

THE HISTORY OF INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIP IN THE CHURCH: A BRIEF APPRAISAL

DILEEP KUMAR (KUMARDK30@YAHOO.COM)

Abstracts: It is no exaggeration to state that the relationship of Christianity with other faith traditions has been an issue from antiquity. Serious questions have been raised concerning the traditional Christian attitude towards other religions. One of the allegations is that; for most part of its history Christianity has been an exclusive religion, treating other faiths with indifference. Does this allegation hold water? Let us examine the historical veracity of this contention.

The writings of the early Church Fathers and subsequent writers provide a captivating overview of Christian approaches to other faith traditions marked both by accommodation and conflict. Initially, the Christian community was a small minority, often persecuted on account of its faith. Fear of being absorbed by syncretic movements of the time prompted Church Fathers to make absolute claims with regard to their faith and morals. During the Middle Ages dogmas and doctrines came into play and, to a large extent determined the Church's attitude to people of different faith traditions. The missionary enterprise put the Church into contact with many vibrant religious communities outside Europe. Some missionaries attempted to study them, while others rejected them as "pagans". Christianity's claim to be the final and perfect religion was challenged by the modern philosophers, who spoke for the unity of all history as the field of God's work, thereby undermining Christianity's claim to uniqueness, and ascribing equal value to all religions. The Second Vatican Council proved to be a turning point in the history of the Church's relationship with other religions as it invited Christians to re-think their attitude to the majority faiths around them. It is heartening to see that during the last few decades a marked change has taken place with the official Church seeking to work in collaboration with people of other faith traditions to realize its mission.

This paper intends to examine the traditional Christian approach to non-Christian religions from the perspective of interreligious relationship. At the outset I must admit that taking into account the vastness of the history of the Church, it is not feasible to address this issue in detail. Nevertheless, my attempt here is to identify and examine what factors affected the Christian attitude towards other faith traditions down the ages. Did Christians make any attempt to recognise the good in other faiths around them? What steps has the Church taken to make peace with people outside the Church? And, what has been the effect of the rise of Christianity on its interreligious relationship in general. One cannot just overlook the contribution of the Indian Church, and the subsequent theologies that emerged in the Church in keeping with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Hence, a tract on Indian Church history concerning its understanding of other religions will help in getting a more comprehensive view of the Church's interreligious relationship.

Key Words: absolute, attitude, communities, dialogue, exclusive, *extra ecclesiam nulla salu*, syncretism, pagans, faith traditions, inclusive, *logos*, Interreligious relationship.

A. THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHURCH WITH OTHER RELIGIONS DOWN THE AGES

The New Testament was able to use words, concepts, and symbols which had developed in the history of religions over the years. Subsequently all those concepts with their pagan and Jewish connotations were absorbed into Christianity without affecting the picture of Jesus.¹ Thus, interpreting the *Logos*-theology the early Christians evolved a more dialogical attitude in their relationship with other faiths and cultures.² On the other hand, Christianity as an offshoot of Judaism had carried with it a Rabbinical and Pharisaic heritage which tended towards conservatism. And, the fear of Christianity being absorbed by syncretic movements of the time prompted early Christians not only to make absolute claims with regard to their faith and morals, but also to develop a rather exclusivistic attitude in their relations with people of other faiths.³ The early Church Fathers employed Greek philosophy to articulate Christian faith.

Justin Martyr saw philosophy as a preparation for the gospel, and a valuable tool for the expression of Christian truth. He taught that although the Divine *Logos* appeared in fullness only in Christ, 'a seed of the *Logos*' was scattered among the whole of humankind long before Christ. Hence, those who lived and now live by reason are Christians, even though they have been considered atheists, such as Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them.⁴ Similarly, Irenaeus of Lyon and Clement of Alexandria recognised the presence of *Logos* among people of other faiths and cultures. Irenaeus held that God has been revealing *Logos* to all peoples in diverse ways in order to bring them under one head which is made manifest in Jesus Christ. He also spoke about the hope (salvation) of those who lived before the coming of Christ. Speaking on diverse religious pursuits of truth Clement expressed that truth is one although it is interpreted in many ways.⁵ In fact, Clement sought to stress commonalities that would draw Christians and philosophers into a relationship of mutual learning. Therefore, he affirmed that just as the law prepared the Jews, so also philosophy prepared the Greeks for Christ.⁶ Clement was followed by his disciple Origen, who advanced upon his master's position and developed a theology of the divine *Sophia*. Accordingly, he held that God has blessed all humans in every generation, especially those whom he found to be holy, with certain amount of divine

