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INTERFAITH ENCOUNTERS AND A GOSPEL OF SHALOM
The Danger of Delinking Ecumenism and Missions
Reflections of a Singaporean Methodist
By Malcolm Thian-Hock Tan

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INTERFAITH ENCOUNTERS AND A GOSPEL OF SHALOM

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1. The Creation of a Global Village

The World has become more like a “global village” following the end of the Second World War. Historian Felipe Fernandez Armesto explains it as “the aftermath of the era of global empires” where “for most of (previous) history, most States had to be “unitary”, with one religion, ethnicity and identity”.¹ The obvious undeniable observation of past history was that..... “For many centuries, each of the great religions and cultural units of the world lived its own life in almost complete (geographical) isolation from the others”.²

The two important stages in the breaking down of this centuries long civilizational isolation were the discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco Da Gama in 1498 and, especially for the Islamic Middle East, the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798. Since then, the development of travel technologies and the greater ease and rapidity of communications have unified and connected the continents of the world.³ Other factors which have helped to create this present “global village” are found in the following Post World War II realities: “the range and intensity of migrations, the progress of ideas of racial equality, the multiplication of religions and the large scale redrawing of state boundaries”.⁴

Moreover, after World War II many international agreements and institutions were set up, acting as further catalysts to the process of organizational globalization, for example the International Fixed-Exchange Rate Monetary arrangement under the Bretton Woods agreement, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Court.⁵ Some of these agreements have subsequently broken down (i.e. Bretton Woods) or are considered ineffective (i.e. World Court) or have been accused of straying from the original purpose (i.e. IMF). Yet by the 1970s the process of globalization propelled by the Multi National Enterprise (MNE) as an organizational form had acquired a life of its own with enough worldwide influence to keep “sovereignty at bay”.⁶ To explain.....

In terms of its ability to move knowledge, people, capital, goods and services, and technology across borders, the process of globalization, led by MNEs, had gone far beyond the reach of any national sovereign government or international agreement.⁷

Globalization is an undeniable reality today involving the connectivity of the nations of the world in matters of trade and political cooperation. However commerce and travel also produces social interaction. "Globalization is the empirical condition of the modern world", which can be defined as "the network of interconnections and interdependences characteristics of modern social life". Consequently, there is now a strong sense that "the world is becoming, for the first time in history, a single social and cultural setting".⁹

It should be pointed out that in this present globalized post cold war context of MNE driven international trade and social interactions, a new interfaith world has already gradually emerged. As we have seen, the process for this goes back (before the cold war) all the way to the time of the ending of the Second World War. "One of the great facts about the later twentieth century is that the world has become an "inter-religious" world...adherent of different religions have been mixing with one another on a scale unprecedented in world history'.⁸ International Trade has eventually resulted in a "global village" which has created the opportunity for many to have interfaith encounters in a world in which societies have increasingly become multiracial, multi cultural and multi religious throughout.

2. Conflict in the Global Village

It is always nice to live in a village if it is an interesting, happy, peaceful place to live in. Like it or not, the global village fuelled by international capital will inevitably evolve a "global capitalist monoculture". One should not be surprised if "the power of transnational capitalism to distribute its cultural goods around the world is projected, towards the distribution of a capitalist monoculture". The process is already taking place. 'Out of the "incorporation" of all national cultures into the global capitalist economic system is arising an overarching culture of capitalism'. This understandably will provoke a fierce reaction in many places especially where global culture becomes overbearing. Some have said that religious fundamentalism is cultural protectionism. It is the 'self conscious defense of 'traditional' values and practices precisely defined by the undermining of tradition threatened by global compression'.¹⁰ Conflict in the global village takes place when traditional beliefs and communities are threatened by intruding global forces which appear to be strong enough to bring about their marginalization in their very own societies. In many such cases, some in these communities will respond in a decisive return to a measure of traditional beliefs and values. Sometimes this takes the form of a militant fundamentalism. It is a slippery slope for one to go from fundamentalism to religious extremism which could then, also, follow the logic of proactive communal violence against those who are seen to be the enemies of God and tradition.

