

Religious Pluralism and Religious Identity from an Indian perspective

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Opening Prayer:

(1) "Our Father" sung in Polish.

(2) ASATO MA SADGAMAYA FROM DELUSION LEAD ME TO TRUTH
TAMASO MA JYOTIRGAMAYA FROM DARKNESS LEAD ME TO LIGHT
MRITYOR MA AMIRITAMGAMAYA FROM DEATH LEAD ME TO IMMORTALITY
OM Shanti, Shanti, Shanti OM Peace Peace Peace
(Bu: 1,3,28)

May the river of my life flow into the sea of love that is the Lord. ...

May the thread of my song be not cut before my life merges in the sea of love
(Rig Veda II, 28, 5)

(3) ISLAM: BISMILLAH-IR-RAHMAN-IR-RAHIM

In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.

My dear Sisters and Brothers,

In this Presentation I am going to highlight the essential aspects of Religious Pluralism as acknowledged by scholars both in India and the world over, as well as our own Religious Identity which emerges by belonging to a particular Religion, and in our case it is Christianity, since the people whom I am addressing are by and large Christians, and the interaction or more deeply the CONFLUENCE of these two features gradually forming us Interreligious persons, after the example of our “Sat Guru” or “True Teacher” **Jesus**, who is presented in all the four Gospels, as I will show you in the course of my presentation, *as an Interreligious Person par excellence*.

Religious Experience of Humankind

During the last four or five decades extensive scientific study and research have been undertaken into the religious experience of humankind and study of comparative religions to discover the basic experience from which all religions spring, by serious scholars such as Mircea Eliade, Ninian Smart, etc. Ninian Smart has written a very comprehensive book, *The Religious Experience of Humankind*. It is a very pervasive work, beginning from the human experience of God from prehistoric times and primitive religions down to contemporary religious experience, including Ideologies like Marxism and so on. In the very opening lines, he says: “Throughout history and beyond in the dark recesses of people’s earliest culture, religion has been a vital and pervasive feature of human life. To understand human history and human life it is necessary to understand religion... Each of the great religions is like a *growing organism*.”¹ People who have read and reflected on this great work say, “The author holds that the study of religion can be a scientific discipline... Whether guided by God or spirits or the hope for ‘*Nirvana*’, men/women have always tried to see beyond their senses.” It is opined that “in this study of great world religions, the author shows that religions grow and change and affect each other just as living organisms do... One cannot understand human history without knowing something about people’s religions.”² **Religion is considered as the liberative core of every culture.**

This study and research have brought out notably two conclusions:

- (1) All human groups without any exception have had an *Isvara Anubava*, an experience of the Sacred, or the Divine Mystery.
- (2) This experience of the Divine Mystery is veering inexorably towards the fact that this Divine Mystery in **ONE**.

The oldest Hindu Scripture, the Rig Veda says: “*Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti*” (1.164.46), meaning “Being is one but the wise speak of it in manifold ways.” It was this *One Being* which stirred the minds of the Vedic Sages and Seers of all time, so that all “gods” were seen as but names and forms (*nama rupa*) of this *One Reality*.

When I was in the Novitiate in 1958-1960, I happened to read a book on the Eskimos, now called the **INNUIT**. An Oblate missionary was narrating his experience with the Eskimo or InnuIt. He asked an InnuIt, “How do you call ‘God’? The InnuIt stood still, took a deep breath and uttered a very long loud cry, his face radiant! The Missionary continues: “I did not understand the meaning of the sound that was uttered; but the way he uttered the sound, and from the radiance in his face, I understood that God for this InnuIt is someone immense, transcendent, and unfathomable. I knelt down to worship the “God” I saw in him!” The Oblate Missionary was baffled that the “God” he came to preach to these “uncivilized” and “uneducated” InnuIt, has already visited this people!

Swami Bede Griffiths, OSB (1906-1993) with his deep experience as an Indian Sannyasi (Hermit) affirms this: “God has graced every tradition with INSIGHT into the DIVINE MYSTERY, from the most primitive to the most

¹ Ninian Smart, *Religious Experience of Humankind*, Lancaster: University of Lancaster, 1970, 11, 13.

² Smart, *Religious Experience of Humankind*, back cover.

sophisticated – each has a gift to bring to the world”. Rudolf Otto, in his *Idea of the Holy*, has attempted to uncover the hidden source of religion. Human beings faced with the vastness of the mysterious universe, awoken to what he calls, “*mysterium tremendum et facinans*”, i.e., *a tremendous and fascinating mystery*.³ It awakens one to try to explore it, and to fathom its immensity. It awakens a yearning in her/him for something inexplicable.

Spirituality is an experience of the “BEYOND” as they say in the Hindu Tradition, “PARATH PARAM”, i.e., Beyond the Beyond. God in Hinduism is addressed as BRAHMAN from the root *brh* or *bri*, which means to “expand” or to “grow”. Brahman – God, therefore, is an ever growing, expanding reality. The Spirit reaches the depth of the Divine, the Spirit/God is beyond all *nama/rupa*, i.e., names and forms. Spirituality calls for *SELF-TRANSCENDENCE*.⁴

