

Revelation and Revelations

Human beings from most ancient times have a sense for a Transcendent-Immanent divine being or power relating to human life and the universe and said to be responsible for the existence and destiny of human beings.

This Transcendent-Immanent is an unknown power, or being. Its connection to and difference from the universe is not known and is differently reflected on by schools of philosophical thinking. The universe is said to either emanate from or be created by such a supreme divine power, often named, God. There are claims especially by religions to have some special intuition concerning this power.

I. Revelation and revelations

Revelation refers to the making known of an unknown. Theologies of revelation would consider it their task or privilege to make known the divine that is unknowable by normal human means of direct knowledge such as through the senses or the unchallengeable apodictic conclusions of the human intellect.

Revelation by the transcendent-immanent divine can be implicit or explicit. Implicit would be through an operation in a human person or in a community. Explicit would be in communication through a privileged person or a community claiming to receive a divine message. From such explicit revelation there could be theologies claiming some special divine inspiration of privileged teachers of humanity or authors of divinely inspired texts.

An understanding of *implicit revelation* would be the case of the conscience which may be said to be from the divine indicating right and wrong. In the Christian perspective it can be spoken of as the spirit in each person. A consensus of a community seeking its point of view in a moral action can also be regarded as an implicit revelation from the divine present in the community. Implicit revelation to the conscience is specific to a person and given situation with even nuances of possible unclarity and doubt. It can adapt itself to changing circumstances. From this understanding of an implicit revelation we can derive also ethical norms and principles of a natural law or considerations of a natural theology, indicating moral norms in a wider perspective and even internationally.

Explicit revelation would be a claim by prophets and religious leaders to have a direct revelation from the divine. Their teaching can be written in texts regarded as sacred scriptures. The presentation of inspired sacred texts would involve issues such as the Canon the limits of the inspired words, their interpretation and their formulation in terms of doctrines in a given language, culture and philosophy of a community.

This has the problem of interpretation over time and space. It is also influenced by who writes the revelation, for whom, the use of language, metaphors etc... Thereafter there is the problem of the preservation of the texts and their interpretation. In the explicit revelation there is the power play of who interprets and in what particular context. Further how is a text to be understood by succeeding generations in different areas of the world?

There may be a clash between the claims of explicit external revelation as interpreted by an authority as of a church and the pressing demands of an inner voice. There may then be situations such as when Luther said before an ecclesiastical court: 'here I stand and cannot do otherwise' – bringing about even a centennial split in the Christian church. When the implicit inner voices of individuals are expressed publicly and acquire a social momentum, there can be people's movements of even a

revolutionary nature as in France in 1789 and in China in 1949. It may be debated as to how far the movements of human history are the indicators of a divine intervention.

In the liberative struggles there could be a situation in which the persons in authority interpret the explicit revelation in their favour to the disadvantage of others. Then the powerful would claim a divine legitimation of their privileges as in the theory of the divine right of kings, or the claims of a church or religion to be the unique vehicle of eternal salvation for all humans. There could be then a clash between the inner voice of conscience, in individuals and among the oppressed, and the claims of the powerful.

In a situation where a church authority has acquired exclusive and monopoly control over the external explicit revelation, the implicit revelation within persons and groups may lead to radical questioning and even a refusal to accept the rulings of the power elite. The movement from an exclusive revelation to a more inclusive or pluralist one could be understood as the result of a clash between the explicit revelatory message enthroned in power and the compelling inner voices of the excluded, marginalised or oppressed seeking revindication of their rights and a true interpretation of the explicit revelation.

The movement from a rigid claim of a monopolistic inflexible revelation to a more enriching and dynamic pluralist understanding of ongoing revelations may be seen as a historical movement of the implicit revelation seeking a correction of an explicit interpretation of the divine will in the exclusivist paradigm.

There can be **revelation of the divine by natural phenomena** in so far as people assume the creation, or evolution of the universe and of human life by or from a divine power. In that sense nature reveals the divine as creation points to a creator or emanation to its source. We can speak then of **a natural theology** derived from our knowledge of nature or on our reflection of the divine as a creator and sustainer of the universe as the source of its emanation or evolution.

A natural moral theology can be derived from the conclusions of human reason in relation to what is required for peaceful, harmonious, just and fulfilling human life and relationships. (This itself based on a presumption that we are meant to live peacefully in communities and not to fight and kill one another). This is a natural human or humanistic point of view that is basic to ordinary human living at all levels from the personal, family, to the world community.

In a sense this is also the source of consensus on such texts as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, agreed upon by the UN in 1948. We may also reflect likewise on internationally accepted or proposed documents such as the Kyoto Treaty concerning the environment.

This type of conclusions concerning nature, and human life in community is the under girding source of our system of values and relationships that can and have been thought of by human beings at all levels of evolution through thousands of years. It continues to be a generally acknowledged and acceptable source of human understanding of right and wrong even in the present age of globalisation and world wide communications.

