

A Christology of Complementarity and Harmony: Discipleship in the Context of Religious Pluralism

Jacob Kavunkal SVD

In the context of religious pluralism as well as the intense reflection on the mission of the church, Christology has come to occupy the central place in theological writings. A Christian cannot compromise the Christian faith in the centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian living. How this is to be understood and spelt out is the issue. This has to be done in the light of the biblical evidence.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* Pope John Paul II has reminded the church in Asia that its mission in Asia has to be carried out in the spirit of complementarity and harmony (n 6).

All of this indicates an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul, And it is the core around which a growing sense of “being Asian” is built. This “being Asian” is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the gospel in away which is faithful to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul.

This in turn offers us the possibility of evolving a Christology from a complementary perspective in so far as mission is the sharing of the Christian experience of Jesus Christ.

In the following pages we shall see how we can develop a Christology of complementarity, which in turn will enable us to live in harmony with the followers of other religions, without watering down the Christian faith in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Right at the outset it has to be emphasized that these reflections are made for the sake of greater discipleship and not for more information on Jesus Christ or as rationality for Christian belief.

It may also be pointed out that Christology has to be developed with a spirit to make it meaningful to the local context and to the audience, as did Jesus of Nazareth consistently. So also the different addresses in the Acts of the Apostles (2: 17-36; 13: 16-41; 17: 22-31; etc.) as well as the Pauline letters show us how the New Testament supports Christian diversity in the understanding of Jesus Christ. As Jeffrey Vanderwilt has written, what the Jerusalem Council taught was accommodation, toleration and justification. But ‘heresy’ came in to defend authority with its ‘anathema’ to create a church with borders.¹

1. Harmony in the Asian World-view & Bible

Harmony is a foundational value in the Asian world-view represented by concepts like *yin-yang*, *tao*, *Rta*, etc. Etymologically, *Rta* in Sanskrit means course and thus it refers to cosmic order, the maintenance of which was the purpose of all gods. It was understood as ‘right’ so that the gods were not just preserving the world from physical chaos, but also

¹ Jeffrey Vanderwilt, *A Church Without Borders*, (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1998), 150.

from moral disorder. *Rta* was very much associated with the right performance of the sacrifice and consequently the Vedas devote considerable space to the scrupulous carrying out of the various rites.

The *Rg Veda* concludes with a prayer for harmony and peace, with the help of Agni and by a union of hearts and oneness of Spirit:

United your resolve, united your hearts,
May your spirits be at one
That you may long together dwell
In unity and harmony.” (X, 191, 4)

In all Asian religions, including the primal religions, harmony is a prized value. Asia is known for its spirituality of harmony. It constitutes “the intellectual and effective, religious and artistic, personal and societal soul of both persons and institutions in Asia.”² Seeking harmony with the divine and with nature within and around humans has been the Asian way of life. This is amply verified by the hospitality extended to the different religions. India, thus, wholeheartedly welcomed the Zoroastrians, fleeing persecution in Iran. The nascent Christian faith too found a welcoming home in the Indian soil. Harmony implies the recognition and respect for the other. It is not an imposed unity or uniformity. Neither is it a merging but upholding the individuality of the other with whom one lives in concord.

In the bible too we come across this esteemed role of harmony. The Israelites lived in harmony with others, in the context of their consciousness of their own identity, which they lived with the awareness of God as the Lord of all peoples and history. The universal and cosmic covenants show how all nations have a place in Yahweh’s plan. Yahweh desires order and cosmic harmony as reflected in the earlier prophets of Israel as Hoshea (Hos 2: 20). Later prophets like Isaiah present universal harmony as the ideal (Is 11: 6-8). The concept of the Kingdom in the New Testament retrieves the Old Testament idea of harmony. Ephesians 1: 10 proclaims a universal harmony and cosmic reconciliation between things in heaven and things on earth.

Hence our understanding of Jesus Christ must lead us to situate ourselves to live in authentic harmony with our brothers and sisters in Asia.

2. The Christology of Complementarity

The biblical justification for a Christology of Complementarity can be categorized in the following headings: Creation, Wisdom Literature, the Pre-existent Word and Incarnation with the ministry of the Historical Jesus.

