

Pluralistic Inclusivism: A Suggested Perspective in Theology of Religions

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A Christian understanding of Church raises the issue of a viable theology of religions, which we identify as Pluralistic Inclusivism and which is different from Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism. Pluralistic Inclusivism is an approach, which is totally open to receive insights from other religious experiences and theologies. The suggestion is, to go beyond a comparative approach to an inter-relational approach, as religious traditions are not static finished products, rather dynamic inter-related experiences of growth. Pluralistic Inclusivism stands for dialogical theologies that encourage the relational convergence of religions, conceiving on the one hand the diverse religious resources of the world as the common property of humanity and on the other a possible growth in the richness of each of the religious experience through mutual inter-relation. It inspires each religious faith to be pluralistically inclusive i.e., on the one hand each living faith is to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to its conceptual content and on the other, Inclusivism is to transform its meaning to witness the fulfillment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths. It inspires Christian faith to be pluralistically inclusive i.e., the content of the revelation of God in Jesus is to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to it as per the requirement of different places and times and it is through such pluralistic understanding of the gospel that its true inclusivism is to shine forth. Here Pluralism transforms itself to focus on its centre, which is God as God in a universally conceived Jesus, and Inclusivism transforms itself to bear witness to the fulfillment of the Christian understanding of Christ in and through the theological contributions from people of other faiths. The basic affirmation here is that there is a possibility of the fulfillment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths and this perspective can be applicable in the case of any faith.

Such a perspective rejects the other schools in theology of religions namely Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism as defective. According to Exclusivism one's own religious faith is the only valid path to liberation and that is the criterion by other faiths are understood and evaluated. Inclusivism accepts the divine presence in other faiths but rejects them as not being sufficient

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for liberation apart from one's own faith. According to it, all the truth in other religions belongs ultimately to one's own faith, which is its fulfillment. Pluralism holds the view that all religions are equally salvific paths to the one God. The Ultimate Reality upon which the faith of all believers is focused in every religion is the same, though interpretations of its essential nature may vary. Exclusivism is its own rejection, what Inclusivism has is only a disguised exclusivism and Pluralism is not a solution to pluralism.²

Pluralistic Inclusivism is a perspective in inter-religious relations in which all the religious resources of the world are considered as the common property of the whole humanity. All religious experiences and traditions are simultaneously ours. We do not have any one particular religious tradition alone as our own and others as belonging to others. All are mine as well as all are for all others. All belong to all. It is a religious perspective in which while remaining in one's own religious faith-experience, one can consider other faiths as one's own, as the common property of humanity, for an increasingly blessed and enriched life. Here the otherness of the other is negated. Our natural tendency is to affirm the separate identity and uniqueness of our religious experience as compared to the other religious experiences. After affirming the separateness, we may try to dialogue with the others, seeking an opportunity for authentic witness of our faith as well as learning from other faiths. Pluralistic Inclusivism is an entirely different perspective than this. It is the affirmation of the interconnected identity and uniqueness of all religious experiences as our own and here our witness is to a world faith and our theology is a world theology.³

Again, Pluralistic Inclusivism suggests a relational convergence of religions. An important aspect of relational convergence of religions is mutual conversion. Being born in a religion does not mean that we should die in that religion in the same way as we were born. We can get converted into the true spirit of one's own religion and in that very conversion get converted into another religious experience as well. The faith experience of the Indian Christian is not pre-formulated, but is in the process of formulation through the guidance of Hindu and other religious experiences. Indian Christian theology is a conversion of Christian theology to the Indian religio-cultural context.⁴ In the very conversion to Jesus in India, there is a conversion to the religio-cultural context of India, effecting thus a double conversion and this hints at a possible relational convergence of religious experiences.

Here we are challenged to evolve a more comprehensive role for other

² Cf. K. P. Aleaz, "Religious Pluralism and Christian Witness- A Biblical-Theological Analysis," *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXI, No.1, Dec.-March 1990, pp. 48-67; *Harmony of Religions. The Relevance of Swami Vivekananda*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1993, pp.162-65; *Theology of Religions. Birmingham Papers and Other Essays*, Calcutta: Moumita, 1998, pp. 168-99.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-80.

