

## **PRACTISING CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN INDIA TOWARDS A METHOD**

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### **1. Introduction**

While sociological and anthropological factors are quite necessary for understanding Christian-Muslim relations, it must be noted that theological factors are foundational and compelling. In India's multi-religious and multi-cultural context, an appropriate method to learn about and practise Christian-Muslim relations begins with respectful meeting and 'faith-sharing' between Christians and Muslims. Through the practice of meeting and engaging with one another at the deepest levels of their being, they can come to recognise one another as co-pilgrims with a common task of striving to obey the will of God in their lives according to their religious convictions and contributing to justice, peace and harmony. This essay will present the broad context of India where religious minorities, more specifically Christians and Muslims, are socially, culturally and politically alienated, marginalised and dominated by groups that use religion politically. This is precisely the context in which Christians and Muslims are called to practise interfaith dialogue. The essay will also present and evaluate the methodology for promoting Christian-Muslim relations that Father Paul Jackson SJ, a forerunner in Christian-

Muslim relations in India, practised, while training young men and women in their theological formation, and was later adopted and practised at Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi. The essay also discusses some proposals for dialogical engagements between the two faith communities in the future.

## **2. An Overview of the Indian Context**

### ***2.1 A Shared Sense of Oneness in Diversity***

India is immensely diverse in every aspect of life. Snow-clad mountains, dancing seas, thick forests, fertile fields and hot deserts decorate her landscape. The peoples of this sub-continent speak numerous languages. Their cultures are varied. They follow different religious traditions. They dress in varied fashions. Their literary, cultural and political histories are varied. Thus ours is rightly called a subcontinent! This diversity enriches us. In this diversity we affirm our unity, and in our unity we recognise diversity. Our unity derives its strength and nourishment from such an incredible diversity. Our unity is born not just from mere acceptance of and respect for the other, but, more fundamentally, from the celebration of the diversity of peoples, cultures and religions. Moreover, the unity of this vast nation is maintained not by passive acquiescence to and tolerance of different points of view, but through active engagement among diverse views in order to promote a life of dignity, self-respect and security for all Indian citizens. From this diversity arise a shared sense of oneness and a deeply mystical experience of union as fellow citizens. A common identity (political identity) as Indians comes not from a particular dominant culture but from the shared sense of oneness rooted in diversity. This unity in diversity and diversity in unity is the bedrock of Indian nationalism.

### ***2.2 Two Contrasting Visions of the Nation***

#### ***2.2.1 A Territorial Vision: Nation as All Peoples Living within the Territory***

The leaders of the Indian freedom struggle invoked this shared sense of oneness and shaped and moulded a nationalism that tried

to represent different shades of beliefs, perspectives, ideals, standpoints, positions, visions, opinions, viewpoints, values, outlooks, attitudes, ideas and ways of life. They were learning the effective way of representing diversity in a pluralistic context. They embraced diversity and claimed to represent or to speak for India. These leaders adopted a self-conscious pluralism. “We come from diverse backgrounds, and within our membership we represent diversity. So we claim our right to speak for all Indians,” they maintained. They represented the grievances of all in a non-denominational way. They did not invoke an idea of uniformity, where cultures merge and give rise to one culture! They knew that such homogenization does not fit the sub-continent. Only eccentrics will entertain an idea of such uniformity.<sup>1</sup>

The Constituent Assembly of India consisted of men and women representing India’s rich diversity. The Fathers and Mothers of the Constitution of India chose a vision of India that treats all with equal dignity and respect. The Preamble of the Constitution succinctly portrays this vision of India:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation; IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. M. Kesevan, “India’s Embattled Secularism,” *Wilson Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2003), <https://www.questia.com/read/1G1-97132909/india-s-embattled-secularism-holy-wars>, accessed August 14, 2018,

