

The Challenge of *Fratelli Tutti* to the Indian Context

Introduction

The topic of challenges to the Indian context, arguably, is very complex in as much as every number of the Encyclical offers a challenge to the Indian context. This article, however, limits itself to church's relation to other religions in the light of the Encyclical's invitation to, 'fraternity and social friendship.' The Pope reminds the church that its service is not one of waging a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; but simply spreading the love of God (FT 4). In as much as fraternity and social friendship has a universal scope, it is open to the followers of every religion as well. It is an invitation "to dialogue among all people of good will" (FT 6). The vision of creating "a single human family" cannot be left to any one religion (FT 8), but requires the collaboration of all, as fellow pilgrims.

1. The Indian Context

India has earned a name for its deeply religious spirit and has the first written religious Scriptures in as much as the Babylonian texts like Gilgamesh, though more than 4000 years old, are largely of socio-political nature. Similarly, despite the tension between the followers of Hinduism and Buddhism in the early stages, leading to the near disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its origin, traditionally India is taken to be a religiously tolerant nation that welcomed the followers of foreign religions like Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam¹. India is home to most religions like Primal religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. Traditionally these religions coexisted peacefully, until the arrival of the Moguls and western Christian missionaries.

Today religious violence is a major phenomenon of Indian society. In the past such conflicts were largely between the Hindus and the Muslims, to a great extent, due to the very nature of these religions, with regard to beliefs and practices, but got aggravated by the expansion work of the Muslims. In recent times the Hindu opposition to religious conversion has been extended to Christians as well leading to many untoward instances, including the killing of several Christians and the destruction of numerous churches.

Enlightened Hindus would appreciate the Christian influence in reforming Hinduism from within, to make it more extroverted, leading to reforms like the abolition or mitigation of many of the traditional practices such as the widow-burning (*sati*) or the caste system. One cannot be blind to the Christian impact on the making of the Constitutions of the Republic of India. I am inclined to suggest this catalytic role, along with the educational and other social outreaches, as the greatest service that Christianity has imparted to the Indian society.

On the other hand, Christians, unintentionally, though, have contributed to the current religious violence in India. Though difficult for Christians to grasp, most Hindus would recon the Christian conversion work as a by-product of the colonial conquest and as an invasion on the majority community. In the same vein, inadmissible though, many Hindus take it for granted that the followers of the tribal religions in India are part of Hinduism. There are also sections within the majority community that would be happier if the traditionally weaker sections of the Indian society are left at that situation as it would offer better chances of exploiting them in different ways. The Christian empowerment projects runs counter to such vested interests.

Well-known as it is, India traditionally is esteemed to be a spiritual nation, home of ancient religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and

¹ Through the Arab traders Islam came to the southern coasts of India already from its early history.

Jainism with written scriptures. No wonder that the late Pope Paul VI during his visit to Bombay in December 1964 qualified India as a nation that sought God with relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence and in hymns of fervent prayer (AAS, 1964: 1032). All this makes Francis' proposal of making Religions at the service of Fraternity in the world, as the greatest challenge that the Encyclical offers to the Indian church. It calls for a paradigm shift in Church's understanding of its service in India, always centred on the kingdom-ministry of Jesus.

2. The Papal Call

Out of conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters (FT 128), and from the need to think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home (FT 17), and concerned about the prevalence of a "throwaway" world that readily approves that part of the human family can be sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence (FT 18), and at the expense of the equal dignity of all human beings, the Pope calls all to a shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity.

Approvingly quoting the Bishops of India, "The goal of dialogue is to establish friendship, peace and harmony, and to share spiritual and moral values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love" (CBCI, 2016) the Encyclical invites all to a dialogue between the followers of different religions to build fraternity and defend justice in society (FT 271). Believers in different religions are open to the Father of all, the basis of human fraternity and the transcendent dignity of the human person, who as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore, the subject of rights that no one may violate.

The followers of different religions know how their witness to God with a sincere heart, can enrich each other, as fellow pilgrims. The trampling of the dignity of fellow human beings and the violation of their rights is the result of removing God from one's vision (FT 273). Hinduism teaches how God is the indweller of all human beings. If so, considering another person as ritually impure is an insult to the God in whom one believes and worships. In the same vein, gender discrimination too goes counter to the faith in the one God. It flows from a desensitized human conscience, distanced from

religious values (FT 275). Interreligious dialogue in this context involves a concern for integral human development. Church's charitable and educational activities have a public role, for the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity. The Church as a family among families, leaves home and the places of worship "in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity ... to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation" (FT 276).