Yet the battle between global and traditional forces do not account for all the conflicts taking place in the past century. In fact, the twentieth century was simultaneously the century of globalization as well as the bloodiest century in history. It was the century of Total War followed by bloody Totalitarianism and then by (the wars of) Terrorism. It was between the time of Totalitarianism and Terrorism within that century that mass genocide (a.k.a. ethnic cleansings) took place. Some of the contributory factors for the occurrences of mass genocide were: ¹¹

- i. The break up of Multi-National States.
- ii. The dissatisfaction with the failure of de-colonization to bring about economic prosperity.
- iii. Population pressure, leading to increased competition over land and diminishing resources.
- iv. The weakening of the nation-state due to global economy, instant worldwide communication, transnational migration and intermingling of population, the growth of international and regional organizations and self assertion within borders.
- v. The weakening of the influence of traditional religion and ideology coupled with a growth of new religions and fundamentalism.

One can think of many examples which will fit into the enumerated factors above.

In the light of the increased potential for communal conflicts in our global village the futuristic projections made by Philip Jenkins in “the Next Christendom”, especially in his chapter entitled “the Next Crusade”, are to be taken seriously. The thesis there is based on the observation that... ‘at the turn of the third millennium, religious loyalties are at the root of many of the world’s ongoing civil wars and political violence, and in most cases, the critical division is the age-old battle between Christianity and Islam’. ¹²

The following projections emanate from the above observation.

- i. Religious feuds will continue and become worse, because the future centres of global population will be mainly in countries that are already divided between, the two great religions and where divisions are likely to intensify. ¹³
- ii. The potential flashpoints will be those states with a minority representing 10 or 20 percent of the population, amply sufficient to resist efforts at religious harmonization, and quite enough to sustain military struggles. ¹⁴
- iii. Some of the problematic areas in Christian-Muslim relations are identified: “Issues of theocracy and religious law, toleration and minority rights, conversion and apostasy, will be among the most divisive in domestic and international politics for decades to come”. ¹⁵
- iv. A clear case of direct provocation for Muslims will be the present noisy euphoria in some evangelical missiological circles today:

Buoyed by successes across the globe, (western) evangelicals are talking seriously about spreading their faith within the...heartlands of Islam. To appreciate the sensitivity of such a movement, we have to remember that for a Muslim to abandon...faith is apostasy, an act punishable by death under Islamic law. As the maxim holds, "Islam is a one way door. You can enter through it, but you cannot leave".¹⁶

We all live in the same shrinking village and many things provoke us against each other. Unfortunately, religion is often part of the problem because it sometimes becomes a deadly flash-point in our increasing interfaith world. Even more tragically, the never ending tension between Christianity and Islam seems to be the most likely source of interfaith conflict for the foreseeable future. Will there ever be peace in the House of Abraham? It appears that what happens there will have implications for world peace.

3. The Singapore Experience – Revivalism and Competition

My country, Singapore is only a 618 sq km island republic. Today (9 Aug 2007), she celebrates 42 years of independence and nationhood. Like the global village, she is multi-racial, multi cultural and multi religious. She too knows about the experience of religious revivalism and competition over the past few decades, since the 1970s.

In 1970, the total number of professing Christians would not have exceeded 3% of the population. By 1978 Christians accounted for 8% and by 1980 the Christian percentage was 10.30% of the total population. This encouraged some to declare triumphantly that 'Christianity is the only religion that is making any significant number of converts and most of these are people who are leaving (traditional) Chinese religion'.¹⁷

However in a year 2000 population survey conducted by the Department of Statistics, the figures appear rather differently:¹⁸

Trends in religion

Percentage of population aged 15 and above

Source: Census of Population Office, Department of Statistics

| | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Buddhism | 27% | 31.2% | 42.5% |
| Christianity | 10.1% | 12.7% | 14.6% |
| Taoism | 30% | 22.4% | 8.5% |
| Islam | 15.7% | 15.3% | 14.9% |
| Hinduism | 3.6% | 3.7% | 4% |
| Other religions | 0.5% | 0.6% | 0.6% |
| No religion | 13% | 14.1% | 14.8% |

From the above, it is clear that the 1970s to the year 2000 have been decades of religious revivalism. Christianity, within 3 decades, grew from approx. 3% in 1970 to 14.6% in the year 2000. However Buddhism was the fastest growing religion in Singapore, growing from 27% in 1980 to 42.5% in 2000. The number of Muslims remained constant at 15% throughout, likewise those who claim to have “no religion”.