⁴ Cf. K. P. Aleaz, "Conversion: Some Indian Christian Reflections," *NCC Review*, Vol. CXV, No.1, Jan. 1995, pp.28-42. Cf. K. P. Aleaz, *Religions in Christian Theology*, Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2001.

religions in Christian experience than what has been envisaged in the past. To reduce the role of religions to liberational praxis is a reductionism. To reduce the interpretation of religions solely in terms of Folk tales again would be a reductionism. Of course our focus should be the people, as has been emphasized by the Asian theologians; but people centered on a comprehensive religious life. How the comprehensive religious life of people of other faiths is related to the gospel of God in Jesus is the basic question to be answered in the third millennium.⁵

Also, there is growth in the richness of religious experiences by mutual sharing and separatist tendency in religious experience is discouraged by Pluralistic Inclusivism. All are common resources and they are used commonly. There is social justice maintained in the realm of religious experiences by sharing with those who do not have, but this is entirely different an attitude from that of imposing upon others forcibly what they do not want. Pluralistic Inclusivism always maintains humility to see that others have better things than we do.⁶ The superiority of others is always affirmed in it, rather than claiming our own superiority. In other words, here there is a reversal of the positions of Exclusivism and Inclusivism which maintain one's own superiority in religious beliefs over against others as well as which try to impose one's own convictions on others. According to Pluralistic Inclusivism, if one is intimately familiar with one's own religious system alone, that is a very religiously poverty stricken condition; Exclusivists are thus religiously very poor. Pluralistic Inclusivism upholds just distribution of religious resources. If economic justice is very hard to attain, as one has to fight for it, the case of resources related to religious experiences may be of easy access though Patriarchy and initiation procedures may try to create barriers. The point is, there is a possibility for "religious justice" in the world, which is economically unjust due to the oppression of the South by the North. Imposing one's own faith on others is the only religious injustice, and the Semitic religions as well as the colonial rulers have resorted to this in some areas and periods in the past.⁷ If so, the call of Pluralistic Inclusivism is for religious justice; for the just distribution of religious resources. There is no more imposition of religious resources, but only the whole-hearted mutual reception of these by people of diverse faiths. If religious separateness and rivalry have caused much bloodshed in the history of humanity Pluralistic Inclusivism should cause the opposite. In Pluralistic Inclusivism there will no more be any killing of others; there will only be self-

⁵ Cf. K. P. Aleaz, "The Role of Asian Religions in Asian Christian Theology", *Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 15, No.2, Oct. 2001, pp.268-87.

⁶ For example, Christians may maintain that the richness of Advaitic experience can teach them many a things, which they do not possess. Cf. K. P. Aleaz, *The Relevance of Relation in Sankara's Advaita Vedanta*, Delhi: Kant Publication, 1996.

⁷ S. J. Samartha, *One Christ Many Religions. Toward a Revised Christology*, Bangalore: Sathri, 1992, pp.36-41.

sacrifice for the sake of others; there will only be self-sacrifice for the growth of the religious experiences of others as well as for the growth of one's own religious experience.⁸

The age of considering different religions as isolated, self-contained compartments is over. The age of considering other faiths as inferior to one's own is again over. Mutual interaction and enrichment on an equal footing is the inevitable reality for today and all the days to come. Different religions will contribute to each other in arriving at the content of the faith-experience of each. The different 'paths' are no more entirely different, isolated paths. Each path becomes a path by receiving insights from other paths. Hence, the important point is the question of the uniqueness of one path as compared to other paths does not arise any more. Now, what we are interested in is the unique blending of two or more paths together for the emergence of the creatively new in each of the earlier paths. This is dynamic interaction. In addition, conflict between different paths cannot have the last word anymore; there is a possibility for a natural growth from relational divergence to relational distinctiveness to relational convergence of religions.⁹

One important aspect of Asian context is religious pluralism and Christian pilgrimage is progressive integration of the truth that is revealed to others in one's own experience of the story of Jesus. We have a duty to identify the glorious ways in which God's revelations are available to us in other religious experiences, which can help in our experience of new dimensions of meanings of the gospel of God in Jesus.¹⁰ Rather than evaluating other religious experiences in terms of a preformulated criteria, we have to allow ourselves to be evaluated by them in our understanding of the gospel. They in Holy Spirit will provide us with new meanings of the person and function of Jesus, rather than we dictate to them always. From particular Jesus we have to come to the universal Jesus.¹¹ Universal Jesus belongs to the whole of humanity in Holy Spirit.