Christians, while esteeming the ways in which God works in other religions and having high regard for the manner of life and conduct of the followers of other religions, must be resonating with the compassion and the tender love with a capacity for reconciliation, springing from the Gospel (FT 277).

3. Perception of other Religions from the Biblical Perspective

The initial openness of Christians towards other religions in modern times can be described as a type of 'democratic thinking', i.e., since these religions are active Christians have to accept them, tolerate them and even enter into dialogue with them. Rarely was it the result of a biblical analysis to situate them from the biblical perspective.

Basic to the Christian experience of God in the Bible is that God is one who reaches out to all, especially the suffering and the poor, those on the margin. Thus, the first experience of the Hebrew community in Egypt is a God who tells them through Moses that God has seen their affliction and heard their cry (Ex 3:7). The very nature of God as compassion, love, is to reach out as described in the book of Genesis. Creation is the expression of this reaching out of that desire in God (*bereshit*=beginning, desire) (Gen 1:1). All human beings are created in God's image (Gen 1:26) and with whom God entered into a covenant relationship (Gen 9:9). Later in the New Testament, evangelist John will underline how all humans are created and *enlightened* by God's creative Word (1.1-4; 9).

From this biblical declaration it follows that there is no justification for the Christian claims of exclusive knowledge of God or for a distinction between natural and supernatural revelation. All religious experience anywhere in the world is the result of this divine initiative.

This does not prejudice the divine call of individuals or peoples for a special service. Abraham is called to be a blessing to all humans (Gen 12:3). God makes a particular covenant with Israel so that for God it will be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19: 6), i.e., as a priestly and holy people they will be a light to the rest of the nations of the world (Is 42:6; 49:6).

This particular call is repeated in the New Testament as well when the Word Incarnate creates a new community (Mk 3:14 par) and tells it that this community is to be a light to the world (Mt 5:13-14). It may be noted that Jesus of Nazareth, as God’s Word Incarnate (Lk 1:35), came from God whom no one ever had seen, to make him known (Jn 1:38; 12:45; 14:9) through his ministry culminating on the death on the cross and resurrection. He creates the new community as the sacrament, servant of the Kingdom, the focus of his ministry, through which he manifested the Father and Father’s love and Father’s nature.

Though all people receive the divine revelation through the Word, followers of other religions cannot justifiably be described as ‘anonymous Christians,’ in so far as the Word is made Christ, in the light of his incarnation, ministry and death, by God by raising him from the dead (Act 2:22-33). Only the companions of the Word Incarnate are Christians, followers of the Way (Act 11:26), called precisely for continuing the ministry of the Lord.

The Christian approach to the followers of other religions has to be anchored on this biblical realism and not because of a sense of helplessness as though nothing else is possible, nor because of the revival or growth, often associated with aggressive nationalism, of these religions.

4. A Call to Interreligious Dialogue

It was pointed out earlier how the nature of God manifested in the Bible is that of self-reaching out. This is what Christians have experienced in Jesus of Nazareth, ever reaching out to the neighbour, whether sick, hungry, sinful, demon-possessed, or the marginalized due their profession or for whatever reasons. This reaching out, characterized as the proclamation of the Kingdom, along with the universal revelation, impels Christians to enter into

interreligious dialogue (IRD) by reaching out to the followers of these religions. Dialogue is “approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground” (FT 198).

IRD is not an entity but a process of becoming. It is a process of becoming a community of persons, respectful and respecting, transforming and transformed, renewing and renewed. This allows IRD to have a certain amount of spontaneity as well as open-endedness. It acknowledges the need to turn to each other and together to the ground of our being, to the goal of our existence. Thus, it is permeated by a sense of the radical Transcendence and at the same time, down to earth immanence in so far as it is primarily directed to the horizontal level, in terms of understanding and acceptance of each other and together to the marginalized of the society. It is through and through guided by the mandate to “seek first the divine reign” (Mt 6:33). IRD is a cooperative and constructive interaction among people belonging to different religious traditions (Muck, 2016: 8) leading to communion, inclusive of all.

IRD as a religious experience, is a symbol of the kingdom to which we are pilgrimaging: it is a “diffused symbol” (Arbuckle, 2010: 25). Its meaning depends on the different contexts of the dialogue process: faith, religion, and commitment to transformation:

After all, symbol is an embodiment of meaning, enabling humans to communicate, perpetuate and develop a vision of human life.

