

New Creation in the Contexts of Religious Pluralism and the Wesleyan Critique

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The theme of "new creation" is peculiarly a biblical theme. In compliment to the description of the theme of creation or origins, which is one of the dominant and over arching themes in the Bible, the motif of new creation or a transformed creation stands in sharp relief in the biblical texts. One cannot help being impressed with the emphasis and importance given to this theme. The idea of new creation occupies a significant place in the Johannine and the Pauline writings in the New Testament. In the background of the development of this idea lies the theological thought of John that all things were made through the Word and without him was made nothing that came into being. In him is life and the world was made through him (John 1:3). The light of God's new creation breaks forth in the darkness. "Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light (John 12:36). According to John, the world is designated as the creation of God. Significantly, it is characterised as the fallen world, which lies under the dominion of evil powers (John 12:31) ¹.

For Paul, the creative work of God manifests his invisible power and divinity. No one has any reason for not distinguishing the creator from the creature. Ever since the creation of the world God's qualities and nature have been understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Rom.1: 20). Because it is God from whom and to him are all things (Rom.11: 36). Paul sees Christ as the principle of creation, the first born of every creature in whom everything in heaven and earth is created, both visible and invisible. Paul expresses the supremacy of Christ through the words- He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church. He is beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood shed on cross (Col. 1:15-20). But in these last days God has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe (Heb. 1:2f).

If universe has been created through Christ, likewise Christ is also the principle of the new creation. If one is in Christ, one is new creature. The old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2Cor.5: 17-19). Paul pursues this theme of new creation further by adding that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do God works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. So we as Christians are

¹ B.W. Anderson: Article on 'Creation' in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of The Bible*, ed. G.A. Butterick *et al*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962, p.732.

God's work as new creation (Eph.2: 10). Christ has made of Jew and Gentile one new man (Eph.2: 15). God through Christ has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of two. In Gal.6:15 he further writes that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision mean anything; what counts is a "new creation".² The burden of issues involved and highlighted here is the question what is our mission as Christians, as God's new creation living in our time amidst the existential reality of religious pluralism? What are distinctive claims of the Christian faith as adhered to by us, which cannot be compromised and diluted? How in our particular predicament should we relate and understand our relation with our neighbours of other faiths and their claims? Can Wesley's doctrine and his distinctive contribution to Methodism of prevenient grace and his numerous exhortations in his well-known sermons help us to a better understanding of our relation to the followers of other religions? Will the insights from such a theological endeavour provide us insights and resources as theological grounds and basis for combining forces with the people of other faiths in combating and subjugating the negative effects of newly emerging but death - dealing forces such as globalisation? Therefore it become important to bear in mind that the crux of the discussion is not to take a mere excursion but get deeper understanding of the diverse cosmological theories, mythological views and ancient cosmogonies of the world religions and the concepts of the creation or origins. The biblical doctrines of creation and new creation as based on the scriptural foundations do not stand by themselves but depend on and elaborate the redemptive activity of God in history. In the Jewish tradition on which the Christian doctrine is built, these doctrines are viewed in the light of Israel's covenant faith of which these are both the presupposition and the fulfillment. In the New Testament, creation is seen christologically that is in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the new creation through him has already become a historical reality. On the basis of scriptural foundation, the Jewish view is built up on the belief that human heart is the arena of conflict and decision between the two tendencies of the evil impulse and the good impulse. It was for the Christian scriptures to view the human tragedy after creation in terms of a fallen and corrupted creation. This was in accordance with the popular Jewish belief based on the story of Satan's rebellion against the creator, and his fall from his high position in the heavenly council. Thus history is the scene of God's struggle with Satan, the ruler of the present age who seeks to establish a rival kingdom and to seduce people into his slavery. This view presupposes a historical rather than a metaphysical dualism. Satan is not an eternal being but is a parasite on God's creation. His rule will endure only as long as people are led astray and deceived by him. In the last day when God's victory is complete, Satan will be destroyed.³ Obviously this view has strong apocalyptic overtones. But prior to this view there is an earlier development of thought spearheaded by the prophets in the Bible who proclaimed when once the judgment of God has been accomplished, God will make a new beginning and will bless his people with a new heart. Prophet Ezekiel preached that God would bring his people into a new covenant relationship as he would give him people a new heart and put a new spirit in them. He would remove from them their heart of stone and will give them a heart of flesh. And he would put his spirit in them and move them to follow his decrees and be careful to keep his laws (Ezek. 36:26-28). Prophet

² John.L. Mckenzie, S.J. Article on 'Creation' in *Dictionary of the Bible*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965, p.160.

