Learning from India
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Where the assumptions of dialogue in the West assume groups of individuals meeting up and talking to each other, the assumptions of dialogue in India always involves people in community. Within orthodox, traditional Hinduism, in particular, the public and private realms are in acute tension. The relationship between dharma and svadharma is a major theme of the Gita. Although there is a private realm, there are endless required connections with the public realm. No where in Hinduism do we find a “state of nature” myth where individuals opt into society. There is an important givenness to our place in the cosmos: we are born into a family, which in turn is located in a community, which in turn is located in a caste and class structure. The entire order of the universe depends on the recognition of this givenness. In short, the concept of an individual is largely a Western construct.

Given this key difference, the models of dialogue emerging in India are very different from the dialogue industry in the west. Although it is true that due to the influence of America throughout the world there are versions of the western dialogical mode in India, indigenous versions of Indian dialogue are very different.

In this lecture, I shall illustrate this with four case studies. The first is Ashutosh Varshney’s important study on intercommunal violence. Varshney is important because he explores the role that interreligious organizations play in maintaining peaceful relations between religions. The second is Bede Griffiths – an English Roman Catholic (trained at Oxford) who settled in India. The third is Raimundo Panikka, who although born in Barcelona was clearly shaped by his Asian past and then brought much of that wisdom to conversations in the West. The fourth is Kalarikkal Aleaz, who currently works at Bishop’s College, Calcutta - an Indian Orthodox theologian who has spent much of his life in conversation with western scholars on the theology of other religions. Our task in examining these bridge scholars is to reflect on whether the ‘dialogical’ method is different from that we find dominating the west.

Ashutosh Varshney

We start then with Varshney. One of the most significant books published on violence and religion is his masterful study called Ethnic Conflict & Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India. Before we examine the argument, it is worth standing back and reminding ourselves of the problem. H. S. Wilson describes very elegantly and clearly the tragic events that engulfed Gujarat in violence in 2002:

‘A small spark can trigger a forest fire if other conditions are conducive. That is what happened in Gujarat. Apparently a fabricated squabble between a Hindu and a Muslim over a petty transaction on the railway platform led to an alleged premeditated attack on a Sabarmati Express train carrying pilgrims and the Kar Sevaks from Ayodhya back home to Gujarat on February 27, 2002, at Godhara. The result was the death of fifty-eight Hindu pilgrims/Kar Sevaks, burned and charred from a fire caused by pouring gasoline on the train and setting it on fire. The retaliation was equally gruesome, with more than nine hundred Muslims dead (unofficial estimate is two thousand) as a result of Hindu attacks which continued as long as two months after the incident. The methods followed to accomplish this were horrifyingly medieval, if not ancient. Houses were set on fire; children, women, and men were butchered with sharp instruments, iron rods, chains, knives, and swords. Women, young and old, were raped and killed or burned. It was reported that state law enforcement personnel, police and security forces, either connived, collaborated, or showed indifference to such atrocities carried out on their own people only because they
belonged to an unacceptable alien/foreign religion! It was also observed that the ongoing conflict in Kashmir and the December 31, 2001, attack on the Indian Parliament building also gave Hindu militants both momentum and respectability in spite of the lawless nature of their acts.2

The first discovery we make as we move to the Indian context is that this is a place where religious identity matters. Dialogue between the religions is not so much a luxury that can keep the middle classes occupied at their interfaith club, but a political and social necessity.

Now we turn to Varshney. The issue in this study is simple: why is it that certain towns in India erupt into communal violence and others do not? To answer this question, Vashney combined together a careful analysis of the Times of India covering the period 1950-1995 with interviews within carefully selected cities. These interviews operated on two levels – the elite (i.e. the leadership of the city) and a cross-section of the city taken from every strata.

The cities chosen all had similar percentages of Hindu-Muslim populations. The first pair was Aligarh and Calicut; the second pair was Hyderabad and Lucknow; and the third pair – Ahmedabad and Surat – was the most interesting. This latter pair comes from Gandhi’s state – Gujarat.