### 2.2.2 *The Hindutva Vision: Nation as People – People Are Hindus*

There is another type of nationalism in India advanced by right-wing Hindutva groups, which calls for homogeneity. They invoke uniformity by basing themselves on one particular religious identity, namely, the Hindu identity. This neglects diversity and conflates nationalism with majoritarianism, which creates first-class and second-class citizens. One dominant community tries to corner power for itself using a powerful political rhetoric. The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS, National Volunteers Organisation) and its ideological associates hold on to such a truncated vision and seek to force it upon the diverse nation.<sup>2</sup> The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ruling at the Centre and in many states is the political associate of the RSS and shares in its vision. This vision has its roots in the Hindu nationalistic movements of the British colonial period, which considered Christianity and Christian missionaries as a threat to the socio-cultural order of Hindus.<sup>3</sup> One of the ideological founders of Hindutva, Savarkar, wrote a foundational text for the Hindutva movement.<sup>4</sup> He explained a Hindu as one who has citizenship within the territory of India, shares Hindu blood by being born of Hindus, and shares the same Hindu culture. In his view, Christians and Muslims may share the land but not culture since they accepted alien cultures that have roots not in India but elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

The Hindutva ideology projects the Muslim community as a monolithic community in perpetual conflict with the belief systems, norms and values of Hindus. This projection is sustained by three distorted historical formulations. First, Islam is the religion of

<sup>2</sup>See: "Hindutva's foreign tie-up in the 1930s: Archival evidence," in *Economic & Political Weekly*, January 22, 2000.

<sup>3</sup>C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s* (London: Hurst & Company, 1996).

<sup>4</sup>Savarkar, *Hindutva* (New Delhi: Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 2003).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. C. Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, ideologies and modern myths* (New York: Berg, 2001), 94-96.

imperial Turks and Arabs who coerced Hindus to embrace Islam and thus established their religious hegemony over Hindus. Secondly, Muslim rulers of India are plunderers who deliberately humiliated Hindus and deprived them of their self-respect and sense of pride. Thirdly, the Muslims rulers killed Hindus indiscriminately, raped Hindu women at will and destroyed the sacred temples and sites of Hindus, thereby depriving Hindus of their glorious legacy. Muslims are seen as the ‘threatening other’ in perpetual conflict with the Hindu ‘nation’<sup>6</sup>

M.S. Golwalkar, one of the founders of the RSS, described Christians as a ‘cancer’ within the Hindu body.<sup>7</sup> Many ideological institutions affiliated to the RSS often project Christians as foreigners living within the Indian borders and threatening the Hindu order and culture.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of Hindutva demonise Muslims and Christians in order to provoke violence against them. Lynching of Muslim men, enormous devastation brought on Muslim businesses, demolition of the places of worship, destruction of the homes of Christian pastors, and killings of Christians and Muslims in riots engineered systematically by individuals and groups with the connivance of those in power have all done a great deal of damage to our integrity as peoples of our great nation. These challenges threaten the very existence of Christians and Muslims in India. Many audacious statements by people close to the corridors of power imagine an India without Muslims and Christians.

### ***2.3 Internal Challenges from the Long and Complex History***

Christian-Muslim engagement is a story of great complexity and nuance.<sup>9</sup> Christians and Muslims have related with one another from the time of Prophet Muhammad, and the relations have

<sup>6</sup>K.S. Lal, *Indian Muslims: Who are they?* (Delhi: Voice of India, 1990), 39.

<sup>7</sup>C. Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, ideologies and modern myths*, 130.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 114.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Tiesszen, *A Textual History of Christian-Muslim Relations: Seventh – Fifteenth Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 1.

continued throughout history.<sup>10</sup> The mindset of Indian Christians, as noted by many scholars, is greatly influenced by a Western Christian mindset, which is fed by the attitudes of the Byzantines who had many military conflicts with Muslim empires.<sup>11</sup> The Christian missionaries as well as the Christian texts on Islam and Muslims available in India passed on this negative attitude towards Muslims to large sections of Indian Christians. Thus Western Christian negative views of Islam have found their way into the hearts of many Indian Christians. The many debates that were held between Muslims and Christians in colonial India reflected such hostility. Such polemical encounters left a deep negative impact on the hearts and minds of many Muslims.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, many Christians and Muslims hold prejudiced view of each other. Consequently, the level of mutual understanding between these two communities is often very low.

