

DIALOGUE-IN-PRAXIS

Much has changed since December 6, 1992. A new phase has appeared on the horizon of Inter-faith Dialogue which, of late, has assumed a more cosy and relaxed course in intellectual exercise. The process of structured dialogue, a situation that was the hallmark of the ecumenically sponsored theology of dialogue in India, almost came to a jolting halt. Doubt about its utility and purpose was raised. The adjustment process, with some accommodative postures, was not yet complete when new phase suddenly erupted. A massive, violent reaction followed from the minority community, belonging not to the periphery of Ayodhya but distant places in Maharashtra, Kerala and Tamilnadu. It took a considerable toll of human life and property. The distrust of one minority community toward others penetrated deep into people's conscious and sub-conscious psyche, as different tones and languages started to appear from rival religious and political leaders of our great motherland.

The event need not be considered in isolation. The long history of our people reflects the relationships of people in different camps, wearing different caps. The trauma of the partition-experience remains fresh in the collective mind of people and families of the subcontinent. In the fiftieth year of independence as a nation, the trauma revisited many homes and families. A desire to rekindle the experience, a reaction as-it-should-have-been, emerged with strengthened vigour, in new forms and expressions. It was a time, especially for three nations of the subcontinent, to traverse the memory lane of events that gave birth to their initial experience of nationhood.

The last few years have been marked with a manifestation of resurgent movements in almost all major religions in India. This, on the one hand, is a welcome sign. On the other, it has been a matter of great concern, since it has led to some violent expression of religiosity among adherents. We may take satisfaction in the fact that we do not have anti-blasphemy laws, as do our neighbours, and that bishops do not commit suicide in order to draw the world's attention to the plight of Christians. Yet, we watch helplessly as our places of worship, or those of others, are razed or threatened to be razed to the ground. The fear of such action from the majority community cannot just be brushed aside any more.

The rise in social, cultural and political groups that profess religious affiliation, some with political clout and power, may not be a new phenomenon. Extension of their mass base and support surely is. Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bhajarang Dal and their families are no longer unknown entities or appendices to the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS). They have carved out their own area of influence in the Hindu society. Different jihad groups, liberation armies and liberation fronts among Islamic and Christian communities have also developed. They all threaten the very fabric of a secular and pluralistic society, leading it towards more chaotic and racially centred societies and communities.

The year 1998 has introduced yet another factor into our situation: the hung parliament and the rise to power of a government dominated by the *Hindutva* (Hindu-cultural-nationalistic) forces. The shouting of religious slogans in Parliament by members of a particular political party points to a new development. So also, the forsaking a major political commitment to construct a *mandir* (temple) and removing Article 370 (that provides special status to the State of Jammu & Kashmir). This gives credence to the theory of a hidden agenda within the new government. Minorities fear crippled inter-faith relations for the coming months and years, now more than ever, as different signals and pronouncements emanate from leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and groups associated with it. Power-in-governance provides power to manoeuvre societal relations. And the process has already been started by the most active groups of socio-cultural organisations associated with the BJP. Reported preparations for the construction of a temple at Ayodhya, scrapping the Minorities Commission, diluting the privileges of minority religious institutions and organisations, raising objectionable remarks about the use of wine in churches may not be just casual leaks. They may be intended to test the strength and reaction of minority and secular communities.

The smiling 'Buddha' at Pokhran in May 1998 was a great scientific feat with numerous political implications, assessment of which continues. Nobody thought of its religious implications, that it could be used to arouse religious sentiments for political purposes. The talk of constructing a temple at the nuclear test-site and scattering sand from there all over the country to demonstrate the power of a particular community may be an expression of some over-zealous activists. But the message is not lost. The rise of another power along the line of those possessing nuclear arsenals, with no hesitation by some to associate them with religions—Christian, Islamic, Jewish and communist—is a matter of great concern. The kind of mood that prevailed and the statements issued after the explosion of eleven nuclear devices in the subcontinent was nothing other than war hysteria with religious coloring.

In the Indian context, a paradigm shift has taken place in the process and understanding of dialogue. Opportunists are perplexed at this sudden change in situation; theoreticians busy themselves to explain new phenomena and to readjust their theories. In such a situation, those who are sincere in their approach and commitment to inter-faith relationships may need to come forth in order to build a society free from mutual distrust and a psychosis of fear. A new era in inter-faith dialogue needs to be initiated with vision to build a new community of humanity based upon the mutuality of trust and fraternity. The initiative to establish the Kingdom of God lies squarely upon the shoulders of individuals and communities that share a common heritage of God's revelation in their history and culture. Those who are more interested in constructing temples for God upon destroyed debris of common history and evolving cultural heritage hardly qualify.

Most failures in dialogue result directly from disregard for the *hoi-poloi* and basal grass-root communities. There was a time when individuals used to fight on behalf of religions and religious communities. An era of communal wars to 'settle' the issues was followed by a

pluralistic ecumenism of theology of religion. The latter was highly sophisticated, statement oriented and programme directed. Each has its own merits and demerits; each has its own validity, purpose and utility. The time has come to move on, however.

The Proposals

The present need is for community involvement in thinking, programming and action. Community necessarily means both the particular religious community and the inclusive, pluralistic community. There is no doubt that the Christian community of scholars and theologians has done pioneer work in initiating dialogue as a way to enhance inter-faith relationships and to build mutual trust and friendship. The same process has proven to be the best means to reduce tension and promote peace, harmony and understanding. Basic units of communities in general—individuals, families, group of families, units of social organisations and institutions—are also needed.

