

Doing Theology in a Pluralistic context. John Joshva Raja

1. Religions – Destructive or constructive?!

Religions are constructive as well as destructive. They are constructive because as institutions they serve communities of their own and others; as rituals they bring people together; as power centres they try to share the responsibilities among their members; as relationship they help people to relate to God and to others in special ways and manners; as culture they provide certain ways of living together and as narratives they provide doctrines, ethical values and other teachings that help people to follow a particular way of faith and life. Nevertheless Religions are also increasingly becoming destructive and dangerous for the human existence. Most of the religious leaders divide people rather than unite. Religious faith at times leads a few to kill themselves. Religious ideologies motivate the followers to eliminate others whom they assume or think as enemies.

Religions are becoming destructive. I include Christianity too into which I am engaged in such destructive activities, may be indirectly. Can we then argue that we all get rid of religions? Am I persuading people to become an atheist or anti-religious? No Not at all. My mind is increasingly becoming critical of the way the religions and faiths are being used by a particular group of people.

I read many religious texts and interacted with different religious leaders and communities. The basic thrust of most of the religions is to bring one closer to God and also to one's own neighbour. The differences often come only in identifying the name and description of God and neighbour. But unfortunately religion is often misused by many today. One religious community sees the other community as an enemy or as an outside threat or even a terrorist. In this paper I would like to explore while critiquing

religions can we find a way to understand God and interpret the religious narratives. This one has to do within the framework of mind where different religious communities may co-exist and will mature to a state where they might learn from each other to improve their own faith. This is where doing theology become important in a context where religions become do dangerous.

a. Religion and Conflicts -

First let us look at the reality around us where the conflicts and confrontations are part of everyday life. There are conflicts in Kashmir, North East, Gujarat and in other parts of India. The primary motives behind these conflicts are communal, caste, racial, social, political, tribal and religious. Even the international conflicts have to be understood from different perspectives. The conflict between Israel and Palestine can both be interpreted as political as well as religious conflicts. The war on Iraq has to be interpreted from economic as well as political perspectives. The conflicts existed even before religion was brought as an effective means to group people together. The conflict between Israel and Palestinians existed as a political flight but now has become a religious conflict. The conflicts are of diverse characteristics. One cannot generalise the conflicts into religious clashes alone. I mean religion alone is the cause for the conflicts. But religion is very much used by a few people to enhance these clashes.

b. Huntington and Clashes -

Clashes across the world are diverse in nature. Huntington argued the clashes are between civilisations and so the final clash will be between Islam and West. Thus most of the clashes in the world are studied under the purview of clashes of cultures or civilisations. In the summer of 1993 *Foreign Affairs* published an article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations¹?” by Samuel Huntington. His article generated discussions among many intellectual communities. In his article he wrote:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. ...the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate the global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future” [Huntington, 1993, p.1].

For him the evolution of conflicts began from the clashes among kings, emperors, nations and then moved to conflict of ideologies (Communism and liberal democracy). After the collapse of the Soviet Union the main conflict is between civilizations. The countries will group themselves in terms of their culture and civilizations rather than on the basis of their political or economic systems or of their ideological similarities.

He identified seven major civilizations² in the world which are: Sinic³, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic and Western, Latin American and African. He argued that the western

¹ He defined civilization as the largest units of identity to which people adhere – each unit consisting of groups of culturally compatible countries. Civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identify people have short of that which distinguishes from other species. [Huntington 1993: p. 2].

² Huntington adds the Russian orthodox as a separate civilization.

civilization ends where western Christianity ends and where Islam and Orthodoxy begin [Huntington, 1996:p.159]. Huntington made an appealing thesis which was widely read and appreciated as a description of what is going on in the world. Among the civilizations he highlighted the clash between two – Islam and West. He argued,

The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the US Department of Defence. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world [Huntington 1996:p.217].

Though he recognises the internal differences in some nations and cultures his division of West and the rest, particularly of West versus Islam has been criticized by many scholars. Neither the Western nor the Islamic communities have a monolithic culture, as he seems to argue. It is difficult to understand why he speaks of West versus the rest, particularly Islam. While he identifies Islam to be single cultural identity, then why did he not point out the clash as between Christianity and Islam. The main clash should have been between Western Christianity and Islam but he selected the word ‘West’ rather than ‘Christianity’. These are some issues which are not addressed in his thesis.