Fr. Jackson noticed an interesting dynamics operative in the Christian prejudice against Muslims. He once mentioned to this writer that among the students training to become Catholic priests those who had the opportunity for some good contacts with Muslims had something good to say about Muslims. However, on Islam they shared some of the classical Western views of Islam. Often students who do not have contacts with Muslims, besides holding on to negative views on Islam, imbibe the media image of Islam and Muslims: that Islam is an inherently violent religion and

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<sup>10</sup>Robert Caspar, "History of the Christian-Muslim Relationship," (1-41) in Micheael L. Fitzgerald and Robert Caspar, *Signs of Dialogue: Christian Encounter with Muslims* (Zamboanga City, Philippines; Silsilah Publications, 1992), 2.

<sup>11</sup>Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syria Writings on Islam* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>12</sup>Two important scholarly works have shed new light on the Christian-Muslim controversy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. See A.A. Powell, *Muslims & Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India*. London Studies on South Asia No.7 (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993) and C.W. Troll, "New Light of the Christian-Muslim Controversy of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century", *Die Welt des Islam* 34, (1994), 85-88.

that it was spread by the sword; that Muslims cannot live in peace with others since they think that Islam is a perfect religion and that it should be imposed on all; that the Qur'an is a corrupted copy of the Bible; and that women are treated poorly in Islam.

On the Muslim side, it is often claimed that Christians have corrupted the religion brought by Jesus by considering him 'Son of God', while he was in fact only a messenger, that Christians eat food prohibited by God in the Bible, and that Christians, along with Jews, have corrupted their sacred Scriptures. Sometimes, one may also meet Muslims denouncing the West, which they consider Christian, accusing the people of the West of conspiring with the Zionists to destroy Islam. Some even imagine a grand conspiracy of Christian West, in which all Christians participate, to dismantle Muslims everywhere. Such Muslims often forget that the local Christians who live with them share with them the same struggles and aspirations and that have nothing to do with any conspiracy, whether it exists or not.

Several questions of theological and cultural import come up in my engagements with Muslim friends in different contexts. I try to offer responses, basing myself in the abundance of authentic dialogical literature available in the Christian tradition.<sup>13</sup> I gently decline to engage in political conversations and conspiracy theories. However, in conversations I certainly make a point that for us South Asian Christians it is more important to live and witness to their Christian faith than to enter into polemics.

If we carefully look into the false prejudices Christians and Muslims have about each another, we can recognise that they are rooted in historical, sociological and theological misgivings and misunderstandings. It is now clear that Christian-Muslim relations in India have to tackle many challenges, external as well as internal.

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<sup>13</sup>Christian W. Troll, *Dialogue and Difference: Clarity in Christian-Muslim Relations* transl. David Marshall (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2009) and *Muslims Ask, Christians Answer, Dialogue with Difference*, (NY: New City Press; 2012).

Christian-Muslim conversations should not begin with the polemics of the past. The polemics should be laid to rest. *Nostra Aetate* urges us to forget the past and begin anew. Mutual ignorance is an obstacle in building relationship between the two communities. How do we help both Muslims and Christians to grow in mutual understanding? Where do we start? I think that we must begin with personal contact with our brothers and sisters of the other community with whom we live.

### **3. A Methodological Concern: Experience as a Theological Resource**

Traditionally, Christian theology places sacred Scriptures and Tradition as sources for theological reflection. Contextual theologies add another resource, namely, *the life situation of the faithful*. By bringing the cultural, social, political and religious context of the people seriously into the reflections on faith, contextual theologies call for correlating the text with the context. Sacred Scriptures and Tradition are reflected on in light of the joys and sorrows of people: texts are understood in a particular context, and the context is interpreted in the light of the texts. Faith reflection is not done in isolation from the life context of people but, rather, in the context in which people live. Contextual theologies are a dynamic and critical reflection on the situation of people in the light of faith.

