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**Being Christian neighbours in the context of religious plurality:
certain theological considerations**

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Introduction

Being Christian neighbours in the context of religious plurality involves opportunities and challenges. The opportunities and challenges are implied, at least in a limited sense, in the following citations from two theologians of inter-religious dialogue, one from Asia and the other from Europe:

1. "Opening the gates of hospitality to neighbours of other faiths is far more urgent than strengthening the fences that separate religious communities from each other in a multi - religious society. There can be no true community unless strangers become friends and travellers become pilgrims on the road to the city of god."¹
2. "Loving our neighbour does not mean agreeing with each other, but respecting each other and what each believes, with our differences."²

Meeting in an Asian country, centred on the theme 'Receiving one another as Christ has received you' (Romans 15:7), the plenary commission of the Faith and Order is obliged to reflect on what does it theologically mean 'to receive one another' in the context of religious plurality and being Christian neighbours 'with our differences'.

1. Religious Plurality as a theological context of the Faith and Order

Probably for the first time in the history of plenary commission of the Faith and Order, a complete session is set apart for theological considerations on religious plurality. Is it mainly because of the multi- religious context of the region where the commission is meeting? I think, it is more than that. Or is it 'a late falling in line' on the part of the Faith and Order also to talk something on inter-religious dialogue? I think, the Faith and Order Commission has a distinct and somewhat different mandate here.

A. A word on the pilgrimage so far

For some decades, the Roman Catholic Church through the Secretariat / Pontifical Council for Non-Christians, and the World Council of Churches through the dialogue unit / office, have been engaged in dialogue with other religions. A vast amount of materials in the form of common statements, declarations, Bible Studies, 'Guidelines', 'ecumenical considerations', personal reflections etc. have been available in print and electronic media. These materials, in general, are excellent pieces of reflection on the rationale and praxis of inter-religious dialogue. There are also exceptionally beautiful theological approaches, insights and even 'discoveries' with their impact on the ecclesiological self-understanding and missionary vocation of the church. But most of these, until the eve of the 21st century, catered mainly for the missiological or living together or conflict easing motifs of interested constituencies and naturally invited mixed – responses.

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¹ S.J. Samartha, "Religious identity in a multi-faith society", *The Star of the East*, New Delhi, Sep-Dec 1987, p. 27.

² Andrew Wingate, "Inter-religious Dialogue, Conflict and Reconciliations", *Current Dialogue*, WCC Geneva, No., 41, June 2003, p. 18.

B. Awareness of religious - plurality as a global context

The impact of globalisation on religion is most vividly pictured in our own times. Dr Christopher Duraisingh identifies even a clash between the assimilative globalisation and the fragmenting struggle for particularity : "It is this context of a clash between an assimilative globalisation and a fragmenting struggle for particularity that constitutes the locus of *missio Dei* to – day"³. The flow of people with their religious identities from the South to the North and from the North to the South, resurgence of religion in conservative forms, increasing instances of violence in the name of religion, proliferation of new religious movements etc. have contributed to an awareness of religious plurality as a global context.

This context is pictured with more clarity by His Holiness Aram I in the following words:

"Religiously homogenous societies are being replaced by multi-religious societies. Now that religions are living in permanent and close interaction with each other, religious plurality is no longer a conceptual issue, it affects the very texture of societal life and creates new paradigms, new ways of life, and a new self – understanding. It also shapes multi-relationships and multiple belonging within our institutions, our families and even within ourselves".⁴

C. Need of a theology of religious plurality

In the new globalised situation, religious plurality is the immediate context of life necessitating inter-religious encounter whether people like it or not. This demands a rationale of inter-contextual relationships on the part of every religion. Naturally, Christianity has to answer whether it can theologically account for other religions within the parameters of its doctrinal affirmations and faith-traditions. Same question may have to be answered by other religions too. Need of a theology or theological understanding of religious plurality is projected by His Holiness Aram I as the most demanding in the ecumenical agenda:

"Religions may generate mistrust and intolerance, and even fuel ethnic and political conflicts unless a common ground for a harmonious co-existence is found among them, therefore inter- religious collaboration under girded by a serious theological dialogue, is imperative and urgent. Furthermore, the churches and the ecumenical movement must seek a deeper theological understanding of religious plurality, which shapes the very context in which the church is called to witness to God in Christ".⁵

Already urged by a similar exhortation by the Moderator, the central committee of the WCC (2002) recommended that Faith and Order, CWME and the inter-religious relations and dialogue office together undertake a study with renewed emphasis on "the appropriate theological approaches on the relationship of Christianity and other religions". A Consultation consisting of representatives of the three above ecumenical constituencies took place at Bossey in October 2003 and a process is underway to provide preparatory materials on theological understanding of religious plurality, for the next WCC Assembly at Porto Alegre (Brazil) 2006.

D. Religious plurality emerging as a living context of the Faith and Order

During the course of its deliberations focussing on Christian unity, the Faith and Order Commission realised that the cause of Christian unity is inseparable form the cause of human unity.