2.1 Creation

In the bible we have an all-encompassing divine plan manifested in the story of creation. God’s universal vision unfolds in the creation of heaven and earth culminating in the creation of humans in God’s own image (Gen 1: 1-26). Similarly the bible ends with the

² BIRA IV/1, in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, (eds) G Rosales & G Arevalo, (New York: Orbis, 1992), 249.

universal vision of the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21-22). For our purpose what is important is the underlying Christological dimension of creation. God creates everything through God's Word, in the Spirit (Gen 1:1f). This Christological dimension of creation is found later in the New Testament where it affirms that creation is, through, by and for Jesus Christ (Col 1: 15-17; Eph 1: 10).

The biblical creation narrative leads us to have an inclusive vision, to include the whole cosmos as part of the divine plan in Jesus Christ. As Irenaeus held, creation was not the end but the beginning of God's relation with humans. Creation is the very beginning of history. In other words, history is not the result of human sin. What God made at "the beginning" was only the initial part, which was expected to develop later through a historical process.³ Thus the incarnate Word is linked with creation. Creation is not extrinsic to incarnation. Nor is incarnation an after-thought of God or the result of any human act. All history is in God's hands and God leads it through its events to the goals that God has set in Jesus Christ.

The whole cosmos participates in God's self-communication in the Word. It expands, progresses and evolves into the fullness in Christ. Hence Teilhard de Chardin could speak of the whole cosmic process as one of Christ-bearing. "The prodigious expanses of time that preceded the first Christians were not empty of Christ, for they were imbibed with his power."⁴ The Johannine Prologue too dwells on the creative role of the Word (Jn 1:3). Creation, the Self-exteriorization of God, takes place through the Word. Creation as well as Incarnation can be said to be the Self-communication of God *ad extra*.

Creation is an integral part of Revelation. Divine revelation unfolds through word and deed. "The plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity. The deeds manifest and confirm the realities signified by the words," teaches the Council on Revelation (DV 2).

2.2 Mediation of Wisdom

The Christological dimension of creation is further spelt out in the Wisdom literature. Wisdom was created by God before all things and is associated with all the works of God (Prov.8: 22-36). Here Wisdom is presented as the first creation through which everything else is created (Wis 7: 22; 8:6; etc.). In every generation Wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God (Wis 7:14). Wisdom is the source of right conduct and teaches the fear of God and justice (Prov 3:7; 8:13). Wisdom is the dispenser of all goodness and God's friendship, the source of salvation to those who welcome her (Wis 6:19-20). Wisdom presides over the destinies of humankind right from the beginning (Wis 10:1-24). Having come from God Wisdom takes possession of every people and nation (Sir 24:6). Wisdom is all-powerful as God, she is God's counselor and sits on throne by God's side (Wis 9:4).

³ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 2.25 in Gonzales, *Christian Thought Revisited*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999), 29.

⁴ Tony Kelly, *An Expanding Theology: Faith in a World of Connections*, (Newtown: Dwyer, 1993), 74.

Wisdom is God's order and counsel and hence it is identified with the Torah (Prov 1-10; Sir 1; 24). Wisdom is the universal mediation of revelation, Grace and holiness. Later the New Testament authors will identify Jesus with Wisdom (Lk 11:31f; Mt 12:41f; Col 1:15-17). St. Paul speaks of Christ as the Wisdom of God (1Cor 1: 24). We have a number of texts scattered throughout the New Testament as examples of this identification (Phil 2:6-11; Eph 2:14-16 I Tim 3.16; etc.). The early Christological hymns such as Col 1:15-20; Phil 2:6-11; Jn 1: 1-18; etc., express the early community's faith that Jesus, the incarnate Wisdom of God, had a cosmic role in creation and salvation.

Commenting on the Johannine Word, Raymond Brown points out how John was influenced by the personified divine Wisdom as described in the Old Testament.⁵ Wisdom literature manifests the ecumenism of the Old Testament. Raymond Brown continues by giving a comparison between Wisdom in the Old Testament and the Johannine thought.

2.3 The Pre-existent Word

The Prologue can be qualified as the Johannine genealogy of Jesus Christ. Though the preexistence of Jesus Christ is not absent in the Synoptic Gospels, only John describes the activity of the Pre-existent Word that became Jesus of Nazareth.

The Word that became incarnate in Jesus Christ was God and was with (the)⁶ God from the beginning. With the use of the imperfect *en* (was), throughout verses 1 and 2, John brings out the timelessness of the activity of both God and the Word, which are described thereafter. The salvific activity of God in the Word is an eternal one, preceding even creation. For the Jews it was the Word of God, the creative agent in Genesis, the prophetic agent in the prophets, and the source of Wisdom in the Wisdom literature. The Word was the divine power operative in history exercising power and presence.⁷ The Hebrew notion of the Logos, thus, is more functional.