³ B.W. Anderson, Article on 'The New Creation' in *The Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G.A. Butterick *et al*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1962, p.730.

Jeremiah preached that God would bring his people into a new covenant relationship. "The time is coming," declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. "It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." (Jer.31: 31-33). Prophet Hosea's teaching echoes the same emphasis; "In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land so that all may lie in safety (Hos.2: 18-19). According to this emphasis in the teaching of the prophets, not only the old and the corrupt humanity will enter into a new history, but also the entire creation will be regenerated and transformed. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together and a little child will lead them (Isa.11: 6). This prophetic eschatology developed the vision of the new creation, the new heaven and the new earth- "As the new heavens and the earth that I will make will endure before me," So will your name and descendants endure (Isa.6: 22). Prophet Isaiah was one among the important prophets who developed a profound view of inter-relation of creation and history. God's power and wisdom in creating heaven and earth is the ground of assurance that he will also redeem his people as a new creation. The prophet envisions that the new beginning in history will be God's new act of creation. This creative event ensures that the creator will make as Redeemer all things new. Through this creative act of renewal, his people and nature will be completely transformed as they are taken up in the new history.

Isaiah's prophetic vision of a new creation echoes in the New Testament in the Pauline teaching. The future glory of the new creation is expressed in Romans 8:19-22, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. "The New Testament insight of new creation is basically christological in nature. The new creation is in Christ. The central message of the good news in the New Testament is the announcement that in Christ, God has already inaugurated the new history through his kingdom for which the prophets of the Old Testament were fervently hoping and yearning. The New Testament declares that the new creation has already happened. Simultaneously the inauguration of the kingdom of God also has a promise of the consummation of history when there will be a new heaven and a new earth free from the decay and corruption of evil and when all creatures and heaven and earth will join in a song of rejoicing and praise to the creator. "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them, singing - To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power for ever!" (Rev.5;13). Paul elaborating on the theme of new creation exclaims that God's redemptive deed is not less than an act of new creation (2Cor.4: 6). Paul declares that the new life of faith has its source in the sovereignty of God who creates into existence that do not exist (Rom.4: 17). To sum up the Pauline view of new creation, it is in Jesus Christ God has restored the humanity as intended at the original creation. Jesus Christ is the new man in the likeness of God and in the image of the invisible God. He is the beginning of the new humanity into which any person may be born by his decision in response to divine grace. Through Christ, humanity puts on the new nature. It will be a gross theological absurdity to attempt to apply any principle of comparative or contrasting methodology to ideas of creation in

other religion of the world on the basis of Christian norms such as the peculiarly Christian theme of new creation and to try to trace a corresponding idea in the realm of religious pluralism both contemporary and the ancient. Some ideas may seem to be comparable, however the biblical theme of new creation may not be reduced to the barest minimum connotation to fit into a common dominator of comparison in a pluralistic context. As the biblical idea, perception and insight are unique in their own way among other faiths. Only being aware of this caution, one may venture to look at the ideas of creation, re-creation or new creation more meaningfully in other faith otherwise it will be an insensitive, self-defeating and a fallacious methodology. However sensitized with this caution we still can examine from our own the theological vantage point, theme such as re-conciliation, renewal, fulfillment and transformation with similar Christian theme with some measure of imperfect approximation in meaning and resonance of ideas. For such an examination, five living religions of the people of the subcontinent of India are referred to in the context of new creation understood as broadly as reconciliation, fulfillment and transformation, with awareness of the fact of inherent limitation of interpretation.