A new paradigm shift

This totally NEW VIEW of the Universal presence of God and his relationship to all humanity and to the Universe, calls for a NEW VISION. God is not the monopoly of a particular people. SHE/HE is the ABBA -- FATHER-MOTHER of all as Jesus himself taught. This brings to the fore a great TRUTH: **REALITY IS PLURALISTIC, IT MUST BE RESPECTED AND ACCEPTED**. Before the Vatican Council II, Christians by and large were of the view that the Holy Bible is the only Revelation of God or the Word of God, and when it comes to religion, God is dealing only with the Jewish “Chosen People” and later through Jesus Christ, dealing with the Christian people who are now the “New People of God”. During the Vatican Council II Christians were jolted out of their dogmatic slumber to realize that Israel and the Old Testament are but SIGNS or SACRAMENTS pointing to the God dealing with all the nations. Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. (1914 – 2009), the famous Belgian-born Dutch Catholic Theologian, in his great work “Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God” makes this Dramatic Statement: **“Non-Christian Religions are Sacraments of God”**. When the Old Testament is read in Christianity, it became the New Testament, pointing to God dealing with the nations through JESUS CHRIST the SACRAMENT OF GOD. JESUS CHRIST is again a SIGN pointing to GOD present and acting among all people and all nations. As we read in the book of Revelation: “...I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne...”(Rev. 7:9). At the end of the Vatican Council II (1960-1965) the Church through the Council Document “*Nostra Aetate*” exhorts her sons and daughters, “to **REGOGNIZE, PRESERVE and PROMOTE** all that is good in the Ancient Religions”, and speaks very highly of them (§2).

Jesus the Christ is a particular, historical expression of the WORD to a particular people in time and space; but one should not make this CHRIST-EVENT absolute for all people.

God by the action of his Spirit and Word has brought into existence, innumerable religions from time immemorial. As I mentioned in the introductory historical survey, God has not left out a single human group from his embrace, every single human group has had an Experience of the DIVINE giving rise to a plethora of Sacred Books and Religious literature, feasts and festivals, many forms of meditation, leading to the exploration of the INNER WORLD OF THE SPIRIT. Swami Bede Griffiths, OSB, says that the present modern discovery of the outer space is a mere child’s play when compared with the exploration of the inner world of the Spirit! A Theologian named Romanus says that God has not yet finished with his creation; we can expect greater things to come!

The Religious Panorama – the fabric of the Holy Spirit, is indeed very grand! There is a beautiful German VISION of GOD: GOTT IST DIE ALLE UND ALLESUM FASSENGE LIEBE

³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed., transl. John W. Harvey, London: Oxford University Press, 1950.

⁴ See Swami Joseph A. Samarakone, OMI “Searching for the Sacred,” A paper presented at the Indo-German Seminar, “Searching for the Sacred,” Chennai, January 2007.

God is the ALL-ENCOMPASSING LOVE, HOLDING EVERYONE and EVERYTHING.

There is a beautiful sacred text in the oldest Upanishad namely, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (BU)*, which runs as follows:

Om purnam adah, purnam idam
purnat purnam udayachate
purnashiya purnam adaya
purnam eva avasishyate
Om Shanti... Shanti... Shanti... (BU V.2.1).⁵

This Upanishadic *sloka* in a way sums up the *Vision of God for the Humankind and the Universe*, going beyond all sectarian boundaries through which, religions in particular, have divided people from people. Happily Mother Nature has been unaffected by this narrow fragmentation. This *sloka* – the Scared Verse, holds up Mother Nature in her pristine beauty, in the form of ‘unity in diversity’.

In India we often have Interreligious live-ins lasting for about a week, where people belonging to 10 or more World Religions and Ideologies come together. They come together, pray together, read and reflect on the Sacred Scriptures of all these various Religions, meditate together and Celebrate life and God’s manifold gifts he has showered on these Religions. I have presided over many of these Prayer and worship sessions. In one of these, one of the most touching experience of the largeness of heart was a prayer said by a Sikh gentleman Kulwant Singh : **“When I have found Thee, there is no “mine” and “not mine”, everybody is MINE!”** Later he shared with me that he enjoyed a very lucrative post in the Indian Diplomatic Service. He heard an INNER VOICE calling him to resign this post and come. The “WORD” was so strong it would not let him go! God took him to a LEPER COLONY in the state of Maharashtra where he looks after a group of lepers. He told that it is the 3-hour prayer and meditation which he has every day in the morning that gives him the power and strength to work among these lepers; to take their hands and bind their wounds with love and care as though they were his own hands. Kolkata St Mother Theresa narrates a similar experience working with the lepers.

I read another touching story about one ETTY HILLESUM, who lived in the NAZI CONCENTRATION camp for Jews. She wrote, “We can be at home ANYWHERE, if we carry the HOME within us”. In that camp she reached out to many to comfort them before she herself was consigned to the AUSCHWITZ - the HULOCAUST! While alive she decided to be the ‘thinking heart of the Barracks’.

The truth is this: I can feel at home anywhere, with any person or group provided my HEART and MIND are OPEN, and life is much happier and richer this way.”⁶

Inauguration of the Mission of Jesus

Scripture scholars consider Luke the Evangelist as the best New Testament writer who is “incorrigibly systematic”! In Luke’s Gospel Jesus is presented as having been anointed by the Father through the Holy Spirit (3:21-22), now full of the Holy Spirit returned from the Jordan, and was led (or driven) by the Spirit in the wilderness where he fasted for forty days (4:1). Then Jesus filled with the power of the spirit, returned to Galilee (4:14) and began his ministry.

⁵ The meaning of this verse is as follows: “Om! That is Fullness, this is Fullness, / From Fullness comes Fullness. / When Fullness is taken from Fullness / Fullness remains. / OM! Peace, Peace, Peace!” Though this mantra is found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, this is placed at the head of the *Isa Upanishad as a Blessing* and recited during the *Pratha Sandhya* (Morning Prayer) in many an *Ashram* in India, both Hindu and Christian.