³ Sinic describes the common culture of China and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

c. Chomski on Huntington -

Asghar Ali Engineer noted that the enthusiasm in the West for Huntington's dubious hypothesis shows widespread prejudice against Islam since the period of crusades [Engineer 2001:16]. Chomski [2002:100-1] criticised the thesis by saying, "Huntington wanted (us) not to think about rich powers and corporations exploiting people, that can't be the conflicts, but, as a clash of civilizations – between West and Islam and Confucianism". Pointing out the United States' support for the Saudi Arabian government, Chomski argued that the main reason for this support is that Saudi ensures that the wealth of the region goes to the right people: not people in the slums of Cairo, but people in executive suites in New York. For him there is a clash with those who are adopting the preferential option for the poor no matter who they are [Chomski 2002:101]. Though Chomski's examples of clashes between Catholic churches and US in the Central America support his emphasis on economic elements, he does the same generalisation in relation to Islamic countries⁴. The clash between nations and religious communities is more than at cultural or economic level because the grouping of nations or communities cannot simply be explained using Huntington's or Chomski's theses. In a few contexts or incidents their theses might be true but that does not mean that their theses apply to all conflicts in all contexts.

d. Tariq Ali on Huntington -

Taking a different view Tariq Ali [2001] in his book on 'Clash of Fundamentalisms - Crusades, Jihads and Modernity', argues that the clash is between

⁴ He refers to Saudi Arabian country as the most extreme fundamentalists in extreme. For him Saudi Arabian leaders treat women as awfully as they want and direct the money to US.

American hyper-patriotism which is interwoven with market fundamentalism and radical Islam. For him Huntington's thesis is reductive nonsense. The fundamental political relationship between 'civilizations' is better characterized by terms like 'inter-related' and 'imbricated' than by the zero-sum notion connoted by 'clash' or 'conflict'. When different civilizations interact with each other, they do not necessarily end up in clashes and conflicts [Tariq Ali 2001: 274]. In some interactions between the Western countries and Muslim countries, there is a closer co-operation and co-ordination between the nations rather than conflicts (such as Pakistan and US in the war against terrorism). Even within so called western countries there is no general agreement on the war on terrorism (German's objections). In this sense the Tariq Ali's argument was right in his emphasis on the inter-relatedness of civilizations. It means the relationship between cultures and nations is more complex than what Huntington classifies as the West and the rest.

e. Said on Huntington -

While appreciating the argument as compellingly large, bold, even visionary, Edward Said [1997:1] argues in his article, 'The Clash of Ignorance' that Huntington did not have much time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization or even the interpretation of each culture. For Said, a great deal of demagoguery and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization. He argued that the huge complicated matters like identity and culture are simplified by Huntington like the Popeye and Bluto Characters in a cartoon network programmes "where both bash each other mercilessly with one always virtuous pugilist getting the upper hand over his adversary".

For Said, Huntington reduced ‘civilizations’ to what they are not: shut down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of myriad currents and countercurrents. Civilizations animate human history and helped different communities and nations to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing [Said 1994:2]. Though Huntington recognises the plurality within civilizations, his explanation of the conflicts in terms of ‘the clash of civilizations’ seems to represent a misunderstanding of Islam and other cultures. There is no such homogenized western culture just as there is no single Islamic culture common to all Muslims. Having lived in the ‘West’ and having read about Islam through books, media and conferences, Huntington seem to know more about Islam than those who lived among Muslims.

f. Ignorance and Conflicts -

‘Ignorance’ about other civilizations is the major problem of the world today. Many of us know other people and their cultures mainly through the media. We perceive other people through what we see or hear or read. We are often exposed to the negative news and information about ‘other religions or cultures’ through the media. Sometime we believe in the information about others. Thus those stereotypical images and meanings in the media shape our perceptions and attitude towards other religions and cultures. The clashes begin in one’s mind where the other is often misunderstood and often mistaken as an enemy of one’s culture. This is where one needs to systematically study the problem to discover whether people are ignorant about ‘others’ and whether media contribute to it.

g. Ignorance and the other -

Reviewing Huntington Tariq Ali argued it is the clash between American nationalism and Islamic fundamentalisms. However Chomski has pointed out the problem with the economic exploitation and its links with clashes. A strong argument is being made by Edward Said who wrote an article on 'Clash of Ignorance'. It is the ignorance of the other that causes the clashes between groups and communities. Ignorance does not mean not-knowing the other but knowing in a wrong way that means knowing only the negative aspect of the other. Ignorance is exaggerated not merely by the media but is also misused and articulated well by the power centres (economic, political and religious). This articulated ignorance is widely spread and confirmed with a few selected publicised incidents. Many of the politicians, media practitioners and the public knew the other communities as terrorists and fundamentalists mainly. The misuse of ignorance about the other by the politicians aim at polarising religious communities and thus help the power centres to maintain the status quo even at the cost of many people's lives.

