

Pluralism towards Authentic Communion: Theology and Religious Education in Dialogue

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Modernity had brought to us a reality that truth is not anymore to be regarded as single and absolute thing or entity, but something that is pluralized.¹ Certainty become something that is contained in a particular. Truth is truth because of the context it is beholden. If this is the reality we are into at this time, how does one become sure with what he believes in? How does he make himself believable to others? Could there be beliefs and values that one could share with others? Particularly, how does the reality of a “pluralized truth” affect the work of a theologian who reflects on the truth of faith?

To better frame these concerns, an examination of the phenomenon of modernity and its effect on the thought and practice of people will be looked into. It is in here that the reality of plurality of beliefs and values will be given much attention among others. Second, by pointing out the plurality of beliefs and values, a question on what attitude theologians have to take in handling such reality will be accentuated. Third, a discussion on how to contextualize theology amidst this pluralized reality will also be made. Or to put it in a question form, “What theology should be amidst the context of plurality of values and beliefs?”

I. Modernity Pluralizes

Max Weber, Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim predicted that religion, with the coming of Modernity, will cease to exist as secularity will replace the supernatural and religious.² The reason for this, according to Weber, is that in Modernity rationality will enlighten the darkness brought about by the shadows of religion and superstition.³

¹Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming A Fanatic* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 26

²*Ibid.*, 3.

³Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action vol.1: Reason and Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xvii.

As history unfolds, religion did not cease to exist as it was expected.⁴ Religion and religiosity instead was transformed into new face. Modernity did not succeed in making society into the expected secularity its proponents predicted. Modernity instead produced another reality – plurality.⁵

The phenomenon of reality is very evident as people from all walks of life would have different views on different matters. As views differ and judgments were made out of the different views about reality, a plurality of choice also became real. Choices were made from the most mundane (such as choice of clothing fashion) to the most sublime answers they seek on deeper matters of life, such as, “Who am I?”, “What is life’s meaning?”, “What is living believing there is a God?” All these become thinkable.

II. Modernity Relativizes

As Modernity pluralizes, so it also relativizes. The time-honoured values, beliefs, practices and norms are now challenged by new values, beliefs and practices which were foreign to the former adherents. The phenomenon of cultural exchange, an effect brought about by the progress in migration, travel, media and communication, made these plausible.⁶ Modernity made the world smaller, as globalization (a neo-colonialism) expanded.

People in Modernity began to challenge, if not question, the existing beliefs, values and practices, as the present situation tells them that there are now other beliefs, values and practices existing that differ from theirs.⁷ They are now exposed to new and other forms of beliefs, practices and time-honoured values brought about by the contact they made with other peoples. Modernity truly relativizes truth as it pluralizes reality. Thus, a Filipino may claim to be Roman Catholic but at the same time believes and adheres to the Hindu karma. Or a self-claimed Christian abides at the same time to feng shui, astrology and horoscope.

Modernity, as it relativizes, offers a kind of freedom from the burden of “absolutes” in life. Relativization weakened or in the

⁴Jurgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no.1 (2006): 1-25, accessed May 15, 2015, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x/epdf>.

⁵Berger and Zijderveld, 18.

⁶Ibid., 9-12

⁷Ibid., 12-17.

extreme cases, obliterates the absolute status of meaning. This happens likely with realities that cannot immediately be confirmed by senses. The world of beliefs and values would fit this.⁸ As modernity relativized reality, the power of choice, consequently, also comes out.

However, as plurality of choices frees the person from the “absolutes” of the past, once freed, this same person would seek to find groundings that would ascertain him in life. Putting it in another way, as soon as modernity frees one from fanatic absolutism, the freed person immediately searches for more stable “institutions” to direct his life. So while modernity pluralizes and makes one a relativist, it as well, consequently, makes the same person fanatic to the new discovered adhered truth.⁹ (Sartre)

III. Fundamentalism as a Reaction to Modernity

However these “absolutes” became diluted (truth-claims) because of relativization, the tendency from the person to absolutize them again to have groundings (certainties) would persist. Such form of adherence when extreme is what fundamentalism is all about.