In this context of national religious instability, Christians in Singapore have been accused of being offensive in their preaching and evangelism by many of those who hold to traditional Chinese religions (Buddhism and Taoism), Islam, Hinduism and those of no religious persuasion. Our lack of sensitivity seems to be the unanimous verdict of almost every other person in our own land.

In October 1988, the Ministry of Community Development (MCD) tasked some academics from the National University of Singapore (NUS) to produce a study: ‘Religion and Religious Revivalism in Singapore’¹⁹ where, among other important observations, the various causes of religious conflict resulting from revivalism were noted in that study. They were as follows:-

- i. Religious zeal resulting in interfaith tensions because of the following reasons
 - a) a dominant more assertive religion is seen preying on a weaker, less organized one, hence displaying aggressive, unfriendly behaviour.
 - b) Insensitive manner of preaching, which gives no thought to the feelings of others.
 - c) Condemning the religious beliefs of others, resulting in direct insult, therefore implying a lack of respect.
- ii. Aggressive religious propagation resulting in organizational religious expansionism at the expense of other faith communities, thereby provoking interfaith competitiveness.
- iii. Religious organizations engaging in political activism which can bring it into a confrontational, adversarial relationship with the authorities.
- iv. Religious conflict being intertwined with issues of social stratification. Christians are generally seen to be better off and better educated proportionate to most of those who hold to Islam, Hinduism and traditional Chinese religions in Singapore. Therefore, religious conflict may also bring up concerns pertaining to sensitive issues involving the “Haves” and the “Have-nots” in our society.

Tragically, in both a global village and a cosmopolitan island republic, religion can be dangerous and be the reason for people to hate and struggle with each other. Sadly, Christians appear to have their fair share of the responsibility for things as they are now. The items mentioned above, however, should be interpreted as feedback from the general public received and collated by the academic researchers. Therefore it is safe to conclude, that according to our neighbours, we Singaporean Christians have forgotten about all the good Asian values we were supposed to have been brought up with i.e. goodwill with our neighbours to be practiced, in not doing things which will cause them to “lose face”. i.e. be embarrassed or ‘put to shame’. This is practiced when we are respectful to them as our elders and sensitive to their feelings in all our communication and interactions with them. Apparently, our Christian preaching with people of other

faiths seems to lack all those qualities associated with good manners so understood in our own Asian cultural context.

4. Social Order and State Imposed Religious Harmony

Concerning the construction of social order within the context of a global village, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto has a few considerations for us to take note of. ²⁰

- i. Pluralism is the conviction that a diversity of cultures i.e. religions, languages, ethnicities, communal identities, versions of history, value systems, can be accommodated on terms of equality in a single society.
- ii. Although pluralism assumes that reality cannot be contained by monist or dualist thought, pluralism is still not relativism. It does not claim that all cultures can be accommodated. (One can still rule out Cannibalism.) Conceptually, it is pluralism and not relativism which can leave open the possibility of peaceful argument about which culture, if any, is most suitable in a given context.
- iii. The ideal arrangement is the realization that the intense competition of rival ideologies can only be contained in democracies by a political pluralism: i.e. the admission to the lawful political arena, on equal terms, of parties representing potentially irreconcilable views as long as the Common Good is not endangered.
- iv. In a world, where globalization and other integrative processes make most historic communities defensive about their own cultures, there is much evidence of the difficulty of persuading those communities to co-exist peacefully with the contrasting cultures of their neighbours.

With this as our background, we can proceed to look at a useful tool for interpreting such conflict situations. The Four-Factor Theory of the dynamic of Conflict ²¹ has been attributed to 2 Christian social activists: Richard Hauser and Father Raymond Helmick, (S.J.) Both have been involved in ministry where societies have been torn by ethnic strife. Based on their experiences, the following model can help in the analysis of conflict situations in Mutli Cultural societies. Hopefully, a better understanding of inter-communal disharmony will enable all concerned to do their bit to defuse existing states of tension.