Symbol has the innate ability to make us feel ‘at home’. At the same time, by the same logic, it invites us to enter into the world of the symbols of the other and this is the mystery of, the dynamic of IRD, ushering in the gifts of different faiths that will serve as a reservoir of common pilgrimage - the reality of IRD.

A symbol is any reality that by its very dynamism or power leads to another deeper reality through a sharing in the dynamism that the symbol itself offers (and merely by verbal or additional explanations (Arbuckle, 2010: 25).

A good many of modern problems and conflicts, strangely though, have religion at their root (Sacks, 2016: 99), whether it is the Arab-Israel conflict, conflicts in the Middle East and Syria, the Kashmir problem, Indonesian conflicts, the

conflicts in the southern Philippines and many others. In theory at least, all religions have the inbuilt theological underpinning for mutual understanding and collaboration.

The belief in the *antaryamin* in Hinduism², i.e., the Divine nature making a self-surrender to God³, the Buddhist teaching of universal compassion, the Christian call to love and care for the neighbour, the basic understanding of harmony in the Chinese and Confucian religions, the understanding of Yahweh, the creator of all and as the Lord of History in Judaism, the vision of the salvation of the universe as understood by the primal religions, are all inviting religions to come closer and to collaborate, rather than to compete and combat with each other. Right relationship with neighbours is the focus of all religions. This is the challenge of Inter Religious Dialogue. Christians in particular, by their call to witness to the coming of the divine reign in Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of the *extensio Dei* (Divine self-reaching out), are called to IRD.

Prophet Isaiah's vision described in Is 6:1-8, reminds us how our history, our experience of God, does not begin with us. The history of all people of God is part of our intimate relationship with God. "All the earth is filled with his glory" (Is 6:3). Isaiah's vision tells us also that no one, not even Isaiah or Moses, can have a total vision of the divine and this is an invitation for religions to touch the Holy as experienced in the other, to be enriched by the other. God's dialogue with humans does not begin with any particular religion but with creation. This divine initiative coupled with the universal covenant God made with humans (Gen 9:9-17), challenges Christians to look into what they have in common with others, rather than what differentiates them from others.

It has to be acknowledged also how all religions in essence advocate peace, love, unity and tolerance, which the colonial Christianity, due to a narrow missionary zeal, overlooked. Equally, there is no room to compare religions in order to establish one's own superiority. As

the Benedictine nun and author, Joan Chittister, has underlined no people is unique in an absolute sense, in so far as anything in human condition is common to all. "And all of these peoples have grappled with the same kinds of questions and have arrived at their own answers" (Chittister, 2007: xi). What is important is to realize how each religion has a particular service to render to humanity, and ask how together we can usher in a superior quality of human existence. As far as the Christians are concerned this uniqueness is the service to the Kingdom.

Already the Old Testament paves the way for inter religious understanding leading to enrichment of one's religion. The Babylonian exile brought Israel into contact with the leading religion of the Babylonian world, Zoroastrianism and to be enriched by it, in the understanding God. We come across strict monotheism in the Bible only towards the end of the exile (Is 45:18) though there was already the monolatry. The Zoroastrian understanding of the two ages facilitated the belief in the idea of resurrection of the dead. Sean Freyne writes: "The doctrine of the two ages is the theological underpinning for the belief in the idea of the resurrection of the dead - a doctrine that finds its first unequivocal expression in Daniel: 12:2-3" (Sean, 1983: 95). Judaism's adaptation to a life without the temple through the institution of the synagogue, too, results from the Zoroastrians who did not have one central temple but a temple where a community existed.⁴

In the gospels, as we have seen already, Jesus is not an advocate of a religion as much as a quality of life based on love and mercy. The early Christians were quite creative in their openness and sensitivity to the religious world of the times manifested in doing away with circumcision (Acts 15), in the theological interpretation of Jesus as the Lord rather than as Christ/Messiah (Acts 11:20 in contrast to Acts

² According to Rg Veda Reality is one but sages name it differently (*ekam sat: vipra bahudah vdanti*) (Rg 1.164.46)

³ This cannot justify the killing of a fellow human being as an unbeliever!

⁴ Though one hardly comes across scholarly literature stating that the synagogue worship rose due to the influence of Zoroastrianism, scholars like Martin A. Cohen do recognize how the synagogue originated during the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BCE (Cf. Cohen, 1987: 209-218), and this in turn supports Freyne Sean's position that the Jewish synagogue came into being under the influence of Zoroastrianism (Sean, 1983: 96).