The social and communal strife and tension are hallmarks of every third-world community that is pluralistic, democratic (not necessarily in political terms), and developing. Underneath every claim of communal harmony in our society, one can hardly ignore areas of conflict, tension, anger and mutual mistrust. This situation demands transparency and sincerity that can lead to dialogue-in-confrontation. Communities no longer can avoid questions and suspicions such as motives, conversion and baptism, extra-territorial loyalties, foreign support and contribution, militancy, communalism, fundamentalism, secret agenda, personal laws, politics of religion, caste discrimination, women's issues, etc. Dialogue on such issues will not be free from tensions and emotional flare-ups, charges and counter-charges, threats and walkouts. One need not fear such situations within dialogue. Perseverance, sincerity, integrity and loving concern will ultimately succeed.

Social concerns and liberating motifs are no longer a monopoly of Christian missionary endeavours; others too have joined or carved out their own areas of influence. Inter-religious and inter-ideological groups are quite active in programmes for social upliftment, human dignity, justice issues, and liberation movements for women, Dalits and weaker sections of the society. Prudence and commitment demand that diversified labours and energies be channelled only through a united body, to be more effective and liberating. Ideology divides, whereas praxis unites. The need of the moment is for a dialogue-in-praxis, keeping in mind the following. Ramakrishna Mission has been active in areas of education, medicine and publication. RSS has been involved in programmes to build up cultural nationalism and social services. Siromani Akali Dal has highlighted the problems of Sikhs as a minority community. Bahuguna and Patekar have raised environmental issues. Swamy Agnivesh has led agitation to liberate bonded and child labourers. Dialogue-in-praxis may provide an opportunity to all involved for better understanding and co-operation. It may also facilitate other successful channels to help communities grow.

In pluralistic societies, communities—majority as well as minority—have much to share by way of confession and catharsis. They have not always been considerate or sympathetic to each other's needs and feelings. They have not always been patient, tolerant, or willing to accommodate different views and ways of living. They have often been wrong rather than wronged in their application of universal principles of justice, human dignity and equality. An opportunity through dialogue-in-reconciliation may provide a healing touch to a society whose communities have become a 'mental-wreck,' ever ready to react violently to even the slightest provocation in order to express feelings of hurt and frustration.

Dalit communities in general, but Dalit individuals in particular, have been discriminated against, exploited and abused for centuries by caste-structured societies and communities in India. Such wrong needs not only to be corrected; the wronged must be restored to full human dignity and self-hood as the minority, dominant society repents and has a real change of heart. Such a *meta-noia* should be explicitly visible through the sprouting of new communities devoid of distinct, caste-related stigma.

Eastern religious-spiritual-traditions value silence (*shanti*). It is valued as the vital, potent force in communicating divine as well as human messages. Dialogue-in-silence characterises the ultimate in all processes that involve dialogue. In the fiftieth year of our independence as a nation, we remembered Mahatma Gandhi, the chief exponent of dialogue-in-silence. His actions involved withdrawal from spoken words; spending time in prayer, meditation and fasting; participation in inter-faith and corporate worships. His Silence never hindered dialogue; it continued through notes and activities. Inter-faith, community worship may provide a setting for dialogue that will create a genuine community of believers in the Ultimate Source of our being and help communities to transcend narrow dimensions of human institutions based on caste, colour and creed. In the stillness of mind and in the silence of words, the community and individuals will open themselves up to the possibilities of dialogue with the Ground of Being of all that exists. Hope remains—to realise unity, harmony and integrity in all of creation in and through the One in whom we move and have our being.

Concluding Remarks

No experience of dialogue is worthy if it is conducted, or engaged in, without sincerity and integrity of purpose. The Christian community or individual need not to have any hidden agenda when it/he/she enters into dialogue with people of other living faiths and ideologies. No community can be expected to compromise matters of Ultimate Concern and faith-commitment. Christo-centricity cannot be compromised with any theological or non-theological ideology, even Theo-centricity. There can be no Christianity without Christ, though there can be various forms of theism, theologies and religions with or without Christ. Our neighbours in India are not unaware of this fact and will greatly appreciate if we do not compromise our living faith-experience (*Christanubhava*). In the Indian context, we need to develop a 'Theo-Christo-centered (*Nara-Hari*) theology of Religion' rather than a Theo- or Christo-centred one.

Each occasion of dialogue-in-praxis, therefore, need not be a situation of dialogue-in-theological-issues; if it is, specialists should deal with them. The uniqueness of Christ is not an extra-ordinary claim made by some ordinary people; it is a witness borne out by individuals and by a community of faith. The salvific experience brings about a complete change (*meta-noia*) in a person's total life-pattern, so much so that it provides deep courage to pursue any risk. The sheer joy (*khara*) of such personal and communal experience compels a person to share it with anyone who cares to listen or wishes to also participate in the experience of the Ultimate (*Brahmanubhava*). This joy (*ananda*) is the content and subject matter of Christian faith-experience (*anubhava*) and witness (*marturia*). There is no need to be ashamed of it; there is no need to be apologetic about it. The dialogue-in-confrontation may encourage the individual, and community, to develop an unapologetic theology of dialogue in our own context and situation.

Suggested Readings:

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