- | | | |
|------------------------|---|--|
| 1 st Factor | : | The Internal State of the Majority |
| 2 nd Factor | : | The Internal State of the Minority |
| 3 rd Factor | : | The Confrontation between Parties |
| 4 th Factor | : | The Context or (Social) Framework in which conflict takes place. |

In the 1st Factor, the feelings of the majority when things go wrong is crucial. The usual occurrence is that when things go wrong, the majority must have somebody to blame i.e. a scapegoat. Often it is the minority that is at the receiving end of majority rage. In the 2nd Factor, the feelings of the minority do not help to improve the situation either. They often play the role of the discontented and agitating sector of the community. Moreover, minorities tend to dramatize the role of being a victim which in itself is an invitation to further violence. The 3rd Factor involves understanding what the quarrel is all about, on its own terms. This may help in finding solutions. The 4th Factor refers to the social context especially to issues of the legal framework and to the more abstract concept of group identification.²² (i.e. the “who am I” question)

Applying the Four Factors to the Singapore situation, the 1st Factor points to the majority who hold to traditional Chinese religions, who feel preyed upon by an aggressive religious minority, in a way which shows no regard for the way we have all been taught to relate appropriately to one another. Surely a situation of thoughtless insult heaped upon injury.

The 2nd Factor brings us to appreciate the feelings of the Christian minority community. At the feeling level, the Christian community carries out her evangelistic work because of a sense of having a mission given to her by God, a sense of happy duty. Obligation and duty especially when they are happy ones can be very potent sources of motivation within the Asian cultural context.

The 3rd Factor brings us to the nature of the confrontation between the traditional Chinese religious majority and the still growing (mostly Chinese) Christian minority. What is going on is not yet at the stage of physical violence. There are however feelings of anger and tension on the part of the majority and feelings of unfair treatment on the part of the minority, especially when the authorities appear to openly favour the promotion of traditional religions in public spaces.

The 4th Factor is the social context created by the authorities for religions to coexist in our pluralist society. 2 instruments for that purpose are the Religious Harmony Act of 1990 and the Declaration on Religious Harmony which all religious leaders and followers are supposed to agree to hold to. Some even go so far as to have their respective congregations publicly declare it annually.

l) The Religious Harmony Act

In this context of State imposed religious harmony, one can conclude that the Religious Harmony Act is the manner in which the authorities place limits to the extent religious people can speak about and practice their deeply held convictions. We are free to believe, discourse and practice our faith until the Common Good and Peace in society is threatened. Then the authorities will step in, as the following newspaper report informs us:

From Straits Times article (12th May 2001) entitled:

Government reins in religious leaders:

The government came close to invoking the Religious Harmony Act on a number of occasions to stop religious leaders here from mixing politics with religion and putting down other faiths.

The religious leaders stopped their activities after they were summoned and warned by the police and Internal Security Department officers. Had they persisted, the law enacted in 1990 would have been used against them, said Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng in an interview with the Straits Times. Under the Act, they would have been slapped with a Restraining Order forbidding them from addressing any congregation or group on any subject. They would also be barred from holding office in any editorial board or committee related to their religious publications. Those who violate the order can end up in court and, on conviction, face a maximum penalty of a fine of up to \$10,000 or up to two years' jail or both.

If the Religious Harmony Act described above is about 'Boundaries' and limits to be set, then the 2nd instrument: the Declaration on Religious Harmony involves the element of societal 'Covenant'. It describes the social contract that forms the basis for all religious communities co-existing and functioning in this island republic.

II) Declaration on Religious Harmony

We, the people in Singapore, declare that religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-religious Nation.

We resolve to strengthen religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect, and understanding.

We shall always

- *Recognize the secular nature of our State,*
- *Promote cohesion within our society,*
- *Respect each other's freedom of religion,*
- *Grow our common space while respecting our diversity,*
- *Foster inter-religious communications,*

And thereby ensure that religion will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore.

Most Christian leaders in Singapore do not see any conflict between the State imposed Declaration on Religious Harmony and their own theological convictions which serve as a basis for their praxis. For them it is "*render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and render unto God what belongs to God*". (Mt 22:21)

5. Ecumenism as Basis for Interfaith Relations

Hans Kung made the startling declaration in the 1980s: 'No World Peace without Religious Peace'. He also made several related observations: ²³

- i. Great disasters have been occasioned in politics by religious strife among Christians.
- ii. The great world religions (not just Christianity) share in the responsibility for some of the most notorious powder kegs in the world today.
- iii. The most fanatical, the cruelest political struggles are those that have been coloured, inspired and legitimized by religion.
- iv. The alternative today is peace in the *ecumene* (inhabited world) or destruction of the *ecumene* itself.