The book weaves together a riveting description of the history and culture of these cities with a fascinating analysis. The argument that emerges is that there is a direct link between the structure of civil society and ethnic violence. By ‘civil society’, Vashney means the social gap between the family and the State: so all forms of social activity are part of civil society, including political parties insofar as they operate as a vehicle for association in a city or a town. Now in a small village, everyday and informal ‘civic communication’ might be sufficient to keep the peace when tension occurs, however, Vashney shows, in a city this is not enough. For peace in the city, there is a need for what he calls ‘associational civic engagement’. In other words, there is a need for structures and organizations, in which Hindus and Muslims are members, to become a bulwark against potential communal violence. So, for example, in the 1920s and 1930s, in both Ahmedabad and Surat the following organizations were strong: the Congress Party, the Gandhian voluntary associations, and the Business associations. (In Ahmedabad, the labor unions were also strong.) The net result in both cities was peace. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Congress party was in decline; the Hindu BJP was on the increase. Correspondingly, the Gandhian voluntary associations were in decline and the Hindu nationalist organizations were on the rise. The net result was two cities that became unstable. As a result Ahmedabad had violence throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Meanwhile December 1992 in Surat saw 197 people killed. It was only the strength of the Business associations in Surat that saved Old Surat; all the killing took place in the shantytowns.

Varshney summarizes his argument thus:

‘[W]hy is it so often the case that ethnic relations in some cities or regions explode into violence and riots, whereas the same communities in other cities or regions of the same country stay peacefully together, or at any rate, manage their tensions without allowing them to degenerate into rioting and killing? . . . Ethnic violence tends to be locally or regionally concentrated. Short of nationwide civil wars, it tends not to be evenly spread across a country. Violence tends to exist in pockets. Civic linkages across communities provides a solution of the puzzle. . . . Being highly local in its intensity and texture, it begins to explain how connections between groups provide a city, town, or region with, as it were, an immune system that can take exogenous shocks (or “viruses”) from outside, as systemwide changes with respect to local settings by definition are. Conversely, the absence of such links makes a city or town highly vulnerable to such shocks. Local-level factors cannot be read off the systemwide institutions. They have a life of their own.’3
It is, in many respects a vindication of the work of the political theorist Edmund Burke, who stressed the importance of the ‘little platoons’ (the organizations between the State and the individuals). Human life everywhere needs the community that these organizations provide. However, in addition, Varshney argues, these little platoons, provided they are properly constructed, can save many lives.

The point is this: interfaith activity that serves wider purposes (dialogue as an end in itself is rarely sufficient) can be an important bulwark against the pressures and stresses of living together. Our first and key lesson we learn from India, then, is the imperative for dialogue to be about something that transcends the simple pleasure of talking together. In addition, it needs to be organized. The dialogical activity needs an institutional purpose and framework. The dialogue needs to generate deepening friendships and commitments that endure through the tense times.

This is our first lesson: we shall now turn to the dialogical methodology of three further writers. We turn to Bede Griffiths.

**Bede Griffiths**

Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) was a Benedictine monk, who moved to India in 1955 and became a *sannyasi*. An Oxford educated (he was taught by C. S. Lewis) convert to Roman Catholicism, he became a leading advocate for the importance of dialogue. His interests were vast and included the mystical, the New Physics, as well, as Hinduism. The first clue to Griffiths dialogical method is reflected in his life. He moved to India; he took on a Hindu form of community life – he formed an Ashram. He learned the languages; he worked hard to understand Hindusim from the inside.

The goal of dialogue for Griffiths is nothing less than an experience of the God of Hinduism. So he writes:

> ‘It is in this cave of the heart that the meeting has to take place. That is the challenge. It’s no good just studying Hinduism in the university or reading about it in books. We have to live this Hindu experience of God, and we must live it from the depth of our experience of God’s revelation in Christ and in the Church.’

The activity of dialogue is one that involves the ‘heart’ rather than the ‘head’. He strongly recommends against endless discussion about doctrine; instead it the experience that is important. It is a total act of empathy. In *The Golden String*, Griffiths insists that real unity is made possible in the space, which is beyond words, in between humanity and God. Unlike many dialogue exponents, then, he commends interfaith prayer. He writes:

> ‘It is only in prayer that we can communicate with one another at the deepest level of our being. Behind all words and gestures, behind all thoughts and feelings, there is an inner center of prayer where we can meet one another in the presence of God. It is this inner center which is the real source of all life and activity and of all love. If we could learn to live from that center we should be living from the heart of life, and our whole being would be moved by love. Here alone can all the conflicts of this life be resolved, and we can experience a love which is beyond time and change.’