⁶ Joe Manath, SDB, INSIDER-OUTSIDER, New Leader Vol.128, No.15, August 1-15, 2015, p.7.

Now comes a poignant moment when Jesus comes to “Nazareth where he had been brought up” (4:16) and enters the Synagogue on a Sabbath day, stands and reads from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah (4:18-19) to witness to his mission: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21). All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth (4:22). **JESUS’ MISSION is INAUGURATED.** Now Luke intentionally places a very important teaching of Jesus as his very **FIRST TEACHING**: Jesus places before his Jewish audience two Old Testament events.

- 1) “...there were many widows in Israel in the time of Prophet Elijah, when.....there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon (4:25,26)”, a non-Jewish person.
- 2) “...there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the Prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian (4:27)”, again a non-Jewish person.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the way Jesus perceives the incident about the healing of Naaman, the leper, by Prophet Elisha. In the Old Testament narrative (cf 2Kgs. 5:1-19), the punch-line is that **“there is no God in all the earth except in Israel!”** 5:15. In the Gospels, however, Jesus handles this same event in a very different way:

“...there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the Prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian (4:27)”!

When the Jewish people heard this “all in the Synagogue were filled with rage, they got up and drove him out of the town ...” 4:29.

Jesus was shaking their very foundational belief: “Israel is the only chosen people of God”. They were so rooted in this Ideology, they went to the extent of making a monster out of Yahaweh, a “tribal God”, who destroys other nations, their religions and cultures in order to settle this nation in a “land flowing with milk and honey”! With the passage of time they added a little grace to this Ideology: Israel was chosen “so that all nations may be blessed through them”! Has this ever happened? In fact history witnesses to the contrary even to this day!

The beautiful experience of God as Yahweh - I AM WHO I AM, the source of all LIFE, is completely distorted! Jesus right through his mission was labouring hard to liberate this “tribal god” of the Jewish people and reveal him as ABBA - the FATHER/MOTHER of ALL.

Some, especially the Mystics, do not want to call God as ONE, since “ONE” is a human category. They prefer to call GOD a MYSTERY.

A similar idea is expressed in a Shaivite Scripture:

THENNAR UDAYA SIVANE POOTRI
ENNADAVARKUM IRAIVA POOTRI (THIRUVASAGAM IV/164,165)

Hail to THEE, O SIVA – the GOD OF LOVE, who holds this Southern Nation as your special possession; you are the same ONE who is worshipped as GOD by ALL THE NATIONS, Hail to THEE.

The later day Church though claiming to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, rooted for a more triumphalistic model of the Jewish people, called itself the “People of God”, equating the CHURCH to the KINGDOM in an exclusivistic world-view. Incidentally in the early days of the Church, it was of the understanding that Jesus and his Good News should be confined only to the Jewish People. It was by the action of the Holy Spirit the early Church broke out of the “Jewish shell” to become the Universal Church as it is beautifully described in the Cornelius-event (Act 10:1-48) which culminates in God’s Revelation to Simon Peter:

“God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34)

In the Book of Wisdom we read: “**You are merciful to all**, O Lord, and **despise nothing** that you have made (11:24). In the Book of Deuteronomy we read how **God has given HIS WORD to all people**. Surely, this commandment (“THORAH”) that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross the other side of the sea for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” No, **the WORD is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart** for you to observe (Deut. 30:11-14). In the Old Testament the word “THORAH” meaning LAW is the compendium of God’s Word. Here again we have restricted the presence of the WORD of GOD only to the Bible. But Jesus our SAT GURU shows the way.

Jesus the Interreligious Person par excellence

At the very outset of his MISSION Jesus having awakened his Jewish People out of their dogmatic slumber continues this MISSION as his MINISTRY unfolds:

When asked by the Samaritan woman which is the true God one should worship, Jesus says: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship Him” (Jn. 4:21, 23). Further, the beautiful prayer that Jesus has taught his disciples, the “Our Father,” has arisen beyond all sectarian boundaries and has become a veritable Universal Prayer that every believer in God can pray. In every Interreligious meeting we use this prayer “Our Father”.

Sufi Rumi (1207 – 1273), the Islamic mystic says: “...lovers of God have no religion but God alone.”⁷ As I read the Gospel in the context of an *Ashram*, with its interreligious thrust, I am pleasantly surprised that they are completely devoid of the superiority claims of the Old Testament. In the Gospels, we do not see Jesus denigrating any one religion. On the contrary, we see him recognizing and praising the faith of people belonging to other religions, e.g., one is able to appreciate the moment of ‘conversion’ for Jesus when he came face to face with the Syrophenician woman whose humble demeanour so struck him that he was able to recognize a “great faith” in the woman (Mt. 15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30). Again, amazed at the faith of the Roman Centurion, Jesus exclaims: “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith!” (Mt. 8:10; Lk. 7:1-10); in the same breath, he adds: “... many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham ... in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 8:11). He was able to form and shape the minds of his disciples who were all Jews, that many years after the departure of Jesus Christ they were able to present faithfully in the Gospels the interreligious person, Jesus.

This is the great Legacy that Jesus has bequeathed to his disciples and to all people of goodwill, which every disciple should strive to follow with every fibre of his being. But Christianity, which claims to continue his work among the people, got embroiled in Roman imperialism, and equated one particular historical institution, namely, the Church with the Kingdom of God, as someone cryptically remarked: “Jesus preached the Kingdom and out came Churchianity!”

