

**Peaceful Co-existence in Multi-religious India
through Interreligious Dialogue: The Mode of
being the Church in India today with Special
Reference to 'Dialogue of Life'**

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Introduction

India is the birthplace of multiple mainstream religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, along with many tribal communities, some of which follow pantheistic traditions. During the course of its history, India has become home to many foreign-born religions as well, such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism (today known as the religion of the *Parsees* in India), Christianity, and Islam. It is generally believed that people of different faiths in ancient India co-existed peacefully under their local rulers, although sporadic tensions between Buddhists and Brahmin¹ Hindus, and among different castes of Hindus, occasionally erupted into riots. More frequent religious conflicts began with the arrival of Islam in the early middle ages in north India, although Islam had already spread into the south by the 7th century. Taking a broad view of Indian history from ancient to modern times, one may admit that by and large, dissimilar cultures and religions have co-existed peacefully in India. India has produced sacred books that promote tolerance, such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Dhammapada, and Bhagavad-Gita, and many eminent individuals have arisen in the country, for instance, the Buddha, Emperor Ashoka, Guru Nanak, Emperor Akbar the Great, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Narayana Guru and others. However, its relatively peaceful history changed with the nation’s partition into India and Pakistan in 1947, wherein around one to two million people were reportedly killed (The New Yorker, June 29, 2015). Ever since that partition, India has witnessed an increase in religious intolerance, and religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians have experienced systematic persecution.

In the nation’s recent history, however, incidents targeting Muslims and Christians intensified after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power under

1. A member of the highest caste of traditional Hindu society.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in 2014. According to the National Catholic Reporter (May 29, 2015), within 300 days of Modi's governance over 600 cases of violence against religious minorities — 149 targeting Christians and the rest targeting Muslims — had been reported, with 43 people killed. The BBC (22 April, 2011) reported that over 1,000 people were killed in the 2002 Gujarat violence that arose when Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, and the majority of the victims were Muslims. The BBC has also reported Modi as having stated, following the incident, that “Hindus should be allowed to vent their anger” (22 April, 2011). This riot began after a train arson incident, in which 60 Hindu pilgrims were killed. According to Fox News (March 14, 2016), 26 cases of religiously motivated violence against Christians have taken place since January 1, 2016, and despite the spread of violence the Hindu radicals enjoyed “near complete impunity for their actions” (Fox News March 14, 2016). Today, religious minorities, in particular Christians, who constitute merely 2.3% of the total population, live in almost constant fear, with Christian institutions often being attacked, nuns raped, and villages set on fire by Hindu fundamentalists (The Huffington post, May 27, 2015).

Protecting the lives, properties, and rights of the religious minorities in India is first and foremost the responsibility of the government, as articles 25-28 of the Indian Constitution grant assurance of religious freedom and equal treatment to all citizens, regardless of caste, creed, or religion, and yet minority communities, and in particular Christians, have been discriminated against and systematically persecuted in India's recent past. Although leaders of the Church requested the state and the national governments to intervene in the targeted attacks against them and assure them security, the situation has not seen much improvement, and people continue to live in fear and insecurity (Pasricha, 2016). In this context, this paper assesses the role of interreligious dialogue as a means towards peace-building, and highlights ways the Church could further its attempts towards peaceful co-existence with people of other faiths in India, through ‘dialogue of life’ — one of the forms of interreligious dialogue.

The Church in India

There are various views concerning the origin of the Church in India. According to some scholars, St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus laid the foundation of the Church in India in the 2nd century AD, while another group of scholars claim that it was the Christian merchants from Syria and Persia who brought the faith to India. However, there is a long history concerning the Christian faith in Kerala, one

of the south Indian states, that can be traced back to AD 345, with many legends narrated even today concerning the works of St. Thomas the Apostle, among the St. Thomas Christians.² St. Thomas is believed to have been martyred in Tamil Nadu, a state adjacent to the state of Kerala and his tomb is still publicly acknowledged as being in Chennai city. As these St. Thomas Christians in the beginning were not a missionary community, they did not spread their faith outside their community. They retained the Chaldean liturgy and Syriac language and maintained fraternal ties with the Babylonian Patriarch (New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1997, p. 281). Thus, the Christian faith remained only in the southern part of India until the arrival of Francis Xavier, a Spanish missionary who reached the city of Goa in 1542.