Without making the mistake of reducing all political conflicts to religious ones and without assuming that religions, in general, and Christianity, in particular, can solve or prevent all global conflicts, he believes that it is time now to 'take seriously the fact that the religions must share in the responsibility for bringing peace to our torn and warring world', ²⁴ It starts first with a change of mind-set: the awakening of a global ecumenical consciousness.

Consequently, according to Kung's logic, we have less reason today for understanding ecumenism in a narrow, constricted, ecclesiocentric fashion: Ecumenism should not be limited to the community of Christian churches; it must include the community of the great religions, if ecumenism – in accordance with the original meaning *oikumene* – is to refer to the whole 'inhabited world'.²⁵ Hence the two fold distinctions are made between Ecumenism *ad intra* which concentrates on the Christian world and Ecumenism *ad extra*, which is oriented towards the whole inhabited earth. Both Ecumenism *ad intra* and Ecumenism *ad extra* are interdependent because 'peace is indivisible'.²⁶

The next mindset adjustment needed is the realization that interfaith relations is more a meeting of peoples rather than the meeting of religious systems. It is important for Christians to realize that we do not relate to other faiths, so much as we relate to people of other faiths, as people to people and person to person.

Consequently, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan can be better understood as the parable of the Good Neighbour (Luke 10:25-29). In fact, our Lord commands all who will listen to: 'go, and do likewise'. He taught this as a by-law of the Command 'to love our neighbour', which is understood in this parable as any human being who is in need of our help. The 'good neighbour' is the person who crosses confessional lines to help another human being in times of need. I believe there should be further reflection on this parable so that we can explicate a Good Neighbour Theology approach, especially in the midst of our conflict infested global village. I propose the following considerations:

- i. This parable challenges all who wish to follow the teachings of Christ to be prepared to do good to all people, whether or not they hold to the same religious beliefs as we do.
- ii. It also challenges us to do Good for its own sake, in obedience to the Commandment of Christ, and not for any other lesser ulterior motive such as religious conversion.
- iii. The parable also reminds us to humble ourselves and be willing to receive help from our neighbours some of whom may be of a different faith persuasion from us.
- iv. The parable teaches us against religious bigotry where we cannot recognize the good done by other human beings simply because they belong to another faith persuasion.
- v. This parable teaches us that sometimes the demands and activities of religious organizations may stand in the way of our loving and helping our neighbours, thus keeping us from keeping the Commandments of Christ

Taking the bold step forward in a direction of the Good Neighbour Theology will be the opposite of having a 'Fortress Mentality' criticized by evangelical leader Paul Little, when he observed with dismay that many Christians do not even have friends from outside their own faith community.

They would be poor ambassadors indeed who are sent overseas only to build compounds around themselves and their fellow diplomats and never venture forth to meet the citizens of their 'host countries'. In the same way, it would be sad for us to build fortresses around ourselves and befriend only believers.²⁷

The third mind-set change we need to make, is to have the realization that it is not possible to positively relate to our neighbours and yet ignore the importance to them of their religious commitments. 'The Christian encounter is a meeting of people with people and with people as people both in their religious life and in their non religious life'. This is because 'true conversation cannot take place unless each party to it can speak in terms of their own total system of thought and experience'. Consequently, many 'Asian churches are (today) gravely weakened in their witness by their lack of knowledge of and even interest in the cultures of their people'.²⁸

The serious question many Christians have is that of the dilemma of

how they can reconcile their own positions as witnesses to the truth in Jesus Christ with the necessity of subjecting themselves to that process of mutual correction and learning which belongs to a conversation when it is truly open.²⁹

What may help is that, 'when Christians are aware of the wonder of the treasure which they have in Christ, they will be able, not with fear, but with joy and expectation, to enter into the lives of those of other beliefs so as to discern in them their treasures'.³⁰

The fourth mind-set change is the recognition that diverse true descriptions of the sum total picture of a reality, can be taken together and constructed into a coherent thought system which will make sense of the various parts of the whole. Mark Heim in an attempt to avoid the 2 extremes of exclusivism and relativism introduces for us a very useful 'grammar of religious diversity'. His assumption is that the diversity of religions have a diversity of religious ends as well i.e. spiritual fulfillments. Not all of them are of equal value. In fact theoretically, he allows 'for the possibility of religious failure or utter lostness' as well as, the existence of a supreme religious fulfillment. His theology of religions is a four-term grammar with four possible co-existing options:³¹

- i. A specific and ultimate religious fulfillment
- ii. An inclusive all encompassing way by which others may converge towards that fulfillment (even while initially unaware that they do so)
- iii. Achievement of other religious fulfillments that are different from the ultimate religious end.
- iv. A state of existence without religious fulfillment at all.