The Official Church identified itself with the Kingdom and set on a mission of bringing everyone into the Church. A wrong understanding of the Theology of Religions informed the Missionary Ecclesiology of that time. Those who were outside the Church were considered to be anti-Kingdom: “*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*” (meaning, “Outside the Church there is no salvation”). This doctrine was followed for more than a thousand years until 1949 when it was declared *heretical* by Pope Pius XII and, eventually, a Jesuit priest, Leonardo Feeny of Boston was excommunicated since he adamantly held on to this doctrinal proposition.

⁷ Bede Griffiths, *Universal Wisdom*, London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994; *Poems of Rumi*, 106; *The Shepherd’s Prayer*, 362.

With the above doctrine as the basis, missionaries were sent out into the world on a mission of “conversion”. With a missionary zeal they wielded the long handle and were trying to bring in everyone into the fold of the Church by means fair or foul. Conversion was the order of the day. When the missionary proclaimed that Jesus Christ is the *Life of the World*, the world witnessed death and destruction of continents and cultures, mostly initiated by the associates of the missionaries! Thus, the Church with its imperialistic spirit, and not the spirit of Jesus, distorted the Vision of God for Humankind and the Universe in terms of Unity and Communion, and brought about Division and Separation. Some other religions too followed suit.

Today, especially after Vatican Council II, and the new paradigm shift, the Church has begun, at least conceptually, to realize her life and work in reference to the Kingdom. The Council proclaimed that “the Church in Christ is in the nature of a sacrament, a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all people...” (*Lumen Gentium*, §1). As a ‘sacrament’ or a ‘sign’ of Jesus “who revealed that God is with us to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life” (*Dei Verbum*, §4), the Church should live this legacy of Jesus and proclaim God’s saving love for all people, irrespective of their religious affiliation.⁸

When we look into the basic teachings of the Founders of almost all the World Religions there is a beautiful symphony harmoniously resonating through. No wonder they come from the same Source, nourished by the same Spirit (cf Ezek. 47:1-12)! A couple of years ago I came across a scholarly book by Dr Rayappa A. Kasi (Ecowarrior) entitled: “*In search of the Lost Kingdoms. Asoka’s Dhamma and Jesus Christ’s Kingdom of God*”. Dr Rayappa Kasi is trying to show that the Beatitudes proclaimed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount resonate very well with the Rock Inscriptions.⁹

But invariably when it comes to “MY RELIGION”, the *AHAMKAR* → the “I-Maker”, the Ego raises its ugly head giving rise to Religious Fundamentalism. In the Tamil language we have a word for Religion - MADAM. But this same word also refers to a “Rogue Elephant”, “to be drunk with Religious Bigotry”. The word *MADA* refers to one of the six **Capital Sins** as enumerated in Hinduism. Some Hindus have told me that they get very humiliated when Christians ask them to be converted to their Religion, without realizing that they are what they are because of the Religion to which they belong! This Religious Bigotry has given rise to so much of Religious conflicts, violence and wars right down the centuries. Paradoxically, it has been said that more blood has been shed in religious wars than all the World Wars put together!

Kingdom of God: The Legacy of Jesus

The Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus is an all-inclusive reality. It is not so much a new religion but a new vision of society. This new vision springs out of his foundational experience of God as the *ABBA*, the Father of all. Jesus called this, the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven. This new society, which has its roots in God or Heaven, has to become a reality on this Earth, here and now in our own lives. We find a similar vision in the *Katha Upanishad*: “The Tree of Eternity has its roots above and its branches on earth below. Its pure root is Brahman, the immortal from whom all the worlds draw their lives, and whom none can transcend. For this Self is the Supreme” (II.3)!¹⁰

⁸ Joseph A Samarakone, OMI, Religion and the Arts, *My Adventure with Interreligious Dialogue*, Vol.12-1-3(2008), p 131-132.

⁹ Ibid Chapter 4: *Historical Jesus – A Practioner of Dhamma, Kandahar, Greek/Aramic Bilingual Rock Inscriptions*, LTD Media Publications, Chennai, India, 2014, p 207-217.

¹⁰ *Katha Upanishad*, II.3 trans. Eknath Easwaran, *The Upanishad*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007, 95.

If we could sum up in one word the teaching of Jesus, it is **Kingdom**. This word 'Kingdom' is found 122 times in the Gospels whereas in all the four gospels we find the word 'church' only in two places and that too in the Gospel of Mathew (16:18; 18:17). Scientific Biblical hermeneutics tells us that the word 'church' probably was not a concept in the vision of Jesus.

Who are the people worthy of the Kingdom? Jesus answers this clearly by narrating the parable of the Wedding Banquet (Mt. 22:15-20; Lk. 14:15-20). All People are welcome to the Kingdom provided they prove themselves worthy by practising the 'Kingdom values' which we find enumerated in the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:1 ff.). Incidentally, these teachings form the basis of every religion and Ideology. Hence, a person who wants to be a follower of the Kingdom need not necessarily break away from her/his ancestral Religion. Here in India Mahatma Gandhi is recognized as a great follower of Jesus who practiced the Gospel more than any other average Christian. But he remained a Hindu till his death.

When asked who is the greatest in the Kingdom, Jesus says: "the least one who is worthy to be in the Kingdom is even greater than John the Baptist" (Mt. 11:11). Jesus' teaching is very revolutionary. He didn't give much importance to belonging to a particular religion.