Dwelling more on the aforementioned, Berger and Zijderveld distinguished two types of adherents to this behaviour. First, to what they regard as “natives” or “traditionals”. These are those who by birth, and not necessarily their choice, adhere to the belief-system and practices of a particular group or society. Putting this in the religious sense, these are like those, who did not choose, but became members of a particular faith-tradition because of its institutionalization e.g., baptism. This is not to say, however, that this was made out of coercion.¹⁰

The second type of adherents, on the other hand, could be described as “converts”.¹¹ If “natives” or “traditionals” are described as birth-right members, “converts”, by its name, were converted members. These are those who by their choice (freely made) became part of the group (e.g., religion). These are those who decided from the myriad of choices chose such particular

⁸Ibid., 26.

⁹Ibid., 47-48

¹⁰Ibid., 80-82, 84

¹¹Ibid., 83, 85

belief-system or religious institution, unlike the “traditionals” who inherit the lifeworld (Habermas) because it was served to them (probably more like handed down to them), such that, a Filipino is Catholic because it is the religion of his family. A Filipino Evangelical Christian, on the other hand, is regarded as “convert”, as this denomination could be regarded as young religion (later developed) compared to Catholicism who came in the Philippines and institutionalized its influence much earlier.

IV. Plurality’s Implication to Theology

A. Positioning Theology in a Plural Context

As Plurality tells us of the “goodness” present in other spheres and not just in one’s own (religion and other institutions), a need for dialogue and more appropriate method in theologizing should be made. However, appropriation of theology is not the only institution one has to consider in the myriad of values and beliefs. Thus, in a wider context, we could say that this is true to all facets that concern themselves in the conflicting tension between relativism and fundamentalism due to the plurality of beliefs and values.

Borrowing from the framework of the sociologists Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, they proposed a middle position in their work entitled, *Prerequisites of Any Future Worldview That Will Be Able to Present Itself as a Middle Position between Relativism and Fundamentalism*.¹² In view of that, they say:

First, there must be a clear delineation between the core of the position and the more marginal components of the religion (adiaphora). The way to do this is to mark the outer limits of possible compromise with other positions. This is because in the modern plural situation a need for a compromising position is called for. Christian theologians, for instance, would probably compromise the other miracle accounts in the New Testament but not the resurrection of Christ which is regarded as core.

Second, a believer must have openness to the application of modern historical scholarship to his own tradition. Meaning, one should have recognition of the historical context of the tradition. It is by this that fundamentalism becomes difficult to maintain. A differentiation

¹²Ibid., 116-119. For the unabridged form, refer to the aforementioned pages.

between what is factual and what is theological should also be made as this will also distinguish the core issues and the marginal components (adiaphora).

Third, there must be a rejection of relativism to balance out the rejection of fundamentalism. This tells that if there's no such thing as truth, one's own position, cognitively as well as morally, becomes basically irrelevant and completely arbitrary choice. It is as if saying, the flat-earth theory has to be given the same epistemological status as modern astronomy.

Fourth, there must be the acceptance of doubt as having a positive role in the particular community of belief. (This is the kind of doubt that is described as a kind of wonderment, a positive attitude that is not reflexive but proactive; it is a kind of curiosity that brings out energy to search for the truth in a modern pluralized society. It is not in a relative cynical sense.)

Fifth, there must be a definition of "others" that does not necessarily be categorized as enemies. Putting it differently, the community of belief must have the ability to live in a civil culture and to engage in peaceful communication with the "others".

Sixth, there should be the development and maintenance of institutions of civil society that enable peaceful debate and conflict resolution. History has shown a need for "mediating structures" – institutions standing between private life and the state (e.g., venues for inter-faith discussions, say in University setting, could be made).

Seventh, there must be the acceptance of choice, not only as an empirical fact but as morally desirable one. This acceptance is not only a matter of allowing individuals to make unconstrained decisions on a wide array of religious, moral, and lifestyle issues (within certain limits), but it is also an institutional matter – that of accepting a plurality of voluntary associations over a wide array of religious, moral, and lifestyle issues.