It is believed that in Kerala, the St. Thomas Christians lived in perfect union with the people of local faiths. Brown (1956, p. 16) states, "There is no evidence at all that the Christians were considered a foreign community. They were a recognized part of Malabar society and that society had colored their understanding of Christianity." Another fact that helped them to adapt to the cultural milieu of Malabar, was that most of the early converts to Christianity were from the Brahmin caste of Hinduism (Brown, 1956, p. 167). This explains why local kings, too, accorded the St. Thomas Christians a high rank in the caste system, a rank even superior to that of the *Waniers* and *Kammalers*, and *Vyisyas*.

With the arrival of Francis Xavier, a new era in the history of the Church in India began. Francis Xavier started his missionary work mostly among the fisher folk of the coastal areas, starting from Goa and extending to Tamil Nadu. After Xavier followed many Christian missionaries belonging to different religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church and Christianity began to spread across India. Mission works of most of the Spanish and Portuguese missionaries were confined only to areas under Portuguese jurisdiction in India, and therefore there was hardly any tension between the Christians and members of the local communities. Later with the arrival of the Dutch and people from Great Britain, protestant missionaries entered India and began spreading their faith. The first two Protestant missionaries who landed in India on July 9, 1706 were Germans, namely Ziegenbalg and Plutschau, who were sent by the Dutch King (Julius, 1908, p. 30). The British rulers generally followed a policy of non-interference in the customs and traditions of the natives, owing to fear that it

2. A group of Christians in the South Indian state of Kerala, who are believed to possess roots that can be traced back to St. Thomas the apostle. They are also called Malabar Christians.

might offend the Hindus and create unrest (Immanuel, 1984, p. 19-29). As a result of this policy, the new converts to Christianity did not face much opposition from the local Hindu community, except in cases where some Indian nationalists associated Christians with their colonial oppressors. Although there were conflicts between Christians and other religious communities during and after the colonial period, in comparison with other religions, Christianity enjoyed a relatively peaceful existence in India.

Interreligious dialogue

Cardinal Francis Arinze³ (1997, p. 16) defines interreligious dialogue as: “a meeting of people of differing religions, in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, in order to listen to the other, to try to understand that person’s religion, and hopefully to seek possibilities of collaboration.” While engaging in dialogue, Arinze insists on listening, because dialogue requires an appreciation of what the other person is, believes, prays, or lives. For Arinze, willingness to listen, asking questions for clarification, and seeking to understand, are direct ways to the other person’s heart and trust. He reminds us that comparative religion and religious debates are not interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue, “does not aim at bringing about the unity of all religions in a kind of super-religion” (Arinze, 1997).

Various forms of interreligious dialogue

The Catholic Church acknowledges four types of interreligious dialogue, which are also approved among interreligious dialogue experts. These are dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of discourse, and dialogue of religious experience.

Dialogue of Life

Dialogue of life is a form of interreligious dialogue that takes place between believers of different religions, as they interact with each other in their daily lives in families, schools, places of social or cultural contact, workplaces, in politics, trade or commerce, and other areas. People of different religious background engage in dialogue of life when they are open to one another, as they share their projects and hopes, common concerns and sorrows. Although they do not discuss religion in these

3. Cardinal Francis Arinze has been the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome since 1985.

interactions, they draw on the values of their beliefs and traditions (Arinze, 1997). According to Samwini (2011), "dialogue of life, by virtue of primarily basing relations on blood or social ties, can lead to the dispelling of prejudice and engendering of mutual understanding." Samwini continues, stating that dialogue of life challenges adherents of religions to offer witness to their faith in their day-to-day lives, and thereby attain dignity and respect without oppressing the other. This mutual enrichment is essential for community development and peaceful co-existence. While formal interreligious dialogues attempt to answer the question 'How do we live our lives together?' dialogue of life is 'the already negotiated answer' (Sturm, 1993, p. 2). Samwini, then, believes that while formal interreligious dialogue seeks to build understanding on the basis of similarities between different faiths, dialogue of life does not necessarily look for similarities, but seeks to bring peace even amidst acknowledged differences. The result is better relationships among people of different religions, and peaceful co-existence.

Dialogue of Action

Arinze (1997, p. 18), posits that dialogue of action refers to followers of different religions cooperating for the promotion of human development and liberation in all its forms. A joint project between a Muslim group and a Catholic group who form a committee to run a leprosy-control clinic is an example of dialogue of action. Arinze points out that dialogue of action brings people together, even at global level, irrespective of their religious affiliations, to common causes of humanitarian concern such as the 1991 Malta project to establish practical cooperation on the global humanitarian problem of refugees and migrants. This project was organized by Christian and Islamic organizations, which together made the following declaration, "We affirm that we must work together to ensure that the rights and dignity of all peoples on the move, and their families if separated, are respected and upheld no matter who these people are or wherever they may be found" (Arinze, 1997, p.18-19).