Jesus Christ - the Mystic

For all aspiring to be disciples of Jesus, **Jesus of the Gospel is the ultimate norm of Discipleship**. One of the outstanding features in the life of Jesus that strikes us on the face is the long hours he spent in mountains and deserted place in PRAYER to his ABBA – FATHER.

- All the three synoptic gospels tell us that he fasted for forty days in the desert". The Gospel tells us that "the Spirit drove him in the wilderness" (Mk. 1:12).
- Mk. 1:35 In the morning while it was still very dark (before dawn) Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place and there he prayed.
- Lk. 6:12 Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.

Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray as we read in Mt. 6:5-15. Here Jesus tells his disciples, "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners, so that they may be seen by others.... But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.... When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases."(6:5-7).

When we read this text of the Gospel in our context we allow this text to flow into our Indian spiritual tradition, we read this text as follows: "Whenever you pray **go into your INNER ROOM**, meaning '**cave of the Heart**', and pray to your Father in secret (meaning, 'silence')." This refers to the process of "Meditation". Here "Meditation is understood as the process of leaving the level of the mind, the "world of the senses", where one's EGO dominates, and going down deep into the "cave of the heart" in silence and enter into communion with the FATHER. St. Augustine (354 – 430) in his *Confessions* describes the process of Meditation leading to the experience of *theosis*: "*Seek for yourself, O Man; search for your true self. He who Seeks shall find himself in God*". Swami Gnanananda of Tirukoviloor, the Guru of Swami Abhishiktananda, speaking of meditation says: "Return within to the place where there is nothing and take care that nothing comes in. Penetrate to the depths of yourself, to the place where thought no longer exists and take care that no thought raises its head. There where nothing exists is fullness; there

where nothing is seen is the vision of being; there where nothing appears any longer is the sudden appearing of the Atman – the Self! Dhyana is this”¹¹

Swami Abhishiktananda (Fr. Henri de Saux, OSB) (1910 – 1973) one of the pioneers in the Christian Ashram movement who along with Fr. Jules Monchanin (1895 - 1957) (who later took the name of Swami Parama Arubi Ananda) founded one of the earliest Catholic Ashrams, the **Saccidananda Ashram** (Shantivanam) on the banks of the river Kaveri in Thanneerpali near Kulithalai in Tamil Nadu, speaking about meditation says, “*Meditation is the fundamental dimension of every human person without which he cannot be a human person!*” He makes this statement in a small book entitled, “**PRAYER**”, the only book he wrote in English in 1967. In the same book he muses on our Christian Priests and Religious who say that they are “part-time contemplatives”! He asks amusingly, “Can there be a ‘part-time man’?” In the same way as there cannot be a ‘part-time man’, so there cannot be a ‘part-time contemplative’!” When people asked him, “Then what about the people who do not meditate?” He calmly responds, “They are as good as dead!” As the Dhammapada says, “Watchfulness is the path of immortality: unwatchfulness is the path of death. Those who are watchful never die: those who do not watch are already as dead” (Verse 21, Translation by Juan Mascaro). The *Patanjali Yoga Sutra* defines Meditation as “*CITTA VIRUTI NIRODA*” the stopping of all thought-waves of the mind.

The Gayatri Mantra

The people of India have been passionately longing for Spiritual Vision. There is a prayer in the *Vedas* which for over 4000 years has been in lips of millions of Indians. It is the *Gayatri Mantra*:

TAT SAVITUR VARENIAM

BHARGO DEVASYA DHIMAH

DHIYO YO NAH PRACHODAYAT¹² Rig Veda III,62,10

After adding a first line and a last line the *Gayatri Mantra* is chanted as follows:

OM BHUR BHUVAH SVAH

TAT SAVITUR VARENIAM

BHARGO DEVASYA DHIMAH

DHIYO YO NAH PRACHODAYAT

OM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI

This could be translated as follows: O Divine Breath, you are in the earth, in the sky above and in the havens beyond. We have come to Mediate on the glorious Splendour of *SAVITRI – the VIVIFIER DIVINE / LIFE-GIVER*. May SHE/HE illumine our *DHI* – the penetrating or intuitive faculty / May this *LIGHT* illumine our minds and our hearts. (This is a laboured translation to bring out the true meaning).

¹¹ Abhishiktananda Swami, Guru and Disciple: An Encounter with Sri Gnanananda, a Contemporary Spiritual Master, p.75.

¹² Juan Mascaro, *The Bhagavad Gita*, translation first published 1962, published by Penguin Books India 1994, Introduction p.10.

Early in the morning as the SUN rises with all its Splendour, (sometimes also at Sunset), people after performing their ablutions stand before the **Rising Sun** and chant this *Sacred Gayatri Mantra*. The people see in the SUN the presence of the **Divine** as *Mother and Father*, source of *Light and Life*, Heat and Energy - **TAPAS**

It is customary to chant the *Gayatri Mantra* before *Meditation* or *Dhyana*. Here *Meditation* is seen as the process of becoming the “**Contemplata**” - *that which one is contemplating*, namely, the **DIVINE**. *Meditation, therefore, transforms one into the Divine.*