B. Contextualization of Theology: A must in a Plural World

Any kind of understanding of theology as an unchanging, already finished *theologia perennis* is being challenged nowadays in the name of relevance. Here, Stephen Bevans explained the reasons for contextualizing theology.¹³ He said,

If one looks externally for reasons, in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania, Christians here are becoming increasingly convinced that there is a dissonance in the traditional approaches to theology and their own cultural patterns and thought forms. The Indian

¹³Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2003), 9-15. For the complete discussion refer to the aforementioned pages.

philosopher-theologian Raimon Panikkar, for example, maintains that Indians cannot really accept the principle that might be called the backbone of Western philosophical thinking – the principle of contradiction, because for Indians, things can indeed be and not be at the same time. This is close to the principle the Taoist have on Yin and Yang, which points to the fact that all things participate in the reality of opposites.

Secondly, if theology is being understood today as necessarily contextual it is because of the oppressive nature of older approaches. There, theological approaches were filled with the assumptions of male superiority which have little to do with the real meaning of Christianity. With this, there have been movements and pressures to make theology and church practice more consonant with what is positive and good in various cultures, while at the same time being more critical of what is destructive in them.

After the colonization period, African and Asian countries began to realize that there are values in their culture that are just as good as those of their colonizers, if not better than them. The need to express this new consciousness of independence and self-worth, in the area of religious practice and theology, is particularly important. Consequently, efforts at contextual theologizing have to be made.¹⁴

Saying all of these, Bevan quoting Bernard Lonergan (1988) said, “Theology is what mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix.”

Furthermore, the factors that would prompt for the need to contextualize theology could also be found within the Christian faith itself.

First, Christianity is naturally incarnational. This incarnational principle in Christian theology is at the heart of its creed, where it teaches the incarnational process of God becoming visible, graspable, and intelligible in Jesus. Through our agency, we are called to continue the incarnational process of making the Gospel a message contextualized in culture.

Second, there is the sacramental nature of reality, where the incarnation doctrine proclaims that God is revealed not in ideas, but in concrete reality. Jesus is “the sacrament of the encounter with God.” If the ordinary concrete things in life reveal God’s presence,

¹⁴ Ibid., 11

in culture, human experience and events in time, i.e. of context, then they are sacramental and revelatory. So if Christianity wants to understand itself, it must be able to “unpack” its “sacredness”.

Third, there was a shift in the understanding of the nature of divine revelation as being an internal factor determining the contextual nature of theology. In theology written before the Vatican II, revelation was conceived largely in terms of propositional truth. According to Jose de Mesa and Lode Wostyn (1982) the dynamics of revelation and faith are “in form of eternal truths handed down to us from Christ and the Apostles. Faith was understood to be the intellectual assent to those truths. All these were systematically arranged and presented as the Catholic Faith.”¹⁵ At the dawn of Vatican II, theological thought began to shift. Revelation is understood and spoken in more interpersonal terms – God’s self-communication to men and women. Faith, consequently, was understood as a personal response as well. Although revelation was still understood as being complete – Karl Rahner (1978) said, “in Christ, God has expressed Godself completely – God’s revealing action was also seen as something that was ongoing as God continues to offer Godself to men and women in their daily lives.”¹⁶

Fourth, a Christianity that calls for a contextual approach to doing theology is the catholicity of the church. As Avery Dulles (1988) has written, catholicity implies that “narrowness and particularism have no place in the true church of Christ... To be qualitatively catholic the Church must be receptive to the sound achievements of every race and culture. Catholicism pays respect not to mind alone, nor only to the will and the emotions, but to all levels and aspects of human existence.”¹⁷

Fifth, contemporary understandings of God as Trinity speak of God as a dynamic, relational community of persons, whose very nature is to be present and active in the world, calling it and persuading it toward the fullness of relationship that Christian tradition calls salvation. As David Cunningham points out, Christian faith in God as Trinity opens up a vista of God’s “marks” (Augustine’s *vestigia*) in the world’s events, in people’s experience