¹ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1968), 16.

² Edmund Chia, ed., *Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 92.

³ *Ibid.*, 92-94. Israel's concept of "Chosen People" gave birth to strict monotheism, wherein the Jews tended to assert their superiority by denying divinity to pagan gods. A sort of similar attitude is seen in Paul, perhaps inherited from Jewish exclusivism, when he severely denies that the non-Christian gods have any real existence at all (1 Cor 8:4-13, Rom 1:18-32).

⁴ Saint Justin Martyr, "First Apology," Ch.46.

⁵ Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata," 1.7.

⁶ Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata," 7.2.

wisdom and made them prophets and friends of God.⁷ On the other hand, Origen found it difficult to accept that God's saving activity extends to those outside the Church. He stated, "Let no one persuade himself, let no one deceive himself: outside this house, that is, outside the Church, no one is saved."⁸ Thus, the early Church Fathers demonstrated a mixed type of attitude towards people of other faiths. In fact, they tended to assert Christian superiority by denying divinity to pagan gods.

On the other hand, at the level of intellectual pursuit, the Fathers seemed to be dialogical for they tried to form a bridge between Greek philosophy and Christianity. Many were greatly influenced by Sophism and Neo-Platonism and could articulate Christian faith in the thought pattern of the Greeks that seemed compatible with gospel teachings. We must note here that theologies developed by the early Church Fathers to account for the wisdom found in other religions, were mainly with reference to Greek philosophy, and not religion. They never affirmed other religious structures, although they recognised their cultural elements as a form of *preparatio evangelica*.⁹ Nevertheless, they were open to non-Christians whom they thought could be saved by the universal presence and the activity of the *Logos*, insofar as they strive to do good.

After the Edict of Milan (313 CE), Roman emperors began to favour Christianity, and subsequently it got the status of the official religion of the Empire. That was the beginning of an era when the interest of state and Church began to merge. Since Christianity did not have to reckon with other faiths, it developed an aggressive attitude towards them. Augustine of Hippo tried to identify his 'City of God' with the visible Church, and thus made a definite shift from a *Logos*-centered universalistic attitude to a Church-centered exclusivistic approach towards other religions.¹⁰ Augustine's thought was radicalised by his disciple Fulgentius of Ruspe who categorically stated that all who die outside the Church will go into that fire which was prepared for the devils.¹¹ This gradually gave shape to the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salu* (outside the Church there is no salvation), a formula which was previously used by Cyprian in the context of unity in the Church, and came to be seen as "central to the way in which other religions were perceived."¹² Thus, the early Church from her dialogical approach gradually shifted her interest to Church-centered exclusivism, distancing herself from other faith traditions.

The Church during middle ages greatly differed from what it had been from the beginning of its existence. *Cuius regio eius religio* (follow the religion of the ruler of the region) came to be seen as

⁷Origen, "Against Celsus," 4.7.

⁸ Origen, "Homilies on Joshua," 3.5. Quoted in Francise A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside Church?: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 20.

⁹ Gavin D'Costa, "Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism*, ed. James J. Buckley, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, and Trent Pomplum (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), 450.

¹⁰ Chia, *Dialogue*, 99.

¹¹ Clark H. Pinnock. *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 40.