No doubt, the focus of the prologue is the advent of the pre-existent Logos into the world at a certain moment of time. But at the same time it asserts the universality of the work of Logos. The world is Word-permeated as everything was made through him (1.3). The Word is the source of life and this life is the light that enlightens every human being coming into the world (1: 4-5,9). This describes the revelatory character of the Word in creation.

As E.D. Miller has pointed out, in John 1: 1-5 we have four strophes, each making an assertion about Logo's relation to something, and in each strophe to something different. Thus the first strophe is about Logos in his personal relation to God, the second is about his creative relation to the world, strophe three expresses the Logos in his incarnate relation to humans and strophe four turns our attention to the Logos' victorious relation to

⁵ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (I-XII), (Garden City: Double Day & Co., 1966), cxxii.

⁶ The Greek version of Johannine Gospel uses the definitive article with God, giving the possibility of making a difference between the divinity of the Word and of the Absolute divinity of God.

⁷ Brennan Hill, *Jesus the Christ: Contemporary Perspectives*, (Mystic: Twenti-Third Publications, 1994), 213.

evil.⁸ These themes recur through out the rest of the Gospel. It begins with the “beginning” and thus the whole human history is assumed into the four strophes. The incarnation is the visible concrete presentation of the four themes.

Through the prologue John makes history a theological category due to the salvific presence of the Word. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the empirical historical reality so permeated by the divine as we do in John due to the presence of the Logos. Incarnation is in relation to and in continuity with the other states of God’s saving activity in Logos. The pre-creation, creation, Incarnation and the present are the four stages of the activity of the Logos. Due to this all-pervading activity of the Logos graphically narrated in the prologue, St. Augustine in his *City of God* approvingly quotes a Platonic philosopher who is reported to have said that the first five verses of the prologue must be written in gold and displayed in the most prominent places in every church.⁹

St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians presents Christ as the mediator of creation and salvation and insists how Christ’s mediatory role extends to all things, seen and unseen, in heaven and on earth (1: 15-17). The same cosmic dimension continues in his letter to the Ephesians. Christ plays a central role in reconciling all things in heaven and on earth, thereby opening the way for a Christology that is cosmic in scope (1: 9-10).

Thus, in the Prologue, as well as in the early Christological Hymns, we find a theological connection between God’s action in creation and Jesus Christ. Everything in creation bears the mark of the Word, the divine reaching out to the world. God had God’s salvific plan close to God from the beginning. All history and every single thing that happened took place through the mediation of the Logos. The world is the realm of the revealing Word. Logos who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth is already with God in whom the entire divine mystery of salvation is already hidden. The whole creation stands bathed in the light of salvation through the Logos.

2.4 The Incarnate Word

The Logos who was present in the world from the beginning, and prefigured in the Old Testament as the *dabar* (word: Gen 1:3), and the *hokma* (wisdom), as the agent of creation, and the ground of the divine self-manifestation and the source of salvation, in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4) became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1: 14). If Jn 1: 1-5 describes the revealing work of the Word in creation, Jn 1: 14 onwards is the description of the revealing work of the Word Incarnate. Through the signs and discourses the incarnate Word manifests God so that at the end of his ministry he can say “those who have seen me have seen the Father (14:9).

Incarnation is the visible and concrete presentation of the Word who is operative in the world from “the beginning,” enabling us to “see and touch his glory.” The whole ministry of Jesus was the manifestation of the true divine nature in human form. In Jesus we encounter the divine in the fullest form as far as the humans are concerned. The picture

⁸ E.D. Miller, *Salvation History in the Prologue of John*, (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 91.

⁹ St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* x,29.PL 41.307.

that emerges from the earthly ministry of Jesus in the Gospels is that he was intensely conscious of God as his intimate *abba* and that he was anointed and sent to proclaim the arrival of God's reign. The reign of God was central to his ministry. Though throughout his ministry he manifested God as the *abba*, God as such was not his main concern, but the reign of God as realized in him. He showed that when we accept the neighbour fully, when we include the excluded, the marginalized, the lonely, the little ones, the sinners, etc., all of whom he characterized as the poor (Lk 4: 18; Mt 11:6; etc.), we encounter God.