Heim's paradigm appears most attractive for those who try to hold with integrity several related positions about other Faiths, within creative tension.

- i. To affirm Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world.
- ii. To acknowledge that Jesus Christ works freely amongst all peoples beyond the limits set upon Him by the institutional church.
- iii. To acknowledge that other Faiths also have their own valid spirituality although objectively speaking, there appears to be no dynamic equivalence with the Christian revelation i.e. they have their own religious ends.
- iv. Not all religious truth-claims are of equal truth value. Some may even be harmful to the Common Good of the global village.

Ecumenism *ad extra* taken seriously means that Christians should eventually overcome their inner insecurities and be at peace within, as they relate positively with men and women of other Faiths who are their Neighbours in everyday life; as well as to be able to appreciate everything good, true and beautiful in other Faith traditions, which their Neighbours hold to very dearly and yet, because of the Love of God in Christ Jesus, Christians bear faithful witness and testimony with their Neighbours, in pointing to the loving truth that is in Jesus Christ. This witness is carried out whilst recognizing that everything good and true in other Faith traditions is the common ground and point of contact for both sincere friendships between Christians and their Neighbours, as well as a bridge for the Gospel of Jesus Christ to have meaningful proclamation amongst all peoples.

6. Living Apologetic: Ecumenism and Missions together

More meaningful than intellectual arguments for the truth claims of the Christian faith, is the irresistible argument of a transformed life through the power of the Gospel. This lived reality of a new creation must surely be demonstrated in the realm of human relationships. According to the Johannine Jesus: we are called to be one as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one. Only then will the world believe in Jesus Christ through our witness (John 17:21-23). Consequently, it is 'inconceivable to divorce the obligation of the church to take the Gospel to the whole world from its (other) obligation to draw all of Christ's people together. Both are essential to the being of the church and the fulfillment of its function as the Body of Christ'. Therefore, the 'mutual coordination of mission and unity is non negotiable'. To claim that 'the ecumenical age has now taken the place of the age of missions is to misunderstand both; and to neglect either ecumenism or

missions is to lose both', altogether. The correct watch word, then is: Unity in Missions and Missions in Unity. ³²

In a world of religious strife and conflict over differences, real or perceived, a church in mission and unity can truly serve as a 'prophetic sign and foretaste of the unity and renewal of the human family as envisioned in God's promised reign'. After all, ecumenism is 'not a passive and semi-reluctant coming together but an active and deliberate living, and working together'. More than that, 'ecumenism is only possible where people accept each other despite differences. Our goal is not a fellowship exempt from conflict, but one which is characterized by unity in reconciled diversity'. ³³

Surely, the reality of 'unity in reconciled diversity' will be of interest to a strife torn global village where differences usually produce competition and conflict. A Christian community living out this scriptural ecumenism within her fellowship will certainly be able to declare the Gospel of Jesus Christ with integrity. In so doing, she becomes a manifest sign of hope to the global village.

Yet it takes a while to learn how to live ecumenically within the Body of Christ. One learns by the scriptures as well as through trial and error. It has been observed in church circles that previous paradigms for doing ecumenism was one where unity was without diversity or where diversity was without unity. Since then, the mind-set has shifted to one where unity seeks to preserve diversity and where diversity proactively strives after unity. How is this ever possible? The common witness and explanation of the universal church is that 'in the midst of all our diversity, there is a fixed centre: Jesus Christ'. It is 'this common foundation, this point of orientation, which enables us to engage in joint service and united witness' ³⁴ in the global village. This then, is the contour of a new paradigm for our ecumenism *ad intra* which then forms the basis for the much needed ecumenism *ad extra*: 'That the world might believe'. (John 17:23).