To realize this goal, he insists that the participants need to be ‘mature Christians’. He writes:

> ‘I believe that God has given this experience of the Upanishads, the Gita, and the Hindu tradition to the world. We are being called to encounter it and to relate it to the Christian experience of God. In our ashram we have had many people coming to share this experience with us and we have found that those who come with a mature Christian faith find that their faith is enriched and deepened by this experience
of the Hindu scriptures. I may say that immature people can be thrown off their balance very easily if they have no deep understanding of their own faith. One must really understand one’s Christian faith and live one’s Christian faith, and only then can one understand and live out the Hindu experience in the light of Christ.  

For Griffiths, rootedness is a precondition of the dialogical enterprise. Here he is stressing that the rootedness makes the appropriate interpretation of the experience possible. Rootedness, then, makes possible both the empathy (to appreciate the role of a faith tradition is an encounter with God) and interpretation (to see how that a Christian already knows is true relates to the new experiential dimensions) necessary for the dialogue. And the goal of this dialogue is a fresh illumination of the nature of God. He warns against starting with doctrine; instead, he insists you must start with experience.

With this beginning, there are five main features of his thought. The task of interpretation involves the following:

1. Finding parallels.
2. Recognizing complimentary images
3. Locating the activity appropriately in the Christian drama
4. Learning appropriate lessons
5. Willingness to be critical

We shall now work through each of these in turn.

The first ‘finding parallels’ is a key feature of Griffiths method. As he expounds Hinduism so he moves back and forth. He explicates the Hindu worldview, then, in search for a parallel, moves back to the Christian scriptures. So, for example, Griffiths is explaining the relationship between the One and the many in Hinduism. He writes:

‘There is one absolute, infinite, transcendent Being who is beyond all the gods and all that can be named in heaven and on earth. The gods are *devas* in Sanskrit, “the shining ones.” They are much more like angels, though that distinction was never made clear as in the Hebrew tradition. They are perhaps nearest of all to the “cosmic powers” of St. Paul.’

This is typical. He moves back and forth recognizing in Hinduism an equivalent parallel in Christianity.

The second methodological feature is linked to the first. With the first he is finding something ‘similar’ in Christianity; however, with the second, he finds something contrasting, yet complimentary. This is a major theme of his writing: he believes the West needs the East. The views of reality in both are contrasting yet complimentary. On a more theological level, he believes that the contrasting accounts of the ultimate reality are complementary. He starts with the marvelous story of Fr. Monchanin – the founder – visiting a school:

‘[H]e went up to a group of children and asked them, “Where is God?” Some were Catholics and some where Hindus. All the Catholic children pointed up: God is in Heaven. All the Hindus pointed to their breasts: God is in the heart. These are two different ways of looking at God: God is everywhere and nowhere, but you can think of Him as above and you can pray to Him and ask His grace to descend, you can kneel in penitence, and ask for mercy. This is obviously a completely, valid way. But equally you can think of God as immanent, present in the earth, in the water, in the air. There is a beautiful passage in the Upanishads which says: “To that God who is in the plants, to the God who is in the trees, to the God who is in the earth, to that God who is in everything, adoration to Him, adoration to Him.” I feel these two different ways are complementary. Just as the Christian, starting from above, discovers the Holy Spirit as immanent and realizes the presence of God in the whole creation around him, so the Hindu,
starting with the immanence of God in the creation, in the human heart, rises to the idea of God beyond the creation and beyond humanity.’

As we shall see in a moment, not everything in Hinduism is complementary with Christianity. But certain things are. As one sees a complimentary movement so one’s understanding of the divine is illuminated. Griffiths explicitly refers to ‘the principle of complementarity.’

The third feature of Griffiths’ methodology is to locate Hinduism appropriately in the Christian narrative. He does so in such a way that a conservative Roman Catholic or an Evangelical could accept the appropriate placing of Hinduism. So, for example, he takes the conversation between Melchizedek (Genesis 14) and Abraham as evidence that ‘in the beginning of the biblical tradition there was this recognition that God had revealed Himself to the Gentiles, to what were later called “pagans”.’ Griffiths cites with approval John Henry Newman’s talk of a ‘dispensation of paganism.’ He then writes:

‘All over the world we are rediscovering this pagan religion, this dispensation of paganism. Melchizedek is a priest of this cosmic religion. Now, to crown it all, in the Psalms the Messiah is said to be “a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek” – not of the order of Aaron, of the Jewish priesthood, but of Melchizedek, this “pagan” priesthood. This is surely of immense significance: that Christ comes to fulfill not only God’s revelation to Israel, Moses, David and the prophets, but also the whole of this cosmic covenant, this cosmic revelation.’