It has also to be kept in mind that the mission of the Incarnate Word was not a religious one in the sense that at no point of his ministry did he try to change the religion of the people. In fact he was a Jew, though a counter-cultural one. As a Jewish prophet he wants to die in Jerusalem, though he dies on the periphery of the city as a criminal.

Likewise, contrary to the presumption of the existing atonement theology, nowhere in the ministry of Jesus do we come across Jesus trying to change God's attitude to humans, except perhaps on the cross when he asks forgiveness for his executioners (Lk 23:34). Nor do the four Gospels justify the Pauline atonement theology except for one or other isolated text, which in fact can be explained without recourse to the atonement theory¹⁰. In the Gospels the crucifixion is the result of the ministry. The ministry leads to his death (Mk 3:6; Lk 12:12 and par).

2.5 The Mystery of the Word

From the foregoing reflections it is obvious that just as there is only one God, regardless of with whichever name that God is addressed, that God reaches to humans only through one Mystery, which Christian Tradition identifies as the Person of Jesus Christ. What is important is the reality and not the name. The names, Logos, Wisdom, Word, etc., are cultural.

On the other hand the reality itself is beyond human grasp. Scriptural scholar John P Meier has shown how we cannot know the total reality of Jesus of Nazareth with all his thoughts, words, deeds, feelings, etc., but only the Historical Jesus that is the scientific reconstruction based on the Gospels and other available sources.¹¹ If so, how much less do we know the Word. "If the Historical Jesus is not the real Jesus, neither is the "theological Jesus" investigated by theologians according to their own proper methods

¹⁰ Interestingly, none of the Scriptural Scholars whom E.P. Sanders reviewed as to their view on the purpose or aim of Jesus and the reason for his death, has said that the passion and death was an atonement, but as somehow related to his ministry (E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, (London: SCM, 1987), 3-58). The Passover meal pointed to the deliverance from the Egyptian bondage and at the same time to the new Exodus. It symbolized also the forgiveness of sins in so far as Yahweh returned to redeem them from Pharaoh. Now the new Exodus has come in Jesus and hence also forgiveness. Hence without recourse to any atonement, the text Mt 26: 28 can be explained. Just as the Passover meal pointed to a forgiveness of sins, this meal of the new Passover also indicates the forgiveness of sins. The exile was caused by sins (Jer 31:31-34) and the Exodus and the later restoration was a forgiveness of sins. So also the Messianic Kingdom that has come in Jesus is a sign of forgiveness of sins.

¹¹ John P Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol 2, (New York: ABRL Doubleday, 1994), 9.

and criteria,” observes Meier.¹² Hence it is better to refer to the Mystery for the reality of the Word. Mystery was used by St. Paul in his letters (Eph 1:9; Rom 16:25; Col 1:26, etc.). More significantly, Mystery would be acceptable to the followers of other religions in the context of Inter Religious Dialogue.

Humans, limited as they are, cannot reach out to the Transcendent unless the Transcendent himself takes the initiative. In the bible this initiative, we have seen, is described in terms of the enlightening activity of the Word. Religions are the social and historical expressions of the human response to this divine initiative, divine revelation. Hence, all religions are supernatural, or revealed, though as human responses, they can be mixed with limitations as well.

Though all religions participate in the Mystery, no religion, including Christianity, can claim an exclusive and exhaustive monopoly of that Mystery. In *Lumen Gentium* Vatican II asserted that the fullness of the divine reign is an eschatological reality and the church is straining towards that fullness (n 5). If so the realization of the fullness of the Mystery too is eschatological.

Every religion, in so far as it stands under the enlightening activity of the Word, participates in the Mystery of the Word. Each religion has its own role and function and is salvific through the creative activity of God in and through the Word. John Paul II distances himself from every form of exclusivism that prevents a real and respectful dialogue with other religions, by affirming the real possibility of salvation in these religions (*Redemptoris Missio* 9-10). Christian openness to the followers of other religions flows from the Christian faith in God who has manifested God’s self through creation in Word. A Christian is called to continue the ministry of the Incarnate Word. This according to the Gospels is to work for the realization of the divine Reign, by manifesting the human face of God in our lives as it happened in the ministry of the Incarnate Word. “As the Father has sent me so do I send you,” instructs the Risen Lord in the Johannine Gospel (20: 21). This mission of witnessing to what happened in the Incarnate Word entails also a willingness to affirm what God has done among all peoples through God’s Word.