Corresponding to this natural consciousness of relationships of the human and the divine is a generally accepted understanding of **the human conscience** that is experienced by all persons with the use of reason and freedom. The personal conscience is an inner voice of an immanent divine that speaks to each individual

from within oneself indicating the right and wrong of a human action. For an individual it is the ultimate or final indication for right and wrong and hence a criterion for decision-making. It is also the ultimate criterion of evaluating the subjective goodness or badness of a person's actions and life. Conscience is internal and subjective and can be influenced by person's upbringing and the social and political context.

These two criteria, the natural law or norms of rights and wrong as seen by the consequences of a human action on personal and collective fulfilment and the personal conscience speaking within an individual, give the objective and subjective norms for evaluating human action at all times and periods of a person's existence or of community life from the simplest to the most complex levels of global living.

These can be regarded as sources of the **natural revelation** of the divine transcendent-immanent, God, existing and active before all forms of formal explicit revelation and religions evolved by humans over time and space. They are primary revelations experienced by humans of all known times and places.

Arising from these sources of natural revelation are the different claims and expressions of revelation said to be directly inspired by a divine source. Such revelations claim to make known to humans truths concerning human life, its origin, its essential and existential situation and ultimate destiny after death.

These are claims of revelation that depend on the sources of revelation, on the expression of the revelation in human language and its interpretation by persons and communities over time and space in different cultural settings often through their own dominant powers.

Such claims of divine revelation, or revelation of the divinity, can be said to be mediated through a connection to a divine source or intervention or may be the result of a sense of the presence and message of the divine evolved over long periods of time by primeval human communities. They may have their beliefs and rituals relating to a divine power present and active in the universe. These would be natural religions of the peoples, sometimes called native religions, without a specific claim of inspired divine revelation to a particular privileged person or group. In these there can be a multiplicity of claims of divine presence, action and revelation throughout the world and coming down from past ages. They may be said to include non-rational or superstitious beliefs with corresponding practices or rituals in relation to the nature and the presence of the divine. They may relate to the cycles of life and nature such as the seasons, the times of planting and harvesting and birth and death.

These claims of revelation are subject to evaluation according to one's individual conscience the natural laws of human relationships and in more modern times the investigation of sciences. These can also be the source of happiness as well as of fears concerning one's personality and present and future life according to the type of interpretation given. Institutional perspectives in religions may be a way of capturing controlling and taming the divine.

In the present understanding of revelation concerning Christ, there has been generally an *exclusive* presentation of Jesus Christ as a unique saviour in his own person. If we interpret the salvation issue differently there could be room for an *inclusive* approach which would make other religions capable of salvation through the influence of Christ. A broader perspective would be when the other religions are thought of as capable of leading to salvation through their own means without reference to Jesus Christ. Such a concept of revelation and theology would be a

pluralistic perspective and enrichment of the divine that no claim of revelation can exhaust.

A more systematically conceptualised claim of divine revelation is in the more **institutionalised religions**. These have written scriptures, norms or codes of conduct for humans, teachings concerning the nature of the divine and explanations about the origin and destiny of human life. They have religious teachings or theologies that are handed down from generation to generation by a community that accepts them. They have also a leadership of priestly elites that interpret the texts and govern the community in religious affairs. These teachings are an inspiration to their believers and practitioners and give a certain value orientation to the relationships and cultures. They may include some less desirable elements favouring discrimination among persons and communities. They also help form the conscience of individuals through processes of community education and the rituals of worship. Generally the power elite tends to interpret the texts in their favour, sometimes even with an ethno-nationalistic flavour.

Among such claims of revelation are the different world religions coming down from recent antiquity. Some of these more renowned religions have their origins in Asia and the Middle East, such as Hinduism (Confucianism, Taoism,) Buddhism and Zoroastrianism...Islam.

II Christianity

Christianity is one such claim of divine revelation of God coming down from the Jewish community and sacred scriptures that form the main source of the Christian Bible.

The religions that existed prior to Christianity may not have had a claim of exclusivity concerning the truth and the means of salvation for the whole world. They did not have a possibility to relate to other peoples as Christians later could. In the Christian tradition the most wide spread claim of divine revelation is that proposed by the Roman Catholic Church. (*My comments refer mainly to this Church, as it is the tradition best known to me.*)

Early Christianity, from the records we have, understood the core teaching of Jesus as one that advocated love of neighbour and God. The Acts of the Apostles would seem to indicate that the early church was concerned about implementing this teaching by a practice of sharing their resources so that there was no one in need. (Acts: 4, 32). The rapid conversion of many persons to Christianity to the then known world was also due to the good example of the Christians who were more considerate to their neighbour than maybe expected in the times of slavery and imperialism.

