

Attitudes and Approaches Employed in the Dialogue of Jesus With the Samaritan Woman Their Relevance to Interreligious Dialogue Today

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The world of today includes pluralism of various kinds: ethnic, cultural, ideological and religious. The pluralism of cultures and religions is obvious in most countries. No country today can claim to be only homogeneous i.e. no country can assert today that it consists of just one race or one ethnic group, one culture, one language and one religion. People move and settle in different countries and continents for various reasons, helped by modern transportation and communication facilities. Migration into all parts of the world is on the increase due to economic, political and cultural factors. Human life has become essentially intercultural and interreligious and so dialogical too. A cohesive intercultural living and harmonious interreligious existence are not merely a fact of life but also a challenge to humanity.¹ Interreligious engagement is today a universal concern. "There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions".²

India in particular has been a cradle of manifold cultures, religions and ethnicities and it has been hailed for its prodigiously rich variety of peoples, cultures and religions. Cultural diversities, religious pluralities and ethnic varieties form the mosaic of India. Unity in diversity has become the breath of life in India. The peace and harmony of these diverse ethnic, cultural and religious groups is inextricably linked to their mutual respect, relationship and dialogical living. The wider and deeper one's fellowship with others is, the richer and more wholesome the person's life becomes.³

Religious bigotry, communal violence, caste and terrorist atrocities of the recent past in India have jeopardised the very legacy of its pluralism.⁴ Growing intolerance and cultivated hatred among various ethnic and religious groups are spreading like the virus that corrodes and endangers Indian polity. Communalism, religious fundamentalism and caste hegemony are breaking the very fabric of India's pluralism. The spread of the majoritarian communalism, growth of aggressive Hindutva which aims at the supremacy of the Hindu religion, headed and monopolised by the Brahmin caste, cultural nationalism which works towards making India a Hindu Rashtra have begun to attack and axe the very roots of pluralism in our country. Today religion is politicised and used to divide people. Culture is communalised and well-engineered attempts are made to usher in a dominating monoculture. Hatred and hostility of other cultures and religions are provoked and propagated.

In this state of affairs only dialogue between religions and cultures can re-establish the respect for the value of pluralism and hold India together. Because our country is a cradle of religions and as religiosity is part and parcel of the Indian ethos, interreligious dialogue is for us a historical mandate. Against this background I attempt to study some of the attitudes and approaches found in this dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42) and to highlight their relevance and challenges to our interreligious dialogue today. At the outset we will briefly deal with the Johannine discourses and dialogues in general.

1. Discourses and Dialogue in John

The use of speech in the Fourth Gospel is abundant.⁵ Discourses and dialogues are a special stylistic feature in the Gospel of John.⁶ C.H. Dodd says, "Among the various forms in which the Church's witness

and saving work of Christ is presented in the Gospels, the one most characteristic of the Fourth Gospel is the elaborately wrought dramatic dialogue".⁷ Scholars believe that a discourse source has contributed to the composition of the Gospel of John. R. Bultmann suggested that behind the Fourth Gospel there exists a source from which John derived the discourses that he assigns to Jesus.⁸ The form and manner in which the fourth evangelist has presented the teaching of Jesus is significantly different from that of the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus' teaching is rendered in a series of long, elaborate, well-developed discourses that consist partly of dialogues and partly of monologues. By and large the dialogues tend to move on to monologues that explicate and expound their themes at greater length.⁹ Most of the dialogues in John can be seen in the broader framework of Johannine discourses.¹⁰ John has used and interconnected discourse and dialogue in presenting the teaching of Jesus. A broad classification of the Johannine dialogues can be presented as follows: dialogue with individuals (2:1-8; 1:35-39; 1:47-51; 3:1-21; 4:4-26; 4:46-50; 6:5-10; 7:1-9; 11:1-44; 12:4-8; 12:20-26; 13:6-11; 14:1-7; 14:8-14; 20:11-17; 20:24-29; 21:15-23), dialogue with the sick and the sinner (5:2-14; 8:2-11), dialogue with hostile persons (5:17-47; 6:25-65; 7:14-30(36); 8:12-59; 10:22-39), dialogue with those in authority (18:19-24; 18:28-19:16), and dialogue with the disciples (13:6-11; 36-38; 14:5-7; 8-14; 16:29-33).

2. Attitudes and approaches employed in the dialogue

The various types of Johannine dialogue present Jesus as an eminent dialogue partner. The different methods, approaches and attitudes employed in these dialogues are enlightening and Kingdom-building. We shall presently study the attitudes, approaches and methods employed in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman and try to draw their relevance and challenges for our interreligious dialogue today.

2.1. Openness to Reach Out to Others

What is striking about this dialogue is Jesus' attitude of openness to reach out to others. The dialogue proper in John 4:7-26 is preceded by a fitting introduction (vv.1-6). Verses 1-3 present the transition of Jesus' ministry from Jerusalem (2:12 - 3:21) and Judaea (3:22ff) to a Samaritan city called Sychar (4:4-42). The awareness of the Pharisees about the baptizing activity and growing popularity of Jesus (v. 1) and a possible threat of their unleashing a persecution against Jesus might have been the reason for Jesus' move from Judaea to Galilee. Jesus chose to go to Galilee via Samaria.¹¹ The use of *e'dei* (*edei*) highlights the necessity of Jesus to pass through Samaria. This necessity is described by some¹² as 'geographical necessity' and by others¹³ as "divine necessity". Though this journey was not pre-planned by Jesus, God had willed it.¹⁴ In the Fourth Gospel *edei* is usually associated with God's plan (3:14,30; 9:4). Though his journey through Samaria was necessitated by geographical expediency, his stay in Samaria was guided by divine necessity.¹⁵ Jesus' undertaking of this journey showed his openness and readiness to follow the will of God. As a Jew, Jesus was also quite aware that the route via Samaria would take him through the land of the Samaritans who were held in contempt by the Jews. But this journey of Jesus through Samaria shows his attitude of openness and readiness to reach out to people like the Samaritans. This attitude and approach is a good preparation for his dialogue with the Samaritan woman.