As early as 1990, the Faith and Order Commission undertook the study on Ethnic Identity, National Identity and the Search for the Unity of the Church and during the course of the study the issue of Identity and boundaries came up which had at least indirect bearing on Religious Identities. Subsequent studies have seen more direct and immediate implications on Religious Plurality.

³ "Mission towards reconciled and inter-contextual communities, International Review of Mission (WCC?), Vol XCI No 363 Oct. 2002, p. 487.

⁴ "Report of the moderator", WCC Central Committee, 26 Aug - 2 Sep 2003.

⁵ Ibid.

The fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela (Spain) in 1993 inspired a study process to begin with the subsequent Standing Commission and thus started 'a convergence' – one-sided studies on Ecclesiology, Ecumenical Hermeneutics etc. Following the Plenary Commission at Moshi (Tanzania) in 1996, new study projects were added through the subsequent Standing Commissions and the study project on Theological Anthropology is specially significant. During the course of discussions on Ecclesiology the issue of diversity and the relation between Gospel and Culture were always alive and this had direct implications to religious plurality⁶. In the study on Ecumenical Hermeneutics, the issue of "living in diverse contexts" was addressed and it could not escape referring to "peoples of other living faith traditions"⁷ The ongoing study on Theological Anthropology has been continually addressing the issue of the image of God the entire humanity and addressing the issues of brokenness of human dignity in the context of religious conflicts. In brief, on many occasions in the Faith and Order deliberations, the theological understanding on religious plurality has been touched upon. An observation in this connection may be further significant: the motivation for most of the Faith and Order theological investigations relating to religious plurality was intrinsic and unlike some of the extrinsic motivations for theological understanding of religious plurality evident in the recent ecumenical projections.

Therefore the task, for the Faith and Order Plenary Commission, is to consolidate the already existing Faith and Order theological considerations on Religious Plurality and to contribute to "a holistic and inclusive theology" of Religious Plurality, as the WCC Moderator envisages, in association with all other ecumenical constituencies.

2. Being neighbours in the context of religious plurality : few reflections from the multi – religious situation in South Asia

The predominantly multi-religious situation of Asia has a long history and rich tradition of religious neighbourhood. It can also be said that almost all world religions are of Asian origin: Judaism, Christianity and Islam from West Asia, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism from South East Asia, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism and new forms of Buddhism from North East Asia. The west Asian religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) had almost a common concept of religious neighbourhood strictly subservient to monotheism. The South Asian Religions, in general, shared in varying degrees a culture of neighbourhood that nurtured a harmony in and through diversities. Even, one of the most successful South Asian missionary movements, Buddhism, always upheld "Tolerance" as the supreme virtue. For example, Emperor Ashoka of India (3rd cent. BCE) who accepted Buddhism, laid down regulations for the promotion of already existing culture of religious tolerance, as illustrated in the Twelfth Rock Edict:

"The Devanampiya (ie. the Emperor Ashoka) honours members of all sects, whether ascetics or householders... The essential message varies from sect to sect, but it has one common basis, that one should so control one's tongue as not to honour one's own sect or disparage another's on the wrong occasions; for on certain occasions one should do so only gently, and indeed on other occasions one should honour other people's sects; by doing this one strengthens one's own sect and helps the others. While by doing otherwise one honours one's own sect and does a disservice to others... concord is the best, with each hearing and respecting the other's teachings. It is the wish of the Devanampiya that members of all sects should be learned and should teach dhamma."⁸

In brief, the South Asian Religious situation upholds a concept of religious neighbourhood that has at least three characteristics:

- i. The central religio-philosophical tenets (of the Religions of south Asian origin) never necessitated a "theology" or "theological understanding" for religious plurality, rather, such a 'theology' is already inherent in those tenets
- ii. The inter-religious encounter is never motivated by extrinsic factors, or eventualities, rather, it is intrinsic to the very existence.

⁶ See for example sections 61-63 (revised document), The Nature and Purpose of the Church (FO/2003:10).

⁷ A Treasure in Earthen Vessels, Faith and Order Paper No. 182, sections 38-42.

⁸ Cited by Paulos Mar Gregorios, Religion and Dialogue, ISPCK Delhi. 200. Pp. 151,152.

- iii. Beyond the boundaries of structures, events and regulations of each religion, there is a common reverence for an inner enlightenment (fully dynamic and ever growing) that is entirely opposite to the spirit of western enlightenment.

It should be added here that the success or survival of any new or 'stranger' religious forms in the South Asian context largely depended on the willingness to positively respond to these three characteristics. I think, in the case of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, history has validated this.

The bearing of these reflections on the Christian theological considerations on religious plurality is that, in an age of Globalisation, the very understanding of "theological considerations" should become holistic accommodating also the neighbourhood patterns in the religious life of South Asia. Neighbourhood patterns in the religious life of South Asia, would teach us that it would be too much ambitious or artificial and even irrelevant to attempt formulation of a theology of religious-plurality accommodating certain "classical" paradigms and perspectives like "inclusivism, Pluralism or Pluralistic inclusivism" along with certain doctrinal entry points in Christology (eg. 'Hidden', 'unknown', 'unacknowledged') Pneumatology, Missiology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology etc...