In the first two three centuries the Christians were subject to persecution for their belief. The numerous martyrs considered fidelity to their faith more important than life itself. But the situation changed very much after the conversion of Constantine, the Roman emperor, to Christianity and the church became the religion of the empire. From this time the development of Christian theology was rather influenced by its association with power than due to any direct revelation through Jesus Christ.

Christian exclusivism- historically

The church, associated with the Roman emperor, claimed also authority to be able to interpret the divine revelation through Jesus Christ. During this period the

teaching of the church was evolved mainly through the Councils of the church generally convoked and presided over by the emperor or his delegates.

The church teaching of this period was evolved in such a way that Jesus Christ is said to be the unique son of God and the necessary saviour of humanity. During these centuries it was also argued that the whole human race is fallen into original sin and in an unredeemable position without divine grace which could be obtained only through Christ and the church. He is said to have communicated his divine powers to the church headed by the Pope and the hierarchy. The church claimed the power of deciding what the sources of revelation are, and of determining the Canon of the revealed scriptures. She also claimed the monopoly power to interpret the scriptures authoritatively and authentically due to divine inspiration. The church claimed to be the teacher of all humanity in matters concerning salvation. Therefore it was claimed that the church and the Christians had the obligation to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth and bring all humanity to the saving truth that was entrusted to it.

In that situation there was a unique theology that excluded other theologies and revelations and claimed a monopoly of the knowledge about God and a unique communication from God to humanity. While this may not be necessarily the only group that claimed such a privilege, the church had the situation of being allied to the Roman emperor whose power spread to the areas to which Europeans had access then. This brought about a situation which the Christian church claimed exclusive spiritual powers concerning salvation and communion with God.

This position of a combination of *monopolistic exclusivist theology with secular power* gave the church a sense of superiority over all others in matters concerning the spiritual life and eternal salvation of all persons. It made Christians not only arrogant but also intolerant and developed a theory of holy violence for the sake of the salvation of souls. Many of the peoples within the reach of the Europeans in the centuries from about the 4th till the 16th century were therefore subject to the dominion of the churches in matters of religion and theology.

In the process there were significant divisions in Christianity as between the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches, and from the 16 century the Protestant Churches. These and other churches such as the Syrian had different theologies but it would seem that they all agreed on the teaching about the divinity of Jesus Christ and the necessity of belonging to the Church for eternal salvation. There was all the same a difference in their approaches towards revelation. The Catholic Church claimed that the Christian community was the bearer of the divine revelation. Hence subject to the authority of the church there could be an ongoing interpretation of the revelation that continues. This gave the Catholic Church a potentiality of certain openness to a plurality of theologies while also tending to make the hierarchy more authoritarian. On the other hand the Protestant Churches affirmed that revelation was limited to the Bible and this made it more difficult for them to accept a plurality of valid theologies.

In a still later period when European power spread to the rest of the world through colonialism, the Christian churches also extended their influence to the areas colonized. They participated in the process of colonisation by the European powers with the conviction that they were spreading the message of Christ and making available the means of salvation to the “pagan” peoples who had other forms of revelation and religion. Therefore we have a situation of one dominant understanding of revelation allied to superior political and military power that condemned other interpretations of revelation and where possible imposed their brand of Christianity on the conquered peoples.

Winds of change

It is only after the process of liberation of the colonised peoples in the second half of the 20th century that the Christians began to reflect more deeply on whether their interpretation of the salvation by Jesus Christ was a correct one. In the second half of the 20th century there has been an evolution of Christian theologies that had been more open to other religions and theologies. In the Catholic Church the Second Vatican Council (1962 -1965) acknowledges the spiritual values of other religions and in more recent decades has also been prepared to consider the other religions as paths to salvation. The Protestant churches, through the WCC, have also been opening themselves towards a greater acceptance of dialogue and cooperation with other religions even in matters such as the realization of justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

How is one to evaluate Christian theology over the centuries in its claim to be the unique valid theology for the whole world. Secondly are any changes so far made adequate to provide for a respect for the divine and for the rest of humanity as well as to cooperate in the building up of the global human community of our times, inspired by the religions?

A valuable thought in terms of revelation would be to see whether one refers to a divine power that is monotheistic or otherwise. Assuming that we are thinking of revelation within a perspective of monotheism, revelation would have to be from the one divine source. In this case the essence of all revelations would have to have a commonality since the divine is one and the truth is one. On the other end since revelation is a way of human expression of what is said to be a divine communication it would take place in different languages, philosophies and cultures and therefore there would be different revelations, theologies and religions.