Even if they (those who hold media or power centres) knew about the positive characteristics of the other communities, some of them intentionally or knowingly articulate about the ignorance to save their power or political status or wealth. Some of them even publicise this ignorance about the other for protecting their interests. This is also done in name of national interests, religious revival and defence of the local culture. In this way majority who attacks the minorities often knows them but they attack so because a phobia is created about the other in their mind which is created through an articulated ignorance both by the media in association with the centres of power.

h. Religious Narratives and Ignorance -

Religious narratives have often fallen into those hands who often wanted to place once against the other. The creation, articulation and misuse of ignorance about the other among the religious communities is basically due to the religious narratives while economic, social, political contexts and population expansion contribute to the wider problem. We need to blame the religion for the problem but we should be careful not to isolate religion alone for the conflicts and clashes. Because we are part of religion we need to look at the ways to address the issues of conflict. We need to address this problem through religion by interpreting its narratives. Of course in some context religion is the cause of the problem whereas religion is not directly responsible for the problem. But we try to address and solve the problems through religious narratives. There are many ways of looking at the problem and addressing it. Identifying the problem within each religion.

The way religions look at the other and the image of the other built in the religious narratives including basically accepted texts. Let me use examples from Christianity where the other is looked as a heathen or pagan often which is nowadays challenged and are no more used by many for the others. Children are also taught often by a few Christians other gods as evil gods. It is unfortunate that some are still using such terminology. Within each religious narrative the way the other is developed is related to the ignorance about the other. Those who have lived or interacted with the other have shown a wider knowledge about them. Whereas those who were brought up without any knowledge of the other and also with a negative image of the other can easily be influenced by the articulate ignorance of the media. Even the people who live with the

other and knew about the other are also nowadays influenced because of the lies that are also propagated in the name of religion and national identities. If at all we are looking at removing the ignorance we need to look at the way the religious narratives operate in promoting the ignorance about the other. While trying to address this issue by providing a positive image of the other, we need to reinterpret religious narrative in such a way that it would support our own initiatives and others within our own religious communities. This is where doing theology in the context of pluralism becomes very important for all of us.

2. Christian paradigms -

Let me begin by highlighting the three familiar schools of approach in this area. Pluralist, exclusive and inclusive approaches.

a. Exclusive approaches –

Let me first talk about Exclusivism. “No other salvation is possible except through Jesus Christ” is the kind of statement the exclusivist would point to. The Biblical versus such as “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we much be saved” (Acts 4:12) and also Jesus’ sayings such as “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). Hendrik Kraemer is one of the names that are often mentioned in this paradigm. Kraemer objected to the surface level similarities between religions. Kraemer stated,

I propose to set the religions including Christianity, in the light of the Person of Jesus Christ, who is the Revelation of God and alone has the authority to criticize – I mean, to judge discriminately and with complete understanding – every

religion and everything that is in man or proceeds from him (Kraemer H, *Why Christianity of All Religions?* (1962) P.15 London: Lutterworth Press.

This he calls as Biblical realism which for him should determine a Christian attitude to the non-Christian religions. For him every Christian should proclaim the truth about God and humankind which is revealed only in Christ. But Christians should strive for the presentation of the Christian truth in terms of modes of expression that make its challenge intelligible and related to the peculiar quality of reality in which they (non-Christians)live (Kraemer H, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, London: Edinburgh House Press 1938. p. 303). He argues that under the search light of Christ all religious life, the lofty and degraded, appear to lie under the divine judgement, because it is misdirected (Kraemer *Christian Message* p136). For him undeniably God works and has worked in man outside the sphere of Biblical revelation and so even in this fallen world God shines through in a broken troubled way: in reason, in nature and in history”. Any revelation can only be effectively discerned in the light of the special revelation of Jesus Christ (*Religion and the Christian Faith*, London: Lutterworth Press 1956 232).

i. Critique of Kraemer

Many scholars have highlighted the problems with Kraemer. D’Costa argues that Kraemer does not only neglect the dynamic nature of religion as well as the creative interaction between beliefs and practice which result in the development and changes within religious traditions because of his emphasis on the totalitarian nature of religion (*Theology and Religious Pluralism*, Gavin D’Costa 1986 Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p.61). First of all we need to accept the fact that there are number of versus in the Bible that

clearly point to an exclusive faith in Christ and a need to spread this faith to all in the world. The universal relevance of the Gospel cannot be denied by any Christian. There is a uniqueness of the message and revelation of Christ. It is difficult to see this uniqueness makes the Christian faith as an exclusive one. The gospel is often seen by many Christians as an exclusive one within the framework of Christian faith, doctrines and Biblical narratives.

ii. Critique of Exclusive Approaches -

One needs to recognise the other passages or versus in the Bible where Jesus is seen to have other kind of approaches towards other faiths. The claims of superiority of the revelation of Christ over other religions can not be substantiated as Jesus himself was a Jewish religious person and he never started a separated religion as such. Even though Jesus was a historical personality many things were reported from a faithful early Christian community which underwent a post Easter transformation. The demand by Jesus to proclaim the Gospel to all did not mean to spread Christianity or to proselytise people into another doctrine or ideology or faith rather it means to invite people to the Kingdom of God and to practice its values. The exclusive claims are often made to defend the institutional Christianity or to protect the power structure of the church or to hold on to the deadly denominational doctrines which often divide people rather than unite and often exclude 'other' in the name of denomination or religion or faith.