In practical terms, the witnessing church in unity and mission should simultaneously, begin to do away with at least those (interchurch) conflicts of which they are the cause: they can settle the doctrinal (and ensuing practical) differences that have divided the church (ecumenism *ad intra*). At the same time, they can proactively intervene for the sake of understanding and reconciliation between estranged peoples (ecumenism *ad extra*). ³⁵ Jesus said: Blessed are the peace makers, for they shall be called the children of God. (Mt 5:9)

7. A Gospel of Shalom on Asian Soil

It is not only important to know that the Lord Jesus has given us a message for the nations. It is also important to know how we are to communicate it with others. It was Koyama who said that 'Christianity suffers from a 'teacher complex'. We only want to teach others. Seldom are we able to learn from

others as well. In an interfaith global village where many religions compete to tell their story, it may be more than necessary for us to learn to initially earn the right to be heard by others. In truth, people will not be happy to hear us out if in the first place we are not willing to hear them out. Too much of Christian preaching is more of a monologue rather than a dialogue. 'Christ is the answer?' But did we ever find out what was the question in the first place?

As we listen to our friends from other faith communities, we can be enriched by some of their insights. For example, the Islamic tradition draws a very clear line as to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable discourse when one seeks to engage in *Dakwah* (missionary preaching). The Islamic Shariah identifies eight forms of unacceptable discourse.³⁶ They are:

- i. Public utterance of hurtful speech: to violate the honour of the person
- ii. Slandorous accusation: to tarnish the good name of a person
- iii. Libel: inventing something false about a person
- iv. Insult: to attack the dignity of a person
- v. Cursing: an invocation of malediction on a person
- vi. Accusation: to allege that a true believer is actually in a state of unbelief
- vii. Sedition: to prevent the faithful from practicing their faith
- viii. Blasphemy: hostile verbal attack on God and His prophet

Preachers of the Gospel in an interfaith global village would do well to heed the 8 forms of unacceptable speech. Perhaps we will then be able to share what we have in a more gentle, sensitive and unprovocative manner. A mindset change will have to take place here: To see people as people and not as objects of our programmes to convert them to Christ.

Contrary to the misconceptions of many, the evangelistic calling of the Christian is not negated when Christians engage in sympathetic dialogue and interaction with their neighbours of other faiths. Ecumenism *ad intra* has prepared them for the ecumenism *ad extra*. Ecumenism and evangelization always go hand in hand. However, in a global village prone to interfaith competition and conflict, it will have to be a Gospel of Shalom and not a provocative Gospel of Triumphalism. In fact, our Lord sent His disciples to heal and to preach the Kingdom. He instructed them to declare 'Shalom' to the homes that they visited in the course of their preaching. (Mt 10:7-14) What does it mean to take the Gospel of Peace seriously in our preaching and in our living?

The bad news is that we live in a world where a culture of violence is promoted and glorified at many levels in our global village. If Jesus Christ is Good News for us, then His Shalom should help us to transform the culture of violence around us, into a culture of Peace. Just as wars begin with the hearts and minds of human beings, peace also can start from within us because of the transforming friendship of Jesus. The apostle Paul declares Jesus as our Shalom (Eph 2:14) in the

following ways:

- i. Christ is the one who destroys hostility within us against others (v14)
- ii. Christ is the one who has abolished traditions and cultures that promotes hostility against others (v15)
- iii. Christ is the one who brings about fusion and the meeting together of two hostile parties "thus making peace" (v15)
- iv. Christ is the one who through His cross has reconciled us (together) to God, thus making us friends of God and of each other (v16)
- v. Christ is the one who came to teach and preach about peace to all warring parties, near or far (v17)
- vi. Christ is the one through whom we share together a common salvation (v18)
- vii. Christ is the one in whom we experience together the fullness of Deity (v18)

Moreover, our experience of Salvation in Christ results in Peace with God (Rom 5:1-2) This produces a Shalom lifestyle and a Shalom Missiological agenda as our purpose in life. Paul's teaching in Eph 2:15-18 points us in those directions.