9:22), and in similar theological and practical developments.

5. *Fratelli Tutti*, a Retrieval of the Gospel Path for Asia

The Encyclical's greatest challenge to Indian church is IRD as the service of the divine reign. It has to move away from any triumphalism and behaviour to become credible by collaborating with other religions as well as with the poor and marginalized and, thus, to decolonize the contours of its theology.

The gospels indicate how the religious methodology of Jesus was not so much that of founding a new religion as much as reforming the Judaism of his times through a hermeneutical transformation based on love and compassion. Jesus was a faithful Jew who died as a prophet in Jerusalem, "but God raised him up" (Act 2:24) and "has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Act 2:36).

The encyclical unfolds that spirit and invites the church in India/Asia to be an agent of such a transformation through dialogue. The Christian presence in Asia is not for the sake of a radical altering of the religious map of Asia by displacing the age-old religions of Asia but to transform the human society through dialogue into a genuine fraternal community of love - *Fratelli Tutti*. This is in keeping with the spirit of Vatican II whose two most important contributions were the articulation of Church's relation to the modern world and to other religions.

Indian reality, in general, can be described as the plurality of religions, cultural diversity and of the many poor. Despite the gigantic stride democracy has made in India, social democracy still remains a far cry. Caste system in different hues and economic disempowerment have anchored a hierarchical structure that ensures the dominance of the powerful, pushing the powerless to the margins. Jesus' invitation to be converted in the context of the arrival of the Kingdom (Mk 1:14), remains ever urgent for the Asian context. In practice, however, this can be done only with the collaboration of all the religions. This makes the Encyclical's demand for dialogue with the followers of the religions vital for the Indian church so that it be faithful to its Lord.

In principle, at least, all Asian religions subscribe to harmony as an Asian value. As Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* described, "complementarity in harmony" (FT 2) can be characterised as the evangelical norm for Asia. Obviously, love is the foundational value for the Christian community, spelt, out as the existential practice of the principle, *Fratelli Tutti*. Thus, the Encyclical goes a long way in helping Indian church to discharge its service of becoming a light (Mt 5:14) in Indian society.

In India the frontiers of the Kingdom and non-Kingdom lie not between the church and other religions, but between the margins and centre of the of Indian society, the centre understood as those with whom the decision-making power is vested. Advocacy in dialogue assumes an irreplaceable role in this circumstance. What best the church can offer in this unenviable situation of subverting the values of justice, equality and genuine freedom, is the spread of divine goodness and communion leading to acceptance and sharing, rendering each his/her due. The naming of that social repentance is the motto: *Fratelli Tutti!*

It is the expression of repentance in the context of exclusion and exploitation, ushering in a "Cosmotheandric"⁵ communion. The cosmotheandropic vision, with its emphasis on trusting the other, is the end-product of dialogue in so far as dialogue is a meeting of persons. It is an exercise of faith, hope and love: "faith in the ever-inexhaustible mystery beyond the reach of objective knowledge." (Panikkar, 1979: 6). One's eschatological hope for the world enters the heart of the dialogue overriding any fear or prejudice. It is love that impels us towards our fellow human beings. Dialogue is a 'cosmic' confidence in so far as we place the trust ultimately not in humans but in the Ultimate Reality.

Humans are so made that they cannot live in isolation or find their fulfilment except in the sincere gift of self to another. Nor can humans find the true beauty of life without relating to others. Largely, this is true of religions as well

⁵ The expression was used by R. Panikkar, to mean the communion between God, humans and the world. See Panikkar, 1993: 55. I prefer to speak of cosmotheandropic experience, as Andros *refers to man while* Andropos *is inclusive of man and woman*.

in so far as religions are practiced by humans. This implies a “dialogical dialogue,” that is to say, an in-depth experience of the spiritual experience of the other. As we said, it is an experience of faith, hope and love, leading to the primordial interconnectedness of all humans (Panikkar, 1993: 77).

This, in turn, leads us to the fact that Christianity cannot be identified with rituals, isolated from the lived experience of those participating in the ritual. Their historical experience cannot be separated from the rituals. The compassion and true knowledge of God is the defining element of the Christian existence and they form the substratum of any Christian practice. The Encyclical is inviting Catholics to this fundamental principle of Christian life, through the concept of borderless fraternity. In the Asian context the concept of a borderless fraternity cannot be isolated from justice to the margins that requires the collaboration of the followers of all Asian religions. Inter religious dialogue does not remain an ivory tower but an expression of the option for the poor.