The claims of uniqueness of the revelation of Christ are also made within the framework of Christian faith. In simple words the uniqueness of Christ is that the logos became flesh and dwelt among us. The gospel narrative contains both the words of Jesus

and also the words about Jesus (Christ-event). The Christ-event was unique and complete revelation, nevertheless it could not be communicated through single absolute gospel. Rather four gospels were kept together in order to explain and interpret the event of the word becoming flesh. The early Christians who kept the four gospels together recognised the difficulty of explaining the Christ event from one perspective or within one Gospel and so left each writer to explain the event in one's own way and thus left them together. Though the experience of the event was unique and true but when the event was interpreted and communicated through narratives the early Christians accepted them as they are rather than absolutising the language of the gospel itself into an exclusive format. Rather they continued to interact with their creativity on the narratives and thus provided new meanings for new issues that were arising in the first or second century context. Many of the early Christians were Jewish and Greeks and thus brought their respective religious experiences into their religious practices. As soon as the gospels were written down and the fear for people like Arian and others the absolute claims were made about the gospels.

iii. Narrative idols?

For me there is no problem with the uniqueness and universal relevance of the Gospel. The Gospel must be proclaimed to all because it is expected of every Christians. At the same time there is no need to claim superiority over any other faiths or doctrines because the Gospel that one preaches is shaped and packaged within one's own doctrines, ideologies and also within one's own conviction. The gospel's main content is the announcement of God's love to the world to all, in particular, through Jesus Christ and a

demand for all to love God and neighbour. The uniqueness of the gospel is that Jesus went to the extent of giving his life for the sake of bringing people to God and to understand their neighbours. In this light God's revelation continued even after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's revelation cannot be contained within the Gospels that are written down because of its dynamic continuous activities in and through the Holy Spirit. Limiting God's revelation within the narrative of the gospels means we are idolising the narrative and thus placing it above God and replacing God with the narrative of God. God's revelation is continuously active and will be active in diverse ways. One cannot limit it to mere narratives of the Bible though they guide us into an experience of the revelation again. Exclusive claims have tried to make the Gospel into static and dead fixed narratives which means to idolise them.

The uniqueness of the Christian Gospel can be expressed only in the emptying of oneself and thus becoming the Gospel itself. The churches often find it easy to proclaim the ideal Gospel without practising it and thus distance the content away from its praxis. Thus the major purpose of the Gospel is to bring people to God and also to their neighbours. If this is the case then the uniqueness of the Gospel is that it is ready to crucify the uniqueness itself for the sake of building communities and for the sake of bringing people to God. If any claims of uniqueness of the Gospel becomes a stumbling block for other religious people then we stop making such claims rather our service, mercy and love towards others should help them to understand the Gospel and thus bring them back to God and to their neighbours. There is a uniqueness that we can embody in ourselves rather than claim it and so we become silent in claiming at a mature state. But Christians are called to proclaim the Gospel to all which means we need to communicate

not only through our words but also through our being (life) the Good news. When language fails us (creating confusion in the claims of uniqueness) our being becomes a means of communication (life in silence). Even when we proclaim the Gospel we do not need to claim absoluteness and superiority of the gospel over the other religious narratives because it does not help us emptying ourselves rather show as colonial representatives.

b. Inclusive approach –

In this approach people believe that all non-Christian religious truth belongs ultimately to Christ. It holds together two convictions: the God's grace is operating in all religions of the world that are searching for salvation and the uniqueness of the manifestation of God's grace in Christ which makes a universal claim as the final way of salvation (Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in Christian Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press, 1983 2nd ed.). The Biblical verses such as Acts 10:35⁵; 14:16f and 17:22-31 are often quoted by those who support this approach. Justin Martyr writes, "It is our belief that those men who strive to do the good which is enjoined on us have a share in God... Christ is the divine Word in whom the whole human race share and those who live according to the light of their knowledge are Christians, even if they are considered as being godless" (I Apology 46, 1-4). This summarises the inclusive approaches which was later identified as 'anonymous Christianity' by Karl Rahner.

Karl Rahner points out the two principles that have to be kept together which are: the necessity of Christian faith and the universal salvific will of God's love (Karl Rahner,

⁵ Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (10:35).