¹² D'Costa, "Inter-Religious Dialogue," 450.

a general rule, and Christians found it rather difficult to admit the fact that Jews and Muslims also belonged to the people of God. This led to anti-Semitism and the Crusades.¹³ Islam became an arch rival of Christianity and the Jews were hated for not responding to the gospel message. However, even during this time there appeared a few who attempted to understand Islam and Judaism and tried to build a friendly relationship with them.

Nicholas of Cusa, perhaps the first in the history of Christianity, envisaged the possibility of understanding between various religions. He was of the view that wars were caused by prejudices and misconceptions about the other, and the tendency to assert one's own religion as the absolute norm for all others. He made a journey to Constantinople to get first-hand information about Islam, and to help Christians understand the concern of the Quran.¹⁴ Similarly, Pope Gregory VII took the initiative to make peace with Islam, and in his letter to Anzir, a Muslim king of Mauritania (1076), acknowledged that, although in different ways, Christians and Muslims adore the same God. He urged that Christians and Muslims were required to display to other nations an example of this charity (*ND* 1002). Certainly these words of the Pope must have had a great impact on the peace building process, and can be seen as a positive step towards interreligious relationship. In fact, a reference to this letter was made during the Second Vatican Council (See NA 3). Peter Abelard too held that the Jews and the Christians, though in different ways and in different measures, seek the same good and recognise the same God. While he refuted the Church's trite axiom "outside the Church there is no salvation", he argued that the philosophers' intention of living justly is not different from that of Christians. "However, what does it matter by what name it is called as long as the reality remains the same and the beatitude is not diverse, and the intention of living justly for the philosopher is not different from that of the Christians?"¹⁵ He seemed to have suggested that God, though not in clear terms, had been revealing to pagans as well. Francis of Assisi sought to befriend Muslims to show that he considered them not enemies but friends.

Along with these positive approaches, however, we come across a few radical movements that had a great impact on the Christian attitude towards other religions. Pope Boniface VIII in his Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302) held that "there is only one holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church... outside of which there is neither salvation nor remission of sins." Further he stated that "it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of all men that they submit to the Roman Pontiff" (*ND* 804). The axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* received dogmatic character at the Council of Florence (1442), when it categorically stated that "the Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and preaches that no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics or schismatics,

¹³ Chia, *Dialogue*, 101-102.

¹⁴ Chia, *Dialogue*, 103-104. See also, M.V. Cyriac, *Meetings of Religions: A Reappraisal of the Christian Vision* (Madras: Dialogue Series No. 3, 1982), 145.

¹⁵ Jacque Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of religious Pluralism* (Anand: GujratSahityaPrakash, 2001), 103.

can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (ND 1005). It was the first official statement in which reference to people of other faiths was explicitly mentioned in connection with salvation: on previous occasions when the axiom was used it had been intended to handle situations of schism and heresy within the Christian fold. However, as one can see the Christian approach to other religions even during this period was not completely negative.

The common Christian belief during the Protestant and Catholic Reformation period was that all religions except Christianity are false and their adherents are destined for eternal damnation.¹⁶ Martin Luther’s attitude to the Jews was said to be so negative that he even recommended the burning down of synagogues, and demolition of Jewish homes.¹⁷ Erasmus, the forerunner of the Reformation, was said to be positive in his approach to people of other faiths. He strongly upheld that the Spirit of Christ is operative in every people and culture. “The Spirit of Christ is perhaps more widely diffused than we imagine, and many will appear among the Saints who are not in our catalogue.”¹⁸ He did not hesitate to include Socrates or so-called pagans among his invocations of Saints. Thus he stated, “I can often hardly restrain myself from exclaiming, Holy Socrates, pray for us.”¹⁹ Ulrich Zwingli was influenced by Erasmus, and went a step further to include pious heathens such as Aristides, Camillus, Cato, Socrates, Theseus and likewise many others in his list of the saints in paradise.²⁰ Thus, unlike Luther we see Erasmus and Zwingli sharing the liberal view of the early Fathers who looked for possibilities to interact with other faith traditions.

