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INTER-FAITH HERMENEUTICS: AN EXAMPLE AND SOME IMPLICATIONS

The fact that we in Britain live in a multi-faith context is an existential reality of our times. This has been increasingly recognized by the media, politicians and church people. But the key question is how seriously have biblical interpreters taken into account the people of other faiths in their exegetical cogitations.

Biblical interpretation in a multi-faith context should be aware of at least two things. Firstly, it must be sensitive to the scriptural texts of other faith communities and the spiritual sustenance they provide for many of their adherents. Mahatma Gandhi, so sympathetic to the person and teaching of Christ, nevertheless regarded the *Bhagavad Gita* as 'the supreme book for the knowledge of Truth' affording him invaluable help 'in times of distress.'¹ He also held the view that 'many things in the Bible have to be reinterpreted in the light of discoveries – not of modern science – but in the spiritual world in the shape of direct experiences common to all faiths.'²

Secondly, Christian scriptural interpreters should be conscious that their literary output is likely to reach a wide audience which is not necessarily exclusively Christian. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has been warning Christian interpreters that in their theologizing they should not only take note of Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim scholars who are 'equally intelligent,' 'equally devout' and 'equally moral' but also be conscious of a prospective readership which is likely to include Buddhists, or those who have Muslim husbands or Hindu colleagues.³

The task then for a biblical interpreter is not only to discover how to live as a member of a multi-faith society but also how to interpret the scriptural texts taking note of the presence and the spiritual intuitions of people of other faiths.

One way of facing the situation is to take a cue from the Latin American liberation theologians and re-read some of the biblical materials in the light of the multi-faith context. Recently the Latin American liberation theologians have been vigorously arguing for a re-reading of the biblical texts from the perspective of the poor. In doing so they have given a new meaning to the phrase 're-read.' It means more than to read

again or to re-interpret. It means to take a fresh look at the data and read anew and reformulate the message. It means investing the text with new meanings and nuances.

There are a number of passages that one could subject to such a re-reading. I would like to have a re-look at the narratives which are commonly used to understand Paul's change of mind, traditionally known as his conversion.

Before that, we need to look briefly at the matter of religious conversions and the deep theological and sociological questions they raise.

In the religiously pluralistic context of India, religious conversion means a shift from one religion to another but also more importantly, from one community to another. Therefore conversion to Christianity means not only experiencing, relating to and realizing the ultimate reality in a totally different way, but also stepping into an utterly strange social and religious milieu. It is a change of outlook and orienting one's life to a different focal point, but it also means leaving one's cultural heritage and joining a Christian community whose style of worship and church structure follows Western cultural patterns. Therefore conversion raises many theological issues. Among them are: a) Is one religion superior to the other? b) What aspects of culture and social life should a convert be encouraged to preserve? c) In what ways should he or she be helped to make use of his or her rich tradition to interpret the new faith? and d) Should one leave one's own cultural/social tradition entirely in accepting another faith? The words of T.K. Tiwari, a Brahmin convert who became a Christian, echo these questions:

When I decided to be baptized, I did not think that I was 'leaving' Hindu society. I thought I was adding something anew, something glorious to my Hindu heritage. I wanted to continue to live with my parents, to cooperate with other Hindus in social service work, to visit the temple etc. I was like the early Christians who met daily at Solomon's porch in the temple. Soon I discovered that this was not possible.⁴

Paul's Experience: Two Approaches

Paul's spiritual experience on the Damascus highway – Ac 9:1-9, 22:4-16 and 26:9-19, and his assumed reference to it in Ga 1:11-17 – have been exegeted in many ways. Scholarly energies have been spent look-

ing at these texts historically, philologically, psychologically, and of course, theologically. Basically there are two approaches to these texts and they can be summed up as the Conquest approach and the Reorientation approach.

The Conquest Approach

The Conquest approach sees Paul's experience in terms of conversion and commissioning him to preach Christ to the Gentiles. He is conquered by Christ and he is sent to conquer others for Christ. This approach neatly bifurcates Paul's life – Saul, the fanatical Pharisee bent on persecuting the followers of the Jesus movement, and Paul, the Christian, equally fanatical about preaching his new found savior to the Gentiles. F.F. Bruce captures the essence of this approach:

With astonishing suddenness the persecutor of the church became the apostle of Jesus Christ. He was in mid-course as a zealot for the law, bent on checking a plague which threatened the life of Israel, when, in his own words, he was 'apprehended by Christ Jesus' (Ph 3:12) and constrained to turn right round and become a champion of the cause which, up to that moment, he had been endeavouring to exterminate, dedicated henceforth to building up what he had been doing his best to demolish.⁵

The Conquest approach functions at two levels. Theologically, it tends to project a Paul who is deeply dissatisfied with the arid spirituality of his own faith. His own tradition, the Judaism of his day, is seen as outmoded and legalistic. Romans 7 is taken to be Paul's autobiographical reflection on his inability to fulfil the requirements of the Jewish law. Missiologically, this approach sees his conversion as a warrant to take the Christian message to all parts of the world. In essence, the Conquest approach sees Paul's conversion from the Christian church's apologetical and propagandistic point of view.