Theological Investigations, Vol 6, p.391, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961-84). He outlines four theses in favour of this approach – first, he writes, Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognise any other religion besides itself as of equal right (Vol 5, p.118, 1966); secondly, he emphasises on the universal salvific will of God revealed in Christ. Thus for him a non-Christian religion can be recognised as a lawful religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it (Vol 5, p.121); thirdly he argues that a non Christian cannot be considered as a person deprived of salvific grace, living totally sinful and depraved condition, untouched in any way by God's grace and truth. Those non-Christians who have accepted God's grace in the depths of their hearts are called by Rahner as 'anonymous Christians' (vol 5 p.132); fourthly for him the church is the tangible sign of the faith, hope and love made visible, present and irreversible in Christ.

i.Critique of Inclusiveness -

There is no question about the God's grace being active in other religions. Emphasising Christ event as the only way for salvation and Christianity as an absolute religion point to fulfilment theories. In these theories the emphasis is on God as being active in all religion nevertheless the respective religious narratives point to Jesus as their fulfilment or will lead to him or finality has to be recognised in Christianity. There is no question that Christ is the centre of any Christian faith. No one can neglect the activities of God's grace to Christian faith. When it comes to the interaction with other religions we may recognise God's presence in a few religions. We need to move beyond our theo-

centric as well as Christo-centric approaches because in our interaction with other religious faiths we need to see God's grace is active within all religions and Christ as part of this grace being active even without any need of being recognised as Christ in other religions.

The Christ, the Logos was there from the beginning and so identifying Christ merely with historical Jesus is limiting the motives of incarnation itself. Christ as being God's fuller form of revelation was active not only before Abraham and also after the Pentecostal movement but also outside Christian faith proclaiming different good news to different people in different context. I am not talking about the hidden Christ but a Christ who is present not willing to identify himself as Christ in other religions rather enlightening and confirming with the interaction with Christianity while revealing himself to Christianity from being in other religions. While accepting the Christ as the centre of our faith, we do not need to impose him to be the centre of other faiths or even in our dialogue with others. Christ cannot be exclusively claimed by Christians alone, I mean, Christ as being active from the beginning of the world not only in Jewish religion but also in other religions, reforming, reviving, challenging and incarnating in them.

ii. Anonymous Christianity?

As we believe in the finality of Christ as being the complete revelation of God, other religious friends expect their avatar or prophet to be the final one from God. As I mentioned above Christ is being active outside Christianity too without being identified as Christ and without wanting to be identified as Christ either. In this way any revival or reform in any religion that brings people closer to God and to their neighbour can be seen

as an act of God's grace and shows the presence of Christ as Logos. It is not an anonymous Christianity or hidden Christ rather demanding us to recognise the other religious friends as they are. It also demands us to engage with other religious communities in their search for meanings of life and of God as Jesus himself engaged in his hearers search.

While we hold on to our Christ centred faith we do not need to convince others to accept Christ as the centre of their faith too (except those who are willing to accept this line). Some one may be willing to hold on to Krishna or Ram as their Saviour and Lord. We need to recognise their experience and their insights through which we may understand Christ more than before and may stand corrected. We are also called to share our experience of Christ with them through which their faith too might be enriched and nourished. We may join in the same search for meanings of life and of God or we may disagree but still we can live together and find a common platform to serve God and serve neighbour.

c. Pluralistic approach –

This arises from the demands for tolerance of other religious communities. Tolerance needs to be seen as a Christian moral imperative and as a Christian theological necessity. Hocking argues the relation between religions must take increasingly the form of a common search for truth (W E Hocking, *Rethinking Missions*, New York: Harper and Row 1932, p.47). In the tolerant pluralism knowledge of God is partial in all faiths,

including the Christian and Christianity is the anticipation of the essence of all religion and so contains potentially all that any religion has (W E Hocking *Living Religions and a World Faith*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1940, p.249). John Hick terms his pluralistic scheme as Copernican Revolution and thus he argues as the sun replaced the earth at the centre of the planetary universe so too God ought to replace Christ and Christianity at the centre of the religious universe (J Hick, *God has Many Names*, London: Macmillan, 1980, p.52). At the level of experience the religions portray a genuine, though different, encounter with the divine, and that the differences between religious beliefs and practices reflect the cultural forms and circumstances which embody the experiences (On Hick comments by Allan Race p.83). For Hick the incarnation should be understood mythologically rather than literally. His intention is not to destroy religious particularity, but to view different types of religious experience a complementary and not mutually exclusive. It is the question of the relative validity or adequacy of the images of God which are alive in the different traditions. The God whom our minds can comprehend is a human image, inadequate and incomplete, of what is ultimately indefinable. Difference in doctrine and theological statements reflect difference in the historical and cultural factors bound up in religious belief. The absoluteness of the experience is the basis for the absoluteness of the language (Hick in A Race, p.89). A genuine dialogue and a mutual mission of sharing experiences and insights, mutual enrichment and cooperation should determine the attitude of Christians towards other religions.

i. Critique of Pluralism -

I accept the fact that God is active in different religions at times. But God is not active in all the religions at all the times. At times religion and the name of God is used to persecute or kill other people which is not God's grace rather evil's religion. Any religion that leads people to kill or persecute other religious or faith communities is an evil religion. God's grace is not present in such people's mind. At the same time one cannot generalise a few people's activities as a representation of the whole religion which is happening all over the world now-a-days. Our God is God for all which means the one who created a Hindu also created me and so his or her God is also my God. God reveals himself in all religions continuously that they may come to him and establish good relationship with their neighbours. Because everyone is God's creature, everyone experiences God in one's own way. If I am born into a Christian family I feel Christ is the truth and the way whereas if I am born into a Hindu family I would have seen Krishna or any other gods as the reality.