Dialogue of discourse

Dialogue of discourse, in principle, takes place between religious specialists. In dialogue of discourse, scholars and leaders of various religions come together to listen to one another in an effort to understand the religion of the other at a deeper level. They exchange information on their respective religious beliefs and heritage, through which they come to understand what beliefs and practices they share, and

where they differ (Arinze, 1997, p. 19). Having learned about each other at this deep level, they attempt to seek solutions together to the problems they face in the world. Groupe de Recherches Islamo-Christien (GRIC), a group of Muslims and Christians who are committed to do theological studies together of both religions, is an example of dialogue of discourse in action.

Dialogue of religious experience

Dialogue of religious experience consists in sharing one's religious experience with a follower of another religion. In such exchanges, both parties should be open and even willing to share in the religious experience of the other. Dialogue of religious experience is generally conducted by people who are deeply rooted in one's own religious tradition, such as religious monks who are committed to a more than ordinary pursuit of spiritual progress (Arinze, 1997, p. 20). This type of dialogue generally involves several weeks of residence in a monastery of one of the religions monks, and the following of their daily routines of prayer and work. One sees from the very nature of this type of dialogue, that it is not something easily accessible to all followers of any religion.

Interreligious dialogue and peaceful co-existence

Interreligious dialogue takes place in a multi-religious society as a day to day, mundane activity, even without the notice and awareness of the persons involved. In other words, interreligious dialogue, in one form or other, is an unavoidable part of everyday life for most people around the world. Whether intentional or unintentional, organized or unorganized, all forms of interreligious dialogues contribute to increased mutual understanding, social harmony, and peaceful co-existence between people of different faiths and cultures. The following are some of the specific positive outcomes of interreligious dialogue.

Solidarity with the whole of humanity

All religions promote peace and encourage their followers to be ambassadors of peace. Peace being one of the common goals of all religions, its pursuit brings them together to work for the wellbeing of the whole of humanity. The first 'Parliament of World Religions,' held in Chicago in 1893, was probably the first time in modern history that religious leaders and theologians from around the world came together to discuss issues that influence the whole of humanity with an eye towards contributing

to world peace. This event was likely the birth of interreligious dialogue at a global level. The Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace in 1986 was another such historical event in which leaders of world religions assembled to think together, work together, and pray together for world peace. Pope John Paul II, in his concluding address on October 27, 1986, delivered the following message, "We hope that this pilgrimage to Assisi has taught us anew to be aware of the common origin and common destiny of humanity. Let us see in it an anticipation of what God would like the developing history of humanity to be: a fraternal journey in which we accompany one another towards the transcendent goal which He sets for us" (John Paul II, 1986). Though varied in their demands, all religions seek answers to the fundamental questions that torment the human mind, such as the question of human existence and destiny, the essence of true happiness, the problem of evil and sin, and the reasons for suffering and human salvation. In Arinze's words, "If for no other reason, the followers of the religions of the world should meet, listen to one another, try to understand one another, and see what they can do together" (Arinze, 1997, p.33).

Enrichment of personal experience

Leonard Swidler (1985, p. 187) declares, "the primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly." Anyone who participates in an interreligious dialogue with a receptive and open mind will grow in one's own faith and appreciation of each other. For example, when a Christian notices some Muslim brethren praying five times a day, regardless of place, the sight would naturally challenge and inspire his or her own commitment to prayer and faith. Similarly, when monks of different religions assemble for dialogue, each tradition's asceticism, methods of prayer, and human interaction mutually enrich spiritual life and change one's perception of the other.

Mutual enrichment of religions

As every religion is an embodiment of ideologies and cultures, interreligious dialogue is also an inter-ideological and inter-cultural encounter. Encounter between religions have always inspired changes on both sides. For example, Christianity has helped some religions to do away with practices such as "human sacrifice, killing of twins, the denial of some human rights to unborn children or to women" (Arinze, 1997, p. 25). Similarly, Christians in India have enriched themselves from the Sadhana way of praying and meditation (Amaladoss, 1995, p. 2). Contact with Buddhism has

inspired Christianity to deepen its eco-spirituality and increase its environmental awareness and commitment (Hastings, 2009, p. 60). It is a well-known fact that yoga, though a Hindu tradition, refreshes physically and enriches spiritually everyone who practices it. Today, yoga techniques are adopted by many Christians and especially religious men and women, in their daily prayer and meditation across the world. Similarly, Zen meditation is being used by Hindus as well as Christians in their formal prayers.