The Reorientation Approach

This approach tries to rehabilitate Paul within Judaism and sees his turning point not as conversion but as call – a call to a specific task, in the fashion of the Hebrew prophets. Krister Stendahl is the main exponent of this position.⁶ This view does not see Paul as changing from one religion to another but as changing from one of the Jewish sects to another. Therefore Paul's earlier life is not perceived as one of dejection and spiritual impoverishment. Instead, he is seen as a person who was

proud of his traditions, his people and their calling. Put differently, Paul's life is not the case of a person without faith finding his way to God, nor of a person who is dissatisfied with his own faith, but rather of a person who gets a new understanding of his task.

This approach emphasizes two things. Firstly, it stresses Paul's call as a call to a particular assignment and secondly, it detects a prophetic character in his call. K. Stendahl's words sum up these concerns:

If, then, we use the term 'Conversion' for Paul's experience, we would also have to use it of such prophets as Jeremiah and Isaiah. Yet we do not speak of their conversion, but rather of their call. Paul's experience is also that of a call – to a specific vocation – to be God's appointed apostle to the Gentiles.⁷

From a multi-faith perspective both these approaches are insensitive to the people of other faiths. Both see Paul's so-called conversion from a mission and proselytization point of view. The difficulty with such an exegetical approach is that it envisages confrontation with the people of other faiths. It sees its task in terms of conversion of people who are not within the Christianfold. While one plans for an open aggressive propaganda of the Christian Gospel, the other opts for a soft, covert operation. Under this second approach, the prophetic vocation is seen in terms of purifying and castigating evil elements in other faiths.

A Third Way: Dialogical Approach

In the multi-faith context, there is another way of exegeting the data that is linked with Paul's experience. That is, the Dialogical approach – an approach which acknowledges the validity of the varied and diverse religious experiences of all people and rules out any exclusive claim to the truth by one religious tradition. In this approach, every religion is worthy of love and respect. All religions contain liberative as well as oppressive elements and the hermeneutical task is to enlist the liberative aspects to bring harmony and social change to all people. It is from this perspective I invite you to look at the biblical datum.

Traditionally, scholars have used two sources – Luke's account and Paul's own meager recollections. It is from the accounts of Acts that one gets the popular images of Paul's conversion – supernatural voice, blindness, companions etc. Paul's letters are virtually silent about these and it would be difficult to construct a conversion scenario from them.

Moreover, one has to cull it from his letters which are in fact essentially concerned with other matters, his apostolic status and authority, his integrity, the practical problems of his communities and the non-arrival of the End.

Paul's letters, namely the ones accepted by the majority of scholars, – 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans – do not suggest that he agonized over his past or that he rejected his own tradition. Rather, they claim that he was blameless (Ph 3:6); he was proud of his Jewish calling and in religious fervor he was well ahead of people of his time (Ga 1:14).

Interestingly, Paul does not use the traditional vocabulary that is normally associated with the process of conversion. He does not use the noun form of 'conversion' (*epistrophe*) or 'forgiveness' (*aphesis*) or the verb *ahienai*. There are three places where he uses 'repentance' (*metanoia*) or 'repenting' (*metanoun*) but on all these occasions they refer not to his own experience but to that of others who have already accepted Christ (Rm 1:4; 2 Co 7:9-10, 12:21).

If one were to look for a word that epitomizes Paul's change of perspective, it is Transformation – *metamorphosis*. In his letter to the Romans he wrote, 'Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind' (12:2). The vocabulary and the imagery of transformation is evident in his letter to the Philippians as well. In chap. 3 he speaks about his transformation and re-formation into the body of Christ – 'becoming him in his death' *symmorphosis* v. 10. One of the exciting pictures Paul paints of becoming a child of God is that of transforming from the state of slavery into the state of sonship (Rm 8:15-17). His hope for the Roman Christians is that they, too, will be conformed (*symmorphosis*) to the image of the Son (8:29).