3. Space for Complementarity

In the light of what we have seen we are impelled to be open to the presence of the Mystery of Jesus Christ in other Religions. Even as God’s love is eternal and universal, so too God’s mission. Divine mission is the externalization, concretization of the divine love in the Word. In this sense we can speak of God’s mission beginning with creation. It is at the same time a proclamation of God’s salvation in the Mystery of Jesus Christ. Due to the personal character of divine dealing this mission ultimately takes a human character. That is the meaning of Incarnation. The entire ministry of Jesus was rendering visibility, tangibility and concreteness to the divine love. So much so, time and again, people exclaim how the power of God was manifested in him.

¹² Ibid.

The Gospel of Mark explicitly reminds us how this love and mission is not confined to the community of the disciples alone. It is to be found outside the Jesus' circle as well. Jesus reproves the disciples who complained about 'others' casting out demons (9:38). Marcan Jesus gives Jonah as the great sign of conversion of the Ninevites and he praises the faith of the Syrophoenician woman (7: 24-30). Jesus performs the miracles even outside the Jewish territory such as the healing of deaf man in the region of the Decapolis (7:31-37) and the feeding of the 4000 in territory presumed to be gentile (8: 1-10).

In his very inaugural address at the Nazareth synagogue, the Lucan Jesus, while quoting from the prophet Isaiah leaves out the close, 'vengeance (to the gentiles)' (Is 61.2b). In the same vein he refers to the two key Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha who performed their healing or redeeming acts among Gentiles and not among the Israelites. Though this Jesus portrays how the fulfillment of the text he just quoted need not be confined to the Israelites or to any community. We cannot put limits to divine freedom to work in unexpected ways.¹³

While what we have experienced in the Historical Jesus is the basis of the Christian faith commitment and mission, the pre-existent Word is the ground for the search for complementarity. This does not mean a separation of the two or any sort of dualism, but it refers only to different perspectives of the same Mystery. We Christians must realize that Jesus is not so much concerned about the conception we have of his identity as much as our commitment to his mission. When the disciples of John the Baptist approached him enquiring if he were the Messiah, his reply was not focusing on himself, but rather what was happening through him. This is important for the community of his disciples. They must recapture that mission of the realization of God's rule.

The Historical Jesus is not busy with the activities of the Pre-existent Word, such as creating and enlightening all human beings, but is focused on the realization of the Kingdom and the manifestation of God's nature. Thus the Incarnate Word does not exhaust the mission of the Mystery of the Word. What happened in the Incarnate Word is of key significance for the community of his disciples, though it cannot have any claim of exclusive possession of the Mystery. The very identity of the community is the continuation of the ministry of the Incarnate Word though it has no monopoly on the Mystery. This bolsters the need for looking into the very basis of different religions. Christian collaboration with other religions cannot be limited to certain activities such as Inter Religious Dialogue, or some joint ventures for common good, but must also look into the very being of other religions as permeated by the Mystery that in Christian tradition we identify as Jesus Christ.

This in turn leads us to a second issue. Salvation cannot be described in exclusive terms as the work of the Historical Jesus and available only in the church. God's salvation reaches humans through the Mystery of the Word. We have already referred to the death and resurrection of Jesus as the logical culmination of his ministry, rather than an expiatory sacrifice. In the light of Jesus' death on the cross, we must overcome selfishness and become other-centered. To the extent we conform ourselves to the self-

¹³ Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 71.

giving love of Jesus Christ we are saved, healed of the tendency to selfishness caused by the disobedience of the biblical first parents.

What the early Christological hymns celebrate is the fact that in Jesus God himself is present and God's salvation reaches us through Jesus Christ. This is not a denial of salvation for other peoples. This challenges the church to widen its theological horizons to accept the divine plan of religious pluralism and their role in sustaining the followers of these religions in their pilgrimage to salvation, due to the presence of the Mystery of the Word in them. We need greater humility to acknowledge that we do not know all of God or God's plans, nor of the Mystery of the Word through whom God created this mind-boggling universe. What must interest us is not a one-time redemption or justification, but the daily living according to the divine plan inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus Christ. It is in every day life that human life unfolds and humans have to face the problems of life, including that of religious pluralism.