Griffiths provides a reading of the Scriptures that justifies his conviction that it is one true God who is being disclosed in Hinduism.

The fourth methodological insight is that one must be ready and willing to learn of God from Hinduism. This was the theme of his best known work The marriage of East and West. The scientific, rationalism of the West needs to meet the spiritual, emotion of the East. Indeed, Griffiths believes that a failure to have this encounter could be catastrophic for the West. He talks of it as male meeting female. He writes: ‘The balance can be restored only when a meeting takes place between East and West. This meeting must take place at the deepest level of the human consciousness. It is an encounter between the two fundamental dimensions of human nature: the male and the female – the masculine, rational, active, dominating power of the mind, and the feminine, intuitive, passive, and receptive power. … [T]he past two thousand years, coming to a climax in the present century, the masculine, rational mind has gradually come to dominate Western Europe and has now spread its influence all over the world. The Western world – and with it the rest of the world which has succumbed to its influence – has now to rediscover the power of the feminine, intuitive mind, which has largely shaped the cultures of Asia and Africa and of tribal people everywhere.’

An important reason, then, for entering into dialogue is to have our understanding and perception of the world transformed. And it is a transformation, argues Griffiths, that the West desperately needs. He also believes that Hindu culture needs to learn about democracy, science, and human rights. This willingness to learn of God from another faith tradition is, for Griffiths, a key requirement of dialogue.

Thus far, the methodology has assumed a positive view of Hinduism. However, the final feature of Griffiths’ methodology involves the willingness to identify difficulties and problems with Hinduism. In Return to the Center, he explains, ‘I cannot help feeling that the present situation of India, with its masses of poor, illiterate people, of people suffering from disease and being left to die in the streets, really stems from basic philosophy – all are caught in this wheel of samsara. … This sense of cyclic time and constant recurrence can, of course, lead to a terrible fatalism, which can be sad but which can also be sustaining.’ Although Griffiths did recognize that there are modern Hindu attempts to reinvent the
doctrine of *samsara*, it remained true that for the masses in India it was deeply destructive. Unlike the doctrine of the incarnation that triumphs in a resurrected form of human life, he believed that the doctrine of reincarnation undermined the value of the individual. So he writes:

‘The divine life penetrates history, time, suffering, and death, and then raises history and time and suffering and death into a new creation, a new order of being in which these things are not lost, not destroyed, but transfigured. This gives a value to every human person. With the doctrine of karma human persons get mixed up: you may have been Cleopatra in a past life, or somebody else. You are not yourself any longer, and in the end everything merges into one. You will enjoy the absolute bliss of the one. But “you” are really no longer there.’ 14

So Griffiths is discriminating. He admires the concept of God; he is deeply critical of the doctrines of *samsara* and reincarnation. His method invites us to be equally discriminating.

**Raimundo Panikkar**

We turn now to the second of our three case studies. Panikkar was born in Spain in 1918; he had a Catholic mother and a Hindu father (he is a citizen of India). Much of his professional career has been spent in the United States – first at Harvard, later at the University of Santa Barbara in California.

I shall focus on his *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. However, elsewhere in print, it is interesting to note two criticisms that he has of the West. The first is his attack on the western concept of the individual. When explaining how his study on Buddhism is autobiographical, he works through the significance of the autos, bios, graphia in the introduction to his *The Silence of God*. He writes under autos:

‘I speak, then, not of the isolated individual (that modern Western dogma), but of the human person (that knot in a network of relationships woven ad infinitum). I speak of the autos: the “self” not locked up in the idiosyncratic solipsism of individuality, but expressing in a unique though limited way the whole of reality.’ 15

It is, I suggest, because of Panikkar’s lived relationship with Hinduism that he sees the absurdity of the western preoccupation with the individual. The west has a distorted view of personhood because of this failure to recognize the necessity of locating a person in communities. The second criticism, which may be linked to the first (Panikka does not make it explicit), is his attack on the western model of dialogue. It is often said that Hindus are not interested in dialogue. Panikka responds thus:

‘It all depends on what we understand by dialogue. Indeed dialogue on Western terms interests only Westerners or Westernized Indians. But one of the lessons of this book is that dialogue has many meanings and is carried out on many levels.’ 16

Panikka makes it clear that there are many different forms of dialogue. And the academic dialogue of the West is only one such type.

