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Religious Pluralism and Religious Identity from an Indian perspective

Opening Prayer:

- (1) "Our Father" sung in Polish.
- (2) ASATO MA SADGAMAYA -FROM DELUSION LEAD ME TO TRUTH
TAMASO MA JYOTIRGAMAYA -FROM DARKNESS LEAD ME TO LIGHT
MRITYOR MA AMIRITAMGAMAYA -FROM DEATH LEAD ME TO IMMORTALITY (Bu: 1,3,28)

Vedic Tradition: May the river of my life flow into the sea of love that is the Lord.

- (3) Islam: Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim
In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.

Summary

1. Religious experience of Humankind

This has been the subject of extensive scientific research undertaken by serious scholars for the past four or five decades.

"The Religious Experience of Humankind" by Ninian Smart (1970) is a very pervasive work. He says, "Throughout history and beyond in the dark recesses of men's/women's earliest culture, religion has been a vital and pervasive feature of human life. Each of the great Religions is a growing organism.

Two conclusions from this research.

- (1) All human groups without any exception have had an *Isvara Anubhava*, **an experience of the sacred, or the Divine Mystery.**
- (2) This experience of the Divine Mystery is veering inexorably towards the fact that this Divine Mystery in **ONE.**

2. A New Paradigm Shift

God is not the Monopoly of a particular people. SHE/HE is the ABBA →FATHER-MOTHER of all as Jesus himself taught. **REALITY IS PLURALISTIC, IT MUST BE RESPECTED AND ACCEPTED** the Holy Bible is not the only Revelation or Word of God. Vatican Council II (1960-1965) exhorts her sons and daughters "to RECOGNIZE, PRESERVE and PROMOTE all that is good in the Ancient Religions", and speaks very highly of them (cf. Nostra Aetate. No.2).

3. Religions are Sacraments of God

Edward Schillebeeckx O.P., the famous Dutch Theologian, in his great work "Christ the sacrament of the Encounter with God" makes this Dramatic Statement "Non Christian religion are sacraments of God", meaning SIGNS which point to God dealing with the Nations.

Rev. 7:9 "After that I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne".

4. The Religious Panorama of God

The Religious Panorama – the fabric of the Holy Spirit is indeed very grand! There is a beautiful German VISION of GOD: GOTT IST DIE ALLE UND ALLESUM FASSENDE LIEBE. God is the ALL-ENCOMPASSING LOVE, HOLDING EVERYONE and EVERYTHING.

There is a beautiful sacred text in the oldest Upanishad namely, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad(BU)*, which runs as follows: Om purnam adah, purnam idam / Purnat purnam udayachate / Purnashiya purnam adaya / Purnam eva avasishyate / Om Santi... Santi... Santi... (BU V.2.1).

The meaning of this verse is as follows: "Om! That is Fullness, this is Fullness,/ From Fullness comes Fullness. / When Fullness is taken from Fullness / Fullness remains. / OM! Peace, Peace, Peace!"

This Upanisadic *sloka* in a way sums up the *Vision of God for the humankind and the Universe*, going beyond all sectarian boundaries through which religions, in particular, have divided people from people. Happily, Mother Nature has been unaffected by this narrow fragmentation. This *sloka* holds up Mother Nature in her pristine beauty, in the form of '*unity in diversity*'.

In an Interreligious live-in a Sikh gentleman Kulwant Singh Prayed this: "When I have found Thee, there is no "mine" and "not mine", everybody is MINE!"

5. Jesus - THE Interreligious Person par excellence

Immediately after the solemn Inauguration of the mission of Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazareth as recorded in gospel of Lk. (4:1-22), "Jesus speaks to the Jewish people ..." there many widows in Israel in the time of Elija, when there was a severe famine over all the land; Yet Elija was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidom. There were also many Lepers in Israel in the time of prophet Elija and none of them was cleansed except the Naaman the Syrian"(Lk. 4:25-27). The people were furious and drove Jesus out of town.

Manifesting the Father's Universal LOVE for all is clearly is the Mission of Jesus. He was liberating Yahweh - the God of Life, from the stranglehold of Jewish people who held him as their "tribal god" and manifesting him as ABBA, the FATHER MOTHER of ALL.

The most ancient Hindu Scripture; the Rig Veda (c. 3000 B.C) tells us: EKAM SAT VIPRAH BAHUDA VADANTI (I, 164, 46) *Being is ONE but the wise speak of it in manifold ways*. It was this ONE BEING which stirred the mind of the Vedic Sages and Seers of all time so that all "gods" were seen as but names and forms (nama/rupa) of this ONE REALITY.

In Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke record's the Peter Cornelius Event: Acts 10:1-48, which shows the struggle of the early Church breaking out of the Jewish shell and the birth of the Universal Church. For the first time a non Jewish person, Peter Cornelius, and his family is admitted into the Church. The whole event culminates in big Revelation to Peter.

In the Gospels we do not see Jesus denigrating any one Religion. On the contrary, we see him recognizing and praising the faith of people belonging to other religions, e.g., one is able to appreciate the moment of 'conversion' for Jesus when he came face to face with the Syrophoenician woman whose humble demeanour so struck him that he was able to recognize a "great faith" in the woman (Mt. 15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30). Again amazed at the faith of Roman Centurion, Jesus exclaims: "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith!" (Mt. 8:10; Lk. 7:1-10); in the same breath, he adds: "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven..."(Mt. 8:10,11).

