

THE WORD OF GOD IN DIALOGUE WITH HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

Felix A. Machado

Introduction

I wonder if it is possible to find in the Bible a thread of thought which can teach Christians to understand other religions and to relate to their followers with the respect which is due to them. Is it possible, if I may ask, to identify some themes in which can be perceived the history of religion of a particular people crossing the “history of salvation” which, in turn, may illumine the history of religion of that particular people, and thus become capable of discerning the ‘seeds of the Word’ which are present in the universal religious experience? The knowledge of other religions can also help us understand better the sacred Scriptures in view of a more effective and adequate evangelisation of peoples.

“Does the Bible say anything about other religions?” This question has been the object of study in recent times. Worthy of particular mention is the book by Wesley Ariarajah, *“The Bible and People of Other Faiths”* (WCC, Geneva, 1985) in which the Author has tried to interpret the biblical teaching for the emerging new relationship between Christians and peoples of other religious traditions. One can establish a favourable attitude of the Bible towards people of other religions by citing examples, such as, the Gentile priest Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17-20); The Queen of Sabah (1 Kgs 10:1-13); Abel, Enoch and Noah (Gen. 4-9); Job (Job 1:1). But one may also defend a negative attitude towards the people of other religions by citing examples, such as, the massacre of the priests of Baal at the instigation of Prophet Elijah (1 Kgs 18:18 ff, Deut. 7:1-5; Jos 6: 17-21) or by quoting verses, for example, from the *Letter to the Romans* 1:18-32: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them...So they are without excuse;... Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles”.

But the Chosen People is called to give witness to the One God in the midst of nations that worship many gods. They, the Chosen People, are often tempted by the cults offered by the surrounding peoples. Hence the sharp nature of the message from the Prophets. It must be affirmed that, strictly speaking, other religions are not the direct concern of the Bible, especially of the New Testament. Jesus Christ, the complete and final revelation of God, is the messenger of God in whom erupts God’s saving grace. The antithesis of his message was not another conception of the world but a refusal to accept in faith the gift of God (Mk. 6:1-5)¹.

As a Christian, I begin my remarks by assuming that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, in whom the fullness of the Godhead is revealed in a mysterious way. In other words, “in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14.6), the full revelation of the divine truth is given”². “By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is at the same time the mediator and the fullness of all revelation” (*Dei Verbum*, n.2). Therefore I do not wish to enter into discussion on questions such as: ‘Is revelation given outside the biblical religion?’ or ‘Do non-biblical sacred texts of other religions complement those of the Christian faith?’ My intent is to reflect on how the Word of God can be witnessed to in dialogue with Hindus and Buddhists. The Word of God is Jesus Christ.

¹ Cf. Felix A. Machado, “The Teaching of Christianity Regarding Religious Plurality”, in *Omnis Terra*, N. 372, May 2001.

² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Jesus, On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, Vatican, 2000, n. 5

The words of the late Pope John Paul II may be of help to us to bring some clarity in our understanding of the Word of God in relation to other religions; on the occasion of preparing for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, he wrote: "...Jesus does not in fact merely speak 'in the name of God' like the Prophets, but he is God himself speaking in his Eternal Word made flesh. Here we touch upon *the essential point by which Christianity differs from all the other religions*, by which *man's search for God* has been expressed from earliest times. Christianity has its starting-point in the Incarnation of the Word. Here, it is not simply a case of man seeking God, but of God who comes in person to speak to man of himself and to show him the path by which he may be reached. This is what is proclaimed in the prologue of John's Gospel: 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (1:18). *The Incarnate Word is thus the fulfilment of the yearning present in all the religions of mankind*: this fulfilment is brought about by God himself and transcends all human expectations. It is the Mystery of Grace".

The Pope clarifies further: "In Christ, religion is no longer a blind search for God (cf. Acts 17:27) but the *response of faith* to God who reveals himself. It is a response in which man speaks to God as his Creator and Father, a response made possible by that one Man who is also the consubstantial Word in whom God speaks to each individual person and by whom each individual person is enabled to respond to God. What is more, in this Man all creation responds to God. Jesus Christ is the new beginning of everything. In him all things come into their own; they are taken up and given back to the Creator from whom they first came. *Christ is thus the fulfilment of the yearning of all the world's religions and, as such, he is their sole and definite completion*".³

In this brief intervention I intend to reflect on how, to my knowledge, Hindus and Buddhists relate themselves to their respective sacred texts. The Word of God, according to the Christian Scriptures is not totally unrelated to other religions. I hope that my reflection may contribute to a wider discussion in view of strengthening the Christian-Hindu and the Christian-Buddhist dialogue without obscuring the Christian's commitment to proclaim Jesus Christ, the Word of God, to all people as their Lord and Saviour.