With this open attitude Jesus began the conversation with her by asking for a drink (v. 7). Jesus was fully aware that he was asking for a drink from a Samaritan woman, which was not expected of any respectable Jew. In spite of his awareness of the prohibitory social conventions of his own Jewish community, Jesus did ask for a drink and opened his dialogue with her. Had not Jesus opened the conversation, probably the Samaritan woman would have gone away in silence. An enlightening and fruitful dialogue would not have entered the pages of the Gospel either and the God-given opportunity of the mission of Jesus with the Samaritans would have been probably lost at that time. Jesus' attitude of openness to reach out to others and his approach of taking the first step to open the dialogue led him to a wider horizon of his mission and also to his first mission with non-Jews.

2.2. Freedom to Go Beyond Cultural and Gender Biases

Jesus' freedom to go beyond cultural blocks and gender biases is brought out well by the fourth evangelist in this dialogue. Jesus in his Samaritan mission adopted an approach that enabled him to go beyond cultural and gender prejudices. Since the deportation of the Israelites from the North in 721 BCE, the Jews had been looking down upon the Samaritans as a mixed race of semi-pagans whom the Assyrian conquerors brought and settled in Samaria from Babylonia and Media (II Kgs 17:24-41). Since then opposition and hostility arose between the Jews and the Samaritans.¹⁶ The Jews began to treat the Samaritans as ritually impure people. This opinion was prevalent even in the time of Jesus as the parenthesis in v. 4 indicates: "... Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans". D. Daube translates this, as "The Jews do not use vessels together with Samaritans. suggesting the general assumption that the Samaritans were ritually impure and any association with them would also render others impure."¹⁷ The Jews' fear of ritual contamination developed into a prohibition of all social interaction with the Samaritans.¹⁸ The surprise of the Samaritan woman echoes this attitude, ".How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jn 4:9). But Jesus' resolve to converse with her and to stay with the other Samaritans transcends such cultural biases. Basically Jesus respects them as humans and as children of God (Jn 1:12).

Jesus transcends not only cultural barriers but also gender biases in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman. The position of women in Jewish society was inferior, oppressed and deplorable.¹⁹ Talking to a woman in public was taboo and considered a disgrace.²⁰ Under these discouraging and censorious circumstances Jesus not merely dared to talk to a woman, but a Samaritan woman. A regulation enacted around 65 CE declared that Samaritan women were unclean since they were considered to be menstruating from their cradle.²¹ Since this rabbinic view held that Samaritan women were menstruating from birth, they were considered as a perpetual source of uncleanness and contamination. Therefore all food and drink handled by them were also considered unclean and polluting.

Jesus opened a dialogue not only with a woman who was a Samaritan but also a Samaritan woman of ill repute. She had had five husbands and the one she had then was not her husband either (vv.17-18). She was treated as socially deviant and the very fact that she came to fetch water at midday, an unusual time for women to draw water, shows that she had been shunned by other women in the village. She had to avoid the company of other women who used to fetch water either in the cool of the morning or the evening (Gn 24:11; 1Sm 9:11). Her coming at midday is generally explained by her desire, as a notorious sinner, not to have to meet other women.²²

This dialogue shows that Jesus went beyond all the gender biases of his community and the personal deviances of the woman in order to enter into a dialogue with others. Neither cultural barriers nor gender biases could ever stop his dialogue mission.

2.3. Human Issue as a Starting Point

The starting point of the dialogue here is a human issue: need for water. Jesus, exhausted by the journey at midday was in need of water to slake his thirst. The Samaritan woman who came to the well, was also in need of water for her domestic chores. An ordinary daily need became the starting point of a meaningful dialogue. Their dialogue began not with theological problems or doctrinal discussions or hair-splitting philosophical arguments, but with the Samaritan woman coming to the well and Jesus asking for water. Jesus' method of reaching out to others through daily events and ordinary human issues and concerns is a down-to-earth approach that is quite evident in this dialogue. For Jesus, a human experience can serve also as a medium for conveying a reality of the spiritual order.²³ Though the dialogue led Jesus and the Samaritan woman later on to the realms of theological revelation and social interaction, one should not forget that the starting point of the dialogue was notably a human issue. Human need could become a point of communion among people.

2.4. Jesus' Optimistic Approach

Jesus in his dialogue was optimistic in spite of the initial misunderstanding or inability of the Samaritan woman to comprehend him. His request for water extended into a sublime dialogue on living water. Jesus wanted to lead the woman from the physical need of thirst and water into a revelation of living water as the gift of God. But the woman only understood the material meaning of water and she was not able to recognize the symbolic meaning of living water that Jesus wished to share with her.