Given the fact that a considerable theological fore-thought and some measure of consensus already have taken place in Christian endeavour to relate to other faith with the result of new formulation of certain helpful paradigms propounded by Paul Knitter. These are the views of exclusive normative status of Christian Model as categorized by Professor R.L.Maddox, or the view that there is 'some' revelation of God in other religions or the Mainline Protestant Model or the liberal view that God may work salvifically through other religions as God wills but in conformity with the norms of Christian revelation or the Catholic Model, or the view that limits the normativeness of Christ to the Christian faith with the assumption that other religions too constitute authentic and independent avenues of salvation or the Theocentric Model. This view has been supported and further elaborated by scholars like John Hick.⁴

Referring firstly to the Hindu view about creation and re-creation in the setting of religious pluralism in the India sub-continent, it may safely be surmised that the Hindu cosmological beliefs on the one hand were originally part of the Indian philosophical speculation and on the other were part of the rich Hindu mythology. The earlier reference to the ideas about origins are found in the ancient Hindu scriptures, the Rig Veda which also has the earliest trace of an ambivalent monotheism. *Varuna* the lord of righteousness was invoked as the maker of all things.⁵ After the Vedic pantheons, the *Purusha* or the primeval male is described in the *Purushasukta* narrative. The *Purusha* transformed himself into the world on cosmos. Other creator gods invoked by Hindus are *Vishwakarma* or All-creator and *Prajapati* or the Lord of the creatures. Their names later became synonymous with Brahma, the Creator God. During the period of the Upanishads, the Indian cosmological view was coloured with categories of the Brahman-Atman (the Reality) and Maya (illusion of the Reality). Later on in the *Manu Dharmashastra* the view of an endless process of creation and dissolution dominated the Hindu mind. The universe was viewed as a confused chaos of darkness. The creator removed the

⁴ H. Jacobi, 'Indian Cosmogony and Cosmology' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics ed.*, by James Hastings, Vol. IV Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 4th impression. 1959, pp.129ff.

⁵ H. Jacobi: 'Indian Cosmogony and Cosmology' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics ed.*, by James Hastings, Vol. IV Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 4th impression. 1959, pp.129ff.

darkness by his light and created water first and placed in it the seed of light. Out of this seed or germ, a primeval golden egg germinated in which Brahma sat in meditation. He eventually broke the egg and made heaven and earth out of its halves. Much later, the Hindu sectarian tendencies identified many creator-gods such as *Hiranyagrabha*, *Svayambhuva*, *Narayana*, *Shambhu* and Vishnu. In the backdrop of an unending cyclic concept of time and the fatalistic doctrine of Karma, the ultimate renewal or fulfillment is seen in terms of a merger of the soul, *Atman* into *Brahman* (the Reality). It was only during the *Bhakti* (loving devotion to personal and anthropomorphic God) period that the idea of divine grace (*Prasad*) was associated with salvation or *Moksha* or the ultimate release from the transmigration or birth and rebirth.

Buddhism originally has been an agnostic faith and any speculation about the origin of cosmos was considered wrong. Doctrines of infinity or non-infinity were considered almost as heresies. Buddha, essentially a pessimist regarded the existence of the exterior world as long as one is conscious of it. The Buddhists deny, on the one hand a supreme personal creating power and on the other innate independent power of physical things. It is the *Abhidamma Pitaka* in the Pali language which deals with the cosmological problems of the origin and destruction of the Universe. Thus the Buddhist cosmological system maintains the belief that all being can be divided into two classes, namely the immaterial category (*arupya*) and the material category (*rupadhatu*). The material beings are subjected to sensual and sexual desires. The foundations of the universe are the great elements (*mahabhuta*). They are earth, water, fire and wind and they are the substance of all material things. Besides the belief in a greater universe, the Buddhists believe in a small universe (cosmology). In the centre of this small universe is the great mountain (*Meru*, *Sumeru*, or the Himalaya where the gods dwell and around which the sun revolves. To the south of *Meru* lies *Jambudvipa* or India. Then there are concentric chains of lesser mountains, oceans, islands or continents and below are hills. Human existence is full of pain (*dukkha*) and a miserable predicament.⁶