Understanding of the Sacred Texts in Hindu and Buddhist Traditions

It must be emphasised that various religions differ one from the other. Christians should not consider other religions an ambiguous, undifferentiated and monolithic block. The world cannot be simply divided into "Christian and non-Christian". In other words, when relating to other religions, we need to approach each religion as a differentiated and complex reality. When the sacred texts of some other religion are approached by Christians they will be obviously struck by points of convergence, as well as points of divergence, between the two traditions.

Before I draw conclusions with regard to the theme entrusted to me it is necessary to present briefly some basic ideas concerning the sacred texts in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It is important in dialogue to know the partners. The sacred texts, respectively in Hinduism and in Buddhism, hold a central place; they communicate the core religious experience of these religious traditions. One can hardly pretend to know Hindus or Buddhists if one ignores their sacred texts or overlooks the way the role of these texts is understood by the followers of the respective religious traditions.

The *Sanatana dharma*, as it is called by the adherents of what is generically known as Hinduism, associates itself with "scriptures", the word derived from the Latin root. The word, "scriptures", literally means, "that which is written". When referring to "scriptures", the Hindu tradition uses the expression, "Shruti", which signifies, "that which is heard".

³ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n. 6

But eventually the Shruti also came to be written, as “the scriptures” suppose oral tradition. Thus we can say that Hindus do recognise that holy words have been operative in human history. Hindus thus believe that the sacred words have oral realities as much as written ones and the way they have found their way into human lives is not through the eye (written word) but through the ear (that which is heard). In fact, when referring to the “sacred texts” the Vedic tradition speaks of “shruti” (that which is heard by the *rishis* or the wise).

What is appreciated is the “spoken” and “heard” quality of the sacred texts. The emphasis is on the “hearing” as a mediating sense of religious experience. The very act of writing, therefore, is considered ritually polluting. Consequently, the printed page is not the primary home of the sacred texts. Hence the importance of a guru. Sacred texts as a “reified bounded entity” fail to do justice to the Hindu *weltanschauung*. Written documents, unvivified by personal relationship are considered lifeless. E.g. if a teacher does not find a student worthy of inheriting his manuscripts, he will, in his old age, simply discard them by throwing them into a river.

My observation is that Hinduism emphasises the oral over the written aspect of words. “Vaç”, roughly translated as the “word”, is eternal, intrinsically powerful and supremely authoritative. It is never outmoded and is always worthy of recitation, regardless of whether it is understood or not. It is interesting to observe the emphasis given in Hinduism to the “sacred sound”. This is why another name of the Veda is Shruti because it is the hearing of the “uncreated, eternal Vaç”, the word, in the human way.

Hindus speak of a holistically engaging, particularly sensual and visual, apprehension of the divine. The sacredness of the ‘vaç’ is not on account of its intelligibility. For example, the sacred texts have to be heard by all but not necessarily understood by all. Can we say that a good Hindu is preoccupied by the ‘form’ and not so much by the ‘meaning’ of the sacred text? Comparisons are odious, but in order to reach a more exact understanding I would compare the ‘master of Shruti’ (Stotriya) who recites the sacred texts at ceremonies without understanding them to a medieval monk copying manuscripts or a book producer of a modern society. What a Hindu is expected to do is to ‘participate’ in the sacred texts which are recited because the sacred texts are considered ‘holy’ in themselves, without depending on the holiness of the one who recites them. This is why what is important is to ‘hear’ and ‘recite’, rather than ‘read’ and ‘understand’.

An interesting discussion is carried out with regard to the ‘cognitive authority’ of the sacred texts in Hinduism. It is affirmed that the ‘cognitive authority’ applies not to the objects of perception or other sources of empirical knowledge but to objects not known from such sources. For example, even if a hundred scriptural utterances were to say that fire is cold or that it is not bright they would have no cognitive authority; according to Sankaracharya, if the sacred texts were to say such things then we would have to assume that they intend some other meaning, or else we would be understanding its cognitive authority amiss. In other words, it is not the business of the sacred texts to challenge the evidence of the senses, mental logic, etc., nor is it the business of such knowledge to challenge the scope of the sacred texts, the cognitive authority of which concerns the vision of things unseen.

In fact, in Hinduism, the aim of the sacred texts in the life of a believer is to teach them verities (truths) which lie outside the horizon of empirical knowledge, such as our relationships to one another in the light of the transcendent, about what happens after death, about beings beyond this visible world, etc. Of course, the place of critical reason is not absent here because reason substantiates belief, purifies it, shows its limits, renders it plausible, refutes opposite points of view and provides justification for a critical commitment.