4. Justification for a Christology of Complementarity

As John Meier underlines, Jesus' own ministry was moulded in the Palestinian context of his times. Historical Jesus can be understood only in relation to the people of his times.¹⁴ The whole concept of Jesus as the Messiah can be understood only in terms of the Jewish hope of one who would liberate the people from all foreign powers and establish them in true Kingdom in the covenant spirit. The early church expanded the Jewish idea of the Messiah (Christ) who was to restore Israel in a political way, by showing it was more an eschatological reality anticipated by the casting and healing activities. Hence the second coming was a new dimension added to the Jewish hopes.

When we come to the Hellenistic culture Christ is only a proper name. The burning issue for the Greeks was the understanding of the person, nature and substance of Christ. The Greek mind could not grasp a Jesus Christ who came to manifest the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc., operating in history. The Greeks were accustomed to a God of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Plotinus, *et al.*, who was the unmoved mover, the uninvolved in the material world. It failed to take the Historical Jesus seriously. The living Christ was lost but the correct academic expression of the faith was the main thing. As John Macquaerie has pointed out, after the Greek inculturation, Christology substantially has remained unchanged, with little contact with the modern mind.¹⁵ This lack of inculturation in Christology accounts for the many theological suspicions and condemnations that we come across today.

Our Christology can be moulded in the concepts and problems of our time. Our major problem is not of substance and nature, but that of religious pluralism and the dehumanized existence of almost one-third of humanity. Here the Greek inculturation can serve as a model and must lead us to a more liberative understanding of Jesus Christ, making our faith meaningful to the contemporary times. Christology is a process of interpretation of our faith experience, experience of God in Jesus Christ, "filtered through the words and deeds, the life, death and resurrection, the mediatorship, and personal

¹⁴ Meier, 349.

¹⁵ John Macquaerie, *Christology Revisited*, (London: SCM Press, 1998), 11.

presence of Jesus.”¹⁶ This is clear already from the existence of the four Gospels each of which is the formal gathering of four streams of such interpretations with different perspectives and characteristics. What God was accomplishing for humans in Jesus Christ is described as the saving love. However the tendency had been to confine this saving love to the Christians alone, if not to the Catholics only. A Christology of complementarity spurs us to expand our horizons and see how God is a God of the human history.

5. Missiological Consequences

A practical expression of the faith in a Christology of complementarity would be that we assure the followers of other religions that the Christian service is not directed against other religions in any way. In the past somehow mission was interpreted as oriented against the followers of other religions. Christian mission was seen as a threat to other religions, as it was feared, with justification, that the church with its claim of being the only revealed religion was trying to dislodge other religions. This situation has to be rectified. As John Paul II has taken the pain to point out, “Church’s mission has only one purpose, to serve humans by manifesting the love of God made present in Jesus Christ” (*Redemptoris Missio* 2). We must acknowledge that we have many things in common with them and we, along with them, travel to the common destiny, the fullness of the Mystery.

On our part we have to convince ourselves that our mission is not measuring the faith of others, nor judging others, but serving others by our faithful following of Jesus. Nor should we try to place ourselves at the center, as the God-intended religion, but must realize that God and God’s mission are at the center which reaches out to humans through the Mystery that in Christian tradition we identify as Jesus Christ. In this perspective, God is the Saviour, not the church, though the church is a necessary instrument to continue what was revealed in the Incarnate Word. Just as the Incarnate Word was God with us, *-Emmanuel*, (Mt 1: 23), in every culture the church has to become present, to make God’s presence concrete. The Christian vocation is primarily a call to serve as the salt, light and leaven in the world (Mt 5: 13-15).

Christianity is not a religion in competition with other religions in the religious market, with the attractive wrappings of competitive claims and dogmatic niceties. Christianity is a call to follow Jesus Christ the Word Incarnate in his ministry of going about doing good (Act 10:38), whereby he manifested God’s compassion, God’s other-centeredness. Such a mission is relevant in all places and cultures. Hence Jesus qualified the identity of this community as salt, light, leaven, etc. When communal violence engulfs us, we should not go about with the medieval ideals and colonialistic type of mission. Rather we have to become the inspiration for reconciliation and love. Jesus’ answer to those who informed him that his mother and brothers are seeking him, brings home the key point in mission: All those who seek God’s will in their lives are his mother, brothers and sisters. It is not primarily a question of the religious tag (Lk 8:21). We can even misuse the name of Jesus Christ without concern for the divine reign (Mt 7: 21).

¹⁶ Gerard H Luttenberger, *An Introduction to Christology in the Gospels and Early Church*, (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998), 27.