¹⁵Ibid., 13.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 14.

and cultures, in the natural world. Christian theologians need to do theology contextually because God is present and acts contextually.”¹⁸

The myriad of cultures, approaches, and consciousness today in the pluralistic world bring out the justification for a contextual theology. Pluralism in theology, at the same time on every level of Christian life, must not only be tolerated; it must even be cultivated and encouraged. Paul VI's (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*), (1976) sums all this up when it says that evangelization is something that must speak to every aspect of human life. To quote, “what matters is to evangelize human culture and cultures..., always taking the person as one’s starting-point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God.” Contextualization, therefore, is a theological imperative.¹⁹

However, like what is reflected in the document (*Dominus Iesus*), one could still argue that the propagation of faith via missionary task and evangelization is still the utmost priority of the Church amidst pluralistic reality. In other words, one can always take the triumphalism stance as an option in this present context; however, studies had proven that this approach is unproductive, if not counter-catholic. To name one:

The study of Edmund Chia, *Towards a Theology of Dialogue*,²⁰ points this out. It studied the principal theses of the document *Dominus Iesus*, i.e., on the doctrine of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, as it also warns (the Church) against relativistic theories that seek to justify religious pluralism. Following from these theses, it stressed the teaching about the necessity of Church to attain salvation. Interreligious dialogue, for it to be mission ad gentes, as the Church must continue to announce the necessity of conversion.

Chia’s research examined the reaction and reception the document had engendered, and its significance in the Asian Church. *Dominus Iesus* received an overwhelmingly negative comment, according to the study. Particularly stating, it’s out of context Declaration with the reality of Asia’s multi-religious

¹⁸Ibid., 15.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰ Edmund Chia, “Towards a Theology of Dialogue: Schillebeeckx’s Method as Bridge between Vatican’s *Dominus Iesus* and Asia’s FABC Theology” (Ph.D. diss., University of Nijmegen, 2003).

milieu.

Then, he explored how the Asian Church responds to the issues raised by the document and what alternative way by which the faith can be proclaimed in the context of Asia. The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) proposed an alternative model of evangelization – DIALOGUE. Whether this was dialogue with cultures, with other religions, or with the poor of Asia, the need for an inculturated and contextualized expression of faith, with concomitant theology to guide it was advocated by FABC.

C. The Role of Academic Environment to Contextualized Theology

Saying all of these, we had rationalized the need to contextualize theology. And as theology is to be contextualized, the dialogical approach to appropriate and inculturate it, is the means to achieve this end. Nevertheless, there is also the concern where the contextualization of theology must take place, not to be interpreted as a concern for venue, but rather the setting where it would grow and bear fruit. John Paul II had this answer in the document (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*).²¹

A Catholic University shares in the development of culture through research, transmission of it, and assist cultural activities via educational services. It is open and ready to dialogue with and learn from any culture. Likewise, as it is aware that human culture is open to Revelation and transcendence a Catholic University becomes a primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue. (ECE 43) Through this dialogue in the Catholic University, the Church will be helped to develop means by which it can make the faith better understood by those coming from a particular culture. As it says, 'the Kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men and women who are profoundly linked to a culture and the building up of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures.' A faith that places itself on the margin of what is human (cultural), is a decapitated faith, or is in the process of self-annihilation. (ECE 44) "Besides cultural dialogue, a Catholic University... can offer a contribution to ecumenical dialogue. It does so to further the search for unity among all Christians. In interreligious dialogue it will assist

²¹John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities (Rome: August 15, 1990), accessed May 15, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html. (This document is to be regarded henceforth as ECE.)

in discerning the spiritual values that are present in the different religions.” (ECE 47)

Inter-Religious Dialogue, like any genuine dialogue, is not an easy task. It takes foremost the comprehensibility of the message; speakers speak the truth of reality, have an attitude of truthfulness or sincerity, and consider rightness (propriety) in delivering the message. (Habermas)²² Other than the attitude or disposition one carries, systemic structures are also factors that are of utmost consideration to bring interreligious dialogue plausible, if not sustainable. It is because of this that a friendly (i.e., dialogical) and learning environment such as the Catholic university becomes an ideal milieu to achieve this.