During the Colonial period Christian missionaries could hardly perceive any truth found in other faiths. In fact they were not prepared either theologically or psychologically to respect or to learn from other faith traditions.²¹ The few who tried to open themselves to the cultural values of other faiths were either held in suspicion or proscribed by the Church. However, it was during this time that Christianity came into contact with many flourishing religions of the world. Very few missionaries

¹⁶ The development of the term “Reformation” is a complex issue. In the beginning it meant only one thing, i.e., the rise and triumph of Protestantism. Catholics could not concede that Protestants were true reformers; but only rebels and heretics. The Council of Trent had issued numerous decrees entitled *de reformatione* that led to many reforms in the Church throughout the sixteenth and the seventh centuries. The Catholics could not speak or boast of any Reformation as the Protestant did. It was only in the late nineteenth century a German historian named Leopold von Ranke used the term “Counter Reformation” (*Gegenreformation*), as against the Reformation. Ranke’s new term gave rise to the acceptance of two distinct Reformations, one positive and Protestant, the other negative and Catholic. In the mid-twentieth century, Catholic historians began to reclaim the acceptance of “reform” in a positive way. Hubert Jedin was the first one to use the term “Catholic Reformation” which was far more adequate than Ranke’s Counter Reformation. See, Carlos M.N. Eire, “The Reformation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism*, 63-64.

¹⁷ Cyriac, *Meeting of Religions*, 145-146.

¹⁸ “The History of the Reformation,” *Christian Classic Ethereal Library: History of the Christian Church*, Vol.VII, ed. Philip Schaff (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 326.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Cyriac, *Meeting of Religions*, 146.

²¹ Chia, *Dialogue*, 107.

attempted to study them, while others rejected them as “pagans”. Christianity’s claim to be the final and perfect religion was challenged by the modern philosophers, who spoke for the unity of all history as the field of God’s work, thereby undermining Christianity’s claim to uniqueness, and ascribing equal value to all religions. The Church vigorously opposed this movement. Pope Gregory XVI in his encyclical letter *Mirari nos arbitramur* (1832) and Pope Pius IX in his encyclical letter *Qui Pluribus* (1846) declared that move as an ‘absurd’, ‘wrong’, ‘unholy’ and ‘deadly’ opinion (Cf. *ND* 1007-9) . Thus, history reveals that the Church’s attitude to other religions had generally been determined by both, the needs of the time and by her fundamental principles. In fact, Christianity’s pessimistic view of other religions often over a long period of time gives the impression that interreligious collaboration in the past had little or no place in the history of the Church.

B: Christianity in India and its Relationship with Other Religions

Scholarly findings reveal that Christianity in India lived in harmony with its indigenous heritage of apostolic origin.²² Christians lived in small communities in parts of Kerala just like their compatriots, in their own socio-cultural environment, and were hospitable to various immigrant settlers. Scholars, such as Paul Puthanangady, observe that the apostolic Church of St. Thomas in Kerala is a classic example of an inculturated Church depicting how a faith expression could be at home in a culture quite different from that of its place of origin.²³ However, we have no record to show that the early Christians in India made any effort to enter into dialogic relationship with people of other faiths. Perhaps, they did not feel the need for such dialogue, so strong was their relationship with their neighbours.

It was only after the fall of Constantinople and the arrival of the Portuguese at Calicut that information about Christians in the East, especially of India increased.²⁴ Missionaries who came to India secured the cordial support and co-operation of the native Christians. In the beginning the Portuguese ruler, Afonso de Albuquerque guaranteed full religious freedom to all the citizens. But the motive of speedy Christianisation of Indians led Church officials in Goa to denounce the policy of tolerance.²⁵ It is said that the attitude of Francis Xavier towards the non-Christian religions was not

²² Scholars have taken two different views about the origins of Christianity in India. According to one, the foundations of the Indian Church were laid by St. Thomas, the Apostle, or even by two apostles, St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew. The other view would ascribe the arrival of Christianity in India to the enterprise of Christian merchants and missionaries of the East Syrian Church in reinforcing Indian Christianity. See, A. M. Mundadan, “Origins of Christianity in India: The First Centuries,” in *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, Vol. I, ed. George Menachery (Trichur: College Road, 1982), 4.