How can we arrive at an authentic understanding of Christ or the Christian gospel is the important question. Who decides the content of the meaning of Christ and the gospel is the fundamental question. The meaning of Christ and the Christian gospel has to emerge in the process of an inter-religious

⁸ Jesus may be considered as the symbol of self-sacrifice and Advaita Vedanta provides an ideological basis for self-sacrifice. Cf. K. P. Aleaz, *An Indian Jesus from Sankra's Thought*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1997.

⁹ K. P. Aleaz, *Dimensions of Indian Religion. Study, experience and Interaction*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1995, pp.262-63; "Dialogical Theologies. A Search for an Indian Perspective", *Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 6, No.2, Oct. 1992, pp. 274-91; Felix Wilfred, "Some Tentative Reflections on the Language of Christian Uniqueness. An Indian Perspective", *Vidyajyoti*, Vol.57, No.11, Nov. 1993, pp. 652-72.

¹⁰ Cf. K. P. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta – A Meeting of Hinduism and Christianity*, Delhi: Kant Publications, 1995; *An Indian Jesus from Sankara's Thought*, Op. Cit.

¹¹ K. P. Aleaz, *The Role of Pramanas in Hindu-Christian Epistemology*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1991, pp. 99-100.

communication. Nobody is giving the Christian theologian alone the authority to decide the content of an 'authentic gospel'. People from diverse religio-cultural backgrounds will, in terms of their contexts, decide the content of the gospel. There are diverse ways in which the gospel has been experienced by people of other religious faiths, especially of Asia. The Hindus for example, in spite of the missionary aggression on their religion could experience the gospel of God in Jesus in terms of Neo-Vedantic thought.¹² Neo-Vedanta proclaims the gospel that Jesus had a non-dual relation with God and he is inspiring all the humans also to have the same relation with God through the renunciation of the lower self. Neo-Vedantic Christology is of course just one among the many developments in Indian Christian Theology. Similar line of development of understanding of Jesus and the gospel are there in other Asian countries undertaken by those who are members of a church as well as those who are not, in the context of diverse religious experiences. Here there is a need to question the very conception that Christians are the sole custodians of the Gospel of God in Jesus. Jesus transcends Christianity. We very badly need the help of diverse religious faiths in arriving at the meaning and message of Jesus. There is a need to attempt a comprehensive analysis of the gospel as interpreted by all the diverse religious experiences of the world and this has to be carried out in terms of expositions by both those who are outside and inside the church.¹³

The present author's theological endeavours have been in terms of the perspective of Pluralistic Inclusivism. We have tried to make the very content of the revelation of God in Jesus truly pluralistic by elaborating the contributions of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta to it.¹⁴ We discovered the possibility of understanding the person of Jesus as the extrinsic denominator (*upadhi*), the name and form (*namarupa*), and the effect (*karya*) of Brahman; as the delimitation (*ghatakasa*) as well as the reflection (*abhasa*) of Brahman. We could identify that Advaita provides an ideological basis for the self-sacrifice of Jesus: It is Being (*Sat*) alone who is perceived in a form other than His/Her own, namely Jesus and hence we should not make any assumption of anything other than Being at any time or place. The total negation of Jesus is the total affirmation of Being. We have to sacrifice ourselves as Jesus did to discover our reality in Being. We could also suggest a possibility to interpret the function of Jesus as to re-present the all-pervasive (*sarvagatatvam*), illuminative (*jyotih*) and unifying (*ekikritya*) power of the Supreme Atman; as to manifest that the Supreme Brahman as Pure Consciousness (*prajnanaghanam*) is the Witness (*saksi*) and the Self of all (*sarvatma*); and as to proclaim the eternally present (*nityasiddhasvabhavam*) human liberation. If Christian thought in the past has

¹² Cf. K. P. Aleaz, *Jesus in Neo-Vedanta. A Meeting of Hinduism and Christianity*, Op. Cit.