Naturally, the question then arises as to what caused this radical transformation in Paul's life. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians says that the Gospel he preaches comes from 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1:12). In the next verse he goes on to say that this disclosure caused him to change from his 'former life in Judaism.' It was this revelation that opened up new horizons for Paul. But Paul nowhere tells what the content or the nature of this revelation was. It is here where one has to deal with conjectures. What then was 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' which transformed Paul? The meaning of the genitive 'of Jesus Christ' is very ambiguous. It could mean either that Jesus was the agent

through whom Paul received the revelation or that Jesus was the content of the revelation, namely, that he was the Messiah. The majority of scholars tend to concur with this latter reading. But I would like to agree with George MacRae that Jesus as the Messiah was not central to Paul's Gospel.⁸ Incidentally, Paul does not use Messiah in the sense of a title.

I would like to opt for the other reading which points to the revealing aspect of Jesus Christ, which may give us a clue to unravel the reason for Paul's radically rethinking his 'former life in Judaism.' Paul by his own admission was a Pharisee and as such he was brought up in the understanding that God was holy. This notion of God as a holy One emerged in Judaism as a strategy during the exile and continued to dominate Jewish thinking till the time of Jesus. The Torah, too, was interpreted from the perspective of holiness. Marcus Borg writes:

'Holiness' became the paradigm by which the Torah was interpreted. The portions of the law which emphasized the separateness of the Jewish people from other peoples, and which stressed separation from everything impure within Israel, became dominant. Holiness became the *Zeitgeist*, the 'spirit of the age,' shaping the development of the Jewish social world in the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus, providing the particular content of the Jewish life.⁹

Marcus Borg goes on to show that Jesus on the other hand advocated a different kind of holiness:

Instead, he proposed an alternative path grounded in the nature of God as merciful, gathered a community based on that paradigm, and sought to lead his people in the way of peace, a way that flowed intrinsically from the paradigm of inclusive mercy.¹⁰

Jesus, as an initiator of a revitalization movement within Judaism, opened up another aspect of the God of Israel – God as merciful and compassionate. Jesus was not handing down a new tradition. He was simply reiterating a forgotten aspect of God – that he was merciful and gracious (Ex 34:6) – and as a consequence Jesus was urging his contemporaries to show solidarity and compassion towards one another. 'Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36). Jesus' healing miracles, his acceptance of the marginalized of the time – the sinners, tax-collectors and the women – was an indication that a) God's mercy was available to the very people who were cut off by the pharisaic

interpretation of the law, and b) that this was available without any intermediaries such as the law or the temple. It is not unreasonable to surmise that it was Jesus' retrieval of the availability of God to people without any mediating agencies which caused Paul to rethink his 'former life in Judaism.' It was Jesus' announcement of God's generosity to the people who are not normally within the pharisaic pale that contributed to his death. It is this death which becomes Paul's Gospel, because in this death God demonstrated that he had abolished the impediments and the powers that dominate human life. It was Jesus' words and actions that prompted Paul to retrieve neglected elements in the tradition and transformed his thinking so that he preached a Gospel of salvation which is available to all.

This Dialogical approach, which sees Paul's experience as transformation, offers new possibilities in a multi-faith context.

Firstly, it changes the understanding of what conversion is. Paul's experience shows that conversion can take place within a religious tradition itself. Conversion does not necessarily mean changing from one religion to another. It can mean a conversion to a new dimension of one's own faith. One can be rooted in one's tradition and yet learn more and be open to its forgotten aspects. Peter is another case in point. When we talk about the Cornelius-Peter episode, we always refer to the conversion of Cornelius. What we often overlook is that Peter too was converted. It was a rude shock to him, as it was to Jonah before him, that God's grace knows no bounds and extends to outsiders who are not normally recipients of such love.

Secondly, this approach views the people of other faiths differently. It does not see them in terms of mission and conversion, but accepts them unconditionally without the requirement of ritual purity. One of the key issues that Peter, Paul and those met at Jerusalem faced was not inculcation of Christian ideas into Gentile minds but incorporation of them into the fellowship. It was to this end that Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles – to accommodate them as God's people.

Thirdly, it points to the fact that any spirituality transforming experience is not something that is private, subjective and emotional. But it involves praxis and engagement. Paul's experience underlines not only the solidarity of the believer with Christ, but his/her ethical obligation to walk in the newness of life (Rm 6:4). This means imitating

Paul by sharing maximum solidarity with people who are theologically, socially and economically marginalized.

Some Implications and Some Lessons

General

1. There is no universal interpretation of a text. All interpretations are contextual and tentative. A text becomes authoritative and sacred when it has contextual quality.