The Scholastic theology represented a particular epistemology where the knower knows when the mind is identified with a given object. Contextual theology follows a different epistemology. It is not simply the process of 'knowing'. The first step is immersion. Immersion into the sorrows and joys of people brings about transformation of the self, which is the second step in contextual theology. All who have experienced such transformation are led to seek peace, harmony and justice in the world, to make the world a better place for all. The movement is towards constructing a new world guided by the faith.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology en Route:*

#### 4. Paul Jackson's Method

Jackson's course on '**Experience of Islam**' is unique because of its methodological considerations. He designed his module to help the students of the Regional Theology Centre, Patna **understand, appreciate, and respect** Muslims and their beliefs. He inspired his students while they take this module to **experience** Muslim life, **explore** commonalities and differences, and thus **dialogue** with Muslims.

This module is aimed at helping Christian students gently dispose themselves to Muslims and learn from them by being fully present to them. Such a gentle disposition brings about a new way of looking at them and dealing with them. This experience-based learning challenges the prejudices against Muslims prevailing in the minds of students and helps them open their hearts and minds to enter into a dialogical journey with Muslims as co-pilgrims. In this journey, students learn to appreciate theological differences and discover common grounds for further dialogical efforts. Fr. Jackson writes:

For some twenty-five years, I have conducted introductory courses on Islam in various seminaries and formation houses of religious sisters. The most fruitful of these has been an "Exposure to Islam" program conducted for the first-year students of theology at our small regional theologate in Khaspur, near Patna ... . I would rely on the assistance of one of our schools to make contact with middle-class Muslims, and evening schools, social centres and dispensaries to make contact with poorer Muslims. I would get permission from the people I met to send two students of theology to learn about Islam directly from Muslims. After briefing the students and giving them written instructions, I would send them in pairs to the towns I myself had already visited. Usually they stayed with the local Catholic priest, but some managed to stay in madrasas, and some others with Muslim families. They would

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*Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 5.

leave on a Monday morning and return on the Wednesday of the following week. This would be followed by three days of sharing and reflection on their experience. If some points needed further elaboration, this task would fall on me. Each student then had to write a paper on his experience and his reflections on it ... [T]he program ... gave them experience-based knowledge of Muslims, which helped them become more objective in assessing reports of communal disturbances, for example.<sup>15</sup>

Two methodological tools in Fr. Jackson's method need to be recognised, namely, *seek information* and *share your faith*.

#### **4.1 Ask Questions ... No Argument Please!**

Jackson would instruct the students clearly to ask 'what' and 'how' questions. These are exploratory questions. They open up the field for more exploration. 'Why' questions can be tricky as at times they may carry certain prejudices. Students recognise that serious conversations need a lot of preparation. You must frame your question sensibly and meaningfully, Fr. Jackson would instruct. What the students want to clarify they learn to frame carefully in a 'what and how' question mould. One of the important instructions given is that the students must never argue with the Muslims with whom they are in conversation, since experience has taught that arguments generate heat, but never light.

#### **4.2 Immersion: From Sharing Information to Sharing Faith**

The students gently but surely immerse themselves where they are sent. As they build up confidence in their conversations with Muslims, they explore sensitively a number of other questions regarding their relations between people of different faiths, in order to assess the fear, anxiety, and confidence at the feeling level of the Muslim friends in conversation. This is important since dialogue becomes meaningful only when it shares in the joys and sorrows

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<sup>15</sup>From an e-mail message to this author, June 28, 2015.

of people. Family life, culture, situation of Muslim women, education, life struggles, etc. become subjects of conversations. Rich conversations happen when one fully immerses oneself into the living context of Muslims. Sincere conversations open both the Christian students and the Muslims to go deeper, that is, to move from sharing information to sharing faith. This is crucial. It all depends on how one prepares for the conversation. Conversations have helped many students to sincerely open themselves to others at the level of faith.