¹³ Cf. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of Indian Renaissance*, Madras/Bangalore: CLS/CISRS, 1970.

¹⁴ K. P. Aleaz, *An Indian Jesus from Sankara's Thought*, Op. Cit.

distorted the religion of renunciation and realization of potential divinity of Jesus, into a secular dogmatic religion of the innate vileness of human nature and atoning sacrifice of Christ, it is such an Indian interpretation of the function of Jesus which can rectify that distortion. The work of Christ is conceived here as going beyond the atonement theories.

In terms of Pluralistic Inclusivism we have again suggested an Indian Christian epistemology¹⁵ receiving insights from the Indian philosophical schools, especially Advaita Vedanta. We identified the important meanings of all the six *Pramanas* (sources of valid knowledge) of Indian Philosophy, namely Perception, Inference, Scripture, Comparison, Postulation, and Non-cognition in order to discover these *Pramanas* as sources of valid knowledge in Indian Christian theology so that an authentic Indian Christian theological method as well as an understanding of Indian Christian sources of authority may be clarified for the benefit of all the Indian theological constructions. If Scripture (*sabda*) can be classified under revelation, the other five *Pramanas* come under reason and there is an integral relationship between reason and revelation in Indian epistemology and consequently in Indian Christian thought. Perception (*pratyaksa*) proclaims the integral relation between humans, nature and the Innermost Reality, Atman and makes theology rooted in day-to-day experience. Inference (*anumana*) challenges us to identify the invariable concomitances (*vyaptis*) in Christian theological issues in terms of the present day Indian context. A word (*sabda*) signifies the universal class-character (*jati* or *akriti*) over against the particular (*vyakti*) and so we have to cross over from the particular Bible to the universal Bible. On perceiving Jesus to be like the person pointed out by the Hebrew Scripture and the Upanishads, we come to know that the Hebrew Scripture and the Upanisads definitely point to Jesus through comparison (*upamana*). By means of postulation (*arthapatti*), we can arrive at theological statements that explain seemingly inexplicable phenomena in Christian theology and non-cognition (*anupalabdhi*) recommends an apophatic Indian Christian theology.

In terms of Pluralistic Inclusivism we could also indicate how Advaita Vedanta could dynamically enrich Eastern Christian Thought in its further developments.¹⁶ For instance, the insight that Brahman/Atman pervades, illumines and unifies all the levels and layers of human personality as well as the whole of creation enables Eastern Christian theology to arrive at new insights regarding the energies of God through which God is knowable and through which deification is actualized. The divine willing, the idea of created things, the logoi, the words, are in the energies of God and not in His/Her essence. The Advaita Vedanta view that before creation this universe pre-existed in

¹⁵ K. P. Aleaz, *The Role of Pramanas in Hindu-Christian Epistemology*, Op. Cit.

¹⁶ K. P. Aleaz, *A Convergence of Advaita Vedanta and Eastern Christian Thought*, Delhi: ISPCCK, 2000.

Brahman as potential seed (*bijasaktih*) and undifferentiated name and form (*avyakrtanamarupa*) clarifies this understanding of creation in the energies of God. The *neti neti* theology of Advaita, the experience of Brahman/Atman as the subject and knower of all and every thing and who cannot be known, enables Eastern Christian theology to develop its apophatic theology. The Orthodox conception of deification is enriched through Advaitic insights. Deification is in terms of the implantation (*mayah*) of the Atman in the five human sheaths. The luminous Atman (*atmajyotih*) imparts His/Her lustre to the intellect and all other organs and thus deification is effected. Brahman/Atman unifies everything and everyone in His/Her homogeneity (*ekarasata*) and the result is deification. Brahman/Atman as Pure Consciousness and Witness pervades, illumines and unifies the whole human person by means of His/Her reflection in it and the awareness that Brahman/Atman Himself/herself is reflected in all the levels of our personality gives new vigour to the interpretation of Eastern Thought on human person as created in the image of God.

When we think of Church in pluralist contexts, the issue of the relationship between one's own faith and other faiths becomes important. How can one theologially account for the diversity of the world's religious quest and commitment is the basic question. From the perspective of one's own faith how can one see other faiths is the major concern here. The insights on Pluralistic Inclusivism as identified above can be a suggestion in this connection.