The Samaritan woman expressed a series of misunderstandings of the message of Jesus on living water.²⁴ When Jesus offered to give her living water as the gift of God (v. 10), the woman was not able to perceive it from the standpoint of Jesus; but she answered him from the material or physical sense of water, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" (v. 11). Living water was a common expression for running or spring water that was distinct from still water, as in a cistern or well.²⁵ So her understanding of living water was something just more than well water. How could Jesus give her that type of water without a bucket to draw such water? So she expressed her protests of logical and material impossibility. Again her misunderstanding of living water went only along the line of its physical meaning when she started comparing Jesus with Jacob, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" (v. 12). The Samaritan woman was quite familiar with her Jacob tradition of the well from which Jacob, his family and his entourage drank.²⁶ But she was limited to her own traditions and was not able to see what Jesus was trying to reveal. Her comparison of Jesus to Jacob indicated that according to her Jesus could not be greater than her ancestor Jacob.

In spite of her persistent misunderstanding, Jesus went ahead to expatiate upon the qualities of living water and wanted to enlighten her further, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (vv. 13-14). Jesus discoursed about water of life that would become a spring gushing up to everlasting life.²⁷ But again understanding it just from the plane of the physical meaning of living water, she asked Jesus to give her that water so that she would never be thirsty again and would never have to keep coming to the well to draw water (v. 15).

One easily discovers the persistent misunderstanding of the woman to all that Jesus endeavoured to reveal to her. But Jesus was never discouraged or annoyed at her inability to understand the truth he was revealing. Jesus did not show disrespect when she dialogued from her own traditions and beliefs. Nor did Jesus give up his hope of continuing the dialogue. He was optimistic about the progress of her understanding and hoped that the dialogue would eventually enlighten her because he respected her as an equal partner in dialogue and the very process of dialogue itself. Jesus did not expect sudden, immediate results from the dialogue, but was rather patient and persevering in his dialogue. He believed that the process and dynamics of dialogue would basically enable dialogue partners to meet, to respect, to exchange and to understand each other. Therefore no misunderstanding of the Samaritan woman was able to deter the optimistic approach of Jesus in his dialogue.

2.5. Hostility-Free and Person-Oriented Approaches

John has also presented Jesus very well as one who is hostility-free and person-oriented in his dialogue. The Samaritan woman was quite aware of the prevalent hostility between the Jews and Samaritans. To Jesus asking for water, her immediate response (v. 7) "How is it that you, a Jew,"²⁸ ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria (v. 9) seemed to have sprung from the age-old enmity between the Samaritans and Jews, a hostility to which the Jews had given a socio-religious expression by not "co-using with the Samaritans".²⁹ The curt rejoinder appeared to tell Jesus that he, as a Jew, should not ask of her, a Samaritan, a drink of water. Perhaps she responded first from her socio-cultural background of hostility. Even though Jesus was also aware of the long-standing enmity of the Jews and Samaritans, his approach was friendly. He rose above the widespread societal hostility and cultural prejudices and approached the woman with a friendly

attitude, instead of simply responding from the hostility attitude. Jesus engaged the woman in a discussion on living water as the gift of God (vv. 10-15).

Jesus was hostility-free in his dialogue because he was basically person-oriented in his relationship towards others. In spite of his dialogue partner being a Samaritan, and a Samaritan woman at that, with a scandalous marriage background, Jesus could enter into a meaningful and fruitful dialogue with her. For Jesus, the personhood of the dialogue partner surpassed all her personal background and other prohibitive societal factors. The woman's initially hostile attitude, her inability to understand him properly, her proud talk about their ancestor Jacob, her unwarranted comparison of Jesus with Jacob, her argumentative approach, her different beliefs and opinions could not dampen Jesus' commitment to dialogue with her because Jesus valued the person much more than all her dispositions, weaknesses and behaviour. It is because of Jesus' person-orientedness that the Samaritan woman's inquiries, even her objections, were responded to with integrity.

Jesus basically respected the dialogue partner in his or her otherness. Thus Jesus' hostility-free and person-oriented approach enabled and encouraged his dialogue partner to enter into a meaningful relationship with him and thus into a profound discovery of the truths of life.

2.6. A Non-Judgemental Attitude

Jesus was neither judgemental nor moralistic in his approach to the woman in dialogue. When the Samaritan woman asked Jesus to give her that water which would never make her thirsty and for which she would not have to come to the well, he told her to go and call her husband. This intervention of Jesus during the dialogue has intrigued many scholars. Why did Jesus ask her to call her husband at this juncture? What is the relevance of his discussion on her married life in this dialogue? Did Jesus dialogue like a moralist? Many exegetes have attempted to explain the meaning of the five husbands of the woman through allegorical and symbolic interpretations³⁰ that have brought the personal and moral life of the woman into the dialogue.

But the intention of Jesus was not to probe further into her personal and marital life moralistically. Scholars such as E. Haenchen holds that whoever asserts that Jesus wished to lay bare the morals of the Samaritan woman in this dialogue, have misunderstood the text.³¹ Basically Jesus appreciated her for telling the truth and he did not go into a moralistic discussion of her personal married life. Jesus passed no decisive and judgemental opinion on her married life. Jesus was not interested in exaggerating and criticising her personal life in dialogue. He did not indulge in a 'pointing-the-finger-at' approach to judge and condemn her for her immoral or irregular married life. Such an approach would have alienated the woman from continuing the dialogue. Jesus' non-judgemental attitude enabled her to continue the dialogue at a deeper level recognising him as a prophet (v. 19) and discussing the important matters of worship and the Messiah (vv. 19-26). A non-judgemental approach does help dialogue partners to enter into deeper levels of dialogue.