Shudras, the servile class according to the “varnashramadharma” or the caste system, and women are prohibited from even hearing the Veda. The Puranas may be heard by all; they are the “Smriti” (that which is remembered), an easier form of truth, adapted to the conditions of class; the Smriti interpret and clarify Shruti in a form comprehensible for all mankind in its changing, historical situation. The truth once revealed in Shruti must ever be newly interpreted or explained in Smriti.

According to the Hindu vision, the Veda are eternal and have no personal author. They reside in the bosom of the Absolute. Therefore, in the ultimate sense, neither the sages, nor Brahma, nor even the Lord himself composed the Veda; the Veda is simply promulgated, not authored.

Buddhist *Suttas* (the Pali word for the Sanskrit, *Suttras*) express the doctrinal teaching of the Buddha and claim to be his very word. The *Suttas* are many. They are considered on the same level as Shruti in Hinduism. The teaching, once imparted by the historical Sakyamuni Buddha, is seen as part of the eternal Dharma which is repeatedly proclaimed throughout the ages. The teachings of Buddha open with the stereotyped formula, “Thus have I heard”. What is the place of Sacred texts in Buddhism? Buddha himself is supposed to have said, “As a raft, o monks, will I present you the doctrine, useful for escaping, not for retaining” (Buddha explains that though the raft has been very useful for crossing the river, now the right thing would be indeed to leave it behind and walk on without it). Final liberation is a fruit of personal insight rather than of faith in Buddha. “Buddha does not liberate men but he teaches them how to liberate themselves as he has liberated himself. Men adhere to his preaching of the truth, not because it comes from him, but because, aroused by his word, a personal knowledge of what he preaches arises in the light of their minds” (H. Oldenberg).

Michael Fuss makes an interesting observation : “Since the Dharma is recognised as superior to the Buddha and existing independently from him, the historical heritage of Sakyamuni’s life had been completely entrusted to the reception by the disciples and their preaching. They themselves may determine the sources, establish their authority and give their correct interpretation.”⁴

According to Mahayana Buddhism, a *Sutta* is defined as “an anonymous document elaborated usually collectively over many centuries, which has to be significant without being controversial or sectarian”.⁵ Due to lack of doctrinal authority the recognition of a canon of the sacred texts in Mahayana Buddhism differs from the Christian concept of biblical canonicity. There is also the difficulty that Mahayana does not represent a uniform sect. In Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism or “doctrine of the Elders” the *Tipitika* (three baskets, *vinaya*, *sutta* and *abhidhamma*) are the canonical sacred texts since they give the original teaching of Sakhyamuni. The Mahayana Buddhism recognises this authority of *Tipitika* somewhat like Old Testament in relation to the New Testament in the Christian Bible.

Mahayana Buddhism considers itself the only vehicle to nirvana, whereas Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism according to them, though authentic as well, is considered as provisional truth only.

An interesting remark is made by C. Eliot. He writes: “The religious public of India has never felt any difficulty in accepting works of merit as revelations, whether called Upanishads, Puranas, Sutras or what not. Only rarely have such works received any formal approbation, such as recognition by a council... The natural instinct of the Hindus

⁴ *Buddhavaacana and Dei Verbum, A Phenomenological and Theological Comparison of Scriptural Inspiration in the Saddharmapundarika Sutra and the Christian Tradition*, New York: E.J. Brill, 1991; Brill’.

⁵ C. Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism, An Historical Sketch, Vol II*, London: E. Arnold, 1921, 48.

⁶ *Hinduism and Buddhism, An Historical Sketch, Vol II*, London: E. Arnold, 1921.

was not to close the canon but to leave it open for any additions which might be vouchsafed".⁶

Some Reflections:

Sacred texts form an essential part of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Their role is understood differently in the respective traditions. They are vehicles of liberation/salvation for their adherents. The sacred texts, for example in Hinduism, have a single purport or ultimate concern, which is (the realisation of) Brahman, the truth of truths or *satyasa satyam*.

What should be appreciated and taken very seriously with regard to Hindus and Buddhists is their sincere, honest and "restless searching of the human heart" for the absolute or the transcendence. In this search they have recourse to their respective sacred texts. The first thing to be admired of Hindus and Buddhists is their submission to a wisdom which comes from beyond them. To be able to invoke, that is, to call upon, something greater than ourselves and so break our own boundaries is the beginning of wisdom, the source of hope, and the condition of joy. History bears witness to the fact that both Hinduism and Buddhism have been born, grown and flourished around their sacred texts.