2. Biblical texts are not static or final. They possess a reservoir of meanings and nuances. When one particular meaning fails to meet the need of a community, one can always choose other meanings or other texts that can speak to the situation meaningfully and imaginatively. It is here one can learn from the hermeneutical principles of Hindus and especially how they handle the story of Rama. The story of Rama is told in the epic called Ramayana. But this story is told in a variety of ways within India and also in South Asia. Harry M. Buck has shown how different nationalities (Indians, Sri Lankans, Malaysians, Indonesians) and various sectors of community (women, students, non-brahminical castes) reject the bits that fail to meet their needs and project narratives that continue to excite and speak to their situation.¹¹ In other words, the community chooses to re-tell the episodes that empower them to meet new demands.

3. There is no value-free exegesis. All interpretations are biased. Bultmann himself has said that there is no presuppositionless exegesis. The form-critical school has always insisted on the *Sitz im Leben* of a text. The Latin American liberation theologians point out the importance not only of the context of the text but also the *Sitz im Leben* of the interpreter. All interpreters bring their own academic, ideological and religious biases into their interpretation. Karl Barth in his preface to the English edition of the commentary on Romans wrote, 'No one can, of course, bring out the meaning of a text (*auslegen*) without at the same time adding something to it (*einlegen*).'¹²

4. How then do we overcome our own prejudices? One way is to engage in communitarian exegesis. It is an exercise in which the community of the faithful – lay and professional, male and female, oppressed and oppressor, adults and children, Blacks and Whites – read the text in a dialectical relationship, each questioning, correcting and

enabling the other. This way the presuppositions of one community are mutually challenged and critiqued by the other. It is an enterprise in which the questions posed by one section of community preoccupied with their context are read along with the critical reflections on the text with a view to seeking the truth together. In this way biblical scholars are compelled to come to grips with the problems of the ordinary people. Biblical scholars tend to withdraw from the harsh realities of social problems by taking refuge in the biblical past or, to use the words of J.C. Beker, they tend to wander into the hinterland of archeology. A good example of communitarian exegesis is the hermeneutical engagement of the peasants of Solentiname with Ernesto Cardenal.¹³

Some Ground Rules for Multi-Faith Hermeneutics

1. Calling Names

Christians traditionally divide their scripture into two sections and call the first thirty-nine books the Old Testament, and the last twenty-seven the New Testament. What Christians regard as the Old Testament is held by the Jews to be their sacred scripture. The popular assumption among Christians is that the Old Testament is spiritually and morally somewhat inferior and obsolete, whereas the New Testament is superior and theologically up-to-date. But such a view, as history shows, reflects the very hostile, anti-Jewish stance that we commonly find among Christians.

The customary understanding that the new covenant of the Christians (NT) supersedes the old covenant (OT) is no longer tenable. The books of the new covenant have their own share of theologically and spiritually dubious elements – for example subjugation of women and complacency about slavery. The Jews do not like their sacred scripture to be treated as old. The two adjectives ‘Old’ and ‘New’ give the impression that one is outdated, archaic and no longer applicable, and the other is recent, interesting and relevant. As historical writings, both are ancient, belong to the distant past and are products of an alien culture.

Therefore, when using sacred writings in an inter-faith context, one cannot speak of them in a way that exalts one and denigrates the other, but must allow each to be unique and speak on its own terms. In order to value the integrity of these scriptures, we might call the first thirty-

nine books the Jewish Scriptures, or the Canonical Scripture of Israel or the Sacred Scripture of Israel, and the last twenty-seven books could be referred to as the Canonical Literature of the Jesus Movement, or the Sacred Writings of the Early Followers of Jesus or the Canonical Writings of the Jesus Movement.

2. Place of Other Scriptures

Christians can no longer claim with Tertullian that 'I possess the Scripture and I am the only one to possess it.' In the present hermeneutical task Christian interpreters cannot ignore the religious texts of other faith communities. In the past, biblical concepts were taken as a yardstick to evaluate other scriptural traditions. For example, the Johannine understanding of Incarnation was viewed against the *Gita's* concept of *Avatar*, and the later was judged inadequate and limited. Or the biblical notion of Grace is compared with Saiva Siddhanta's view of *Arul* (Grace) and it is critiqued for its impersonal nature. Similarly, other scriptural traditions are judged defective for their lack of a salvation history model.