2.7. Solidarity Method in Dialogue

We could also recognise a solidarity method in this dialogue wherein Jesus and the Samaritan woman are engaged in their joint search for truth. One of the objectives of the Johannine dialogues is to search for the truth. This search for truth is not merely an individual and personal effort but also a corporate endeavour. Dialogue partners search for truth together and in solidarity with one another.

Once the Samaritan woman had recognised Jesus as a prophet, she believed that such a person would be able to enlighten her on certain religious and theological issues of theirs. Therefore she entered into a deeper dialogue with Jesus in discussing the true place of worship (v. 20). They began searching together and exchanged their own opinions and beliefs as regards the place of worship. They shared from their own deep faith experience. Jesus from his all-encompassing Abba experience was able to enlighten her in her search for truth. He led her not merely from the issue of the place of worship, which was indeed a long-

standing contentious matter between Jews and Samaritans, but also to the object and manner of worship. “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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (vv. 23-24). Jesus enlightened her on the very core of worship i.e., the worship of the Father and the right manner to worship the Father – in spirit and truth. Enlightened by the truth revealed by Jesus, she felt encouraged to dialogue on another religious issue i.e., the coming of the Messiah (v. 25). Jesus was gracious enough to reveal to her another important truth, – I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (v. 26).

The dialogue that had started on an ordinary day-to-day issue of human thirst and need for water culminated in the revelation of great truths. What is impressive here is the solidarity method of Jesus in his dialogue. Jesus’ own profound faith experience had not made him behave like a superiority-conscious, condescending and presumptuous dialogue partner. Nor did Jesus attempt to relegate and denigrate the belief of the Samaritan woman. Jesus considered her as an equal partner in dialogue, respected her faith experience and journeyed with her in respectful solidarity to search and find the truth. He had the conviction and courage to reveal to her the truths they were seeking together. Probably the Samaritan woman was also enlightened on such truths and so she rushed to announce to her people and said in great amazement, “Come, see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be ‘he Messiah, can he?’. (v. 29).

Jesus’ solidarity method in dialogue not only helped the woman to discover the truth of right worship but also to recognise him as the Messiah, it helped the woman to move from a hostile, unfriendly attitude (v. 9) to an open and candid one. There is also a progression in the discovery of the identity of Jesus by the woman. Highlighting the process of growth which the Samaritan woman underwent, J. Kuttianmattathil rightly says: “In the process she moves from a rather disrespectful and hostile reference to Jesus as ‘you, a Jew’ (v. 8), through considering him as sir, lord (*kyrios* v. 11), wondering whether he is greater than Jacob (v. 12), affirming that he is a prophet (v. 19) to the climactic through hesitant acknowledgement that he may be the long-awaited messiah (vv. 25,29)”.³² Solidarity in dialogue helps partners to build a relationship with one another and to discover the truths of life together.

2.8. Not Divisive But Unitive

The method Jesus used in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman has a number of unitive approaches. For Jesus, dialogue is to unite and not to divide people. Through his dialogue with her, Jesus united himself to a large number of Samaritans too.³³ In the context of the prevalent hostility between Jews and Samaritans at that time, Jesus reached out to the Samaritans through his unitive methods in dialogue.

Jesus’ mission was always to unite all people as “children of God” irrespective of their race, nationality, religion and culture. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12). In the view of John, belief in Jesus unites and makes us all children of God’s family. Through his dialogue with the Samaritan woman, Jesus extended his mission to non-Jews for the first time according to the Gospel of John.

For Jesus, dialogue was not just a question and answer encounter. He did not adopt argumentative and debating methods, nor did he wield aggressive and forceful approaches on his dialogue partners. The winner or loser approach was not part of Jesus. Dialoguing process. Therefore he used unitive methods in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman. Jesus dialogued with her more on the points of communion than on the points of conflict. To the woman who took a hostile approach right at the outset of the dialogue “How is it that you, a Jew ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”, Jesus did not adopt a confrontational method but a friendly one. Jesus did not continue her discussion of the longstanding enmity between Samaritans and Jews but proceeded to share with her living water as the gift of God. When the woman tried to question Jesus whether he was greater than their ancestor Jacob, Jesus did not enter into an argumentative debate on that issue to prove or defend himself, but he shared with her the importance of living water. When she acknowledged her irregular married life, Jesus did not exploit it to embarrass or

alienate her. When she raised the common issues of worship and Messiah, which concerned both Jews and Samaritans, Jesus entered enthusiastically into a more profound dialogue on such points of communion. Jesus' unitive method enabled them to enter dialogue at a deeper level.

2.9. A Critiquing Method

The method of Jesus. dialogue with the Samaritan woman also entailed a critiquing approach. His dialogue method did indeed respect the opinions, beliefs and experiences of the dialogue partner. But Jesus did not shy away from constructively critiquing them. He had the courage to critique the religions of both the Jews and the Samaritans. When the woman raised a question about the right place of worship, Jesus would not have hesitated to critique the hostility and opposition that the Jews and Samaritans had built up against each other on account of their respective place of worship in Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim. Jesus criticised their religions, which had forgotten the very core and essence of worship and which had been merely fighting with aggression and enmity over the place of worship by forgetting the very manner of worship also. Jesus – critique of their religions led them to the real core and the very manner of worship. “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” (v. 23). Worshipping God, as Father would not divide and fragment people, but would unite them all as children of God. Jesus' critique called for cleansing the religions of their aggressive, inimical and oppressive elements and emphasized the following of the very core and spirit of religions.