It should not be ignored that Hindus, in particular, manifest great respect for the Holy Bible. Many recognise in it the power of God and thus it is widely read, prayed and meditated upon among Hindus. Reverence, which comes spontaneously and naturally, towards sacred texts is something positive to be noted of Hindus and Buddhists.

Witnessing to the Word of God in dialogue with Hindus and Buddhists Christians must bear in mind three objectives: 1) Deep respect for Hindus and Buddhists and for their respective religious traditions; 2) Safeguarding the integrity of the Christian faith; and 3) Continuing the evangelising mission of the Church.

Deep Respect for Hindus and Buddhists and for their respective religious traditions

The Second Vatican Council reaffirms the traditional doctrine according to which salvation in Jesus Christ is, in a mysterious way, a reality open to all persons of good will. But the Council has also openly acknowledged the presence of positive values not only in the religious life of individual believers of other religious traditions, but also in the religious traditions to which they belong. It attributed these values to the active presence of God through his Word, pointing also to the universal action of the Spirit. From this it can be seen that these elements, as a preparation for the Gospel (cf. *LG*, 16), have played and do still play a providential role in the divine economy of salvation.

Commenting on *Nostra Aetate*, "Dialogue and Proclamation"⁷ states: "Making its own the vision and the terminology of some early Church Fathers, *Nostra aetate* speaks of the presence in these traditions of 'a ray of that Truth which enlightens all' (*NA*, 2). *Ad gentes* recognises the presence of 'seeds of the word', and points to 'the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations' (n.10). Again, *Lumen gentium* refers to the good which is 'found sown' not only 'in minds and hearts', but also 'in the rites and customs of peoples' (n.17)". How and why the Church must relate positively to other religions and their respective adherents is explained succinctly and clearly in the Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*⁸.

⁷ Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation, Reflections and orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, n. 16

⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, 7 December 1990, nn. 55-57

Again, “Dialogue and Proclamation” helps us to clarify the Church’s relationship to other religions: “While proclaiming the message of God in Jesus Christ, the evangelising Church must always remember that her task is not exercised in a complete void. For the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is present and active among the hearers of the Good News even before the Church’s missionary action comes into operation (cf. *RH*, 12; *DV*, 53). They may in many cases have already responded implicitly to God’s offer of salvation in Jesus Christ, a sign of this being the sincere practice of their own religious traditions, insofar as these contain authentic religious values. They may have already been touched by the Spirit and in some way associated unknowingly to the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ (cf. *GS*, 22)”⁹.

Safeguarding the integrity of the Christian faith

Dominus Jesus recalls to the Catholic faithful¹⁰ that “In the practice of dialogue between the Christian faith and other religious traditions, as well as in seeking to understand its theoretical basis more deeply, new questions arise that need to be addressed through pursuing new paths of research, advancing proposals, and suggesting ways of acting that call for attentive discernment. In this task (it is necessary to recall) certain indispensable elements of Christian doctrine, which may help theological reflection in developing solutions consistent with the contents of the faith and responsive to the pressing needs of contemporary culture”.

One will easily find close similarity with regard to certain contents of the sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. One is then tempted to draw conclusions by putting the texts one next to the other. But it must be kept in mind that there does not exist a clearly defined epistemological status between what Hindus believe the Absolute to be or what Buddhism teaches about liberation and what the Christian faith claims concerning the mystery of God¹¹.

Continuing the evangelising mission of the Church

It should be remembered that “Christians who lack appreciation and respect for other believers and their religious traditions are ill-prepared to proclaim the Gospel to them” (*DP*, 73, c).

In proclaiming the Word of God we need to have an attitude which bears qualities (*DP*, 70) such as: To be “**respectful** of the presence and action of the Spirit of God in the hearts of those who listen to the message, in the recognition that the Spirit is the “principal agent of evangelisation” (*EN*, 75). To be **dialogical**, for in proclamation the hearer of the Word is not expected to be a passive receiver. There is a gradual progress from the ‘seeds of the Word’ already present in the hearer to the full mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ. The Church must recognise a process of purification and enlightenment in which the Spirit of God opens the mind and heart of the hearer to the obedience of faith. To be **inculturated** by being incarnated in the culture and the spiritual tradition of those addressed, so that the message is not only intelligible to them, but is conceived as responding to their deepest aspirations, as truly the Good News they have been longing for (cf. *EN*, 20, 62)”.

⁹ Dialogue and Proclamation, n.68

¹⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Jesus, On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, Vatican, 2000, n. 3.

¹¹ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Christianity and World Religions*, Vatican, 1996, n. 4