Jesus is the interreligious person par excellence. He was able to form and shape the minds of his disciples who were all Jews, that many years after the departure of Christ they were able to present faithfully the interreligious person Jesus.

6. Kingdom of God: the Legacy of Jesus

The Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus is an all-inclusive Reality. It is not so much a new Religion but a new VISION of society. This new Vision brings out his foundational experience of God as the ABBA - The FATHER of ALL.

Who are the people, who are worthy of the Kingdom? All people are welcome to the Kingdom, who practice the Kingdom values (cf. Mt. 22:15-20; Lk. 14:15-20). When asked who is the greatest in the Kingdom Jesus says "the least who is worthy to be in the Kingdom is even greater than John the Baptist" (Mt.11:11). Jesus teaching is very revolutionary. A person who wants to be a follower of the Kingdom need not necessarily break away from his/her ancestor's Religion. Here in India Mahatma Gandhi was recognized as a great follower of Jesus who practiced the Gospel more than any other average Christian. But remained a Hindu till his death.

7. Jesus Christ – the Mystic

In the Gospel, Jesus is presented to us as spending long hours in Prayer to God, in mountains and deserted places all night together(cf Mk. 1:35; Lk. 6:12). He teaches his Disciples how to Pray, Mt. 6:6,7:

"Whenever you want to pray go into your room shut the door and pray to your Father in secret..... when your praying do not heap up empty phrases. When we look into the context of the Gospels we can safely presume, the words "Pray" or "Prayer" refers to Meditation. It is this Mystical dimension in Jesus which made him affirm at one point in his life "I AND THE FATHER ARE ONE" (Jn. 10:30).

We see in early Church young men and women filled with the spirit of Jesus, go into the desert to spend time in silence and solitude. Now comes into the scene St. Anthony of the Desert, Father of the Desert Monk. Now history records a great movement of the Desert Mystics.

This was followed by great Religious orders like Benedictine and the Carmelites who devoted much time to contemplation. Great Mystics like St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, a German Mystic Meister Eckhart and many others emerge.

The official Church always looked upon the Mystics with suspicion and never encouraged Mysticism.

When Christianity failed to quench the thirst of the Christians for Mysticism, notably in Europe and America they were drawn to the Eastern Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Sufism, and found great solace in following the Mystical path. Incidentally the great spiritual guide the late Benedictine monk John Main, OSB, before joining the Benedictine order while he was still a young man met a Hindu monk in Malaysia and was initiated to Meditation. This was a rewarding experience for Fr. John Main. Later he taught this to many, adapting this meditation technique to suit the Christian context. Today this has developed into a great movement – WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION (WCCM). This has taken roots in your great country Poland; Mr. Andrzej is the national coordinator. Andrzej is now in your midst.

8. The Spiritual Movement of Ramakrishna Paramahansa

When there was a great flurry of Missionary activities in India, particularly in West Bengal, God raised up an illiterate Bengali Mystic Ramakrishna (1836 – 1886), who was able to stop this tide. The life of Ramakrishna was a great inspiration to many and quite a few young men were drawn to him, one of the well-known being Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902). He formed them into good disciples of the Master steeped in contemplation. People called him PARAMAHAMSA the great Enlightened ONE.

When suddenly Sri Ramakrishna passed away at age of 50, on 16th August 1886 his disciples, who were all young men found themselves leader less; they were thinking of going back to their homes, and live the life their teacher has imparted to them.

It was during this time on the auspicious day of December 24/25, 1886 Swami Vivekananda had a Dharshan or Vision of Jesus Christ the whole night. The next day Swami Vivekananda shared his vision with his other companions: "Mother India needs you, go around India and look for yourselves what the people of India need, especially the poor, and make this your Mission. This pleased all, and on that day they decided to found the Ramakrishna Mission. This happened to be the Christmas Day. So the Christmas Day became their Foundation Day. To this day the Foundation Day is celebrated on Christmas Day in all the Ramakrishna Missions the world over; they invite a Christian priest to preside over the function.

9. Conclusion

The Divine Mystery cannot be compartmentalized into Religions. God is beyond all Religions; the Spirit blows where She wills and we all marvel at this. It is the Spirit who brings into existence all Religions including Jesus Christ and his Disciples and orientates them towards the Universal Kingdom of Communion which the same Spirit is constantly effecting at the heart of humanity.

Let me conclude this presentation with the heart's longing of Rabindranath Tagore for a humane existence: "The human world is made one; all the countries are losing their distance every day, their boundaries rot offering the same resistance as they did in the past age. Politicians struggle to exploit this great facet and wrangle about establishing trade relationships. But *my mission is to urge for a worldwide commerce of heart and mind, sympathy and understanding* and never to allow this sublime opportunity to be sold in the slave markets for the cheap price of individual profits or to be shattered away by the unholy competition in mutual destructiveness."¹

¹ Tagore wrote it in 1930, in Paris.