Out of each one's experience of God religions, culture and practices are established, tested and interpreted over the years and generations. But the question is that to what extent the religious narratives can lead us back to God and to our neighbours. Whether it is Christianity or Hinduism or Islam whether I feel that I am taken closer to God and to neighbour regardless of caste, colour and class. At times religious narratives do take us towards a destructive culture rather than to creative way of life in which God is also present. My contention is that not all the religion nor their narratives take us to God nor God is present in any religion or in any community that destroys other communities or kills other people.

ii. Narrative and Experience -

The second point that I would like to argue against the pluralism is the experience of God is real whereas the narrative that describes such an experience is real to the extent of explaining such an experience. In so far as those who have not experienced the same experience it is only a narrative unless demonstrated in a lab or experienced in a similar manner. I will not term the narrative as myth but narrative does not explain the whole experience rather attempt to describe it within the available language and symbols. Thus the narrative with its limitation cannot claim to be absolute or universal because similar experiences can cause different stories and experiences of the same incident can also create variety of narratives and thus available for diverse interpretations. In this sense the different denominations interpret the narratives in different ways and so no one needs to claim their church or denomination is the true church or denomination. This is also true to different religious claims. These narratives are written in order to preserve the stories of God's revelation and intervention and also to tell the new generations and thus to bring them back to God and also establish better relationship with neighbours. In its immature levels the narratives were used to eliminate other communities but in its mature states the narratives are used to create new relationship between all the living beings.

Narratives of God often unite and at times divide people. Each individual determines the way he or she uses the narratives for his or her own growth or destruction. Each community uses these narratives the way they wanted at times exclusively and in a destructive manner and at times in a creative and also constructive manner. Communities and individuals receive the narratives which contain both constructive and destructive narratives. According to their interests they highlight those elements that they wanted and

thus determine the way they wanted to use religious narratives. At the same time individuals and communities are also engaged in search for meanings of God and of life that would continue to help them to interact with God and also with their neighbours within and outside their communities. On the one hand religious narratives enable people to experience God's revelation continuously. Continuous God's revelation to every being leads to additional narratives or also reinterpretation of existing narratives.

At times people do not understand the existing narratives or search for meanings in the new arising contexts and issues. When they engage in search for meanings those religious narratives that have already addressed such issues can share their stories in order to nourish each other. For this one religious narrative does not become basic criterion to evaluate other religious narratives. Rather everyone is engaged in search for new meanings of the mystery of God's grace and revelation and also of life. In this process of search for meanings one religious friend may help the other without compromising one's own conviction and beliefs. While engaging along with others we may learn together from each other and find out that our faith is enriched by the other and vice versa.

3. Need for An Existential Pluralism -

My conviction that Christ is the way does not need to be changed while engaging in search for meanings along with other religious friends. In this way dialogue can be very helpful and even the grassroot level Christians can be convinced of such dialogical efforts. At times pluralism itself becomes an exclusivist view point because it argues unless you agree that God is active in all religions and also give up the claims of uniqueness of Christ, one cannot have a dialogue. Even though I criticise the claims of uniqueness in the previous sections, it is the reality of Christian faith at the church members level which one has to take into account. This is where I am introducing two concepts – ‘existential pluralism’ and ‘plurality of mission’ which arise out of the demand of the context.

In Indian context different communities fight in the name of religion and of God. Once the society was secular and was accommodative of other religions whereas now-a-days different religious communities in India have become conscious of their identities and try to return to their fundamentals of religions. Some feel threatened by other religious communities and thus try to form alliances among themselves in order to protect their faith and religion. Let me be explicit in this example, in India a few Hindus and a few Muslims are engaged in violent activities against each other in the name of religion. This was seen in the Godhra incident which was not an isolated one. This has led to a misunderstanding and suspicion between different religious communities in Gujarat, particularly between Muslims and Hindus. Such a misunderstanding is spreading all over India between these two communities. In many parts they could not live together as

village communities anymore and so the majority ask the minority to leave the village or the place where they stay in otherwise adopt the majority's culture.

a. From Confrontation to Reconciliation -

The confrontation between Hindus and Muslims in many parts of India is a reality in which other religious communities are also affected. Even Christians are seen as remanence of colonial rulers and so are seen as outsiders. Christians are also blamed for conversions in general and thus their institutions and mission workers are often attacked and even killed at times. In such context Christians cannot remain silent and should engage in bringing a better understanding between different religious communities. Christians should not only try to clear the misunderstanding about them but also should engage in reconciling the Hindus and Muslim communities wherever the conflicts and tension are there. They have to find a way to engage not simply to bring them to Christianity but to show the concern for human lives and for establishing a culture of peace.