²³ Paul Puthanangady, “Before Rome Arrived in India,” in *Rooting Faith in Asia: Source Book for Inculturation*, ed. Mario Saturnino Dias (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2005) 45.

²⁴ R.E. Frykenberg, “India” in *A World History of Christianity*, ed. Adrian Hastings (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 179.

²⁵ A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, Vol.1: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1984), 461.

very positive. To him all Hindus were ‘devil-worshippers’, the Buddhists were ‘atheists’ and the Muslims were ‘infidels’.²⁶ This attitude was shared by the majority of missionaries. Although a few missionaries such as Matthew Ricci in China, and Robert de Nobili in South India attempted to gain knowledge of other religions, their customs and practices, Christianity always remained a superior religion for them.

Just like Portugal the arrival of Protestant nations of Western Europe in India was solely motivated by the spirit of commercial enterprise. Even though they made significant contributions to Indian society, especially in the field of education, social justice and human welfare, they were hardly interested in the building up of interreligious relationship. On the other hand missionary work was largely misunderstood and led to a hostile attitude among many Indians, who viewed the services of missionaries as a means of proselytization. According to R.H. Lesser most modern Christians until quite recently followed Xavier’s tradition, and condemned the whole of Hinduism as superstitious and rather dangerous nonsense.²⁷ Christianity as ever it was, considered itself superior to other religions, and remained foreign to the majority of Indians.

A few missionaries perceived that the Christian task was not so much to convert people but to permeate Indian society with Christian values. Accordingly, a new approach was proposed by J. N. Farquhar, a Scottish missionary in India. Applying ‘fulfilment theology’ Farquhar held that all religions were in some measure divinely inspired, and since Hinduism was leading Indians towards Christianity, missionaries had only to devote more effort to dialogue and mutual understanding.²⁸ This understanding gained some acceptance among missionaries, and was well appreciated both in the parliament of World Religion at Chicago, and in the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910.²⁹ Thus, the mission approach proposed by J. N. Farquhar seemed quite rewarding.

The period subsequent to the Indian Independence was a period of great change for the Church in India. A clear sign to review the colonial model of mission began to appear in the Church. The visit of Pope Paul VI to the 38th International Eucharistic Congress in Bombay was an important occasion for the Indian Church when the Pope expressed his high regards for the cultural richness of

²⁶ Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India: Essays Towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966) 58.

²⁷ R. H. Lesser, “Hinduism and the Western Missionary,” in *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia of India*, Vol. III, ed. George Menachery (Thrissur City: Ollur, 2010), 46. European Colonialism provided both opportunities and limitations for the expansion of nineteenth century mission. Traders often opposed missionaries because they interfered with their exploitation of local people. It is only after the interference of the British Parliament in 1813 that the East India Company was forced to promote mission work. Thus, India became one of the largest mission fields. See, Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity became a World Religion* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 48.

²⁸ Frykenberg, “India”, 185. Fulfillment theology points to an inclusive approach towards other religions, which by applying Mt 5:17 states that Christ came to fulfill and bring to completion not only the ‘law’ and the ‘prophets’ but all the world’s higher religions. In this sense Christ is the “Crown of Hinduism”, and Christianity the fulfillment of other religions.

²⁹ Ibid.

India, and sought to work together with different religions “to build the common future of the human race” (ND 1031-32). Another important event in the Indian Catholic Church was the All-India Seminar held in Bangalore in 1969. In keeping with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, it produced many felicitous results in the fields of theological education, ecumenism, and dialogue with other religions.³⁰ Since then, many efforts have been made, especially through Christian Ashrams and the institutes of interreligious dialogue to present Christianity as a progressive religion.