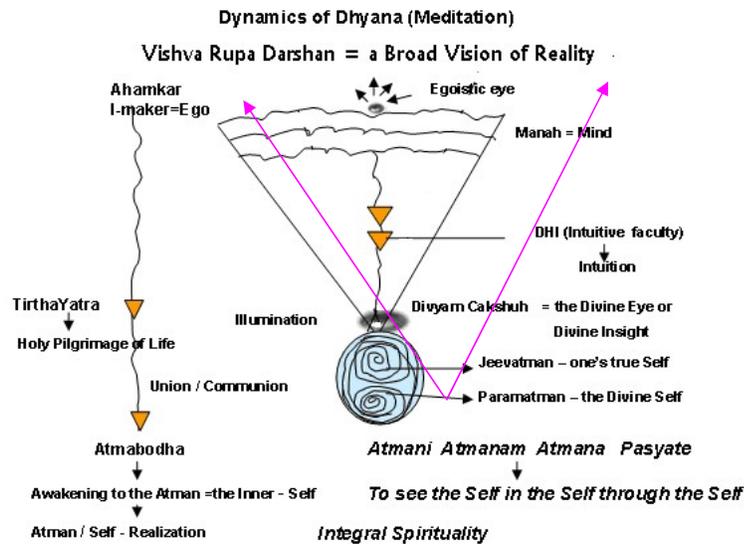
The Dynamics of Dhyana - Meditation

In the Gospel of Matthew the Evangelist uses two Aramaic words which are irreconcilable opposites – **ABBA** and **MAMMON**. Jesus says, “..... You cannot serve **God** and mammon (*Mt. 6,24*). The whole life of Jesus was a life-long struggle, moving away from Mammon and turning towards **ABBA**, as shown in his Temptations in the desert. Mammon represents the *false centre* – the *Ego* and **ABBA** represents the *True Centre*.

When a person is at the level of her/his mind the ‘*egoistic-eye*’ dominates; at this level God is merely the *Object* of her/his worship. Most of our prayers, especially vocal prayers and rituals which are mechanically gone through, are at this level! Here a person looks at everyone and everything in reference to her/his ‘*selfish-self*’ – the *Ahamkar* = the *I-maker*.

When the moment of grace comes to a person she/he realizes that she/he is in her/his false ego centre. Then she/he turns towards the - **Abba** and away from the false centre **Mammon**. This is the moment of **Conversion**. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore says: “When a man gets rid of his “*ahamkar*” or Ego, he enters into his true inheritance and his true inheritance is God”. The person relentlessly moves towards the true Centre – God or Abba and realizes the **Divine** or in our Indian terms, attains **Atmabodha**. So the Holy Pilgrimage of one’s life – **Tirtha Yatra**, is a life-long journey of Conversion, **from Ahamkar (ego) to Atmabodha**. Once a person reaches this stage she/he doesn’t stay there; her/his “**third-eye**” (*Divyam Cakshuh* or *Divine Eye*) is opened and she/he now sees everything and everyone through God’s eye, – at this level God becomes the **subject of her/his being**, - as our OMI Constitutions and Rules says, “**we see the world through the eyes of the crucified Saviour**”, (cf CRR 4) and begins to **serve everyone without the least trace of self-seeking, with total self-abnegation**. She/he is thus gifted with the “*Broader Vision of Reality*” – **Vishva Rupa Darshana Yoga**. This is **Integral Spirituality**. In Srimad Bhagavad Gita the *Bhagavan* – the *Lord*, speaking about the spiritual state of such a person says: “She/he sees the **Atman** (the **Divine Self**) in the heart of all beings and sees all beings in the **Atman**... then I never leave her/him and she/he never leaves me. She/he who in this oneness of love, loves me in whatever she/he sees, wherever this person may live, whatever work this person may do, in truth this person lives in me. And she/he is the greatest **Yogi**... when the pleasure and pain of others is her/his own pleasure and pain” (6 / 29 - 32).

Vishva Rupa Darshanam – A Broad Vision of Reality



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As St. Paul says, “It is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Summing up we could say:

- All are broken people living with various compulsions arising from our false ego.
- It is in the “desert” that we are healed of our brokenness – our compulsions, and we are transformed. Hence the need for all to enter the *desert*.
- It is from this transformed self real ministry flows.¹⁴

Some 20 years ago I was animating the Annual Retreats of the SVDs (Society of the Divine Word) of the Odisha Province at Jharsuguda when I chanced browsing through a magazine in their reading room. I was pleasantly surprised to read a Prayer by Bishop George Appleton (1902-93), evidently from the Western Christian Tradition, entitled “*Candle of the Spirit*” which resonated very much the process of Meditation from the Indian Spiritual Tradition as I have shown above:

Give me a **candle of your Spirit** (*dhi*), O God,
as I go down into the deep of my own being.
Show me the hidden things.

¹³ Courtesy, Fr. Sebastin Painadeth SJ, *Geeta Sadhana*, Sameeksha, Kaladi, Kerala, 1994.

¹⁴ cf Swami Joseph A Samarakone, OMI, *Conversion*, A preparatory paper for the 35th General Chapter 2010 of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, p 7.

Take me down to the **spring of my life**,
and tell me my nature and my name.
Give me the freedom to grow
so that I may become **my true Self (Atman)** -
the fulfillment of the **seed** which you planted in me at my making.
Out of the deep I cry unto You, O God. Amen.

When we look into the context of the Gospel, the words “pray” or “prayer” can surely be presumed to refer mainly to this form of meditation where the WORD is nourished by contemplative silence. So we can affirm that **Jesus is surely a Mystic**.