III A plurality of theologies on the unknown – Dogma's

We have then to ask what would be the nature of the unity and oneness of revelation from the one divine source, and at the same time how there could be a plurality of claims of revelations and religions within even a monotheistic understanding of the divine. Evidently a broader understanding of the divine than monotheism would involve different theologies and revelations of the divine itself. It is understood in this connection that a revelation refers to a human understanding of what is said to be a communication of a divine source, monotheistic or otherwise. Further since the divine is unknowable by human senses or intellect, all expressions of revelations theologies would be only analogical or metaphorical expressions concerning the divine.

Since we have different theologies that emanate from different peoples and cultures we can expect differences concerning the way in which the divine revelations are expressed in relation to the nature of the divinity and their realities about which human beings cannot have clear evidence and knowledge. Therefore Christian and other interpretations of divine revelation would speak differently on issues as the origin of human life and the future destiny of humans after death. As we can see even from Christian theology there can be many interpretations of the nature of the divine about the functions of God and also the personality of God, as three persons in one God. Thus theological treatises exist concerning the Trinity, the Holy Spirit and the creative, redemptive and the sanctifying functions of the three divine persons,. All these are said to be derived from divine revelation but are, in a sense, utilization of Greek philosophical concepts for the interpretation of the divine. One can find other

ways of explaining the divine as in Hinduism where also the divine is attributed various functions and even personalities of different gender.

Such elements and interpretations of the unknown divine, the beginnings and ultimate destiny of human life, can be expressed differently without humans having to be in conflict on such interpretations. Because we cannot have absolute certainty or evidence that is acceptable to all humans, these are only particular interpretations of some claims of the divine revelation. They need not necessarily lead to conflicts, unless a particular theology claims to be the unique and absolute truth, and that all the others are false. Therefore there can be diversities in theologies concerning what is called dogma in Christian theology and these need not be necessarily in contradiction with each other in so far as they need not affect human life and relationships here on earth. A plurality of theologies may be proposed concerning the dogmatic teachings on the unknown divine or about the origin and future of human life, even if they say things that would not be reconcilable in themselves. There could exist different theologies concerning monotheism or a connection between the divine and the human without necessarily being in conflict concerning these unless they are interpreted in ways that affect human life contradictorily. One of the ways in which to deal with the plurality of such theologies is to realize their limitations in so far as their analogical expressions concerning an unknowable reality. And the reality of the divine can be expressed in different analogical and metaphorical terms, without claiming to exhaust the fullness of the divinity or the completeness of a human understanding of the divine.

Moral theologies

The situation could be different when we deal with ethical or moral theology that would give interpretations of a revelation concerning the human condition on earth or norms for human behaviour in given situations. Theologies and teachings concerning the human condition such as about humanity being a fallen race conceived in original sin and doomed for eternal damnation unless saved by divine intervention would have impact on the relationships among peoples. Likewise teachings of religions that speak of the impact of actions of a past life as karma, or caste as being due to a relationship to the divinity would have impact on social living. They would therefore have to be open to critical evaluation and it will be necessary to ask ourselves what are the principles of such a critical evaluation.

Ethical theological teachings deal directly about the norms for moral living such as the commandments in Christianity, the noble precepts of the different religions about truthfulness, love and sharing, respect for human life and honesty. These would have direct impact on the way people live on earth. If different religions and theologies teach fundamentally different ways in which the problems of human relationships have to be resolved they may lead to conflict among persons and groups of communities. Then a plurality of theologies claiming different interpretations of moral revelation would be harmful to human community living.

In this connection it could be remarked or concluded from investigations that the principal moral teachings of the world religions have great similarity. All of them have the basic principle of the golden rule; namely: 'do unto others as you wish as they should do to you'. A consideration of the noble truths, taught by the Buddha and Buddhism would indicate to us how these are so similar to the basic teachings of the world religions.

Theologies concerning moral life and actions of human beings would have to be in general agreement advocating similar values and actions and relationships.

Otherwise such theologies would lead to conflict. In this connection we may remark that Christian moral theologies about relationships with other religions as concerning mixed marriages could lead to social disharmony. Much of the past conflicts of religions were due to the Christian view that the other religions were false, not salvific and that Christians had to live more or less segregated from others. Their worship, education and family life had to be distanced from others. These would require an evaluation as to how and why Christian interpretations of revelation led to so much religious discrimination and conflict in human history over the centuries.

IV Criteria for Evaluation of revelations

What criteria are there for evaluating a theology or theologies when there are differences of interpretation concerning the divine revelation? It can be argued that the sources of Christian theologies are principally the teaching and life of Jesus who has a core teaching of love and unselfish service of the other that are truly meaningful and redeeming for all humanity. This is part also of the primordial religious intuition, inspiration, and example of the noble leaders of the Jewish people in the Old Testament and of Jesus and the disciples in the new.

