THE CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE TOWARDS A CREDIBLE INTERFAITH FELLOWSHIP

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The terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre (Sept. 11, 2001) and on the Indian Parliament (Dec. 13, 2001) have thrown a spanner into the ongoing movements of inter-religious dialogues and cross cultural fellowship worldwide. Till then, dialogue has had the status of a consensus code and has suited the emerging pluralistic culture in all realms of life, whether it be politics, economics or religions. People had already begun to nurse a grandiose dream of a world community of interdependence and harmony at the dawn of the Third Millennium. The ongoing electronic media revolution, growing eco-consciousness, an increase in people to people cultural interaction through trans-territorial economic collaboration and the phenomenal growth of tourism as well as the ever expanding globalized economy have all been seen as heralds of an emerging new world community.

Human history seemed to slowly and surely embrace a culture of partnership both in policies and praxis, cutting across the geographical and cultural frontiers of polities. All these dreams and movements came to a grinding halt in the 'Jihads' of Osama Bin Laden and the Talibans, and the Hindutvada of the some Indian political parties.

In the George Bush’s challenge of either ‘with us or against us’ in international diplomacy, the deep rooted cultural prejudices among various racial, cultural and religious identities have got a new lease of life, and the hidden genetic hatred between ethnic groups has been provided with a new legitimacy and sanctity, so unleashing all forms of violence and terrorism in the name of religion, civilization and nationalism. Attacks on Asians and the humiliation of brown skin in the USA in the days following September 11 are only the tip of the iceberg of the unconscious ethnic and religious contempt among the various social communities, even though multiculturality is considered as a hallmark of the USA. Such hidden feelings may flare up into wider communal violence at the slightest provocation in the years to come.

Even though the ‘International Coalition Against Terror’ has ‘won’ the war on the parched and rugged terrain of Afghanistan, the real battle cry of ethnic animosity and hatred is boiling in the recesses of the wounded unconscious of the Islamic world. Since any heinous terrorist action has an aura of ethnic pride and identity, the social and political atmosphere is from now on going to be charged with uncertainty, insecurity, mistrust and anxiety. In the years ahead humankind will be forced to live in a political and social scenario where terrorism, violence and bloodshed form part and parcel of our daily life. Safety and dignity of persons in multicultural societies like

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that of the USA and India will always and everywhere be threatened with fragile political and cultural equations and compromises.

In this unfolding scenario Huntington's theory of 'Clash of Civilizations' has gained currency. He argued that in the post Cold War world, the critical distinctions between people would be cultural rather than ideological or economic. National, religious, ethnic and racial strands which constitute cultural and national identity will now play a critical role in the world politics, policies and economics. That is to say, cultural and ethnic entities will replace Cold War blocs, and the fault-lines between civilizations will become nerve-centres of conflict in the post Cold-War era.¹

First and foremost, the Church needs a radical new awakening at the paradigmatic level so that it may feel self-confident and competent while engaging in the interfaith ministry in the present world of multiculturality. This awakening can be seen in terms of reframing of Christian self-understanding: firstly, Christian faith as a Way; secondly, Christian Community as a Pilgrim-Fellowship; and thirdly, Mission as a Dialogical Interfaith Pursuit.

Christianity as a Way

Christianity was known as the Way in the early centuries (Acts 9:2; 24:14). This is a core theme in Luke. His entire Gospel is patterned after the Way: way of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem (Lk.9:51-19:27) and later, disciples from Jerusalem to the ends of the world. (Acts 1:8). Christianity as the Way is epitomized in Jesus' own words: 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life' (Jn 14:6). The Truth (aletheia, unveiling) is dynamic and organic, not a static concept or merely an abstract rational knowledge; it is an 'event' or energy or force (sakti) which ever unfolds itself in virtue of itself in the flux of Life until it consummates in the ultimate encounter— 'face to face' (abhimukam) (1Cor 13:12). Hence Jesus' Way inherently belongs to ever-flowing and ever unfolding 'truth' and 'life'.

Jesus' ministry embodies the dynamics of the Way. It has all through been a people's movement rooted in a Gospel of social justice and human rights in the Kingdom vision. It has been a new Way of human-divine covenantal partnership for the establishment of God's reign of righteousness, peace and joy (Rom 14: 17-18). Jesus never defined the Kingdom of God (basileia) in categories and concepts. He conveyed its meaning through symbolic actions like table fellowship with sinners and outcasts, in healing exorcisms. His discourse on the Reign of God through parables, similes, images and metaphors expresses its organic and ever unfolding nature. Especially the 'growth parables' of 'the sower', 'the growing corn', 'the double parable of mustard seed' and 'the leaven', 'weeds among the wheat'