiring*. If everyone misses the stars, the encounter between religions is not a task for specialists. The practice of dialogue is therefore a way of being religious, or rather, as someone wrote, "to be religious today is to be inter-religious, to be human today is to be inter-human (inter-being)". Three more flashes:

a) The encounter between believers is a participation in life, it is a dialogue of life. The commitment of believers to dialogue thus allows them to share what may be the traces of God in history, and it enables them to work together for "the passage, for each one and for all, from less human conditions to more human conditions".

b) There are, however, many illusions/deficiencies that are encountered on the way to dialogue: a faith that is not deeply rooted; a superficial knowledge of the religions of others; present or past socio-political factors; a sense of self-sufficiency and lack of openness that lead to defensive or aggressive attitudes; the belief that dialogue is a sign of weakness or even a watering down of one's faith.

c) Interreligious dialogue is desired because it unites the three worlds: cosmic, human and divine, and the three times: present, past and future. Dialogue is not a new religion, but a process of transformation that seeks the best of each religion. Dialogue changes people and transforms traditions, because religions are not closed systems, but grow with people. They participate in the expansion of the cosmos and in the becoming of God.

5. *Religious*. Dialogue is the religious act par excellence. Dialogue is in itself an authentic manifestation of spirituality, which is breaking down the walls of religious nationalism and opening the way to a new religiosity whose forms are still being sought.

a) Interreligious dialogue is born of a sense of inadequacy in the face of fundamental questions concerning the human, the cosmic and the divine. While it is true that a Christian can find salvation in his or her own tradition, it is no less true that not only liberation, salvation, human wholeness, but also peace and justice are issues that require cooperation, solidarity, sharing, that is, "awareness of human and cosmic interdependence".

b) Dialogue is a way to purify religions, to keep circulating the antibodies against fanaticism and indifferentism. Dialogue is not meant to abolish religions or to reduce them to the lowest common denominator. Interreligious dialogue is a middle way between exclusion and indifference, because it counters both religious extremism, which seeks to destroy the other,

and indifference, which assumes the flat equality of all religions. Dialogue paves the way for conversation, precisely because religions are different but not mutually exclusive.

c) Dialogue is the religious act par excellence. Religions can be three things: a factor of war, as they have often been in the past; a factor of indifference, as they still are for many people today; or they can become part of the solution, that is, a factor of peace and healing for the whole world. In the search for the roots of peace and love for each person, interreligious dialogue is in itself an authentic religious act, because it connects us to each other, to the cosmos and to the divine.

6. *Endless*. Because:

a) Interreligious dialogue is an end in itself, not a means to something else.

b) There are no winners or losers in interreligious dialogue, because there is no battle to be won, no choice of who is right or wrong. This is because the participants dialogue about something that is not at their disposal, they dialogue about something or someone in which they themselves are included and transcended. No one can therefore claim to be an objective and impartial judge, but all must express their differences and remain attentive and receptive to what the other side has to say, because truth happens in conversation.

c) If human beings, like creation itself, are relationships, then dialogue on fundamental issues reveals our deepest humanity. Dialogue is the "recognition that in order to be ourselves, simply to be, we must enter into communion with the earth below, the people beside us, and the heavens above" (Panikkar).

8. *Where, i.e. in what direction*

In what direction do dialogue and dialogues move?

a) Interreligious dialogue does not only tend towards mutual understanding or even towards developing friendly relations.

b) It reaches a deeper level, which is that of the spirit, where mutual witnessing of one's beliefs and the common discovery of respective religious convictions coexist.

c) As a result, different believers walk together towards Truth, towards God, while working together for the good of humanity.

9. *Mystical conclusion*

'In dialogue, thus conducted, the union of truth with caritas, of intelligence with love, is realised' (ES 85).