There are however many other arguments in the Bible which are less praiseworthy or even indefensible especially as they impinge on the rights of human beings. Thus the book of Deuteronomy calls for the total extermination of the seven nations that will be inhabiting Canaan when Israel occupies it (Deut 7, 1-5, 20 6-18) Likewise in the Christian tradition there are different interpretations of texts which have led to conflicts among Christians and teachings of the church that have been intolerant and harmful to others, e.g. concerning other religions or women.

In this situation how can we have a valid principle for the critique of theologies and their sources, namely Bible and tradition? For this we have proposed a twofold principle, one negative and the other a positive, both flowing from the love command of Jesus, the core of his message.

- a) **negative:** Any theology that is authentically derived from God in Jesus must be loving, respectful and fulfilling of all sections of humanity of all places and times. This is the nature of the divine revealed in the basic and better inspiration of the Bible, especially by Jesus the Christ. God is just. Hence any element in a theology that insults, degrades, dehumanizes and discriminates against any section of humanity of any time or place cannot be from God in Jesus. If it is present in Christian theology it is an unjustifiable intrusion by later theologians and must be exorcised from the body of acceptable Christian theology. As Jesus says: 'from their fruits you will know them'. Fruits of hate and insult cannot come from Jesus or God. This gives a principle for the purification of a prevailing and often dominant Christian theology. If there are such degrading elements in a Christian theology their sources must be searched, perhaps they are an illegitimate inference from an acceptable source or else the source itself may be a presupposition that is not justified or justifiable. In the latter case, that source itself must be very critically analyzed and evaluated. We must be careful not to attribute is to God what is of mere human elaboration. On the application of this principle a good deal of the traditional construct of western Christian theology will have to be reviewed.
- b) **positive:** since we believe that all that is good in the world comes from God we can also draw the inference that everything that is *truly humanising and ennobling in any religion or ideology is also ultimately from the divine source,*

and must be respected as such. God wills happiness and fulfilment of all persons and peoples. We can conclude from this that more a religion is truly leading to genuine human self-realisation and fulfilment of all persons and peoples, the closer is it to the divine source. i.e. it helps the resolution of personal problems of individuals as well as improves the societal relations of groups.

This principal of evaluation and critique is in the first instance a rational and ethical one. In that sense it can be presented and applied to any religion and ideology. It is at the same time based on the central teaching of Jesus Christ. It tries to take the core message of Jesus seriously and make it the touchstone of good theology. Should not Christian theology have this as its guiding principle? This principle of critique affirms God as revealed in Jesus Christ namely as a God of love who cares for all irrespective of any divisions, even of creed. It is an affirmation of the centrality of universal love which is made a measuring rod of the authenticity of any sacred text, church teaching or practice.

Jesus was himself for the purification of the religion of the day. He struggled against the wrong interpretations of the law and the prophets that had ended in imposing terrible unnecessary burdens on the mass of the people in the name of religion. The teaching of Jesus is very much concerning the moral life inspired by the love of God. The dogmatic definitions of later Christianity are not found as such in his teaching. At the same time much of the simple evangelical teaching of Jesus is not given an adequately significant place in the presentations of dogmatic theology.

This principle needs to be worked out in each application, as it would seem to have validity both in relation to the teaching of Jesus and human rationality or natural theology. It gives us a way of applying the key value of the Jesus gospel to the theologies and revelations that claim to be from him. It helps to liberate Christian theologies from presentations of God that are unfaithful to the teaching of Jesus eg. on God as intolerant, partial and cruel and fostering inhumanity, dehumanisation and exploitation of human beings and so called wars for civilisation. It does constrain us to see deeper into the origins of certain theological teachings and practices which can not be from God or of revelation by God in Jesus and are of purely human sectarian sources.

Thus the Nicene Creed of 325, still repeated regularly at the Eucharist on Sundays throughout the Christian world, has no reference to the core teachings of Jesus on love, sharing, justice and concern for the other. But is rather a repetition of formulations concerning the divinity, elaborated in Greek philosophical terminology, perhaps meaningful then, but less so now.

We may ask whether contemporary presentations of Christian revelation do not also need a purification in terms of return to the core values of Jesus and a riddance of the excrescences of the centennial theological development in Christendom.

This approach of critically evaluating revelations and theologies may seem at first sight a weakening and dilution of the Christian faith. This need not be so nor is it its intention. What is desired is not the diminishing of faith in Jesus but a purifying and deepening of it and that in the contemporary context of a one world situation and of religio-cultural pluralistic societies. Such a critical dialogue can help relativize what is not certain in

theological claims of revelation and give more attention to what is the core message of the faith in God communicated by Jesus.

To a certain extent present day Christians can think of Western European theology and interpretations of the revelation coming down to us through the Middle Ages as something that also needs purification of its political and cultural limitations.

V Core teachings of the religions

While the particular presuppositions and some conclusions of religions and claims of revelation may tend to divide the followers of the religions, the **core message of the religions** concerning human life and fulfilment can help bring peoples together in mutual understanding and respect and in common action for the good of all.