2.10. A Method of Action

Actions within a dialogue constitute the comprehensive nature of dialogue. Dialogue is not merely talking and exchanging our opinions, beliefs and experiences with others but also acting together in the common interests and goals of humanity. “Religious dialogue does not mean that two persons speak about their religious experiences, but rather that they speak as religiously committed persons, with their ultimate commitments and religious outlook, on subjects of common interest”.³⁴ An action in a dialogue is not to be seen merely as the fruit of a dialogue. But actions within a dialogue can be seen also as part of the process of a dialogue. John has presented such methods of action in this dialogue.

The mission and goal of Jesus. dialogue was to make the Samaritan woman and the other Samaritans the children of God (1:12). Through dialogue Jesus entered into this mission with certain methods of action. Jesus did accept an action of passing through Samaria en route to Galilee from Jerusalem (v. 4). When he saw the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well to draw water, he decided to ask her for water – an action of taking the initiative to open the dialogue. This action not only started the dialogue but also led Jesus to his enlightening theological exchange on living water and worship and also to his own revelation to her as the Messiah. As a continuation or a consequence of his dialogue with the woman, Jesus, on the invitation of the Samaritans, moved to their city and staying with them for two days – an action of association and solidarity that had been forbidden to the Jews. All these actions of Jesus are found within the context of his dialogue with the Samaritan woman and many other Samaritans.

In this dialogue the Samaritan woman was also engaged in action along with Jesus. As a result of her dialogue with Jesus, she began to recognise him as a prophet and the Messiah. She could not keep this revelation to herself and so went in haste to her city, leaving even her water jar, to announce to her fellow-Samaritans what she had experienced. Even though her action is seen as the fruit of her dialogue with Jesus, it could be also seen as part of the dialogue of Jesus with other Samaritans. Note that it was her action of rushing to announce the news to her fellow-Samaritans, which brought them to Jesus. The Samaritan woman by her actions in the process of the dialogue was made an active participant in the establishment of the universalistic reign of the Saviour of the world.³⁵ An action of evangelisation indeed! Eventually the other Samaritans. own action of meeting and listening to Jesus, their action of inviting him and of staying with him led them to their own proclamation of Jesus as the Saviour of the world (vv. 28-30;

39-42). Thus we encounter a number of methods of action in this dialogue on the part of the dialogue partners who engaged themselves in a fruitful dialogue.

3. Relevance and challenges to interreligious dialogue

The world of today is teeming with a rich, ethnic, cultural, ideological and religious pluralism. India in particular has been prodigiously rich with such an amazing pluralism of peoples, ethnicities, cultures and religions. In the present context of India where communalism, terrorism, casteism, cultural nationalism and religious fundamentalism are preying on her pluralism, dialogue becomes a historical imperative to promote peace, unity and harmony among all peoples by safeguarding and upholding pluralism. From our study of the attitudes, approaches and methods employed in Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman, we would present some relevant and challenging features that will make our interreligious dialogue more effective, fruitful and humanising.

- Though we live in a context of pluralism of different peoples, cultures and religions, there is a temptation today to live without even relating or reaching out to others, especially to those who are different from us. Economic independence, self-sufficiency, lack of respect, dislike and hatred of other cultures and religions, tendency to limit and narrow down relationship to one's own homogeneous group, certain groups promoting uniformity and homogeneity to the detriment of unity and pluralism are some of the factors which hamper and hold back people from reaching out to others who are different from them. Jesus' method of reaching out to the Samaritan woman and through her to many more Samaritans who were different and with whom the Jews even had a hostile relationship is both relevant and challenging. In this approach we are inspired to take the initiative like Jesus who took the first step to begin his dialogue with the woman by asking for a drink. It is in reaching out to others that meeting and exchange with others take place, respect and esteem for others grow, and relationship and unity are promoted.

- Prejudices and biases are a common block to dialogue. Cultural prejudices, social biases and pre-conceived religious ideas do not allow anyone to enter freely and frankly into dialogue with others. They do not bring the dialoguing partners together but divide them and set them against one another. Jesus' method was free to go beyond cultural and gender biases to enter into a fruitful dialogue with the Samaritan woman. Jesus' respect for others was not based upon what they had or what they belonged to. He respected them basically as human persons. More than before we are now faced with a well-orchestrated hatred campaign by some religious fundamentalists against other religions and cultures. Hostility will only jeopardise our dialogue and will destroy the pluralistic human family. Therefore we have all the more compelling need to adopt, in our interreligious dialogue, the attitude of freedom to go beyond cultural, social and religious biases and prejudices and hostility-free approaches.

- In inter-religious dialogues, mistakes, failures, faults and deficiencies of the partners are not to be discussed and exploited. Such an approach will only humiliate and alienate the other from the process of dialogue. Definitely no 'pointing-the-finger-at' approach should be employed. This approach in dialogue demands unconditional acceptance of the other person in spite of what he or she is and it generates positive attitudes like cordiality, friendliness and respect between the partners in dialogue. When there is such an engendering attitude and respectful approach, the dialogue partners will be ready to examine themselves in order to rid themselves of their personal or communitarian hang-ups.