The early Christians too would have followed in the footsteps of Jesus. It is this Mystical dimension of Jesus that made him affirm at one point in his life, his *theosis experience* “**THE FATHER AND I ARE ONE**” Jn. 10:30. Christian Spirituality, therefore, is the contemplative participation in the unique *Atmabodha* or *ABBA Experience* of Jesus. The Gospel of John presents a Mystical Jesus. There is a Separate Gospel which is not part of New Testament, which is called the Mystical Gospel of John. The proclamation of Jesus: **“THE FATHER AND I ARE ONE!”** very closely reflects the experience of the Indian Sannyasis (Hermit): “**AHAM BRAHMAN ASMI**”, meaning “**I AM BRAHMAN**”. Indian Christians and even others consider the words of Jesus: “**Kingdom of God is within you**” or “**Kingdom of God is in your midst**” as a fitting equivalent of the *Mahavakyas* “*AHAM BRAHMAN ASMI*” (I am Brahman) or “*TAT TVAM ASI*” (Thou art that). The Sufi Mystic Saadi (1210 -1291) with his final breath spoke to God; “Now in death may the illusion of my separateness be shattered for ever; **may I know you as me, and me as you**”.¹⁵ St. John of the Cross in one of his famous *theosis experience* says: “*What God is by nature we become by participation*”.

Spirituality of the Desert

When the early Church got embroiled in the Roman Imperialism, and ‘Thrones and Dominations’ marched into the Church, the Beatitudes of the Gospels and the Kingdom values receded from the mainline life of the Church. At this juncture God raised up men and women filled with the spirit of Jesus. Now comes on the scene St. Anthony of the Desert (c.251-356) – the Father of the Desert Monks. The words of Jesus to the rich young man “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all your possessions... then come and follow me” (Mt. 19:21), this WORD of God held Anthony in its grip, and Anthony taking permission from his Egyptian mother, worked as an ordinary labourer on the periphery of Egypt and then slipped into the Egyptian Desert. There he spent 20 years in silence and solitude undergoing a great purification. Then he returned to his people. People saw him as a beautiful person, healthy in body, mind and spirit, and experienced in him the “Sacrament of God”. People flocked to him and Anthony who carried the desert in his heart invited the people to enter into this “Sacred Space” – “desert of the heart”, and healed them all. He ministered to his people for a few years and returned to a deeper part of the desert where he died at the ripe old age of 105. St. Athanasius, his biographer gives this information. Now many men and women followed Anthony into the desert, and history records a great movement - Desert Mystics. Centuries later the Islamic Sufis who emerged as the great contemplative branch of Islam, trace their origins to these Desert Fathers.

This was followed by great Religious Orders like the Benedictines and the Carmelites, who devoted much time to contemplation. Great Mystics like St. Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), a German Mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) emerge.

¹⁵Robert Van de Weyer, *366 Readings from World Religions*, ISBN 81-7992- 602-8 p 438.

The Official Church always looked upon the Mystics with suspicion and never encouraged Mysticism. Many of them were condemned as heretics and burnt at the stakes or sent to the dungeon, like the Spanish Mystic Michael Molinos (1628-1696). Christians were forbidden to read their books. Spain certainly is a great fertile land of the Mystics!

But God is all the while raising Mystics all over the world, notably in the Eastern Religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, etc. When Christianity failed to quench the thirst of Christians for mysticism, notably in Europe and America, they turned to these Religions. Today we can see a large number of people in Europe and America where their thirst for Mystical union with God, or as they say “*a deeper walk with the Lord*”, is quenched by Religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism etc. The great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, (1904 - 1984) made this prophetic statement: “The future Christian will be a Mystic or he will not exist at all!”¹⁶

Incidentally the great Spiritual Master, the late Benedictine Monk John Main, OSB, before joining the Benedictine Order, while he was still a young man, met a Hindu Monk in Malaysia who taught him Meditation. John Main found this a very useful spiritual tool and a rewarding experience, Later when he became a Benedictine monk taught this to many, especially to Christian groups in the West, adapting this Meditation technique to suit the Christian context. Today this has evolved into a great movement – **World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM)**, and has influenced many Christians and even others to take to Meditation. WCCM has now taken roots in your great country Poland. Mr. Andrzej Ziółkowski, it's National Coordinator, is now in your midst.¹⁷

An Indian Renaissance

In the late 18th cent. there lived a great political leader named Raja Ram Mohanroy (1772 - 1833), a Bengali Hindu. He loved his land, Religion and Culture. But he did not like some of the anachronistic, uncivilized behaviour of his people, viz., “*Sati*” – a widow being burnt on the husband's funeral pyre, child-marriage, etc... Raja Ram Mohanroy was a great Anglophile himself who loved English culture. He along with some like-minded young men founded a movement called *Brahmo Samaj*. He said, “Let English people, particularly the Christian Missionaries, come to our land and open Schools, and teach our people English. Let our people imbibe the English Culture.” This he hoped will bring about a great ‘renaissance’ in India.

There was a flurry of activities: almost all the Christian Denominations the world over sent their missionaries to India. Some even said, “Oh! at last the opportune moment has come for India to be converted to Christianity”. Swami Bede Griffiths (1906 -1993), an English Benedictine Monk who came to India in the middle of the 20th Century and inculcated himself into an Indian Sannyasi (Hermit) speaking of the above event says, “**But God willed it otherwise!**”: God raised up an illiterate Mystic **Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa** who stopped this tide and saved Mother India, her people and their great ancient Religious and Cultural Tradition!¹⁸

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa

Sri Ramakrishna was born on 17th February, 1836. Young Ramakrishna was an unusual boy given to long hours of Meditation; a lover of solitude. His parents gave him in marriage to one Sarada Devi, hoping that this will make him live a ‘normal life’. But Ramakrishna taught Sarada Devi the Mystical path to communion with the Divine and allowed her free to choose between a marital life and the Bliss of communion with the Divine. She readily chose the latter and remained with him as a life-long consort in the pursuit of the Divine; after Rama Krishna's unexpected death at the age of 50 on 16th Aug. 1886, she remained a great inspiration to his disciples.