A proper hermeneutics should go beyond these tendencies and look for what these religious texts are trying to convey, and understand them on their own terms rather than prejudge them. All scriptures seek to tell in their own way the story of how they understand the mercies of God and the mysteries of life. Of course, there is a radical diversity in the form and content of their stories. Traditionally Christians have insisted that their story is superior and more valid than the others. Christians may tell their story differently but they cannot claim that theirs is the only story. In fact these stories belong to all humankind. The fact that the Tamil classic *Tirukural* is claimed by different religions proves the point of its catholic nature. The *Tirukural* – a book of wisdom sayings – speaks about God, righteousness, right praxis etc., and is used by Saivites, Jains and Buddhists and it is called *Pothumarai* – Common Scripture. In one of the Father Brown stories, 'The Sign of the Broken Sword' Father Brown remarks, 'When will people understand that it is useless for a man to read his Bible unless he also reads everybody else's?'

3. Wisdom Tradition

Probably one way to initiate multi-faith hermeneutics is to retrieve the Wisdom tradition. The strength of the Wisdom tradition is that it is

universal. It is not confined to one culture or a nation. This tradition acknowledges that if wisdom is spirit, it is not restricted to Israel alone but embraces the whole world (Ws 1:17) and finds expression in all peoples and all lands. 'In the waves of the sea, in the whole earth, and in every people and nation I have gotten a possession' (Sir 24:6).

The other positive feature of the Wisdom tradition is its ability to borrow freely and modify materials from other cultures and sources. The Synoptic Gospels record at least 100 proverbial and aphoristic sayings of Jesus. C.E. Carlston has shown that not all of them were from rural Palestine and that one can detect the influence of wider Hellenistic culture.¹⁴ The undue concentration on the distinctive features of Jesus' teaching not only diverted attention from the aphoristic elements in his sayings but also encouraged a dim view of other cultures. The bracketing of Jesus' message with that of other sages is not to minimize his importance but to point to the creative possibilities of the commonly held universal elements in his message. These common elements should provide starting points to engage in multi-faith hermeneutics in a way that the traditional missionary view that Christians have the superior truth does not. An African proverb says that it is through other peoples' wisdom that we learn ourselves, and a single person's understanding amounts to nothing. While acknowledging the distinctiveness of each tradition, the role of the interpreter is to bring out the common elements in them. Three recent examples of such an attempt are Ishanand Vempeny's work on *The Bhagavad Gita* and the New Testament;¹⁵ A.C. Amore's exegetical study of the Buddhist scriptures and their influence on the message of Jesus,¹⁶ and John Eaton's comparative reading of the Wisdom spirituality of the Hebrew scriptures in the context of world religion.¹⁷

Finally, the task of interpretation is not merely description but engagement. The goal of biblical interpretation is not only understanding of the biblical text but ultimately enacting it. The meaning of a text is discovered not only through reflection upon it but also in concrete social action based upon it. The primary concern of an interpreter lies not only in transforming social inequalities as the Latin American liberation theologians are vigorously reminding us, but also in bringing racial and religious harmony among peoples of different faiths.

Notes

- ¹ C.F. Andrews (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi. His Own Story*, London: George Allen & Unwin 1930, 31
- ² M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions. Their Place in India*, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Press 1941, 159
- ³ W.C. Smith, *Religious Diversity* (ed. by W.G. Oxtoby), New York: Harper & Row 1976, 9.
- ⁴ Y.D. Tiwari, *From Vedic Dharma to the Christian Faith*, in: *Religion and Society* 10 (3) 1963, 117-118.
- ⁵ F.F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Free Spirit* (rev. ed.), Exeter: Paternoster 1980, 74.
- ⁶ See his *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, London: SCM Press 1977, 7-23
- ⁷ Ibid. 10.
- ⁸ G. MacRae, *Messiah and Gospel*, in: *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (ed. J. Neusner et al.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, 171f.
- ⁹ M. Borg, *Jesus A New Vision. Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship*, San Francisco: Harper & Row 1987, 87.
- ¹⁰ M. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press 1984, 199.
- ¹¹ H.M. Buck, *Rama and the Asian World*, in: *World Faiths Insights* 9, Summer 1984, 27-36.
- ¹² K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, London: Oxford University Press 1933, IX.
- ¹³ E. Cardenal, *Gospel in Solentiname*, Vols 1-4, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1982.
- ¹⁴ C.E. Carlston, *Proverbs, Maxims, and the Historical Jesus*, in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1) 1980, 87-105.
- ¹⁵ Vempeny Ishanand, *Krsna and Christ in the Light of Some of the Fundamental Themes and Concepts of the Bhagavad Gita and the New Testament*, Pune: Ishvani Kendra 1988.
- ¹⁶ A.C. Amore, *Two Masters, One Message. The Lives and Teachings of Gautama and Jesus*, Nashville. Abingdon 1978.
- ¹⁷ J. Eaton, *The Contemplative Face of the Old Testament in the Context of World Religions*, London: SCM Press 1989

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