After these preliminaries, we can now look in more detail at the Panikka method. There are five features to his method. These are:

1. Every faith tradition is very diverse.
2. The dialogical method is already firmly entrenched in the Christian tradition.
3. Goal is mutual fecundation.
4. Important to convert or ‘fall in love’ with the other.
5. Expect to find Christ.
We shall now work through these five in turn.

On the first, it is vitally important to recognize the diversity of all religious traditions. For Panikka, abstractions, such as Hinduism and Christianity, do not exist. He writes:
‘Hinduism does not exist; there are only living and separated traditions, sampradayas and such.
Christianity also is non-existent; there are thousands of churches, doctrines, and groups that seen from the outside, appear as baroque and overwhelming as Hinduism may appear to the outsider.’

This means, Panikkar goes on to explain, that there is not one Christian-Hindu dialogue, ‘there are scores of them.’

For the second, Panikka sees himself as an heir to the mainstream Christian tradition. In a very revealing passage at the end of The Unknown Christ of Hinduism, he sums up his entire project thus:

‘I have tried to do \textit{mutatis mutandis} what the Christian scholastics, especially St Thomas Aquinas, did with Hellenic wisdom in general and with Aristotle in particular. . . . [H]e was not simply performing the academic work of an interpreter, but undertaking a theological mission of assimilation, namely an explanation of Christian truths by adoption of the Aristotelian framework conveniently transformed. He was not concerned with aseptic “scientific” hermeneutics, but sought only the truth.’

Unlike Swidler, Panikka does not see the task of encounter and dialogue as a fundamentally new mode of operating. Granted the task for Aquinas is within the Christian tradition: he is not standing outside it. For Aquinas, the other is interpreted in the light of Christ, but not with the goal of simply absorbing the other, but properly discovering what the other really means. For Aquinas, Panikka explains, ‘he was saying in his time what Aristotle would have wanted to say, not psychologically, perhaps, but ontologically, in so far as Aristotle tried to explain certain truths that are beyond words.’

As we shall see under the fifth feature, Panikka concurs with this approach.

The third feature of Panikka’s methodology is the goal of the dialogue is ‘mutual fecundation’. Panikka puts it thus:

‘I have insisted on saying that the relationship between the two religious traditions, Christian and Hindu, is not one of assimilation, or of antagonism, or of substitution (the latter under the misnomer of “conversion”), but one of \textit{mutual fecundation}.’

He talks of five different approaches to the meeting of religions. The first is strict segregation, which of course in our global village is increasingly impossible. The second is substitution (i.e. conversion of nations); the problem with this, explains Panikka, is that such an attitude ‘would not only be dishonest and contrary to the principles of Christianity, but it would also be doomed to failure.’

The third approach seeks an ‘eclectic unity and idealistic embrace’. This is often the rhetorical goal of some forms of western interfaith activity. However, the depth of the conflicts and the complex link of religion with cultural identity makes such an approach ‘unrealistic and unrealizable.’

The fourth approach is ‘coexistence’, which implies mutual non-interference. This Panikka suspects is the position that most Hindus would want to take. However, this is not an option for Christians. He recognizes the orthodox commitment, ‘which is that Christianity embodies the Mystery that God has revealed for the whole World.’

Given this, he worries that if Christians tried to commit to mutual non-interference, this would lead to a repression of a basic commitment that might lead to a displaced aggression. He writes:

‘This fourth solution may in the long run become a source of internal corruption within Christianity or may lead to external “compensations” in the form of violent and illegitimate attacks upon other religions. Nothing is so harmful as what modern psychology would call “unnatural suppression” and “pathological repression”.’
So, it is clearly an impossible option for Christianity. And, even though Panikka feels that this position is a temptation for Hindus, it is not a satisfactory position for Hindus. There is a claim embedded in Hinduism that it is the ‘everlasting religion’ for India, which implies a struggle with other religions, which would try to convert Indians.\textsuperscript{28}

So we arrive at Panikka’s last solution, which is mutual fecundation – ‘a mutation in the self-interpretation of these selfsame religious traditions.’\textsuperscript{29}

Panikka identifies three requirements for the encounter:

‘a deep human honesty in searching for the truth wherever it can be found; a great intellectual openness in this search, without conscious preconceptions or willingly entertained prejudices; and finally a profound loyalty towards one’s own religious tradition.’