Every evening, when they return to their place of stay, the students are expected to maintain a detailed journal of the day's meetings: whom they met, questions they asked, responses they got, and their feelings about the conversation. This journal will help in the second stage of transformation, besides assisting the students to consolidate the gains from the field.

#### ***4.3 Theologizing Sessions***

Jackson's method is contextual since it is firmly based on the principle, 'know Islam by knowing Muslims'. The students who go for immersion in the Islamic milieu become familiar with the beliefs and practices of Muslims from their interaction with Muslims of different walks of life. Their conversations with Muslims touch and transform their heart and open up their mind to know Muslims in profound ways, much beyond the stereotypical stories that are often fed by the media. Their experience is personal and deep. On their return, they reflect on their experiences under the guidance of Fr. Jackson. They raise questions in the light of the Gospels and the teachings of the Catholic Church that are found especially in the Vatican II documents *Nostra Aetate* (NA, 2), *Ad Gentes* (AG, 9), *Gaudium et Spes* (GS, 16) and *Lumen Gentium* (LG, 8). Thus their learning is theologically contextual and contextually theological. In other words, the context shapes their theology and theology impacts their way of understanding the context.

It is common experience that experiential knowledge leaves a more lasting impression on the human mind than knowledge gained through books or lectures. Experience, by influencing first the heart and only then the mind, changes one's attitude. A student who went through this experience wrote:

At my home in Mangalore, until I was sixteen years of age, I had had no direct experience of a Muslim community. Brought up on an orthodox Mangalorian Catholic family, I was indoctrinated by my parents, relatives and neighbours – practically all Christians – in the traditional approach to other religions. I was given the impression that Muslims were cruel, only Muslims slaughtered cows in Mangalore, and that they cheat in business and therefore are not to be trusted. The stories of Tipu Sultan's persecution of Christians and the cunningness and cruelty of some of the Muslim rulers of India—at least according to how we were taught—supported my belief imbibed from my elders at home.

Whether I acquired a lot of knowledge of Islam through the immersion experience is not the question I am concerned about. I now feel close to a community which had hardly any place in my life earlier. This attitudinal change was possible only by my lived experience among Muslims. I can certainly say that I can trust Muslims and relate to them as a friend today. Even the 'arch-conservative' *alims* are open to friendship and dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

Many students who have attended Fr. Jackson's course have found the attitudinal change as an invaluable profit they gained from the intellectual, academic and dialogical formation they have gone through at the Regional Theology Centre, Patna. Jackson's former provincial, Father Joy Karayampuram, has expressed his gratitude to Jackson for his contribution to the overall formation of students of theology at this revered institution and particularly for introducing the younger Jesuits into the process of interfaith dialogue. "The lived-in experience among Muslims is a much

<sup>16</sup>Edward Mendonca, "My Experiences with Muslims," *Salaam* 27 (1989): 69-70.

appreciated program for the RTC students at Danapur. It helps us to open our eyes to a great reality of the lives of the ordinary Muslims of the state. I myself benefited from such experience,” he noted.<sup>17</sup>

Father Jackson himself summarises his experience of the methodology that he has developed for the program:

It is abundantly clear that this whole process of initiation dialogue requires deep Christian faith, for it is more directly focussed on receiving than on giving. It seems to be the very antithesis of the why and wherefore of the whole thrust of the life of a Christian missionary – to share one’s faith experience of Jesus Christ with the other. This is not so. In actual fact, it is an incredibly liberative experience. It liberates us from the delusion of thinking that ultimately words, of themselves, can produce faith in another person. Even more startling is the realization that this also applies to our deeds, no matter how noble they may be in themselves, for words and deeds can, in the ultimate analysis, be instruments by which we try to control another person. In dialogue our focus is on the other person and we strive to be as fully open and present to that person as possible. This conscious effort to be enriched by God as experienced by this other person means that we are looking up to the [that] person as Christ looked up to His Father. Surely it is the Holy Spirit who produces and sustains such an attitude of heart and mind and fully incorporates it into God’s loving, providential plan for the welfare of all?<sup>18</sup>