¹⁶ Karl Rhaner, *Theological Investigations*, XX, 149.

¹⁷ Originally this lecture was given through teleconference on “Religious Plurality and Religious Identity” to the people in Poland on 24th Feb. 2017.

¹⁸ cf *The Cosmic Revelation: The Hindu way to God*, Bede Griffiths ISBN 9780872431195, 1983.

The life of Sri Ramakrishna was a source of great inspiration to all, and quite a few young men were attracted towards him, one of the well-known being Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902). Ramakrishna formed them into good Disciples of the Master steeped in contemplation. Many people flocked to him and looked upon him as their great Spiritual Master. They called him PARAMAHAMSA, meaning, the great Enlightened One.

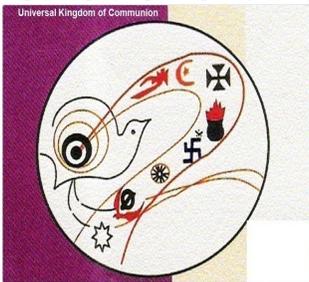
When Ramakrishna passed away quite unexpectedly at a young age of 50, his disciples who were all young men, found themselves leaderless. So they were thinking of going back to their homes and live the life their teacher had imparted to them. It was then a friend of Ramakrishna advised them not to take such a drastic decision when they were in distress. He invited them to come to his estate and spend a few months to get over their traumatic experience.

It was during this period, on the auspicious day of December 24/25, 1886, that Swami Vivekananda had a “*Dharshan*” or “*Vision*” of Jesus Christ the whole night. The next day Swami Vivekananda shared his vision with his companions: “You have been formed by Sri Ramakrishna as good spiritual men;” Jesus said, “Now this spirituality has to be translated into action; Mother India needs you. Go around India and look for yourself what the people of India, especially the poor need, and **make this your Mission.**” This pleased them all. Checking the calendar they found this was CHRISTMAS DAY, a day the Christians celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ, and then and there they took the momentous decision to **Found the Ramakrishn Mission**. Thus Christmas Day became their Foundation Day. To this day the Foundation Day is celebrated in all the Ramakrishna Missions the world over on Christmas Day, and they make it a point to invite a Christian priest to preside over this function. So we find that Jesus Christ is giving his Dharshan or Vision to many a follower outside the Official Church!

Jesus Christ is no stranger to the followers of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna himself had expressed his deep admiration for Jesus: for three days continuously he meditated on JESUS ALONE and had a deep experience of the DIVINE. The Ramakrishna monks had been greatly influenced by the Jesuits of Kolkatta and this is reflected in the rules and regulations they have formed for themselves. The Ramakrishna Math is the Contemplative wing of the Order and the Ramakrishna Mission is the Active wing serving the people, especially the poor.

God is the Source of all Religions

I am narrating all this is to show that the DIVINE MYSTERY cannot be compartmentalized into Religions. God is beyond all Religions. The Spirit blows where She wills and we all marvell at this. The Holy Spirit is not the monopoly of any one Religion. It is the Spirit who brings into existence all Religions, including Jesus Christ and his disciples, and orientates them towards the Universal Kingdom of Communion which the same spirit is effecting at the heart of Humanity.¹⁹ In this Broad Vision of the Spirit, Christians, and for that matter all Religionists, are called upon to play a participatory role, joining hands with all the people of goodwill and **make the Kingdom Come**.



Of course all Religions have their share of Fundamentalists who deviate from the founding spirit. Our Master Jesus Christ himself has given us an acid test by which the true Master can be recognized. We find this in the beautiful Prayer of Jesus to the Father after the Last Supper in the Gospel of St. John: “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely ONE, so that the **world may know that you have sent me** and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:23). Having prayed for Union with the Father and Communion with all, Jesus says this **ONENESS** shall be the credibility for his Mission – by this the “**world may know that you have sent Me**”! So too the credential of any

¹⁹ See Felix Wilfred, “Once again ... Church and the Kingdom,” *Vidyajoti* 57 (1993), 6-24.

person manifesting the face of the DIVINE is that her/his followers are united in **ONE COMMUNION** and her/his teaching brings about **COMMUNION among ALL**.

Conclusion

Let me conclude this presentation with the heart's longing of the Nobel Laureate Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore for a humane existence: "The human world is made one; all the countries are losing their distance every day, their boundaries rot, offering the same resistance as they did in the past age. Politicians struggle to exploit this great facet and wrangle about establishing trade relationships. But *my mission is to urge for a world-wide commerce of heart and mind, sympathy and understanding*, and never to allow this sublime opportunity to be sold in the slave markets for the cheap price of individual profits or to be shattered away by the unholy competition in mutual destructiveness."²⁰

Let me end this Presentation with the chanting of the *Shanti Mantra* – Prayer for Peace:

**LOKHA SAMASTA SUKHINO BHAVANTU MAY ALL BEINGS IN ALL THE WORLD BE
HAPPY AND CONTENTED
OM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI OM PEACE PEACE PEACE**

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24th February, 2017

²⁰ Tagore wrote this in 1930, in Paris. His video recording of this passage in his own voice can be listened to at the link: <http://www.storypick.com/rabindranath-tagore-rare-video/>