C: Christian Attitude towards Other Religions in the Vatican II Documents

In a major shift from traditional understanding Vatican II adopted a rather positive attitude towards other religions. The first official Church document offering such an approach came from the Indian Bishops, who in the First Plenary Council of India in 1950 stated: “We acknowledge indeed that there is truth and goodness outside the Christian religion, for God has not left the nations without a witness to Himself, and the human soul is naturally drawn towards the one true God’ (ND 1017). Similar types of positive attitudes gradually grew in the Church and found a more complete expression in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.³¹ The Council transformed the whole concept of the traditional understanding of mission when it emphatically stated “that the human person has a right to religious freedom and nobody is forced to act against his convictions in religious matters” (DH 2). An attitude of appreciation and respect for other religions was thought to be a more adequate foundation for interreligious relationship. The outcome was the declaration *Nostra Aetate*³² and other documents that gave space to record the Church’s vision and approach to other faith traditions.

In its opening statement the document *Nostra Aetate* acknowledges the plurality of religions, stating that “people are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different people (of faiths) are being strengthened” in our time (NA1). Further, the document presents a brief description about the great religions of Asia, viz. Hinduism and Buddhism, and their inherent richness expressing that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which... often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people.” For this reason Christians are to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage” the spiritual and moral values found among them (NA 2). A note of

³⁰ Isaac Pandinjarekutt, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Bombay: St. Paul society, 2005), 136-137.

³¹ Jose Kuttianimattathil, “*Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” in *Towards a deeper Understanding of Vatican II and the Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Thomas Anchukandam et al. (Bangalore: KristuJyoti Publications, 2001), 234.

³² The history of *Nostra Aetate* is little complex. It began with the wish expressed by Pope John XXIII that the Council should issue a statement on the Jews to clarify the Church’s stand with regard to them. However, many Bishops from the East strongly recommended that the statement on the Jews should be enlarged to include all non-Christians; making an observation that the Council had given only two lines to two-third of the world. Suggestions also came that Judaism be treated not separately, but in the general context of the Church’s relationship to other religions. Hence, the Pope set up the secretariat for non-Christian religions, which took up other suggestions concerning religions of the world.

appreciation for both Islam and Judaism is expressed. Citing the long hostility between the Christians, the Muslims and the Jews, the document urges these communities “to forget the past” by way of “sincere efforts to achieve mutual understanding for the benefit of all” (NA 3-4). Finally, the document makes a universal appeal to respect and uphold the human dignity of all people by eliminating all forms of discrimination (NA 5). Many have appreciated the Church’s new approach in *Nostra Aetate* for taking an extraordinary step to discover positive values in other faiths.

The other Church documents that speak positively about other religions are *Gaudium et Spes*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Ad gentes* and *Dignitatis humanae*. These documents in a way support the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* concerning other religions. Scholars, such as Kurien Kunnumpuram, observe that the Church in India has shown great “openness” in the wake of the Council, and this spirit of openness has enabled many priests, religious, and lay people to study other religions. The CBCI has set up a Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Collaboration, which by organizing several seminars and programmes of interreligious importance, has fostered greater understanding and respect among the followers of different religions. And, interreligious dialogue has come to be seen as an essential element of the Church’s mission.³³ In general, the Second Vatican Council was quite different from those of the past. Unlike the other councils where the Church’s intention was either to condemn others or to establish its superiority, this Council took serious steps to understand other faiths in relation to Christianity.

Indeed, there has been an evolution in the Catholic Church’s understanding of other religions, and interreligious dialogue has become an important activity, both at official level in the activities of the Popes and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and at grassroot level in dioceses and parishes around the world.³⁴ In the period subsequent to the Vatican II the Catholic Church has taken many important steps that have a bearing on interreligious relationship. On May 17, 1964, Pope Paul VI instituted the Secretariat for Non-Christians, which was renamed as the Pontifical Congregation for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988. Its purpose is to establish a relationship with followers of other religious traditions in order to enrich each other.³⁵ The encyclical letter *Ecclesiam suam* (1964) by the same Pope devoted more than half of the document to discussing the theme “dialogue”, and restated Vatican II’s position that the Church recognizes and respects the moral and spiritual values of various non-Christian religions (ES 108). The Federation of Asian Bishop’s Conference (FABC) in its document *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia* (1974) spoke of triple dialogue, with people, culture

³³ Kurien Kunnumpuram, “Achievement of the Council: A Balance Sheet,” in *Vatican II A Gift and A Task*, ed. Jacob Kavunkal, Errol D’Lima, and Evelyn Monteiro (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2006), 24-27.