Countering religious extremism

Interfaith and interreligious dialogue is increasingly used today to combat terrorism across the globe. Today, more than ever, as a result of globalization, a constant movement of people from place to place has led to the interaction of different cultures, ideologies, and religions, a reality that sometimes leads to friction. Providing a mood of mutual understanding and acceptance to people of diverse identities is not only the need and responsibility of religious leaders, but of governmental authorities as well. In 2008, the monarch of Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah, held a three-day interfaith meeting of Shiite and Sunni Muslims of Saudi Arabia and Iran as a way to promote reconciliation among these groups (BBC News, July 19, 2008). In the same year, King Abdullah hosted an interfaith dialogue meeting at Madrid, in which three hundred delegates, representing Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism participated. The highlight of this event was the diplomatic breakthrough between two enemy nations – Israel and Saudi Arabia. This conference called for international cooperation on combating terrorism and unity of human beings, regardless of dissimilar identities (Christian Science Monitor, July 18, 2008). Interfaith and interreligious dialogue at local and international levels, fulfill an important role today in countering terrorism and in promoting shared values.

Foster fraternity among people

Every nation in the world has people belonging to different religions, even though all religions may not be endowed with the freedom of public worship. In such nations, religious or communal conflict of any sort first affects ordinary citizens who may not be well-informed in theological matters concerning their religion, but yet are committed in their faith. Conflicts between communities are often caused by misunderstandings or due to trivial interpersonal issues, which later acquire a religious or communal flavor. Interreligious dialogue in its various forms promotes an

understanding of each other's shared values as well as differences, in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance. Arab-Jew encounters in Israel and Christian-Muslim dialogues in Nigeria are illustrative examples of such endeavors. These honest and face-to-face dialogues convince both parties that to engage in violence and to kill each other in the name of God or religion contradicts their own faith. The Oasis of Peace (Wahat al Salam), an international community jointly established by Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, is a concrete example of building fraternity and peaceful co-existence between centuries-old enemies.

Critical perspective

The Catholic Church, in its journey through centuries and on different continents, has encountered many civilizations, religions, and local cultures, influencing and being influenced by each other. Various liturgical traditions present in the Church today provide witness to this influence. Similarly, even within a Christian community that follows the same liturgical tradition, different types of customs and practices, regarding childbirth, marriage, the conducting of funerals and so on, can be observed across the globe. India, as a multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic sub-continent, exhibits social practices and customs which differ from community to community across the country. A Christian in India has multiple identities, in addition to being a Christian, he or she belongs to a specific linguistic group, a political state, possibly to a tribe or caste, and is a member of an ethnic group as well. These multiple identities exert a deep influence on the way of living of the person, regardless of his or her religious affiliation. Therefore, co-existing with people of different identities within the Church, and with members of the society at large, can prove a challenge and sometimes a dilemma, for Christians in India. When thinking of 'the mode of being a Christian in India' without losing his or her religious identity as well as not causing conflict and division in society, the Catholic Church could consider or even encourage the following recommendations.

Future considerations for Dialogue of life in the Indian context

Living with mixed-faith families is an increasing form of dialogue of life in today's world. Living with mixed-faith families is possible in two ways: (1) conversion of one of the family members to another religion (2) interreligious (interfaith) marriage. Although these two forms of dialogue of life are not very common phenomena in India, they are increasing, especially in the urban areas and among the well-

educated members of the younger generation. However, most denominations of the Catholic Church in India do not in practice encourage these changes. Rather, they actively discourage these two forms of dialogue of life. Certain Roman Catholic denominations such as the Knanaya community⁴ strongly oppose both interreligious and interdenominational marriages⁵. Interreligious or interdenominational marriages are not theologically problematic. People follow these practices even today only to maintain tradition and to preserve the identity of the community through blood relations, which are not actually related to true Gospel values of equal human worth. Although the Church leadership in India does not seem to oppose these forms of dialogue of life in public, they are silent about them. In contrast to this situation in India, interreligious marriages and interdenominational marriages among Christians are very common in many other parts of the world, and they are as successful as intra-denominational marriages⁶.

