

Religion and Interculturality

East and West.
Philosophy, ethics, politics
and human rights

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Advisory Committee:
Anwar Alam, Ram Adhar Mall, Sebastian Scheerer

Religion and Interculturality

by
Ram Adhar Mall

A Dialogue with
Hans-Christian Günther
and
Ali Ashgar Mosleh

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Preface by

Hans-Christian Günther

The present volume consists mainly of two substantial papers of Ram Adhar Mall. To the last one (,Wie kommt Philosophie zu Gott, wenn sie es denn tut?') I append a brief answer of mine. To the first one I deem it unnecessary because I could not agree more with everything, which is said there, and that this is so should be clear from what I wrote about religion in the past (in particular: *Papers on Religion*, vol. 9 of this very series). I just invite the reader to reflect on the paradoxical fact that in history the approach to religion and religious differences demanded by Ram Mall has almost never prevailed, although – at least in my view – it is clearly the approach which religion itself demands from its true followers; in particular the abrahamic religions demand it from their believers: it should be a truism that for the believer in a religion based on a divine revelation it would be blasphemous for anybody to claim to be – as a human being – in the sole possession of the divine truth, a truth which eo ipso goes beyond the faculties of the human mind.

I have added to these two papers of Ram Mall a shorter paper of mine on intercultural philosophy (originally an interview) and a very actual paper of Ali Ashgar Mosleh on the interfaith dialogue with a brief answer of mine.

April 2021

Hans-Christian Günther

Ram Adhar Mall

Protoreligiosity of Non-Violence (Ahimsaa: Gandhi) in Theory and Practice for Peaceful Religious Encounters

(Partly revised lecture held at the Pontifical Urbaniana University: International Congress: Listening to Asia. Pathways for Faith, Rom, 15th- 17th April, 2013)

1. A few introductory remarks

„Ahimsa is not the goal. Truth ist the goal. But we have no means of realising truth in human relationships except through the practice of ahimsa...Ahimsa is our supreme duty.“

Mahatma Gandhi

The central question I ask here and try to answer is: What is it in the innermost self-understanding of religions, which hinders or promotes interreligious, interfaith and even intrafaith dialogues, communication and understanding? The central thesis proposed, discussed and defended here is the following: *Religio perennis* (the Vedic motto , *Ekam Sad'*, ,*Sanatan Dharma,*' *una religio*' of *Cusanus*) is not the sole possession of any one particular religion, be it Eastern or Western. Different religious patterns are irredicible faith patterns and they have every right to believe in their ultimacy and uniqueness without mistaking this uniqueness for exclusiveness and absoluteness. There is a ,proto-religious' ethos, which is the prerequisite for the very possibility of interreligious and interfaith

dialogues. And its motto is: Believe and let believe, refraining from the temptation to absolutize your own faith as the only one for the whole of humanity. Religious truth worth the name does not suffer because of its multiple presence in a variety of religions. In a very important sense, it bears the character of a cipher available to a host of religious intentionality getting fulfilled in the manifold Gestalt of various religions.

There are three categories claiming primacy in some form or other when it comes to encounters among religions: These are: identity, difference and overlapping. Religions and theologies are neither totally identical nor radically different. For, were it so, religious dialogues would become either redundant or impossible. Thus, there are overlapping religious contents which enable us to enter into religious dialogues in full recognition and respect of the fundamental similarities and illuminating differences among religions.

Recontextualizing and reconceptualising the heliocentric theory of Copernicus, we are led to the following picture of the relation between different religions (planets) and *religio perennis* (the sun) in the form of the Holy, the Numinous, the Sacred or God. All the different theologies and religions are like different planets going round the one sun of *religio perennis*. No one particular theology or religion can claim this central position all alone relegating all others to peripheral positions. The protoreligious conviction, which is at work here, must not be mistaken to be a religion itself. It is rather an overarching view accompanying and enabling us to enter into peaceful interreligious dialogues. Such a protoreligious conviction of interreligiosity does not give a privileged treatment to any one particular religion or faith. Added to this, it is an antidote to all sorts of fundamentalism which are found, more or less, in a variety of existing religions even today.