Panikka is offering the following vision: faithful Christians are called to allow the wisdom of God, wherever it is found, to shape our understanding of Christianity. Hindus are invited to enter into the same process. The result is cross-fertilization; this is the goal of the dialogue.

We turn now to the fourth feature of Panikka’s methodology. We should ‘fall in love’ with the other. Panikka explains:

‘A Christian will never fully understand Hinduism if he is not, in one way or another, converted to Hinduism. Nor will a Hindu ever fully understand Christianity unless he, in one way or another, becomes Christian. There are, of course, levels of understanding as there are levels of conversion. It is not necessary however for everyone to “meet” everyone else like this. Certain meetings could be extremely dangerous. Not everyone is able – much less obliged – to incarnate himself in another religion. But if an encounter has to be more than a mere diplomatic move, we cannot escape its exigencies. Since it is not just an individual but a collective and social endeavor, those involved must grasp the dynamics of the history of the encounter up to date, in order to catch and use its momentum and thus continue it in a meaningful way.’\textsuperscript{30}

It is interesting to note how Panikka stresses the corporate nature of the dialogue requires a real understanding of how a tradition has emerged and evolved. In addition, apart from the dialogues which are merely diplomatic, the goal must be such a complete understanding that one sees the beauty and coherence of the other. One should ‘fall in love’ with the other.

It is the last feature of Panikka’s methodology that creates much of the controversy. We should expect to encounter Christ. Wesley Ariarajah interprets Panikka at this point as an uncomplicated inclusivist.\textsuperscript{31} Panikka is easily misinterpreted at this point. So it is important we sketch out his position with some care. He starts by stressing that ‘Christ’ is bigger than ‘Jesus’.\textsuperscript{32} It is Christ, the revealer of the mystery, which is the focus of Panikka’s analysis. Panikka writes, ‘The gist of this book is the concreteness of Christ (over against his particularity) does not destroy his universality (over against his generality) because the reality of Christ is revealed in the person experience of his uniqueness.’\textsuperscript{33} For Panikka, there are entirely unique experiences of God in Hinduism. For Panikka, it is not true to say that Christianity has the entire truth about the nature of God in Jesus. Instead we discover more about the mystery of God in Hinduism; hence the importance of the encounter. However, given the revealing disclosing nature of God is called Christ, a completely proper interpretation of these truths about God discovered uniquely in Hinduism is to call it an encounter with the unknown Christ of Hinduism.\textsuperscript{34} The role that Christ is playing in Hinduism includes the following: first, there is Christ the revealer of the nature of the Mystery called God; second, Christ is the source of everything that is; and thirdly, Christ is the divine Grace that enables connection between humanity and God.\textsuperscript{35} So concludes Panikka: ‘Hence from the point of view
of Christianity, Christ is already present in Hinduism. The Spirit of Christ is already at work in Hindu prayer. Christ is already present in every form of worship, to the extent that it is adoration directed to God. … [I]n meeting and accepting Hinduism as it is, the Christian will find Chrst already there.’

The net result of Panikka’s five-fold methodology is an encounter involving faith, hope, and love. Faith is the work of divine grace; hope is the ‘desire for liberation’; and love is the divine space. ‘Religion’, explains Panikka, ‘meet in the heart rather than the mind.’ The propositional encounter is secondary to the abiding recognition of a deeper unity within the life of God.

The methodology of both Bede Griffiths and Raimundo Panikka is so different from the approach set out by Swidler and Hick. It is perhaps harder and more challenging, but crucially it is also more authentic. We turn now to our final conversation partner, the Indian, Orthodox theologian, K. P. Aleaz.

K. P. Aleaz

One major influence on the dialogue discussion has the ‘christian theology of other religions’ debate. Aleaz is perhaps the leading Indian Christian theologian who is engaging with that debate. He is an advocate for ‘pluralistic inclusivism’. Aleaz explains the idea thus:

‘In Pluralistic Inclusivism both Inclusivism and Pluralism undergo change in their previous meanings. It makes Pluralism inclusive and Inclusivism pluralistic. Pluralistic Inclusivism is an attempt to make a religious faith pluralistically inclusive i.e., the very content of a faith is to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to it as per the requirement of different places and times and it is through such pluralistic understanding of a faith that its true inclusivism is to shine forth. In other words inclusivism transforms its perspective to seek the fulfillment of one faith through the wider horizon of other faiths, which is entirely different from the earlier view of that faith’s claim to be the fulfillment of other faiths.’