However, Shalom means more than peace between warring factions. Shalom also refers to wellbeing and wholeness. In a global village where there are the majority still impoverished, crushed and marginalized because of their poverty and powerlessness, a Gospel of Shalom should bring about 'redemption and lift', a.k.a. the redemption of society. Those who proclaim a Gospel of Shalom should therefore engage in the creation of opportunities for the disadvantaged to be empowered to change their pathetic conditions of life. This they do in the strength of Jesus Christ, their Shalom and new found friend. This they do in the company of the friends of Jesus Christ as well, His beloved Church.

Aloysius Pieris a Sri Lankan Jesuit provides for us an interesting theological framework. He is convinced that evangelization is the top priority of the church today. However, he does not promote just any concept of evangelism. For him, it will have to be what he calls 'integrated evangelism', where evangelism is integrated with both the promotion of justice for the disadvantaged (James 1:27) and in the promotion of peace with all persons of goodwill (Luke 2:14). For him, the goal of evangelism is conversion not so much to organized religion as it is to God's invitation of Shalom in Jesus Christ.

Taking the Incarnation of God in Christ seriously, Pieris claims that the Jesus of the Gospels cannot be proclaimed or comprehended without the 2 fundamental principles of:

- i. Jesus as the irreconcilable antinomy between YHWH and Mammon.
It is here that the spirituality of Jesus is manifest for us to embrace as a lifestyle: allegiance to YHWH and the rejection of Mammon.
- ii. Jesus as the irrevocable covenant between YHWH and the poor.
Jesus invites us to be like Him, to have a heart for the poor and to identify ourselves with them.

We are called to bear witness to this Jesus who gives us Shalom and to, at the same time, live in truthful imitation of Christ. It is in living out these 2 priorities of Jesus Christ that the church will be the authentic Body of Christ and truly discover her life calling in our global village. Pieris claims that in standing in solidarity with the wretched of the earth we truly understand the meaning of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, because this 'Mission given to the church...is absent from the scriptures of other religions. Therefore it imparts to the Church a unique evangelical identity not shared by the non biblical faiths'.³⁷

8. The Antioch Vision for an Ephesian Moment

A noted Missiologist, Andrew Walls, believes that the church is now living in a *kairos* moment, at a crossroads in Christian history. What is known as globalization or the global village is also referred to as the return of the Ephesian moment in the history of the church today. 'In our own day the Ephesian moment has come again and come in a richer mode than has ever happened since the first century'.³⁸ So what happened at the original Ephesian moment described especially in Ephesians 2 by the Apostle Paul?

According to Walls, the Ephesian moment was 'the social coming together of people of two cultures to experience Christ'. Today this is happening on a much greater scale where 'most of the world's Christians are now Africans, Asians or Latin Americans'.³⁹ At this Ephesian (*kairos*) moment the church like the global village is multi-racial and multi cultural, yet holding on to the one Lord, one Faith and one Baptism. (Eph 4:5)

What is even more exciting is that the vast majority of these new Christians will be considered poor by western standards. In other words, we will see a church of the poor coming forth and being manifest, which will be racially and culturally diverse. Surely this will enrich the life of the total church, including her theological understanding and the articulation of the Christian faith that we are all supposed to have in common.

Surely this present multi racial and multi cultural reality of the Christian community will put our claims of the oneness of the church to the test. The older churches of the world can either react in hostility to the newer versions of Christianity that are appearing today or she can leave them alone, establishing a

cold distance between them. Walls advocates a meaningful interaction between old and newer churches. 'We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ'.⁴⁰

What we need to realize is that this Ephesian moment did not suddenly appear out of nowhere spontaneously. The Ephesian moment came about because of the faithful practice of the Antioch example. For it was in Antioch that cultural borders were being crossed as the Gospel was being preached to people of other races and cultures. (Acts 11:19-30) It was at Antioch that cross cultural evangelization was first seriously practiced with earnestness. Moreover, not only were cultural aliens converted in Antioch but the church in the city became an epi-centre for the sending out of more missionaries to go forth and do the same (Acts 13:1-3). The Ephesian moment happened because the Antioch example was followed. In other words, this Ephesian moment today can be even further enlarged if we take the mission of our World Parish seriously. If I may quote from that old Methodist, the Rev John Wesley.

Let me now tell you my convictions in this matter. I look upon all the world as my parish, by this, I mean, that in whatever part of it, I am in, I consider it appropriate, right and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of Salvation.

Letter to the Rev James Hervey 1739

End Notes

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