### **5. Application of Fr. Jackson’s Method at Vidyajyoti College of Theology**

As a teacher of Islam I am learning to make use of the methodological tools of the Jackson Method in the courses on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Vidyajyoti. My experience

<sup>17</sup>V. Edwin and E. Daly ed., *Journeying Together in Faith: A Collection of Inner Pilgrimages in Honour of Jesuit Father Paul Jackson* (Anand: GSP, 2008), 12.

<sup>18</sup>P. Jackson, “Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Patna: Past and Present,” *Salaam* 17: 3 [July 1996]: 107.

is that many Christians and Muslims are ignorant of the faith of one another, even though in many instances they work together. Prejudices multiply in the sap of ignorance. Interestingly, many among them seem to be comfortable with their prejudiced vision of the other and resist exploring the other anew.

Both Christians and Muslims have to overcome the resistance of ignorance. Some of us are victims of ignorance *simpliciter*. We simply do not know who the other is. In other words, we do not have objective information. In the absence of right knowledge, we tend to believe the prejudices that are spread as truth. We often share bias and internalise it. However, when we have opportunities to learn, we recognise our naivety and begin to appreciate the other. Another type of ignorance is *blind* ignorance born of intellectual stubbornness. It acts as a cognitive barrier and resists new knowledge. The prejudices continue to dictate to the heart and mind, rejecting any new knowledge. Simply providing information is not adequate to deal with this form of ignorance. In order to bring about a real change, a collective effort should be made to execute a whole set of carefully-organised programs and long exposures. A sustained effort in this line can cure blind ignorance. Yet another form of ignorance is *culpable* ignorance, which is lethal. It is ideologically-driven ignorance. This form of ignorance deliberately refuses to know, avoids any challenge, effectively shuns any evidence against prejudice, dismisses alternative possibilities, and rejects any new interpretation. It effectively spreads seeds of social unrest.

This shows that we need to fight ignorance at several levels. How do we do it? First of all, people of good will should come together. They must turn away from the past in order to learn for the future. They may look at history and identify persons who laboured hard to root out evils that destroy peace and harmony between people of different religions. There are any number of pioneers who broke new ground in building up communities of peace and opened up new ways of relating with people of other

religions. In their time and context they took new initiatives to sow seeds of peace and mutual understanding like establishing centres for training people in interfaith education. They forged new alliances to resolve long standing disputes and also prepared their friends and companions to make their own journeys promoting social peace and fraternal solidarity. We must all learn from these promoters of peace, harmony and mutual understanding between different communities.

At Vidyajyoti we try to follow Fr. Jackson's method, while making adaptations to render it more suitable for the context of national theologate. First, at Vidyajyoti it is not practical to send out students to Muslim milieus for immersion experiences lasting several days. However, the methodological principle of 'knowing Islam from Muslims' is kept up. Besides class presentations on Islam by this writer, a number of visits are organised for students in small groups to meet Muslims from different walks of life in their homes, mosques, khanqahs, and Sufi shrines.

These meetings and conversations with Muslims give to the students a glimpse of Muslim life. Personal experiences with Muslims help them to recognize that Christians and Muslims share similar dilemmas and anxieties in the current political scenario, that like them Muslims too are a people of God, and that Muslims practise a spirituality which has shades and colours similar to Christian spirituality. Moreover, they find that we need to go out of ourselves in order to be present to the other. This 'going out' helps us to be with others and to experience solidarity and togetherness. A student commented:

A classical example of 'going out' is given in the Gospel of Luke (1:39-56): Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth. Both expectant mothers. Mary and Elizabeth meet with one another, and so do their sons in their wombs! There is joy in that meeting. The Gospel tells that John the Baptist leapt for joy in his mother's womb. Hence I like this expression: "going out"! It is my experience that I returned enriched every time I reached out to my Muslim friends. 'Going out' to the other teaches me to be humble and

shows me my need of the other for a deeper and fuller human life. In my 'going out' to Muslims, I share the richness of my faith with them. At the same time I listen to their faith convictions and in this way allow them to enrich my Christian life.<sup>19</sup>

In this way of learning about Muslims and Islam in India, we notice certain attitudinal changes that come upon the students. One student remarked: "Earlier Muslims were strangers ... now I see them as my brothers and sisters ... Like us, they seek to fulfil God's will in their lives ... like us, they struggle to live up to the demands of their faith, and often, like us, they too fail."

In this method, both students and the teacher learn many things. First, that a Christian reaching out to a Muslim brother or sister needs to humble himself/herself and relate with the other with respect since the ground they tread is holy ground. God is there even before a Christian arrives! Secondly, that relationship is at the heart of dialogue. One cannot progress in dialogical contacts, if relationships are not established and strengthened. This is a continual process over a long period of time. It is wonderful to notice how prejudices melt away in the warmth of relationships. Thirdly, that through experience one can be sufficiently opened up to the faith of the others. And fourthly, that we love the other through knowing the other. Thus, love becomes the key for further theological inquiry.

### ***5.1 Incarnational Nature of Christian Faith***

After experiencing the attitudinal changes, the group enters into a theologizing process. At this level, the socio-economic situation, culture and religious faith of Muslims are taken as the base for theological reflection. We reflect on our experiences with the real flesh-and-blood Muslims we met: real persons, Muslim brothers and sisters. We reflect on their cultures and religious commitments, as we have personally experienced, ted on in the light of Christian faith. A point that strikes is the incarnational nature

<sup>19</sup>From an e-mail message from Soosai Mani to this author, June 28, 2015.

of our Christian faith, which teaches us that God wants to share God's self with us and that God invites all human persons to a life-giving relationship with God. The only way tangible to human beings in which God could do this is, according to Christian faith, for God to become flesh (Jn 1:14). Indeed God became human in Jesus. If this message must continue to touch people today, we Christians must continue this incarnational process. We must continue to become brothers and sisters to the Muslims we meet. God's message has to be contextualised in the Muslims' milieu and this is possible only if we make ourselves their brothers and sisters who share their joys and sorrows.

### ***5.2 Sacramental Nature of the Faith of Muslims***

Secondly, as Christians we affirm that Jesus is the sacrament of encounter with God. Christian revelation also confirms that God reveals God's self in concrete ways in the salvation history of peoples. In the First Testament, God did not reveal God's self as an abstract power. Often God reveals himself to people as a Father (cf. Jer. 3:9, 19; Isa. 64:8, 63:16; Deut. 32:6; Mal. 1:6, 2:10). In the flesh of Jesus Christ, Christians encounter God fully and recognize the fellowship that God seeks with us, offering us the dignity of the children of God. This encounter with God, Christians believe, is not an event of the past but continues to happen efficaciously through the sacraments. Moreover, the sacraments point beyond themselves proclaiming a deep faith that the world is charged with the grandeur of God. God's presence and action takes place within the histories, cultures and lives of peoples. Many students recognise in relating with Muslims the sacramental nature of their faith in the context of their lives.

### ***5.3 God Raises True Worshipers of God in and through the Holy Qur'an***

In the pre-Vatican II era the Church taught faith as propositional truths to which the faithful must give intellectual assent. Vatican II teaches that revelation is God's self communication to

men and women to which they make a personal faith response. In faith one gives oneself to God. In *Dei Verbum* we read that in revelation the invisible God (cf. Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:11), out of abundance of love, speaks to men and women as a friend and dwells among them so that God may invite and receive them into communion with God's self. Our experiences certainly indicate that God raises true worshipers of God in and through the Holy Qur'an, which Muslims consider as God's word.