Buddhism, particularly the Mahayana sect reduces all possible objects of experience to the Void (*shunyata*), which is not a state of non-existence but rather the ineffable non-dual Reality, somewhat like the Vedanta Atman-Brahman Reality which transcends all apparent oppositions, such as being and non-being, self and others, or *Samsara* and even *Nirvana* which is the state of perfection attained by following the Aryan (noble) Eightfold Path.⁷ The state of Nirvana is referred to in the Buddhist Scriptures by a bewilderingly rich variety of names. The best known is the Pali word, *Nibbana*, from the root *va* meaning to blow, and the prefix *nir*, out or off.⁸ Therefore the traditional explanations of Nirvana as the 'blowing out' of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion and as the state wherein the thirst for sensuous experience, for continued existence, and even for non-existence, is altogether absent. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is far from being a purely negative state or a psychological zero, where individuality disappears. What does not in reality exist cannot be said to cease to exist. All that is extinguished is the false

⁶ L.de La Vallee Poussin, 'Buddhist Cosmogony and Cosmology' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics ed.*, by James Hasting, Vol. IV, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 4th impression, 1959, p. 129f.

⁷ L. Basham (ed), *A Cultural History of India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p.94f.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.97.

assumption of one's individuality or ego. Hence, Nirvana is a state of absolute illumination, supreme bliss, infinite love and compassion, total serenity and spiritual freedom. For the *Hinyana* Buddhist, it is an eternal, unchanging and extra-mental spiritual entity, completely unrelated with the cosmic process. For the Mahayana Buddhists it is the Absolute Reality transcending all states. It is the Infinite Light (*Amitabha*), which has nothing to do with personal immortality. Therefore seeking to find anything parallel to the new creation in Christian categories in Buddhism may lead one to a number of explanations and views.

Jainism, a living religion in India is a monastic religion founded by twenty- four *tirthankaras* of whom *Mahavira* was the last one. *Mahavira* was a Contemporary of Buddha. Jainism also believes that life in the world is essentially full of misery and pain. Salvation is understood in terms of release from the cycle of births. This can be accomplished by possession of right knowledge. Jainism acknowledges a dualism of matter and soul, the non-living and living, which constitute the eternal and uncreated Reality. The ultimate object of knowledge is omniscience or *kevalajnana*. Reality can be understood from different angles. This is done by a system of logic, known as the Theory of *Syadvada*. The term *syad* or *syat* means 'somehow' probably, perhaps, may be in order to grasp the relative or conditional character of judgment from the object of knowledge. For Jainism the ultimate salvation is the complete isolation of soul or the state of *kaivalya*. This is attained when the soul disassociates itself from the matter through karma and becomes free. According to the *Jaina* logic of *syadvada*, the reality has innumerable aspects and characteristics on the metaphysical side, but one can know only some of these aspects of reality. Therefore all judgments are necessarily relative. Thus Jainism believes that the Reality manifests itself in many pluralistic ways. This doctrine demonstrate that in matter of theology of religions, Jainism believes in pluralistic approach as it reiterates the probabilistic and statistical view of reality in modern times.⁹

The core of the *Jain* ethical discipline lies in the doctrine of the "Three Jewels" (*Triratna*) i.e., right faith, right knowledge and right conduct which include five great vows (*vrata*) of non-violence (*ahimsa*), truth, chastity, charity and non-attachment. Non-violence or ahimsa, which is greatly stressed in *Jain* teaching, is their main spiritual contribution to India. Their teachings have remained unchanged over more than 2000 years. The concept of *ahimsa* was emphatically preached by Jains in history. This has contributed effectively to the ecological preservation in India even in modern times. The revival of ahimsa as a practical spirituality for political action by Mahatma Gandhi can be traced to *Jain* influence. Though the *Jain* community presently accounts for less than one-half percent of India's population, its generally high standard of personal morality and social ethics as well as its relative affluence give it national respect.

Islam in India recently has been a religion of about 12% of the total population. Muslims in India currently the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia and the second largest religious community in India after Hindus. Muslims constitute a majority in the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir and they are visibly present in minority in

⁹ K.P. Aleaz, 'Syadvada, An Indian Contribution to Pluralism' in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol.XXXIII, No.1, June 2001, Bangalore: United Theological College, pp.133-142.

every other Indian state. A large section of Muslims in India live in rural areas. Their upper class of landlords and urban middle class were diminished by migration to Pakistan after the partition in 1947. Muslims in India are the result of a confluence of diverse ethno-cultural streams: the Arabs, Turkish, Persian and Afghans. In India it were the Muslim Sufis who were among the most formative of Islamic influences.