Research conducted in Malaysia proves that dialogue of life through living together with mixed-faith families has a significant impact on encouraging positive interaction among people of different religions. This type of social interaction can be considered interreligious dialogue at the grass roots level. It is an informal dialogue in daily life but it is very intense and effective in terms of promoting mutual understanding and acceptance among members of different religions. Interviews with Muslim converts living together with non-Muslim family members in Malaysia have revealed that (Sintang & Khambali, 2012, pp. 69-74): (1) *Acceptance of a family member converting to Islam*. One of the family members accepting another religion is a rare incident and socially unacceptable in Malaysian society, where every family traditionally adheres to a particular religion. Blood relationship with the Muslim convert, in this case, helped the non-Muslim family members to accept her new religious identity. (2) *Non-Muslim family members' interest in Islam gradually increased*. The Muslim convert testifies, "When I watch a movie or drama conveying the message of Islam, I will tell them what it is about and they are ready to listen to my explanation. Until now, they know a little bit about Mecca and the reasons why

4. Knanaya community refers to the descendants of Thomas of Cana, a Jewish-Christian merchant from Southern Mesopotamia who migrated to Kerala in 345 AD.

5. Interdenominational marriage refers to marriage between people who belong to different Christian historical and liturgical traditions. For example, a marriage between a person who belongs to Latin Catholic community and Knanaya Catholic community.

6. Intra-denominational marriage refers to a marriage between two people belonging to the same religious denomination.

Muslims perform Hajj there” (Sintang & Khambali, 2012, p. 73). (3) *Non-Muslim family members' misunderstandings about Islam reduced.* The non-Muslim members of the family got over their misconceptions on Islam by living with a Muslim member of their family who witnessed to the teachings of Islam in her daily life. (4) *Non-Muslim family members began encouraging the Muslim convert to follow her religion faithfully.* The female convert's father said the following words to her, “You have to make some changes after you convert to Islam. Don't stick to your old dress code. It's better you wear a headscarf...He used to tell me that he is proud of me being his daughter, even though we are no longer in the same religion” (Sintang & Khambali, 2012, p. 74). The above findings state that living together with mixed-faith families contributes significantly towards promoting understanding between followers of different religions, and contribute to peaceful co-existence.

A second means of an intimate form of the dialogue of life is the open-house celebration of religious festivals. Sintang & Khambali (2012, p. 74) observe that open-house celebration of religious festivals such as Eid Fitri and the Chinese New Year, are becoming a modern trend in Malaysia. During such celebrations, neighbors belonging to different religions cooperate with each other and share meals together, strengthening friendship and growing in mutual appreciation of each other's faith and religious practices. This type of intimate association with people of other religions provides a near insider view of the other's religion and values, and thus enables the ridding oneself of prejudice and discrimination. India is a land of religions, and people of various religious faiths live side by side in the same street, village, or city. Except for Independence Day, Republic Day, and Gandhi Jayanthi (the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi) all festivals in India are religious festivals. Compared to other religions, Christians celebrate only a few major religious festivals in India, such as Christmas and Easter. Although as part of its commercialization Christmas is being celebrated in some cities by owners of shopping malls and business centers, yet that is not being done in the houses of people of other faiths. Even though a few Christian families might invite their intimate friends and neighbors who belong to other religions, most religious festivals for Christians in India remain family affairs.

Finally, the Church needs to make a conscious effort not to alienate its followers from the local culture — making them appear as foreigners in their own land — by accelerating its efforts at indigenization and inculturation without sacrificing fundamental Gospel values. The Church could consider restarting some of the indigenous practices that the early St. Thomas Christians followed, but which were

banned by the Synod of Diamper (Zacharia, 1994, p. 120). Until the Synod of Diamper, St. Thomas Christians used to follow the rituals of the Brahmins at the birth of a child, namely feeding the newborn child with a paste of honey and powdered gold, and wishing the child prosperity. Another practice was related to the child's naming. Besides the baptismal name, every child was given a pet name which was quite indigenous, and very often a Hindu name (Zacharia, 1994, p. 120). A third among such practices was related to the initiation of children into the writing of the alphabet. The initiation ceremony was led by a Hindu teacher who would write the alphabets on the tongues of the children with an instrument of gold, and then make the children write the letters with their index fingers either on a palm leaf (*Thaliyola*) or in rice. These and many other local customs that are not in contradiction with Gospel values and Church teachings could be permitted to continue today among the Christians in Kerala. Following the customs and practices of the land would give the Church a local color and identity, and smoothen the dialogue of life with the members of other local communities.