The most fundamental motive of all religions is in some form or other a

therapeutic one aiming at overcoming human suffering, limitations, fragilities, 'dukha'. All religious experiences fulfil this ever-present religious intention. Soteriology as an interreligious category, as we shall see soon, binds us inspite of the plurality of religious paths leading to it.

In all religions, faith and experience are intimately connected with each other and usually go hand in hand, strengthening and promoting each other. The question still remains regarding the primacy of the one over the other. Religious models with a claim to revealed truth seem to plead for the primacy of faith over experience in opposition to religious models, e.g. Buddhism, which let experience precede faith. The Buddha, in many of his sermons brings his teachings up for discussion and even places them at the disposal of others.

2. Religious Plurality: The question is not how to get rid of it but how to deal with it

From time immemorial, there has been, in some form or other, religious plurality. Religious plurality is normally taken to refer to the plurality of different religious traditions like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. But there is an intrareligious face of religious plurality in the sense of a plurality of interpretations of the same religious tradition. A few examples may verify this point: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism, Sunni and Shias in Islam. Thos who want to get rid of religious plurality seem to believe that there is ultimately only one religion as the true religion for the whole of humanity. On the other hand, there are those who plead for the plurality of religions under the interreligiously binding attitude to believe

and let believe.¹

There may be different possible answers to the question: How come that there is religious plurality at all? Is it simply man-made or is it something, which just happens? The second answer fares better in our context of how to deal with religious plurality. There are two attitudes, which are normally taken with regard to its desirability or undesirability. There are those who say that religious plurality is, no doubt, there but it should not be and try to get rid of it. On the other hand, there are those who recognize that there is religious plurality and maintain that it should be. But the question is really not whether religious plurality should or should not be there. Any answer to this question is already overloaded with ontological, speculative and theological presuppositions. The real issue is with regard to the reasons behind its being there. And these reasons seem to lie in human nature itself, which is not fully homogenous. In other words, there is no monistic anthropology. It is a mistake to take pluralism for relativism. On the other hand, a certain degree of relativism, as we shall see, goes hand in hand with pluralism. Total commitment to one's own religion does recognize and respect similar commitments on the part of others.

Even if we admit the desirability of one religion for all of us, the question still remains how to realise this goal. And any claim to an exclusive absoluteness as a method to reach this goal is violent just to start with. Here the regulative idea of unity is mistaken to be uniformity. Added to this, the crux of the problem is that more than one religion enters the field with such a claim. There is thus a plurality of such claims. What we then get is a multiplicity of 'absolutes'. Thus, instead of our violent attempts to get rid of religious plurality, it is better and more peaceful to get rid of our homemade absolutist claims to truth in singular. This is the best way to peacefully meet the challenge of religious plurality.

¹ Cf. Mall, R.A.: *Der Hinduismus. Seine Stellung in der Vielfalt der Religionen.* Darmstadt 1997.

It was William James who spoke of a ‘distributive pluralism’ and wrote: “The only thing I emphatically insist upon is that it is a hypothesis fully coordinate with monism...Reality *may* exist distributively, just as it sensibly seems to, after all. On that possibility I do insist.”² In spite of the fundamental similarity in our common search for religious ultimates in all religions, the possibility of the plurality of these ultimates is a real one. Not only the names of these ultimates are different. They are different even as ultimates.

The conviction, the attitude of protoreligiosity and interreligiosity, as we shall soon see, pleads for religious pluralism in contrast to religious exclusivism. Acceptance of religious plurality as an empirically and phenomenologically given anthropological constant leads to tolerance and furthers the cause of a peaceful encounter among religions, thus minimising the threat of a ‘clash of religions’.