- A person-oriented approach is indispensable to interreligious dialogue today. This approach will transcend the superiority-consciousness and condescending attitude and hegemonic tendencies in dialogue. Jesus' person-oriented approach in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman respected and valued her personhood in spite of the cultural barriers, gender biases and her own scandalous marriage history. This enabled the woman to move from her initial hostile and curious positions to a more enlightening and deeper dialogue with Jesus. Esteeming the personhood of the other, respecting the difference in the other, considering the other as an equal partner³⁶ in dialogue are some of the basic constituents of a person-oriented approach in dialogue.

- Though efforts had been made on inter-religious dialogue before Vatican II, it was largely after Vatican II,

more focussed and organised endeavours and attempts were launched.³⁷ Vatican II ushered in healthier attitudes, a more conducive and positive approach to other religions. The Post-Conciliar praxis of dialogue in India gave birth to ashrams and dialogue centres and groups which promoted interreligious dialogue.³⁸ In this post-conciliar stage sharing of other religious traditions and faith experiences was encouraged. Sometimes the dialogue was more focussed on the discussion of the doctrines and dogmas of religions which led us to encounter problems like the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ, the unique role of the Church in the attainment of salvation, dialogue and proclamation, etc. Though certain clarity has to be obtained on these issues, experience has taught us that dogmatic positions or theological doctrines should not be the starting point of our interreligious dialogue today. Today, human issues and problems could become the starting point of our dialogue, just as the human needs of thirst and water led both Jesus and the woman into an efficacious and humanising dialogue, many human issues and problems can bring the peoples of all religions together for a meaningful dialogue. Each religion can respond from its faith positions and learn also from those of other religions the ways and means of encountering such human issues. When the starting point of dialogue is a human issue or problem, it will inevitably lead us to a dialogue of action. This will enable each religion to respond from its own religious wealth of beliefs and convictions and which will also help each religion to learn and benefit from the beliefs and convictions of other religions to enter into a corporate and collaborative way of responding to human needs and issues.³⁹

- Our religious dialogues today can also learn from the unitive methods used in the dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. In this unitive method of dialogue, Jesus preferred to dialogue more on the points of communion than on the points of conflict and division. A unitive method brushes aside aggressive and forceful approaches, avoids argumentative and debating ways and keeps clear of a winner-loser approach in dialogue, shies away from hegemonic and dominating attitudes. If there are no proper attitudes and right approaches, dialoguing on points of division will run the risk of widening the gap between religions. Entering into a dialogue from the points of communion will guide religions to discover more and more truths of life and will enable fruitful collaboration with one another.

- Inter-religious dialogue does not dispense with a critique of religions. Jesus' method constructively criticised certain divisive religious and social practices of both the Jewish and Samaritan religions. Jesus' critique of their respective religions led to a new, liberative way of life wherein the Father is worshipped in spirit and truth and which unites all peoples as children of God. Each religion has its own liberative potential and oppressive elements. A method of critiquing religions in inter-religious dialogue will enable each religion to discover more of its liberative and humanising potential and to constructively confront its oppressive elements. With the common goal of building up just and equitable human communities, religions can be purged of their ungodly and oppressive elements and their liberative and life-promoting potentials can be upheld and released.

- **Solidarity method** is of immense importance today to our interreligious dialogue. Dialogue partners search for the truths of life together and in solidarity with each other and so dialogue becomes a corporate endeavour. Jesus and the Samaritan woman were engaged in this solidarity method of dialogue. Jesus respected her search for the right place of worship and the Messiah and was able to share and reveal to her the great truth about right worship. Should any religion claim the monopoly and ownership of the truths of life, it will sabotage the very spirit of dialogue. Imbibing the spirit of Jesus, Vatican II has rightly hinted at the solidarity method in dialogue: "Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture" (*Nostra Aetate*, n. 2). The journey towards the Ultimate Reality becomes more meaningful and fruitful when we make it in solidarity and fellowship with other believers.

3.1. Dialogue as a Historical Mandate

This study of the dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman from the viewpoint of its attitude, approach and method has been very enlightening and fruitful because we have been able to identify in it: outreach to others, freedom to go beyond cultural and gender biases, taking the initiative with the human issue as a

starting point, hostility-free and person-oriented, non-judgemental in its approach, unitive, solidary and positive in its method of action. To some extent, we have also discussed the value, relevance and usefulness of these methods in our inter-religious dialogue today. Religious pluralism has become not merely a fact today but also a very relevant issue and a crucial problem which is not merely a theological problem, but a social problem too.⁴⁰ Definitely this is one of the most crucial problems confronting India in particular in the Third Millennium. Against the threatening and turbulent waves of communalism, religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, the Church's mission in India is challenged today and called upon to steer its barque with its rudder of interreligious dialogue. The Church therefore is called to be a community of dialogue and this dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church.⁴¹ Today, therefore dialogue cannot be optional but is an obligatory mission to uphold "the plurality of religions, which is a consequence of the richness of creation itself and of the manifold grace of God".⁴² Let the mission of interreligious dialogue become a historical mandate to us in the Third Millennium. Let us continue to contribute through dialogue our mite to the building up of just, equitable and harmonious human communities and thus promote the Reign of God in the world.

Notes

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1 M.D. Bryant, *The Inter-Religious Future: Reflections on the Horizon and Way*, in A. Kalliath (ed.), *Pilgrims in Dialogue: A New Configuration of Religions for Millennium Community*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000, p. 147.