Similarly we need to be cautious as not to stretch certain Scriptural texts to argue for the necessity of baptism. For instance, the insistence on rebirth in the Spirit (Jn 3:5) is to be understood in the background of the Jewish belief that one becomes part of the people of God by birth from a Jewish mother. John insists that only a begetting from God produces a child of God and what was born of the flesh is flesh. "He was not dealing with the issue of people who did their best to serve God but had never found Christ proclaimed convincingly enough, especially by example, to warrant belief," writes Raymond Brown.¹⁷

While we may be concerned with the salvation of the followers of other religions, we Christians have to ask if we go on compromising with an unjust and marginalizing system, can we Christians be saved? We have seen how Jesus was not concerned with the religion of the people, but the lot of the people of his time and he did whatever possible to change that and wanted us to do the same. We cannot come into terms with the unjust structures and situations.

We have to concentrate on the salvific love manifested in the ministry of Jesus Christ, through which people could experience the arrival of the divine reign already now as the anticipation and projection of the eschatological Kingdom, instead of a salvation interpreted in the light of the Jewish concept of expiation. As Jesus made the Good News a historical reality through his response to the poor, orphans, tax collectors, widows, and all the marginalized, so too the church must reach out to the suffering, to the lonely, those cast aside, unjustly treated and so on. Thus the church makes the new age, inaugurated through the ministry of Jesus and confirmed by God by raising Jesus from the dead, to continue through its own ministry.

In this, the church has to be open to other religions and movements in so far as they too are contributing to the same cause. Church's faith tells it how they too, in so far as they originate from the same God and are mediated by the same Mystery of the Word, can also be motivated by and participating in the Kingdom.

A Christology of complementarity has to retrieve the Semitic understanding of experience in history, rather than clinging on to claims of Truth. The community will have to ask how Jesus Christ and his message can be made alive in each place through the re-presentation, re-actualizing of his ministry in each place. The Semitic idea of the divine reign with its historical, developmental and inclusive way of thinking must accompany our search for a Christology of complementarity.

This brings us to another related issue. Jesus' ministry was a constant relationship on the vertical and horizontal levels. Jesus is in touch with God and with humans. Jesus re-defined the understanding of holiness from the existing notion of separation to that of relationship, horizontal and vertical (Mk 12: 29-31). What stands out in the ministry of Jesus Christ is the significance he attached to the 'other'. In our context this other is a religious one and hence his or her religion also merits to be considered as the 'other'.

¹⁷ Raymond Brown, *The Churches the Apostles left Behind*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 82.

6. Complementarity leads to Harmony

A Christology of complementarity leads to harmony among religions in Asia. We have already seen how the Asian spiritual insight is built on Harmony. As John Paul II has stressed, “[B]eing Asian” is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony” (EA 6). What makes Christianity unpopular in Asia is its claims of uniqueness. Asians are open to Jesus Christ though they resist Christianity claiming exclusive salvation. Even hard-line organizations like the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak*s (a fundamentalist Hindu group) would be amenable to a church with a Christology of Complementarity reaching out to others. These groups have repeatedly expressed their acceptance of the St. Thomas Christians who lived in harmony with their neighbours of other faiths.

Harmony was not foreign to Christianity. The Christian community in India, tracing its origin to St. Thomas, the Apostle, accepted and respected the followers of other religions. This community believed that each religion is salvific to the followers of that religion, a position that was condemned by the Synod of Diamper in 1559.¹⁸ It merits to be mentioned how this is the only instance where Christianity, right from its inception to this day, lived in harmony with its neighbours of other faiths.

This spirit of harmony is reflected in a letter that Pope Gregory VII wrote to the Muslim King Anzir of Mauritania in 1076 thanking him for the gifts that the King had sent to the Pope and for freeing some of the Christian prisoners. The Pope wrote: “God, the Creator of all, ..., has inspired to your heart this act of kindness. He who enlightens all people coming into the world (Jn 1:9) has enlightened your mind for this purpose. Almighty God, who desires all people to be saved (1Tim 2:4) and none to perish, is well pleased to approve in us most of all that besides loving God, people love others, and do not do to others anything they do not want to be done unto themselves (Mt 7:12).”¹⁹

At the height of the fear of the Muslims, when the crusade was raging, St. Francis advocated a peaceful approach to the Muslims. He advised his monks to be subject to other people of another moral code and religion, without denying one’s own religion. Francis wrote: “They should begin neither quarrels nor dissensions, but should be subject to every human creature for God’s sake and acknowledge that they are Christians” (Rule of 1221 16).²⁰ The witness of fraternal harmony and conciliatory approach, even when religions were at war, seemed more important for Francis.