³⁴ Paul F. Knitter, “Bridge or Boundary?: Vatican II and Other Religions,” in *Vatican II: Forty Years Later*, ed. William Madges (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 266.

³⁵ James H. Kroeger, “Milestones in Interreligious Dialogue,” *Review for Religious* 56, no. 3 (1997): 269.

and religions.³⁶ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), the Apostolic Exhortation, reiterated the Church's esteem and respect for other religions because of their important role in the spiritual formation of numerous people down the ages (EN 53).

Pope John Paul II followed his predecessor, and on missionary journeys to various countries he often sought to interact with the followers of different religions. On World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi (27 October 1986), he made a very significant statement: "Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others."³⁷ Throughout his papacy the Pope was deeply concerned about peace in the world; therefore he often insisted that in this divided world which is torn apart by armed conflicts, economic inequalities and contradictory ideologies, the Church's mission is to promote peace, including peace among the religions.³⁸ A few years later in his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), he made it clear that interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission and that the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue (RM 55). Pope Benedict XVI while emphasised the need for the serious and honest dialogue, he regarded dialogue as a "sacred duty" incumbent upon all those who are committed to building a better world.³⁹ Similarly, the Holy Father Francis in his *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) regards interreligious dialogue as a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so, a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities (EG 250).

Conclusion

My study in this paper reveals that there were very few instances in the history of the Church where the Church took the initiative to understand other religions with a view to mutual enrichment. In fact, the socio-cultural environment in which the Church was born was not very conducive to its growth; as a result, the Church Fathers developed a rather exclusivistic attitude towards other faiths. The imperial Church devoted much of its time to internal organization, and in the process developed many dogmas and doctrines that were not accommodative of other religions. Paradoxically what was thought to be organised and well thought-out was in reality far from being inclusive. It is important to remember that the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* was not the original position of the Church. It was used in the beginning for a different purpose, i.e. unity within the Church. Gradually, but

³⁶ "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia: Statement and Recommendations of the First Plenary Assembly," no. 12-15 (Taipei: 27 April 1974), in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, ed. Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 14.

³⁷ Kroeger, "Milestones in Interreligious Dialogue," 272.

³⁸ Gregory Baum, "Interreligious Dialogue: A Roman Catholic Perspective," *Global Media Journal* 4, no. 1 (2011): 10.

³⁹ Benedict XVI "To the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultation," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 5 November 2008, 19.

unfortunately it was applied to cover the people of different faiths, thereby giving rise to a hostile situation. Comparatively very few attempts were made in the Western Church to examine the fundamental principles that governed the Christian attitude towards other religions. Consequently, for almost eighteen centuries the Christian attitude to other faiths was not marked by a spirit of tolerance. On the other hand, the Church in India seemed to have flourished in a positive relationship with the people of other faiths, right from the arrival of Christianity. Thus we conclude, if the Church had adopted an exclusivistic approach towards other religions, it was mainly because of its rigid position as well as the socio-cultural environment in which it was to take root. Nevertheless, there had never been a time when the Church hadn't had noble souls, who in their wisdom chose a rather peaceful approach towards people of other faiths.

After Vatican II, the official Church in general, started to reach out to other faiths in view of understanding them, and to find areas of common ground for interreligious dialogue. The progressive Church now seeks to work in collaboration with people of different faith traditions to realize her mission and to strengthen her interreligious relationship. In this process she is expected to examine and purify all those elements that are likely to be obstacles on the path of dialogue. In India we see Christian communities joining with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and other religious communities to celebrate their important feasts and at times of inter-communal strife and violence calling for religious harmony and peace. No doubt, there is an evolution taking place in the Church's understanding of other faiths. Today, we can say that the Church of our time is not an isolated Church, but a Church in dialogue with every religion.