2 Hans Küng *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, London: SCM Press, 1991, p. 105.

3 G. Robinson, "From Apartheid to Dialogical Living in India: The Need of the Hour", *Religion and Society* 46 (1-2, 1999) p. 85.

4 The Gujarat pogrom and carnage in 2002 orchestrated and executed by the Hindutva forces like Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Rashtriya Swyam Sevak and Bajrang Dal with the State-sponsored terrorism under the Hindutva-patronising leadership of Narendra Modi is the most recent and worst communal violence since Independence. For an elaborate study of the Gujarat pogrom, cf. Paul Mike, *Racial Hegemony: Gujarat Genocide*, Madurai: IDEAS, 2002; John DAYAL, (ed.), *Gujarat 2002: Untold and Retold stories of the Hindutva Lab*, Delhi: Media House, 2002. Ruthless and well-planned attacks on the minorities like Muslims, Christians are on the increase now. For example, there were just fifty attacks on Christians in the fifty years of India's Independence. But within the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party to political power, there have been about three hundred and seventy five attacks on Christians. See Raj Irudaya, "Attacks on Minorities: A Human Rights Issue", *Indian Currents* 22 (51, 2000) pp. 25-26. For the study of a history of communal riots in India since Independence, cf. N.L. Gupta, (ed.), *Communal Riots*, Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2000; Satish C. Seth, *Communalism: A Socio-Political Study*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2000; Metha and Patwardhan, *The Communal Triangle in India*, Allahabad, Kitabistan, 1942.

5 It has been tabulated that the evangelist has recorded 6,387 words of Jesus in addition to 2,335 words of others, totalling 8,722 words of speech. 56 per cent of the entire Gospel is in the form of speech. See S. BOOTH, *Selected Peak Marking Features in the Gospel of John*, New York: Peter Lang, 1996, p. 113.

6 For an elaborate study on the Johannine discourses, cf. J. Taylor, "The Johannine Discourse and the Speech of Jesus: Five Views", *Scripture Bulletin* 14 (2, 1984) pp. 33-41; D.F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, (Tr. by George Elliot), London: SCM Press, 1973; E. Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1895; B.F. WESTCOTT, *The Gospel According to John: The Authorised Version with Introduction and Notes*, London: John Murray, 1882; M.J. Lagrange, *Evangile Selon Saint Jean*, Paris: Gabalda, 1924; B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins*, London: Macmillan, 1924.

7 C.H. Dodd, *More New Testament Studies*, Manchester: University Press, 1968, p. 41.

8 Bultmann's theory about the origin of John's Gospel proposed that it grew out of three distinct sources: a signs source, a discourse source and a passion source. See R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Tr. by G.R. Beasley-Murray), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971, pp. 6-7. C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge: University Press, 1965, p. 315.

10 B.H. STREETER characterises the Johannine discourses as 'interpretative transformations' of Dominical sayings. This view is gaining currency among scholars today. See B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, p. 367. C.H. Dodd in *Historical Tradition* continues this trend and suggests that the source of many passages in the discourses lies in a tradition of sayings of Jesus which is independent of the Synoptics.

11 There were two routes to travel from Judaea to Galilee: one via Samaria and the other, via the other side of the Jordan. The eastern route along the valley of the Jordan through the Bethshan gap avoiding Samaria was a longer one. The Jews who believed that they would be polluted by walking through Samaritan regions, eschewed this route via Samaria. Also the prevalent hostility between the Jews and Samaritans was another reason for them to avoid this route. But the one via Samaria was a

shorter route and it was also considered safer as it was under the unified administration of the Romans that time. But according to Josephus (Ant. 20.118; War 2:232) this route also posed a lot of dangers and difficulties.

12 C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, 2nd ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978, p. 230.

13 R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 1, p.169; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 59; E. Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, (Tr. by Robert W. Funk), Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, p. 218.

14 G.R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

15 E. Keck, *Luke, John*, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995 p. 565.

16 There had been a brewing schism between the Jews and Samaritans during the period of restoration in which the Temple and city walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt after the return of the Jews from their exile in Babylonia. There was a strong opposition lodged from the North against the rebuilding of the Temple and city walls of Jerusalem. It is recorded in Ezra 4 that 'the adversaries of the people of Judah and Benjamin' opposed and tried to block the work of rebuilding. The adversaries have been traditionally recognised as the Samaritans. The theological differences of the Samaritans with the Jews led them to change their place of worship from the Temple of Jerusalem to a temple on Mount Gerizim during the Persian period. In 128 BCE the Jewish high priest John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritans' Temple on Mt. Gerizim. From that time onwards the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans had aggravated further. On the hostility between the Jews and Samaritans see Str-B 2:438.

17 D. DAUBE, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: The Meaning of 'sugra, oma'*, JBL 69 (1950) p. 139. 18 E. KECK, *op. cit.*, p. 566.

19 For a condensed and important study of the social position of women in Jewish society, see J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, pp. 359-376. 20 One of the old scribes Jose b. Johanan of Jerusalem (c. 150 BCE) used to say, 'Let thy house be opened wide and let the needy be members of thy household; and talk not much with womankind'(M.Ab.1.5). They said this of a man's own wife: how much more of his fellow's wife! It was forbidden to be alone with a woman in public (M.Kidd.iv.12; b.Kidd.81a). Even to greet a woman in public was also prohibited (b.Kidd.70a-b). It was disgraceful for a scholar to speak to a woman in the street (b.Ber.43b Bar). 'He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law and at the last will inherit Gehenna' (M.Ab. 1:5). The disciples of Jesus were astonished that he was speaking with a woman (John 4:27b). If a woman were to converse with everyone in the street, she could be even divorced without the payment prescribed in the marriage settlement (M.Ket.vii.6).