The same spirit of harmony we see upheld by other thinkers like Ramon Llull (1232-1316) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-61). Llull propagated an ideal of unity for the sake of peace, of human unity that would reflect divine unity, doing away with ‘difference and contrariety’ and leaving only ‘concordance.’²¹ Llull insisted also that search for such a

¹⁸ A.M. Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology*, (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998), 39.

¹⁹ In *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, J. Dupuis, (New York: Orbis, 1997), 102.

²⁰ See *We are Sent A Program of Study on the Franciscan Missionary Charism*, (Franciscan Institute of Spirituality in India: Bangalore, n.d), 58.

²¹ J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 107.

harmony requires a language that is not just of pure reason and knowledge, but of love. In his *Libre d'Amic e Amat* he wrote:

The bird was singing in the beloved's orchard. The lover came and said to the bird: if we cannot understand each other through languages, then let us understand one another through love, for in your song my beloved is conjured up in my eyes.²²

We come across the spirit of harmony in another important work, "The Peace of Faith" (*De pace fidei*) of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-61). The work is all the more significant, as Dupuis has drawn our attention to, not only because the author of the work was a Cardinal of the church, but more so due to the timing of its publication, 1454, 12 years after the Council of Florence that upheld the axiom, "Outside the Church no salvation," and just one year after the fall of Constantinople into the hands of the Turks, that shook the whole of Western world.²³ In contrast to the spirit of the Crusades, the Cardinal advocates peace between different faiths and calls for a conference in which experts will seek an agreement between the religions and thus ensure peace.

John Paul II has been promoting that spirit through his various endeavours such as the Assisi Conference of the Religious Leaders (October 1986) and his Apostolic Journeys. In this connection one must see the significance of the many addresses of John Paul II, especially in Asia, though not exclusively in Asia, where he tells the world that the church that he heads, does not harbour any design of swallowing other religions, but in the spirit of the great Council, Vatican II, is ready to collaborate with others to make the world more humane, more Kingdom-like.

In its mission the Asian Church has to take all this into consideration. Christianity is not a religion of certain dogmas but a religion of relationship. If so, this relationship has to be extended to all. In this perspective Jesus Christ is not just a cosmic myth, but a Person, a Mystery that is present and alive in the whole history, including all religions. Christianity stands for a relationship of cosmic dimensions.

Concluding Remarks

What we have tried to articulate are some orientations in spelling out an understanding of Jesus Christ in the Asian context. We have not gone into the various puzzles of Christology. However, we have departed from the traditional approach to Christology as God's involvement in a world already made. We have rolled Christology back to the beginningless 'beginning'. This, hopefully, can spur in us an attitude of collaboration with the followers of other religions, without compromising the Christian faith in the centrality of Jesus Christ or diluting the Christian commitment. Our aim, thus, has been primarily this Christian openness and collaboration. Making others more responsive to our efforts is only a spin-off from the former. It calls for a deepening of the Christian faith as well as commitment. It is the need of the hour. Pastorally it is a more demanding position, but it is fully in consonant with the biblical spirit and it seeks to be relevant and meaningful to the Asian context.

²² Raimon Panikkar, "Philosophy as Intracultural Transgression," in *Crossing the Borders* (eds) Anand Amaladass & Rosario Rocha, (Chennai: Satya Nilayam Publications, 2001), 10.

²³ J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology*, 107.

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Abstract:

Christology has become central to missiological reflections in the context of religious pluralism. The author develops a Christology that preserves the uniqueness of Jesus Christ without devaluing the significance of other religions. Having emphasized the role of harmony in the Asian World view and basing himself on the biblical themes such as the Christological dimension of creation, the role of Wisdom in the Wisdom literature, the Johannine Prologue, etc., he argues that just as there is only one God, there is only one mediation between God and humankind. This mediation, identified as Jesus Christ in the Christian tradition, is a Mystery and is operative in all religions. The Christian community has inherited his mission manifested in his Incarnation. Specifically, it is making present the love of God, God's other-centeredness. The Church has to expand its horizons to accept the divine plan of the plurality of religions and assure the followers of these religions that its mission in no way is directed against them. This will enable the Church to witness to the Gospel in the spirit of complementarity and harmony.