This can be a better deeper and most lasting basis for interreligious understanding and cooperation at all levels, including global social justice and human liberation. Such a dialogue can help disengage the core message of Jesus from its encrustation in a particular cultural interpretation of revelation or even theological school. The faith in and the discipleship of Jesus can then be seen in clearer perspective. It can be harmonised with the core message of the other world religions – if these two can be understood in their essence beyond their particular religio-cultural and ethno-nationalistic expressions.

It would be significant to refer to the core values of the different religions as we can see much similarity among them, and each one as if it were confirming the other. Since the core values refer to human behaviour in real life situations they can be verified as to whether they lead to personal happiness, joy, peace and to similar development in communities. Therefore the core values must be capable of being verified in real life, unlike the dogmatic teachings of religions concerning life before birth or after death. We give below a summary of the values of the four world religions.

The core teachings of the four main religions in our country are similar in their emphasis on care and concern for the other. Thus :

Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you - Hinduism

Hurt not others in ways that you would yourself find hurtful - Buddhism

Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you - Christianity

Be kind to all living beings so that God may be kind to you. - Islam

The religions teach a moral code that includes:

Truth, justice, freedom, equality, non-violence and respect for life;

The moral dimension of Hindu Dharma is embodied in *eight yamas* restraints and *eight niyamas* observances: the yamas are non-violence; not stealing; disciplining desire; abjuring lust and greed; curbing arrogance and anger; not lying; avoiding injustice; shunning wrong doing and evil company. The niyamas are be pure in mind, body and speech; love humankind (*karuna maitriya*), seek contentment; cultivate devotion; develop forbearance; give charitably; study the scriptures; perform penance and sacrifice.

Buddhism is opposed to *thanha*, *lobha*, *moha*, *dosa*, against selfishness, deceit, immorality, theft, violence, as do the other religions.

All four religions teach similar norms for righteous living and finding meaning in life, and include the respect for all humanity. A person genuinely faithful to one's

religion would respect other religions and be a loving and lovable human person. Religions advocate the care of nature and simplicity of life,

VI Exclusivistic, inclusivistic and pluralist theologies of revelation

Christian revelation in relation to other claims of revelation may be presented in a manner that is exclusive, inclusive and /or pluralistic. This depends very much on the presentation of the goal and vision of Christianity with reference to human life. One can think of three different presentations. a. First, fall - redemption oriented salvation, reaching its goal after life, b. secondly, human liberation from oppression to be realised here on earth and c. thirdly, an understanding and presentation of human fulfilment in this life to be continued in subsequent reincarnations.

A. Fall - redemption oriented revelation on salvation

i) The Christian presentation of revelation especially after the 4th century was based on a presentation of humanity as fallen into original sin and being redeemed by Jesus the incarnate son of God. Jesus is said to have redeemed humanity by his personal atonement to the Father. In this perspective, salvation is through the person of Jesus Christ and who must be accepted in faith within the church for a person to be saved. Such a perspective of salvation is **exclusive**. Other religions are then not capable of salvation and are considered as pagan and to be contested.

In the New Testament there are revelations, teachings and speculations concerning salvation, in this life and after death. The sayings of Jesus such as on being the way the truth and the light are variously interpreted especially in the epistles of St. Paul. Throughout the Bible there are references to the struggle of the good and the bad in humans, and of the forces of evil or selfishness that tend to drag the human towards to wrong choices. The teachings as of the prophets invite the followers of God to choose justice, love and peace. Especially from about the fourth century onwards the teachings of Christianity on salvation after this life depend on the hypothesis of original sin, which was said to affect all humanity.

The whole of humanity is said to be born of one set of first parents and to inherit the punishment for that sin –viz. the alienation from God and from eternal salvation. Much of the teaching on salvation of souls is from the hypotheses on the human condition. A further related assumption is the reaction of God to this assumed original sin. God is supposed to be hurt, angry and wanting reparation from humanity sinful since and from Adam and Eve. Even conclusions concerning the relationships among the Trinity were made from the situation of original sin, e.g. as to whether the Incarnation was decided on after the fall!

Such reparation is said to be possible only by a divine-human person. Different explanations were given to the contribution of Jesus to salvation. Views propounded included theories or hypotheses of ransom, propitiation to God the Father, reparation, sacrifice, substitution for sinful humanity, atonement, death ... with also a certain latitude for theological imagination.

Jesus is said to have died in order to pay the price of redemption of humankind. The Catholic Church is said to be the custodian of the merits and graces of Jesus that are to be distributed to those who join the Church and are thus open to eternal salvation. These hypotheses are also related to a three tier view of the reality as heaven above, hell underneath and our earth.

That there is salvation only in and through the Catholic Church. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. This teaching was maintained in the Catholic Church during many centuries, being affirmed in several Councils and Papal Bulls.