The key idea here is that no tradition should assume it has the entire truth about the nature of God. There are good reasons to believe that there is much more we can learn about God from other faith traditions. So unlike Karl Rahner’s version of inclusivism, it is not true that ultimately the definitive and total truth has been revealed in Christ; however, unlike John Hick’s pluralism, it is not true to say that knowledge of God is trapped in an unaccessible noumenal world. Therefore Aleaz is advocating a position that is midway between inclusivism and pluralism.

Aleaz suspects that the problem with Panikka is that he does not let the transformative power of the conversation extend to the central and key symbol of Christ. ‘In the over all,’ writes Aleaz, ‘he [ie. Panikka] is still in the grip of Inclusivism as he is not yet interested to receive the contributions of other faiths in the very “experience of Christic principle”, So contra Panikka, Aleaz insists that are very understanding of Christ can be transformed through the dialogue. Aleaz writes:

‘Pluralistic Inclusivism gives birth to “relational convergence” in Indian Christian dialogical theologies and the theologies of Brahmabandhay Upadhyaya, P. Chenchiah, K. Subba Rao and J. G. Arapura can be considered as following the line of “relational convergence”. We have also attempted the construction of an Indian dialogical theology, more specifically an Indian dialogical Jesulogy. We have tried to make the very content of the revelation of God in Jesus truly pluralistic by elaborating the contributions of Samkara’s Advaita Vedanta to it. We discovered the possibility of understanding the person of Jesus as the extrinsic denominator (Upadhi) of Brahman, the name and form (namarupa) of Brahman and the effect (Karya) of Brahman. We also discovered the possibility of interpreting the function of Jesus as to manifest the all pervasive (Sarvagatatvam) illuminative (jyothi) and unificative (ekikrtya) power of the Supreme Atman, as to manifest the fact that the Supreme Brahman as Pure Consciousness (prajnanaghanam) is the Witness (Saksin) and Self of all (Sarvatma), and as to manifest the eternally
Aleaz sketches out both the requirement and possible content of a Hindu-Christian encounter. The requirement is grounded in an obligation to learn of God from Hinduism; the content is a transformed, modified account of what it means to believe in Christ.

**Standing Back**

These three case studies are all shaped by the assumptions of India. These assumptions are markedly different from the post-Enlightenment commitments of the dialogue industry in the west. The result is a methodology which is significantly different. In all three there is a rich theological task at the heart of the dialogical process. We engage in the process of dialogue so that we can be changed by it. Add to this Varshney’s insight that dialogical structures make a significant contribution to peace making, one can see how a very contrasting Decalogue of commandments for dialogue might emerge. It is to the alternative that we turn to next.

**Footnotes**

1. I made this point first in my *Theology of Engagement* (Oxford: Blackwell 2003) p.120
2. H. S. Wilson, ‘From Communal to Communitarian Vision among Religions in India: A Proposal’, in Viggo Mortensen (ed.) *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 2003) p.185. It is important to note that this tragic outrage did cause much soul-searching in India. The press publicized very effectively those brave Hindus who had protected their Muslim neighbors amidst the blood letting.
7. Ibid. p.19
8. Ibid. p.24
9. Ibid. p.128
10. Ibid. p.29
11. Ibid. p.30
18. Ibid. p.xii
20. Ibid. p.166
22. Ibid. p.32
23. Ibid. p.32
24. Ibid. p.32
25. For his comment on Hinduism, see Ibid. p.37
26. Ibid. p.33
27. Ibid. p.33
28. Ibid. p.33
29. Ibid. p.35
30. Ibid. p.43
32. Ramundio Panikka, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* p.14. Panikka writes, ‘The gist of this book is the concreteness of Christ (over against his particularity) does not destroy his universality (over against his generality) because the reality of Christ is revealed in the person experience of his uniqueness.’
33. Ibid. p.21
34. This idea arises in a number of writers. Keith Ward, for example, has made it central to his work. He positions himself as an ‘open pluralist’. See *A Vision to Pursue* (London: SCM Press 1991)
35. This is my summary of Panikka in *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* p.48-9.
36. Ibid. p.49
37. Ibid. p.60
38. Ibid. p.43
41. K. P. Aleaz, *Dimensions of Indian Religion*, p.95