21 Billerbeck 1:540. This regulation seemed to have canonized an earlier attitude toward Samaritan women. See R.E. Brown, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 170; D. Daube, 'Samaritan Women', in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, University of London: Athlone Press, 1956, p. 375.

22 R. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

23 T. Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42*, Tübingen: J.C.B. MOHR, 1988, p. 95.

24 The Johannine literary technique of misunderstanding or double-entendre is well employed here. The style is that Jesus makes a statement which is misunderstood and the misunderstanding is followed by his explanation (see for further examples 3:3ff; 4:31ff; 6:41ff; 8:21ff; 11:1ff; 12:27ff; 14:4ff).

25 G.R. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

26 J. Ramón Díaz cites in his article on 'Palestinian Targum and the New Testament', NovT 6 (1963) pp. 76-77 about the story of Jacob and the well of Haran as recorded in the Palestinian Targum of Gn 28:10. 'After our ancestor Jacob had lifted the stone from the mouth of the well, the well rose to its surface and overflowed, and was overflowing twenty years'.

27 Jesus' gift of living water is associated with the gift of the Spirit in John 7:37-39. One can possibly see that meaning here as well. See R.E. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 171; E. Keck, *op. cit.*, 566.

28 It is of interest to note that in the Gospel of John it is only in this passage that Jesus is directly designated as a Jew. This is perhaps purported to convey to readers that the explicit mention of Jesus as a Jew is to show that Jesus in spite of his Jewishness was ready to enter into dialogue with the Samaritan woman and to stay in a Samaritan village for two days (v. 40). See E. Haenchen, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

29 T. Okure, *op. cit.*, p.95.

30 See R. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 433; R.E. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 171. Some supposed the Samaritan woman as a symbolic figure for the Samaritans and for their religious apostasy. It was then allegorically interpreted that the five husbands represented the five gods brought by the foreign colonists who were settled by the Assyrians in the Northern Kingdom since the exile in 721 BCE. (II Kgs 17:24ff). So it was held that the five husbands symbolised the five pagan gods worshipped in Samaria. But according to E. Haenchen the allegorical interpretation of II Kgs 17:24ff is not in consonance with the reading of the text. Those foreign colonists in Samaria are said to have worshipped seven deities, not five and these seven not in succession either (p. 221). Origen (in Jo. XIII:8; GCS 10:232) considered the five husbands as a reference to the fact that the Samaritans considered as canonical only the five books of Moses. Jesus' command to the woman to go and call her husband and his knowledge of her five husbands are better understood as evidence of Jesus' uncanny knowledge, i.e., the ability of Jesus to see and know all things. See E. Haenchen, *op. cit.*, p. 221; E. Keck, *op. cit.*, p. 567. This demonstration of his knowledge made her recognise him as a prophet and continue the dialogue.

31 E. Haenchen, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

32 J. Kuttianmattathil, *op. cit.*, p. 510. See also J. Varickasseril, 'The Dialoguing Jesus in the Johannine Gospel', *Mission Today*, 1 (1999) p. 64.

- 33 The significant use of *polloi* in v. 39 and *pollw/| plei,ouj* in v. 41 shows that a large number of Samaritans believed in Jesus and even acclaimed him as 'the Saviour of the world' (v. 42).
- 34 'Declaration of the International Theological Conference on Evangelisation and Dialogue in India', no. 24 in *Evangelisation, Dialogue and Development*, (ed.) M. Dhavamony, *Documenta Missionalia*, no. 5, Roma: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1972.
- 35 S.M. Schneiders, 'A Case-Study: A Feminist Interpretation of John 4:1-42', in *The Interpretation of John*, John Ashton, (ed.), Edinburgh: T&T, Clark, 1997, p. 256.
- 36 M. Dhavamony, *Christian Theology of Religions: A Systematic Reflection on the Christian Understanding of World Religions*, Berne: Peter Lang, 1998, p. 202.
- 37 For a good study of the historical stages of the journey towards dialogue before Vatican II, see J. Kuttianmattathil, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: A Critical Study of the Indian Christian Attempts Since Vatican II*, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 1998, pp. 13-74.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 75-121. The author has also made an interesting study of the post-conciliar practice of dialogue.
- 39 B.J. Taylor, 'Towards Right Living: Interfaith Cooperation for Equitable and Sustainable Development', in *Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism*, (ed.), Julia Martin, New Delhi: Tibet House & Satguru Publications, 1997, pp. 167-168.
- 40 M. Amaladoss, 'Religious Pluralism and Mission', in T. Malipurathu and L. Stanislaus (eds.), *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2000, p. 64; R. Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony: Essays on contemplation and Responsibility*, (ed.), J. Harry, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, p. 56.
- 41 Bira IV/12 Statement of the Assembly, 'Dialogue thus calls us into a New Way of Being the Church', in R. Gaudencio and C.G. Arevalo (eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991*, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, p. 332.
- 42 *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue, Reports of the CBCI Commissions and National Centres and Regional Bishops' Councils for 1987-1987*, no. 25.

Ref.: Text from the Author for SEDOS by E-mail (September 2003).