3. A Theology of Neighbourhood : Certain Theological Considerations

Theological considerations are not just academic exercises of theological speculation. The age of scholastic theology is over and theological considerations aim at building up authentic and genuine relationship with God and the creation Therefore, a Theology of Neighbourhood in the context of religious plurality should have its authentic Christian foundations and meaningful neighbourhood-relationality.

A. Christian foundations in a theology of neighbourhood

i. Holy Trinity: Perfect model of neighbourhood

The mystery of Holy Trinity is the foundational truth of Christianity. According to the CWME preparatory paper I for the Athens Conference (2005), the Holy Trinity is the ideal community: "The Trinity, the source and image of our existence, shows the importance of diversity, otherness and intrinsic relationships in constituting a community". Further, Trinity unveils and eternal relationship and neighbourhood in essential oneness. It may be pointed out that so long as humans can not achieve this essential oneness, the analogy in itself is defective. Theologically speaking, no analogy would perfectly satisfy all the didactic requirements. What is important here is that the monotheism of the Abrahamic religions revealed itself as the eternal relationship of Persons. It is this model relationship of eternal unity in diversity that the Church is called to manifest as the "People of God" and the entire creation is being guided to as "Gods People"

ii. Christ - event and salvation: eternal neighbourhood manifesting in historical neighbourhood

The eternal Logos, while continuing in the eternal neighbourhood of the Trinity, took the historical neighbourhood in Jesus Christ. Availability is the mark of being good neighbour. God revealed "Him"self available to creation and illustrated the most meaningful availability in self-giving. Even though the event, of God's manifestation by taking historical neighbourhood, is complete, the human process of realising this availability and neighbourhood is incomplete. There are qualitative differences in this realising process and these differences cannot be fully comprehended and evaluated by humans. On the other hand, they are in the process of positive or negative response to the ideal historical neighbourhood. revealed in Jesus and sacramentally manifested in the Church, the people of God. In the traditional soteriological language, the historical neighbourhood revealed in Jesus in the unique way of salvation. However, "we cannot set limits to the saving power of god"⁹ that may work in many forms for the actualisation of the true neighbourhood, the unique way of salvation.

iii. Holy Spirit : the real touch of ideal neighbourhood

The real 'touch' or 'experience' of the ideal neighbourhood revealed in Jesus Christ, is through the Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The 'touch' or

⁹ Cf. San Antonio Report, section 26.

'experience' is a subjective and objective process of discernment transformation and attainment of 'pleroma. It is also the "reconciling" and "healing" touch of true neighbourhood, within the Church and among all human communities.

iv. Missiology : called out in neighbourhood and sent out for neighbourhood

Church exists for mission. Mission is integral to Church. If church is first called out (ecclesia) in neighbourhood, it is also sent out (missio) for neighbourhood. Extension of neighbourhood in its inner qualities is thus 'mission'. The "inner qualities" can not limited to qualities of earthly perfection. A striving for transcendental qualities can be called the sign of mission or extension of neighbourhood.

Bringing together the above consideration in relation to religion plurality, we can see how much intrinsic they are to a theology of religious neighbourhood. The foundational tenets of Christianity can, to a large extent, be understood as tenets of true neighbourhood without causing any substantial hindrance for being authentically Christian and genuinely dialogue – oriented.

B. Neighbourhood – Relationality

Neighbourhood – relationality is as important as Christian foundations in a theology of religious – plurality. By 'neighbourhood relationality' is meant capability for nurturing neighbourhood relationships is a context of religious plurality. Healthy inter-religious relationship is not simply the result of theological formulations and conceptual clarifications. It is the prompting of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit that enables to stand above suspicion. Suspicion can be caused by non-theological factors like power gaues and economic interests and it is behind many inter-religious conflicts. Therefore, mutual witnessing or mutual interpenetration is a considerable possibility in neighbourhood-relationality. In this process, it may be reasonable to look at religions as provisional realities marching towards, the eschaton, or moving towards the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation.

Conclusion

In the 'Introduction' I cited two statements. In the conclusion, let me cite two anecdotes from the colonial mission era.

1. "They met (St. Francis of Assisi and Sala'din). They had no common language. Yet near the end of their encounter Sala'din is reported to have said, 'if ever I met a second Christian like you, I would be willing to be baptised. But that will not happen'".
2. "The Friar accompanying an expedition of the conquistadores was offering the vanquished in as the choice of conversion or death. When their king demurred, his hands were cut off and the appeal was then repeated 'Be baptised and you will go to heaven'. 'No', said the king, 'for if I went to heaven I might meet a second Christian like you'".

Being a Christian neighbour equally means being a second Christian with its own corresponding theological challenges. The theological considerations on religious plurality will have to be continued as an unfinished task. Yet, at every moment of being Christian neighbours in the context of religious plurality, we are providing an opportunity for our neighbours to decide for themselves what sort of 'second' Christians we are, either strengthened or weakened by our theological self understanding.

FOOTNOTES

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⁹ Cf. San Antonio Report, section 26.