#### ***5.4 Dialogue and Mission with Muslims***

Our immersion in the Muslim milieu and faith reflections on our experiences guide us to understand the totality of the Christian mission as envisaged in *Dialogue and Mission* (1984), a document published by the Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. In relation to Muslims, the first element of the mission is to be at the service of our Muslim brothers and sisters. It opens our hearts and minds to have a special consideration for them in our service institutions as they face painful marginalisation in present-day India along with us. Secondly, in our liturgical life we bring in our experiences prayerfully to deepen our relationship with God, who invites us along with people of other faiths to the reign of God. We learn to be co-pilgrims with Muslims. Thirdly, as co-pilgrims we learn to walk towards the truth and work together with shared responsibilities for the world and humanity. Fourthly, we recognise our responsibility to announce the Good News of Jesus through our words and deeds. Fifthly, and most importantly, we recognise that "mission is already constituted by the simple presence and living witness of the Christian life, although it must be recognised that "we bear this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7).

#### **6. Evaluation of the Method and Future Concerns**

It should be acknowledged that as a forerunner of Christian-Muslim Relations in India, Fr. Jackson paved a new path with his method and tools. We in Vidyajyoti is making small efforts to follow this path, remaining true to the spirit of his method while

we make the adaptations necessitated by our particular context. Fr. Jackson's method as adopted at Vidyajyoti is open to the scrutiny of theologians and scholars of both Christian Muslim traditions.

In our dialogical journey, we recognise some specific concerns. Dialogue should be open to the emerging aspirations of the many subaltern groups in India. In future dialogue, it must not be forgotten that emerging young Indians, especially from the marginalised groups, look forward to a new and developed India where there is a place for everyone, not just for corporates and some particular sections of people. This needs practitioners of dialogue with imagination and integrity. The socially-disadvantaged groups – Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, etc. – continue to remain at the periphery and are often victims of lopsided development. They may no more be sacrificed on the altar of 'development'. All dialogical discourses should include their aspirations and human rights concerns. We need a dialogue that emphasises diversity and makes human rights a common ground so that religious communities and secular forces can work together and in complementary ways.

### **7. Conclusion**

Christians and Muslims worship the one God (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3) and often live as neighbours and yet often they do not know about each other's faith. Despite studying in the same schools, playing in the same teams, working together in the same offices, and facing similar problems in life, they hardly bother to speak about their faiths in one another's presence. Their image of the other is often conceived in ignorance and fuelled by stereotypes. Christians in general think that Islam has regressed to law and has thus failed to recognise what God has done in Christ. Muslims on their part think that Christianity is a corrupted form of Islam and that Christians equates a prophet with God. Besides entertaining biases, the adherents of the two faiths ignore their responsibility to witness to their faith before one another.

The immersion method discussed above helps both Christians and Muslims to recognise that diversity is a part of design of God, of the mystery of God. Diversity within nature invites us to recognise the interdependence of all that exists. Nature works interdependently. Nature brings forth fruits through a collaborative course of action. Water, soil, carbon dioxide and sunlight make a joint venture with plants to bring about fruits. This is true in the human world too. When people from varied backgrounds put their hearts and minds together, they make a contribution to a new and better world. We are interdependent with all our diversities and are called to work together to build a better world. Working together, we seek unity in diversity, not the unity of uniformity. An increasing number of Christians and Muslims today recognize that dialogue between believers of different faiths, in the context of religious plurality, carried out in obedience to truth, leads to better mutual understanding and more constructive relations that respect the freedom and rights of all. It also includes “witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions.”<sup>20</sup> Thus it is important for both Muslims and Christians to recognize that witnessing to one’s faith in the midst of the others is integral to living one’s faith. In putting Fr. Jackson’s contextual method into practice at Vidyajyoti, we are striving to make a small contribution to the mission of the Church in the realm of interreligious dialogue.

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<sup>20</sup>Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1984), no. 9.