Consequently today India is the largest centre of Sufism in the world. The four best known Sufi orders or *silsila*, the *Chishti*, *Qadriya*, *Naqshbandiya* and *Suhrawardiya* trace their history back to the twelfth to fifteenth century. The Islamic contribution to a composite and harmonious Indian culture, which flowered in the *Mughal* era, remains visible today, particularly in the arts, architecture and music. But with the passing of the *Mughals*, there was little or no social cohesion between the Muslim and Hindu communities. The responses of the Indian Muslims and Hindus to the British political and cultural impact on India were different. In modern times, movements of social reform and modernization arose among Muslims in the nineteenth century. The earliest and one of the significant one such movement was led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Sir Muhammad Iqbal is the next notable name in rejuvenating Islam in India. Their efforts to forge a monolithic communal identity were instrumental in the genesis of Pakistan partitioned out of India. But this did not solve the problems of those Muslims who chose to remain in India. On the contrary suspicion of divided loyalty created further difficulties for them. Serious violence continues to occur even today often directed against Muslims in India by Hindu militant groups and lately a variety of internal economic and political factors and the external rise of Fundamentalist Islam have aggravated communal relations in India. The razing of the *Babri* mosque at *Ayodhya* in December 1992 and its aftermath marked a crucial stage in history for the Indian Muslims.

In modern times, a serious effort to reassert the Muslim place in India, and to halt the decline in Muslim fortunes in post-Mughal era and to rejuvenate the social and religious fabric of the Muslim community, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan dedicated himself to educating Indian Muslims on modern lines and to promoting a favourable understanding of the Muslims among the British. Therefore he chose to serve the East India Company. His efforts to transform the Muslim community resulted in the rise of the famous Aligarh Movement and the establishment of the Aligarh Muslim University. He strove to rouse the Muslim intelligentsia from indolence, lethargy and resignation. His appeal was directed to the upper class Muslims but he did not receive support from the rural Muslim community and from the professional class of his coreligionists in whose hand the future lay.

A serious effort to envision a line of action and an under girding 'theology' for the Muslims in India was pursued by Sir Muhammad Iqbal who was a Punjabi Muslim and was thoroughly exposed to the leading Western ways of thought. His line of thought developed an Islamic effort to transform the Muslims. He studied philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge and later took to a serious study of the *Quran* and Islam. From this he evolved his philosophy of the Self or *falsafa-i-Khudi*, which was the core of his long poem, entitled *Asrar-i-Khudi* or the Secrets of the Self published in 1915. Through this he exhorted Muslims to mobilize their inner resources of spiritual energy and to exert themselves in the national life. He became a famous poet of Urdu and Persian. The idea of 'Pakistan' as a new Islamic and political entity originated with him. Most significantly Iqbal attempted a reconstruction of Muslim religious thought. He out rightly rejected the *Sufi* tendency of exalting contemplation and retreat from mundane life. He interpreted the *Quranic* doctrine of the universe as a theory of creative evolution and made

use of the pantheistic ideas. Iqbal was the philosopher of the cult of the Ultimate Ego. He was against the prevalent tenet of Islamic 'submission' and was the champion of the Ultimate or Supreme Ego. He regarded God as the Supreme Ego. This absolute Ego is the creative infinite Spirit. He believed that the Absolute Ego is both immanent and transcendent in conformity with the philosophy of *Tauhid* as accepted in the *Quran* and based on the nature of God. Iqbal believed in a dynamic view of the universe also. To him nature is not a static entity. Nature is a growing process of interconnected events. He also accepts the Einsteinian conception of a finite but boundless universe and links it with the *Quranic* View of universe. Nature is a field for self-realization. He repudiates the Nietzschean 'mystery of eternal recurrence' as mechanistic and fatalistic.¹⁰ He also rejected the Hindu view of cyclic movement of time. According to the *Jawaid-Nama* of Iqbal there are three steps in the evolution of the ego, namely the realization of the creative possibilities of the ego or the stage of individuality, secondly the ego in relation to other egos and thirdly the realization of the ego of the eternal light of God. Iqbal is an exponent of the concept of the Superman (*Insan-i-Kamil*). This Superman is an effective instrument for the execution of the will of God under total obedience to the ordinances of God. Iqbal was inspired by the concept of spiritual freedom and he referred to the *Quranic* doctrine of *Taqdir* (destiny) as a meaningful concept of spiritual freedom.