3. Uniqueness with or without absoluteness

The debate with regard to the possibility or impossibility of interreligious, inter-faith and intrafaith dialogue is in full swing today. The numbers of meetings, congresses and other forms of get-together are far too numerous to be listed here. There is but a certain uneasy feeling that the majority of these meetings seem to take place at a ‘hardware’ (surface) level, missing the dialogue at the ‘software’ (deeper) level. I often ask myself whether it is possible for hard-core absolutists to enter into a sincere, authentic dialogue. Those who tend to believe in the impossibility of inter-faith or even intrafaith dialogue seem to posit a radical difference among religions. In order to understand the real message of a particular religion, so they maintain, one has to believe in the sole truth of that

² James, W.: *APluralistic Universe*. London 1916, p. 328.

religion. This really leads to some sort of a hermeneutics of identity, which has as its motto: Only a believing Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Hindu can understand the respective religion. Such a move is a deadlock for interreligious dialogues and is doomed to failure. Such a position really entails some sort of a windowless monadic understanding of religions. It is high time to bid farewell to religious monologues. In order to enter into a fruitful interreligious dialogue, the most suitable step is, as mentioned above, to refrain from overrating the similarities and differences among religions and concentrate on the overlapping contents, which enable us to understand the other religion in full recognition of the fundamental similarities and illuminating differences among them.

It goes to the credit of modern Europe, its sciences and technology that we have an unprecedented global cultural and religious encounter. The universalistic bent of the European mind seems to be partly disillusioned because Europe is forced to realise now that the days are gone when Europe alone was destined to make and influence history. This goes to define the present global context, which in its turn contextualizes globally important themes like culture, philosophy, religion, ethics, art, literature and politics. The demand for universal validity and acceptance turns out to be paradoxical, and the need for a binding pluralism seems to be the only via media for interreligious dialogues. There is an intercultural and interreligious challenge facing all cultures and religions today with a word of caution not to be too provincial and chauvinistic.

For quite some time, the problem of religious uniqueness has become a very controversial topic within the intrareligious, intrafaith scene of Christianity. There are two contrary positions. John Hick, the famous theologian and philosopher of religion pleads for a pluralistic theology with its central motto: "God Has Many Names". The protagonists of the pluralistic theology of religions speak of „The myth of Christian Uniqueness" (New York 1987) with

its claim that Christianity is ultimately the only true religion with an absolute universal claim.³ Just three years later, Gavin D'Costa, a student of Hick edited a book entitled: "Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a pluralistic Theology of Religions" (New York 1990). Interfaith and intrafaith encounters seem to join hands here. There is a common structure running through both forms of encounters. We normally tend to underrate the importance of intrafaith dialogues. What we badly need today is an honest questioning of taking uniqueness to be absoluteness beyond the different forms of 'religious correctness'.

Without going into any detail of the controversy here as to whether the claim to Christian uniqueness or the claim to a pluralistic theology of religions is a myth, the interreligious orientation I am pleading for here favours the position taken by Hick as a whole. But the question for me still remains: What does uniqueness really stand for? In a sense, all religions are unique as alternate religions with their inner irreducible character of ultimacy. On the other hand, uniqueness may claim to be in sole possession of the one absolute religious truth. It is this second sense, which goes against the Gandhian idea of the supreme religion of non-violence (ahimsaa parmo dharmah) and jeopardizes peaceful encounters among religions. For Gandhi, the most primordial religiosity, the protoreligiosity is the religiosity of non-violence. „Listening to Asia“, the main title of this congress, may also stand for listening to Gandhi in this respect. Compassion and non-violence seem to be two sides of one and the same religious coin. Christianity and Buddhism go hand in hand in spite of their theistic and atheistic anchorage. In other words, all religious experiences are also spiritual but all spiritual experiences are not necessarily religious in a strictly

³ Cf. John Hick, Paul Knitter (eds.): The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, New York 1987.

theistic sense. "Listening to Asia" may thus also mean that it is too narrow a definition of religious experience to essentially relate it to God. In search of the essence of religion common to all religions, we can hardly take it to be a belief in God, for that would exclude such widespread religions like Buddhism.