In this perspective there was an accent in spirituality and mission on saving one's soul and the salvation of souls.

This was a theological underpinning of the intolerance of Catholics for other religions and other Christians. It encouraged wars considered just, the Crusades and later colonial exploits of Christian rulers and peoples. Cf. Papal Bulls of 15th and 16th centuries concerning conquest of and mission to the newly "discovered" world. This view of eternal salvation gave the Catholic Church a thinking and teaching on mission and spirituality that was intolerant of other religions and tended to neglect social justice and encourage alliances with Christian rulers who exploited other peoples. Mission was thought of in terms of building the Church institution, and the spiritual life was related to the observance of the law, and ritual rather than to genuine unselfish love. This is really contrary to the teaching of Jesus as witnessed to in the gospels.

ii) A second presentation of salvation is that persons could be saved through their good actions which would link them implicitly to Jesus. They would be fulfilling the love command of Jesus without acknowledging or even knowing him. They would be as Karl Rahner calls them "anonymous Christians". Their salvation would, all the same, be through the person of Jesus Christ, the only saviour. This would be an **inclusivist** model of revelation that gives a possibility of salvation for those who are not of the Christian faith by being included in the salvific action of Jesus Christ.

B. Human Liberation Orientation.

In such a presentation of revelation the objective and goal of revelation would be the realisation on earth of human happiness through the overcoming of the oppressions within persons and communities. In the Christian perspective such an approach would present Jesus as a liberator taking position against injustice at all levels. Such a reflection on the role of Christians in the world would include social analysis of a given situation, an option for justice and alliance with those on the side of justice and struggle against injustice. A community in struggle would be showing the path of liberation. Such liberation would also be the way to future happiness in eternal life also, according to Jesus teaching: "I was hungry ..." see Mt, 25, 31. In this perspective it is the human struggle against Mammon that would be the main task of the Christian community. It will bear fruit both in life on this earth and in life after death.

In the liberative interpretation of revelation the liberation movements and theologians claim that God is on the side of the oppressed against the use of force and claims of legitimacy by the dominant oppressors. Different forms of liberation theologies such as some Latin American, some feminist, some Asian, African and black theologies would interpret revelation in favour of justice to the oppressed. Basically their approach would be that justice is a primary characteristic of the divine and goal of the movements for liberation.

C. Fulfilment and happiness

A third presentation of revelation and of religions is in considering the goal of religions to **be human fulfilment and happiness in personal life and in community**. In this there is no understanding of humanity as fallen but in some religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism there is a presupposition of a continuing line of lives in which an individual brings to one's present life the effects of one's good and bad actions in the past life: Karma.

In such a perspective the goal of human life is to be reached in this life through the inspiration of the transcendent-immanent divine as in Hinduism or by one's personal efforts at meditative self-purification and loving kindness towards all others as proposed by Buddhism. In this perspective revelation would be salvation as possible through faithfulness to the path taught by other religions. This could also be thought of as opting for the core values of each religion. In that concept a person could be saved with different religions, which retain their his identity and dignity. This is a **pluralist approach to revelation and salvation**.

D. Humanist approach to liberation-salvation.

Another approach to salvation without reference to religion or to redemption through a saviour would be to consider salvation as dependent to **fidelity to one's conscience** and the fruit of a divine judgment which is unknown to us. This perspective could reflect on the universal salvific will of God. It would be a presentation of revelation without reference to any institutional religion and open to all humanity.

A humanist approach to liberation could understand the transformation taking place historically, particularly due to scientific advancement, as an indication of the divine will and plan for human evolution. The very progress of scientific knowledge can contribute to the critique and reinterpretation of the claims of explicit revelation. Thus the hypotheses of a three tier universe: heaven above, hell below and the earth in between, according to which much of Christian claims of revelation and theology were interpreted over several centuries, is now no longer accepted by scholars. It could be suggested that the transcendent immanent divine is educating the human race, even on religious matters, by the process of development of human knowledge and science.

Concluding:

In these presentations of revelation the first that is fall-redemption oriented is exclusivist, because there is no salvation possible outside the Christian church. The second is a possibility of salvation through an implicit link with Jesus by one's good actions even though not a member of a Christian church. This is an inclusivist presentation of revelation. It does not however give adequate recognition and credit to the other religions. They are sidelined and salvation is, in any case, through Jesus. In the Christian rethinking of the second half of the 20th century this was an intermediate position held by theologians such as Karl Rahner in the search for a more open theology. The third position of a pluralist approach to revelation has been put forward in recent decades as one that accepts and values the other religions on their own as capable of leading humans to eternal life. This is still a contested position in some Christian churches. While some progressive theologians foster this approach, some conservative ones would contest it and some of the so called new churches or Fundamentalists would oppose it strongly. The pluralistic perspective which is a critique of aspects of every institutionalised religion can bring us to a global ethics that transcends each institutionalised religion and at the same time reinforces the best

in each of them. As such it gives a possibility of a multiplying envisioning of religions for another world. It also gives a potentiality of linking the implicit revelations within persons and communities and the best of the explicit revelation in religions. The fourth perspective, humanistic, that human fulfilment is through one's conscience, can be understood in relation to Christian revelation in that it could speak of the universal salvific will of God and the presence of the Spirit of God in all.