Iqbal was a Muslim thinker of action who dared see God face to face. He was inspired by the Turkish Revolution under Kamal Ataturk but he rejected its secularism. He advocated that man is the chosen of God and man is the representative of God on earth and man is the trustee of a free personality.

The modern day Islam has demonstrated that it has much to contribute in lending a moral and spiritual dynamic to the social reforms and revolutions in many parts of the Muslim world. In relation with other faiths notably with Christianity, there are signs of a greater readiness for mutual understanding. In West Asia, the existence of some states depends on a partnership between Muslims and Christians.

There are over thirteen million Sikhs (1981 Census) in the world and most of them live in Punjab province of the Indian republic where this religion originated. Its founder, Guru Nanak was both a mystic and a householder and a key figure of the *Bhakti* movement in India. His faith in the One, formless creator God, his rejection of formal ritual and caste hierarchy, his equation of Hindu and Muslim and his establishment of a community of believers moulded the Sikh religion. He was succeeded by nine *gurus*. Sikh Scriptures, the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the *Dasam Granth* are replete with references about God, the One, without form (*nirankar*) and eternal (*akal*). A great stress is laid upon divine transcendence. God is also full of grace and concern that human beings should have means of salvation and these means should be evident to those who would diligently seek them. God is immanent in all creation. Sikhism also believes that human beings by nature are willfully blind shutting their eyes to the divine revelation. Sikhism believes in a personal God, the omnipotent creator of the universe, a Being beyond time and human comprehending yet seeking by his grace the salvation of human being. For this purpose God reveals himself in his own creation. For Sikhism the meaning and purpose of human existence centre in the divine existence of the Eternal God, he whose creates, sustains,

¹⁰ Vishwanath Prasad Verma, *Modern Indian Political Thought*, Agra: Educational Publishers, 1994, pp.442f.

and he who having created reveals himself in his creation. God by his grace communicate to human being the way of salvation. The *Mul Mantra* in the Holy *Granth* states the basic theological view. The Divine Being is one. He is external and immanent in all things. He sustains all things. He is the creator of all things. He is without fear and without enmity. He is not subject to time. He is beyond birth and death. He is himself responsible for his own manifestation. He is known by the Guru's grace.¹¹ The creation is a vital revelation of God but he is also beyond it. God does not merely create. Having brought this universe into being God watches over with and cares for it. The path to God is like an ascent to higher and higher level of understanding and experience allegorically represented as the five *khands* (realms). The initial is called *Dharma Khand* or the realm of the law of cause and effect. The second stage is called the *Gian Khand*. It is the realm of free knowledge. The third stage is called the *Saram Khand* or the realm of effort. The fourth stage is called *Karam Khand* or the realm of action. The fifth and the final stage is called realm of truth. Here the believer passes into a perfect unity with the eternal God and is the climax of the ascent. This stage can be known only in experience.¹²

Sikhism affirms the concept of a creator God but does not accept that the divine Being ever becomes incarnate. History is significant for Sikhism in a way in which it is not for the Hindus, the Buddhists and the *Jains*. The Sikhs are conscious of history and are aware that they are active participant in a historical progress. For Sikhism spiritual liberation is release from the round of death and rebirth. It is called *mukti* and union with God. It can happen only when the soul has reached the stage of *Saram Khand*, the realm of effort and is in a state of having God's grace and to enter the realm of truth. Any more effort can take no further. Therefore mortification of body and asceticism are rejected as futile.¹³ *Mukti* is the supreme state of living in God's presence which can be experienced in the present life.¹⁴ It may be describe as merging in the Absolute or absorption. Paradise is the bliss of being in God's presence now and hereafter. In terms of relation with other religions Sikhism does not condemn other faiths and it does not make claim of exclusive possession of the truth therefore Sikhism does not indulge in aggressive proselytization .