In general, Indian society, probably because of the influence of the Hindu caste system, has an exclusivist nature to it. In most families, all members belong to the same caste (though not in certain religious communities), and follow the same religion as well. In this sort of social situation, more intimate forms of dialogue of life as mentioned above are difficult to carry out. The Catholic Church which in principle is open to all religions and is also a champion of interreligious dialogue, could play an exemplary role in encouraging its followers to cordially embrace and support members of their family who have converted to other religious faiths or who have married persons of other religions, and open their doors to people of other faiths when celebrating religious festivals. The Church in Indian today could consider these issues as they search for new ways of witnessing their faith and serving Indian society, amidst increasing hostility and persecution of religious minorities.

Importance of dialogue of life

Dialogue of life, as an effective tool for peaceful co-existence in our pluralistic Indian society, needs much attention. In the above-mentioned forms of dialogue of life, people relate to each other first and foremost as blood relatives and family members, and not as members of a religion. Religion plays a less important role in such interactions. Family ties between people of different religious faiths enable them to focus more on the shared elements that bind them together, and to accept the

differences more easily. Thus, peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic society could more easily be achieved through fraternal relationships built among ordinary followers of different religions through dialogue of life, than through the mutual consensus reached by religious leaders in formal interreligious dialogue. Similarly, while religious leaders struggle at interreligious meetings to discover elements of universal relevance in the other's religion, ordinary followers of different religions learn to appreciate each other's religions rather easily through the dialogue of life, which takes place in their daily lives. There is much to be learned for all people from Christian charity and service to the poor, Buddhist eco-spirituality, and the pacifism of certain indigenous communities. Moreover, when the question of unequivocal salvation of the followers of other religions leads religious leaders into a deadlock in their discussion, ordinary followers of religions are more likely to believe that their neighbors would also be saved due to the exemplary life they lead, even though they may belong to a different religion.

There are additional reasons why the Church in India must recognize the importance and incorporate the dialogue of life. First, the documents of Second Vatican Council acknowledge respecting the dignity of other religious beliefs and they urge the universal Church to encourage the faithful to appreciate and collaborate with people of other faiths. His Holiness Pope Paul VI, too, exhorted the Church to engage in dialogue with other faiths, when he said, "wherever men are trying to understand themselves, and the world, we can communicate with them" (Trouve, 1999, p. 390). Acknowledging the other would enrich the Church's self-understanding as well as mutual understanding between itself and other faiths (Samwini, 2011, p. 3) *Nostra Aetate*⁷ states, "A renewal of the Church's consciousness of itself and of its mission could not help but lead to a reevaluation of its relationship with those who do not profess faith in Jesus" (Trouve, 1999, p. 389). Hence, both the Church's documents and its leaders have made it clear that dialogue with other faiths is not merely an option, but the mission of the Church today.

Another challenge that confronts India and reinforces the need for dialogue of life, is the fact of the multitude of religious, ethnic, and tribal communities, as well as the problems and challenges they cause. As shown in the 2011 census, there are 104.28 million tribal people in India, belonging to hundreds of tribes, each with its

7. *Nostra Aetate* is a document of the Catholic Church on its relation to non-Christian religions proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965.

own unique language and culture. So far, neither any single religion nor political party has been able to bring all these diverse groups under a single umbrella. Failure to settle longstanding rivalry between communities leads to repeated communal violence and religious riots in certain parts of the country. Exclusivist tendencies are unacceptable and contradictory to every community's desire for physical and economic cooperation and development, in modern pluralistic India. Moreover, it would be unbecoming of religious communities to be indifferent to local and global movements towards unity and peaceful co-existence, through not engaging in common projects that concern the whole of humanity.

Conclusion

Dialogue of life is one of the most effective forms of interreligious dialogue, and its practice results in an increased mutual understanding and tolerance towards others, which makes a peaceful co-existence not only possible, but likely. A community that practices dialogue of life will find itself in a better position to deal with the challenges of communal and religious riots, than a community that is dialogically isolated from others. We have seen, in India, communities protecting members of rival communities during times of communal violence. As Samwini (2011, p. 4) observes, a community that practices dialogue of life is better equipped to detect signals of violence and respond more quickly and settle the issues through mediation, before they escalate into uncontrollable proportions. Because there are inherent elements in each religion, such as theology, ethical values, symbols, dress codes and so on that naturally divide people, conscious efforts must be taken to learn to accept differences. Engaging in interreligious dialogue with people of other faiths is not only a need of the Church in India, but a mission the universal Church has entrusted it with. For Christians to be worthy of their vocation as children of God they should work to establish peace on earth, as is echoed in Mathew 5: 9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

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