Establishing a dialogical understanding between Hindus and Muslims means Christians should try to mediate between the warring communities as co-existing human beings and also as Christian witness that would reveal God's love and care for all. There is already a movement within Hinduism as well as within Islam that engaged in the search for meanings of reconciliation and peace with other religions. Christians should engage with them in such searches for meanings. This is where it is essential for us to establish multidimensional dialogic interaction between different religious communities.

This interaction will enable people to understand other religious communities and thus find within their religion a way to exist with others.

b. Removing Ignorance of the other -

In such interaction no one needs to compromise one's own faith for the sake of dialogue. This is why I identify this as existential pluralism that means the existential demand for a dialogue towards removing ignorance and misunderstanding of one by the other has to be taken seriously. Otherwise many people's lives are lost in the name of religion and the misunderstanding could lead to major confrontations and conflicts between different religious communities. Such a dialogue demands us to take part without losing our convictions and our faith experiences. Christians can believe that Christ is the way, the truth and the life as it is part of their lived experience. They can also proclaim the gospel to all inviting them to enter into the Kingdom. But at the same time they do not need to offend others by saying their experience, traditions and narratives as wrong or inferior to Christian claims as Christians have not experienced such traditions and experiences.

Hindus can hold on to their experiences as true experiences without contrasting or without imposing their ways of life on others. This seems somewhat 'contradictions within' or 'chaotic proposal' but let me try to make this clear – We do not need to accept other religious faiths and narratives in their fuller form nor need to adopt their traditions and experience to hold dialogue with them. But we do not need to misunderstand them or misquote them as pagans or heathens. We do not need to misunderstand other religions such as Islam as terrorist religions. Because we have not understood them. We cannot

understand other religion as an outsider at all. What we can do is we can try to remove our ignorance about them. If our ignorance about other religions costs people's lives then why not we try to remove such ignorance and thus give a chance to live in this world. It is not only our ignorance to be removed but also others' too need to be corrected.

For this we need to engage in interaction with other religions and also encourage other religions to interact among themselves. This is what I call as existential pluralism where we try to live together as community of communities where religion will not divide us rather help us to relate ourselves with the other. There is an existential demand for us to live along side the other with a better understanding and thus demands us to accept the others as they are while encouraging them to accept us as we are. While engaging in the interaction the not only the misunderstanding or ignorance about the other would be reduced the participants will realise that others too are engaged in a similar religious search for meanings of life and of God if the other is genuinely engaged. If the participants in the interaction decide to travel together further in the search for meanings then they may correct, nourish and enrich each other's faith and thus enable each one to come closer to God and also closer to better relationship with the neighbour.

c. Plurality of Mission -

In this context I would like to introduce the second thought about 'Plurality of Mission'. For me Evangelism, dialogue and social service are not three different contradicting concepts or words. Christians are called to do mission which clearly means communicating the gospel to all people, making people disciples and baptising them in

the name of the triune God⁶. We are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all regardless of caste, race and religion without expecting any conversion and without making any claims of superiority. When people try to enter the Kingdom of God which is accepting and following the principles of Christ we will welcome them. At the same time we can only invite others and not try to convert from one religion to the religion. The conversion from illiterate mass should be discouraged. Using missionaries to increase the numbers in the churches are against the God's mission. This is the first essential aspect of mission. At the same time our mission is also guided by Jesus' other sayings and deeds. Jesus' mission was to show his care for the fullness of the people which also includes liberating them from evil spirits and physical sickness.

The judgement is based on whether we cared for the others or not. Thus mission should also include service to others without relating it to communicating the gospel. It is entirely different mission but through our service we witness the gospel rather than use it as allurements or persuasion towards a religious conversion. It is a way to communicate God's care but we need to be careful not to become like colonisers who went with the bread and the gospel. We need to see engaging with other religious folks in their search for religious meanings and also for God as part of mission. When we try to co-exist with other religious communities, we need to correct many of our old models of mission and attitude toward them. We need to accept others as they are when they accept us as we are. Many of our misunderstandings and ignorance about the other should be eliminated through interaction and dialogue. Thus dialogue should be seen as part of the mission

⁶ Matthew 28:18-20: And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

through which we try to find a way to live with others and also help different religious communities to live together. Our mission is also to engage with others in their search for meanings of life and of God, learning together and nourishing ours and also theirs.