These different perspectives show how modern reflection has led from an exclusivist revelation of salvation to more open inclusivistic and pluralistic presentations of revelation.

All these presentations being embodied in the institutional religions have also the tendency to be interpreted in favour of the power establishments of each religion. In such a situation each religious institution needs correction and purification. The core values of each religion could be a principle for the purification of each institutionalised religion in relation to its vision and path to fulfilment in this life.

VII Towards a global ethic

In the perspective of a global society such an approach gives a possibility of a more universal human understanding of what is goodness, justice that could be open to the discussion and search for following by persons and groups throughout the present world. This would then be a more implicit revelation coming from human evolution over time and space. The religions then been purified from their imperfections can contribute to a more harmonious development and sustainable world order.

Based on a pluralistic approach to revelations and on rationality, natural law and the core values of the faiths and cultures of the peoples of the world and values in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a global ethic can be evolved and worked towards. Some its orientations would be:

1) All human beings have freedom and dignity, irrespective of sex, race, creed, caste, mental capacity.

It follows that every [human being/community] is responsible to ensure that his or her actions do not [impair/undermine/damage] the integrity of any other human being or community.

2) Every human being is entitled to the satisfaction of her/his basic needs, which include: food, housing, health services, income/work/employment, education, leisure.

3) Communities have the right to develop their own identities provided they do so with proper regard for the dignity and integrity of the individual and of other communities.

4) The environment, in all its forms, diversity and interdependence, has its own being which must be protected and respected by humanity.

5) The environment, which sustains human life, is held in trust by each generation for its successors.

6) People without land have the right to land without people.

7) The continuing effects of injustices must be investigated and redressed/remedied.

8) Global systems/structures which produce inequalities and inequity must be investigated and reconstructed to promote human dignity.

9) It follows that the concept and claims of national sovereignty must be subject to the right of all human beings to a life of dignity.

10) All power, even of global authorities, must be exercised in a way that is accountable to those affected by it and therefore no more remote from the people affected by its exercise than is absolutely necessary.

VII Some basic considerations for a pluralistic theology of revelations.

The divine is unfathomable by humans. No one has a control over knowledge concerning God and the impact of divine action.

The claims of revelation or divine communications are always externally expressed analogically, metaphorically and in a given social cultural context.

The power elites in any community tend to interpret such claims of revelation in a manner favourable to them e.g. male domination.

The historically given interpretations of revelation by Christian churches have generally led to the exclusion of the vast majority of humanity from divine grace and eternal salvation.

They have had a bad impact on power holders in the church. Their interpretations have led to long term arrogance and intolerance by powerful Christian churches and to consequent conflicts. They have been invoked to legitimise the Inquisition colonial invasions and centennial colonisation.

The exclusive and inclusive Christian theologies claim God to be on their side to the disadvantage of other revelations.

Their Christology generally interpreted salvation as by Jesus a God man paying a price to an angry God the Father. This would seem to be contrary to the central theme of God is love and love of neighbour and of God which is the criterion of salvation attributed to Jesus in the gospels. The exclusivist and even inclusivist theories are a distortion of the core message of Jesus and an impediment to a correct understanding of discipleship of Jesus.

The clash of the implicit inner revelation to individuals and communities with the explicit exclusivist and inclusivist theologies of revelation call for their revision.

Only a pluralist understanding of revelations can be acceptable to humanity in a world in which the majority of humans are not Christians. The claims of exclusive or inclusive revelations are no longer supported even by the world's rulers of different people's. They cannot be the basis of global interreligious dialogue and convivance.

The de-christianisation of the western people's and the growth of secularism throughout the world no longer tolerate the worldviews and hypotheses on which the earlier dominant Christian theologies of revelation were based.

Due to the exclusivist interpretations of revelation that prevailed in the church uptill modern times, the Christian establishment was often incapable or slow to appreciate historical movements such as the development of science, democracy, feminism. Still less would it appreciate the other religions or even non Western cultures

Given these considerations the Christian churches must investigate as to how and why they were wrong for several centuries on such foundational issues as the human condition, the nature of the divine and the ultimate destiny of humans.

In a one world situation of rapid global communications a claim of an exclusive rigid revelation is no longer tenable or capable of helping build a peaceful and sustainable world order.

Tissa Balasuriya, o.m.i.