Historically and biblically speaking, human experience is one of plurality in every respect, including that of religions. There is nothing to suggest that the divine plan is that of bringing all humans under any one particular religious umbrella, though both the Old Testament (Exo 19:5-6) and the New Testament (Mt 5:14-15) tells of the creation of a people as light to the rest of humanity.

Both the Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, and the Indian Bishops hold out the cause of universal fraternity as the Church’s service to the modern world. In this service IRD with its various shades, can go a long way. IRD can lead the participants to an inter-subjective field of communication orienting to an ever-open horizon of communion. It is both a gift and a task in so far as the ever-open horizon includes also the excluded ones, the visible symbols of the totally Other, the common ground of IRD.

Dialogue is an event in history, with the inter-subjective realm of encounter, meeting the ‘other,’ without any intention of putting fences around the other, but allowing the possibility to be open to the boundless horizon of what God is doing in the world. It is a universe of divine love, divine catholicity without exclusion, the all-inclusive Other. This is the miracle of IRD: a

new awareness of the all-inclusive Other. Equally, it is the awareness of the truth *Fratelli Tutti*!

Addressing the Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat for non-Christians, Pope John Paul II on March 3, 1984 said: “Dialogue is fundamental for the Church, which is called to collaborate in God’s plan with its method of presence, respect, and love towards all persons (cf. *Ad Gentes* 10-12; *Ecclesiam Suam* 41-42; *Redemptoris Hominis* 11-12). ... For the Church, dialogue is based on the very life of God, one and triune God is the Father of the entire human family; Christ has joined every person to himself (RH 19); the Spirit works in each individual; therefore dialogue is also based on love for the human person as such, who is primary and fundamental way of the Church (RH 14), and on the bond existing between culture and the religions which people profess” (John Paul II, 1984: 2).

The fruit of that 1984 Plenary Assembly, the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, declared: “The Church has the duty of discovering and bringing to light and fullness all the richness which the Father has hidden in creation and history, not only to celebrate the glory of God in its liturgy but also to promote among all humankind the movement of the gifts of the Father” (DP 22). Obviously, promoting the truth, *Fratelli Tutti*, through inter religious dialogue, is a fruition of that recommendation.

An inter religious consultation, jointly organized by the Pontifical Council for Inter religious dialogue and the Office of Inter Religious Dialogue of the World Council of Churches, May 12- 16, 2006, stated: “All of us believe that religions should be a source of uniting and ennobling of humans, understood and practiced in the light of the core principles and ideals of each of our faiths, can be a reliable guide to meeting the many challenges before humanity.” The principle *Fratelli Tutti* is such a core ideal and at the same time prepares the way for the universal practice of the respect for the dignity of the human person and the ensuing human rights.

The end product of such a dialogue is, what *Fratelli Tutti* described in terms of “a polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which the whole is greater than any part” (FT 215). The differences are

complementary, rather than conflicting, enriching reciprocally, illumining one another, even amid disagreements and reservations (FT 215). Followers of each religion can learn something from the other. All religions stand in need of conversion and growth, in so far as religion, though based on a divine experience, is a human reality. This makes IRD a constant aspiration and style of life for the Indian church.

Conclusion

The practical emphasis the Pope lays on dialogue can hardly be exaggerated. “Let us arm our children with the weapons of dialogue! Let us teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter,” admonishes Francis (FT 217). This can lead to the “joy of recognizing others, with their right to be themselves” (FT 218). The significance of such an admonition for the Indian society can be understood in the context of constant religious conflicts, not to speak of religious persecution and discrimination, breeding violence and intolerance towards those who are different. This can be overcome only through a culture of dialogue and mutual recognition.

To live by the call of *Fratelli Tutti*, one needs to have a prophetic imagination that can hold together God’s values and the existing reality, always reducing the gap between the two. In contrast to the Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* that outlined a programme for the Church in its life and mission and *Laudato Si’* that gave the world a programme for caring for the environment, the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* gives to the entire humanity a programme to build a new and inclusive world of fraternity and friendship among all, where all can live in peace and harmony and where the rights of all are respected and accepted. In this sense the Encyclical is a spelling out of the Kingdom prayer, the Our Father. This is the vision guiding inter religious dialogue that the church in India pursues.

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