There is a triangular method of his mission which are communicating the message of the kingdom; caring for the people at the margins such as sinners and tax collectors; and holding a dialogue and interaction with his opponents. In this sense Jesus used different methods of mission in different contexts and so we need a new approach known as 'Plurality of Mission'. This means various dimensions of mission need to be held together and thus bring the churches closer together. It demands mission agencies to accept each other's mission. Such an acceptance of the other is possible in the context of Net and its users. While accepting the churches' methods of evangelisation as part of mission, there is a need to enable the churches also to recognise the issues of justice, development and dialogue as other dimensions of mission. The churches need to work together with other traditions in mission. One may have to accept the other way of doing mission as part of Our Lord's mission and thereby come together in order to share the diverse experience and correct each other's weaknesses and mistakes, thus perfecting in mission.

d. Seven dimensions of Mission -

In this sense mission can be understood in multiple ways. First the mission today needs to be prophetic in terms of being present in the public space, recognising the signs, of the time and being critical of the social and political structures wherever it needs to be. Secondly the mission should be liberative in its praxis liberating people from exploitation and the forces of hegemony. In this sense the churches and the Christian institutions should show solidarity with communities at the margins who are affected by the dominant groups. Thirdly mission needs to nourish and strengthen the culture of the people. Christian mission and the process of modernisation have gone together in many parts of the developing world where local aspects of culture were identified as evil, and the converts were asked to give up their cultural practices without question and testing. Fourthly the main task of mission today is to rebuild communities that are broken by communal violence and religious hatred. It needs a reconciliatory approach towards communities which means to listen and encourage people to come together regardless of religious, ethnic and racial differences.

This demands dialogue and interaction between communities. Fifthly mission also includes communicating the gospel to all people. This means we are called to witness and share what God has done in our lives in Jesus Christ. We can engage with others in search for meanings of Christ and of God without making any exclusive claims. Sixthly our mission needs to be development-oriented in which we show our care for the other, particularly the sick and the sidelined. Finally our mission should be participatory. We need to open ourselves that others can discover Christ in us while we need to engage with

other in their search for meanings of God and of life where we will discover God in their activities. It is essential that we engage in each other's search for meanings in order to nourish each other's faith and knowledge.

4. Conclusion

In this article I have brought three stages of argument to highlight the need for interaction between different religious communities. I also showed the necessity for Christians to initiate such an interaction. First there are conflicts between different communities which are increasingly becoming religious. One of the main causes for such conflicts is due to the ignorance on the part of religious communities about the other. In order to remove this ignorance one has to address the way the religious narratives are being used to develop the image of the other and also the way ignorance is articulated through misinterpreted religious narratives to support the power centres. In order to address this religious communities need more interaction and thus establish understanding. In order to motivate Christian communities to engage in such activities of interaction and reconciliation theological scholars have tried inclusive and pluralistic approaches. But unfortunately the words such as dialogue and pluralism are used they create more misunderstanding among the Christian community members.

In this paper I have argued that there is no need for the Christian community to give up their claims of universal relevance of the gospel and thus the proclamation for the sake of the interaction with other religious communities. At the same time they need to see service to other humanity and establishing interaction between different religious communities as part of their missionary duties. In this sense there is a demand for Christians to engage in the process of interaction and reconciliation between other

religious communities even if it does not others to Christian faith. It is not only through evangelism the mission of Christ is carried out rather through interaction and service to others the holistic mission of God can be carried out and thus fulfil the commission of Christ. This is what I struggled to explain as an existential pluralism where for the sake of living together we accept different aspect of missions and keep them in tension. One aspect of mission will help us to correct and nourish the other aspect and thus enable us to mature in our practice of mission.

Such views are relevant to theological as well as religious education because this approach provides space for different views of mission and religious diversities to exist together. One of the major problems with the theological schools in India and abroad is that they are divided on the basis of their approaches to evangelism and critical thinking. They are identified accordingly as evangelical (ATA) and liberal schools of theology (A few colleges under Senate of Serampore System). When we talk about evangelism in liberal schools some of them laugh at it as if it is some what primitive practices whereas at grassroots level many church members are interested only in evangelism and conversion of other religious people. Though the dialogue is a much discussed subject at intellectual level it has not penetrated into grassroots of the churches in India and elsewhere. It is time for those who propose inter-religious interaction between different communities need to take into account the fundamental faith that people want to hold on to in each faith. At the same time encouraging them to engage in a ongoing search for meanings together in order to coexist and nourish each other's faith. There must be openness at the academic level for maintaining this tension between different aspects of

mission on the one hand and also going forward with a pragmatic approach of existential pluralism.

For Religious Education this relevant because it provides a space not only to promote different religious teaching but also a way to respect other religions without affecting our own religious faith. Often religious education in Christian schools end up promoting Christian faith and also Christian morals. In some schools religious education is basically providing teachings of different religions. More than this it is essential to promote interaction among the students themselves and thus evolving a better understanding of the other religions. In some ways religious education need to promote dialogue between different religious children and thus enable them to remove the ignorance about the other. This might create a new culture of dialogue and thus create a new world where these children will not burn each other for belonging to other religions.

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