_____ Dileep Kumar

Bibliography

I. Church Documents

References to the Church Documents are made from following sources:

Flannery, Austin. ed. *Second Vatican Council: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*.
Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2004.

Neuner, Josef and Jacques Dupuis. ed. *The Christian Faith: In the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*. Seventh Revised and Enlarged Edition. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2008.

See Vatican's official Website for Papal Encyclicals. <http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>.

II. Writings of the Church Fathers

“Fathers of The Third Century: Origen,” Against Celsus 4.7, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library: Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, trans. Frederick Crombie, American Edition. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867.

“First apology,” Ch. 46, *The Fathers of the Church: Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls. New York: Christian Heritage, Inc., 1948.

“The Writings of Clement of Alexandria,” Stromateis 1.7, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library: Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, American Reprint of Edinburg Edition, ed. Philip Schaff. Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1867.

____. Stromateis 7.2, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Vol. XII, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1867.

III. FABC Resources

“Evangelization in Modern Day Asia: Statement and Recommendations of the First Plenary Assembly,” (Taipei: 27 April 1974), in *For All People of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, ed. Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, 11-19. Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992.

IV. Books and Journals

Baum, Gregory. “Interreligious Dialogue: A Roman Catholic Perspective,” *Global Media Journal* 4, no.1 (2011): 5-20. Canadian Edition.

Chia, Edmund. ed. *Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2002.

Cyriac, M. V. *Meeting of Religions: A Reappraisal of the Christian Vision*. Madras: Dialogue Series No. 3, 1982.

D'Costa, Gavin. “Inter-Religious Dialogue.” In *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism*, ed. James J. Buckley, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, and Trent Pomplum, 449-462. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011.

- Dupuis, Jacque. *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Anand: Gujrat Sahitya Prakash, 2001.
- Eire, Carlos M. N. "The Reformation." In *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism*, ed. James J. Buckley, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, and Trent Pomplum, 63-80. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011.
- Frykenberg, R. E. "India." In *A World History of Christianity*, ed. Adrian Hastings, 148-188. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.
- Griffiths, Bede. *Christ in India: Essays Towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.
- Knitter, Paul F. "Bridge or Boundary?: Vatican II and Other Religions." In *Vatican II: Forty Years Later, College Theology Society Annual Volume 51*, ed. William Madges, 261-282. Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 2005.
- Kroeger, James H. "Milestones in Interreligious Dialogue." *Review for Religious* 56, no.3 (May-June 1997): 268-276.
- Kunnumpuram, Kurian. "Achievement of the Council: A Balance Sheet." In *Vatican II A Gift and A Task*, ed. Jacob Kavunkal, Errol D'Lima, and Evelyn Monteiro. 23-53. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2006.
- Kuttianimattathil, Jose. "Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions." In *Towards a deeper Understanding of Vatican II and the Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Thomas Anchukandam, Dominic Veliath, and Jose Kuttianimattathil, 229-257. Bangalore: KristuJyoti Publications, 2001.
- Lesser, R. H. "Hinduism and the Western Missionary." In *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, Vol. III, ed. George Menachery, 46-51. Thrissur City: Ollur, 2010.
- Mundadan, A. Mathias. *History of Christianity in India, Vol. 1: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century*. Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1984.
- Padinjarekutt, Isaac. *Christianity Through the Centuries*. Bombay: St. Paul Society, 2005.
- Pinnock, Clark H. *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*. Grand Rapids, 1992.
- Puthanangady, Paul. "Before Rome Arrived in India." In *Rooting Faith in Asia: Source Book for Inculturation*, ed. Mario Saturnino Dias, 45-46. Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2005.

Tillich, Paul. *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1968.