Having made this cursory excursion into the insights of other faiths and coming to the Wesleyan critique of God's revelation in God creation. Wesley in his Compendium of Natural Philosophy with his typical style of simplicity writes, "the world around us is the mighty volume wherein God hath declared himself The book of nature is written in an universal character which every man may read in his own language". The perfection and greatness, the power and wisdom of the creator, his goodness but also his wrath can be deduced from nature. That means "every part of nature directs us to nature's God ."¹⁵

¹¹ W. H. McLeod: *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968, p.163f.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.169.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.221-224.

¹⁴ W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religion Belief and Practices*, Sussex: Academic Press (2nd. edition). 1995, p.87.

¹⁵ Walter Klaiber and Manfred Marquardt : *Living Grace, An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, p.36 (Quoting from John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation : or a Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, 1775, 3rd.ed.) cited in John Wesley's *Theology: A Collection from His Works*, ed. by R Burtner and R. Chiles (1954 reprint Nashville : Abingdon Press , 1982).

Considering Wesley's knowledge of and attitude towards other contemporary religions within his historical context, it is safe to assume that he was informed and influenced by the religious thought about other religions as prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth century England. Most comparative approaches in Wesley's time identified only four major religious traditions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Paganism. He had information but somewhat distorted information about Islam, the tribal religions of Africa and North America and about the religions of India and China. Wesley's sympathies were with the indigenous people and followers of the primal religions because he was convinced that it were the so-called nominal Christians who were behaving like heathens.¹⁶ Wesley may have somewhat romanticized the condition of the indigenous religions and the tribal people. By the 1780's Wesley had further developed his theological articulation by declaring that God may have revealed to some heathens the essentials of true religion by an inward voice. It is here that he brings in his famous idea of Prevenient Grace-that is giving absolute preeminence to God's grace above every condition to be fulfilled by human beings. This has an unconditional nature of justification. Wesley scathingly criticized the doctrine of predestination. He also rejected the doctrine of double predestination because God's grace operates irresistibly without any motivation whatsoever. Wesley did not accept the theological doctrine of unconditional reprobation or the unconditional election. Wesley was clearly influenced by the thought of a Dutch Reformed theologian named Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) from whose name he derived the most important self-identification of his own movement.¹⁷ With this influence of Arminianism and Wesley's own understanding of the ideas of justification and sanctification and with his added thought about the doctrines of prevenient grace and regeneration, Wesley comes closer to the biblical concept of new creation. Professor Theodore Runyon while referring to Wesley's understanding of grace in relation to new creation cites an interesting illustration that Wesley views the process of salvation through the symbol of a house. The idea of prevenient grace serves as the porch or as we in India call it the verandah, justification as the door, and sanctification or holiness as the rooms of the house wherein we are called to dwell. Justification and sanctification describe both divine action and human response, but God's action always comes first. It begins prior to our being aware of it. This is the grace that "comes before" (*pre-venio*) so we are conscious that God is seeking us out.¹⁸ This priority of action on God's part is most obvious and evident in Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. Through this doctrine Wesley makes clear, on the one hand, the impossibility of fallen humanity trying to save itself apart from the initiative of the re-creative Spirit, and on the other, his conviction that God does intervene in the human situation to open up new possibilities for humans. Wesley's intention is to hold at one and the same time the divine initiative, testified to in prevenient grace, and human responsibility.¹⁹

¹⁶ *op. cit.*, Randy L. Maddox, p.12

¹⁷ *op. cit.*, Walter Klaiber & Manfred Marquardt, p. 226.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.227.

¹⁹ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p.27

Finally, how should Christians understand their relation to people of other faiths particularly facing the challenge of pluralism? Religious pluralism has been and will remain a concrete historical fact of our existence. Christians will have to not only tolerate but live with us with a feel of Christian agape and with the steadfastness of their conviction of the faith given to them in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This phenomenon or more aptly the panorama of religious pluralism would not only demand our grudging tolerance but a cheerfully positive view of the faith and practice of our brothers and sisters of other faiths. Hence God's, his Son's and his Spirit's plan of transforming and fulfilling what the Triune God has in mind for the creation will be accomplished in his time and for this according to Wesley the work of prevenient grace is the basis for discerning the work of the Spirit in other religions, and cultures.