4. Cultural and Religious Encounters yesterday and today

When we follow, for example, cultural and religious encounters on the Indian sub-continent in the past we find different patterns of encounter. When the Aryans from central Asia came to India, they met the old culture of the Dravidian people. Although they suppressed the original Indian culture, they did not extinguish it. The origin of the caste system can also be traced back to this encounter. Hindu culture, thus, is a mixture of Aryan and non-Aryan elements. In spite of many difficulties, India has always been experimenting with internal and external multiculturalism and multireligiosity guided by the pan-Indian Rigvedic dictum of 'one truth under different names' (*Ekam sad vipra vahudha vadanti*).

After the victory of Alexander the Great there was a short but intensive encounter between Indian and Greek culture. The well-known dialogue (in Pali called *Milinda Panha* or *Questions of King Milinda*) between Nagasena, the Buddhist monk-philosopher and Menandros, the Greek ruler in the northern part of India, exemplifies this. We have many reports of this time. The debate of King Milinda is famous in world literature. Here we find a very paradigmatic philosophical, intercultural, political and religious pattern of discourse between the king who was very much interested in philosophy and religion and the Buddhist monk-philosopher Nagasena. I would like to quote the relevant portion in short:

Then the king said, " Venerable sir, will you discuss with me again."

"If your majesty will discuss as a scholar, yes; but if you will discuss as a king, no."

"How is it then that scholars discuss.?"

"When scholars discuss there is summing up, unravelling; one or other is shown to be in error and he admits his mistake and yet is not thereby angered."

"And how is it that kings discuss."

"When a king discusses a matter and he advances a point of view, if anyone differs from him on that point he is apt to punish him."

"Very well then, it is as a scholar that I will discuss. Let your reverence talk without fear."⁴

Nagasena here lays down the very conditions for the possibility of an honest discourse, which of course does not demand only intellectual honesty but also the cultivation of ethical and moral qualities which turn intercultural and interreligious debates and dialogues from a way of thought to a way of life. His message is to recognize and respect other possibilities as genuine alternative ways of human beings.

Mahmud of Ghazni, a line of Turkish chieftains started attacking India from 997. He made seventeen raids on India. This war was the beginning of establishing Muslim foreign rule in India, which lasted till it was replaced by British rule. In spite of the religious troubles facing India even today, Hindus and Muslims have often lived together in an interculturally and interreligiously oriented multicultural and multireligious society. Akbar, the great Mughal emperor is famous for his tolerance. Sufism is one of the best examples besides cases of reciprocal influences in art, music and architecture.

⁴ Pesala, B.: The Debate of King Milinda, Delhi 1991, P. 4f.

European colonization of non-European countries was more radical and aimed at the europeanization of the whole world. It is true that India has westernized herself to a great extent but it is not true that India has europeanized herself. Europeanization stands for the software of Western culture and religion, whereas westernization for the hardware of it.

There have been, on the other hand, cultural and religious encounters in human history which were quite pernicious in character, for example, the encounter of Arab-Islamic culture with that of ancient Iran or the encounter between European culture and the cultures of American continents. Here too, the question is: What is it which stands in the way of a peaceful encounter among cultures and religions?

Historical events are polyperspectival. One and the same event can be characterized as fortunate or unfortunate depending on the optics of the victor or vanquished. The discovery of America was a stroke of good luck for the Europeans but very bad for the indigenous population of America.

It is undoubtedly true that nearly all cultural encounters show signs of tension and violence. But the question, which can be legitimately put is this: Why do certain encounters end in a partial or total destruction of one or more cultures? The reason might be found in the very nature of the cultures encountering each other. One of the main reasons for the destructive character of cultural and religious (even political) encounters must lie in the exclusively absolutist truth-claims made by certain cultures and religions. When cultures and religions meet in the spirit of tolerance, interculturality and interreligiosity, they further the cause of cooperation and communication between cultures and religions. In spite of the tensions between Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism in China,, all these three Weltanschauungen succeeded in living together. The spirit of the Chinese saying must have been of great help: three teachings, one