Religious Education and Theology are not new to many sectarian schools and universities. In fact the many Catholic, religious-order-run schools had made Religious Education and Theology one of, if not, their core-curriculum. However, teaching theology in the context of plurality of reality is a different story.

Religious Education (Theology) taught in the Christian context alone would not be enough. As the Indian ecumenist Stanley Samartha said,

“Theology that is needed at this time is one that is not less but more true to God by being generous and open, a theology not less but more loving toward the neighbor by being friendly and willing to listen, a theology that does not separate us from our fellow human beings but supports us in our common struggles and hopes. As we live together with our neighbors, what we need today is a theology that refuses to be impregnable but which, in the spirit of Christ, is both ready and willing to be vulnerable.”²³

Gabriel Moran, a Catholic educator and theorist who has taught Religious Education in Jewish and Christian institutions, provided a very apt description of the relationship between Religious Education and religious pluralism in our present time.

“The existence of a concept called religious education challenges and transforms the Jewish way, the Protestant way, the Muslim way, or the Orthodox Christian way. Religious education is the name for

²²Leslie Howe, On Habermas (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2000), 18-19.

²³Hope Antone, Religious Education in Context of Plurality and Pluralism (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 2003), 27.

the needed response in a radically and obviously pluralistic world.”²⁴

Our Asian region has always been religiously plural in context compared to other regions in the world. Difference in religious beliefs, however, has also been the cause of many conflicts and problems in our region. These religious issues spawned from different causes: from mere ignorance and fear of other religions, to the resurgence of fundamentalism and fanaticism in particular circles of each religion.

While ecumenical movements tried to address these issues in varied ways, there is still more to be done to really broaden perspectives to each faith tradition. This is where education comes in. And this is where Interreligious Dialogue in Religious Education and Theology becomes truly essential and necessary.

The possibility for Religious Education to teach pluralism was placed in the right perspectives by the questions posited by Sara Lee, a Jewish religious educator, and Mary Boys, a Catholic religious educator. They asked :²⁵

- “How should educators teach pluralism given the complexities of human development? How do educators teach avoiding absolutism, universalism, and relativism? How do we develop to our students both an appreciative and a critical stance toward their own (religious) tradition?”
- “How could educators more adequately teach religious tradition in its historical and cultural contexts with all its sinfulness without feeding into the popular understanding of religion as an enemy of reason?”
- “How could we teach more adequately about the other, and possibly treat the other not anymore as stranger but friend? How do we teach the variegated ideas, beliefs and values of our tradition – and of other’s? How could we share our understanding of the Infinite God?”
- “How should educators more adequately deal with forces in the larger cultural milieu, like cultural homogenization, a discomfort with strong expressions of religious particularism (e.g., public display of religious beliefs in

²⁴Ibid., 28.

²⁵Ibid., 48.

Public Square), universalized spirituality, and rampant individualism?"

- “What knowledge, skills, attitudes, experiences, and values are requisite for teaching an informed particularism and toward pluralism? What should teachers study in order to be prepared for such a daunting task?”

But before dwelling on this, perhaps an admission of the simple truth is necessary – that to live in Asia with its multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts means to be in dialogue with and among Asian peoples of different faiths.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, describes this process of dialogue like a “fruit salad”, seen in a natural aspect of the religious life or life in general:

“To me, religious life is life. I do not see any reason to spend one’s whole life tasting just one fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions. When we believe that ours is the only faith that contains the truth, violence and suffering will surely be the result.”²⁶

D. The Meal-table Metaphor: a Dialogical approach in Theology

D.1 Rationale²⁷

Food and eating have relations to teaching. Meal-table sharing connotes lavish hospitality, genuine openness and joyful celebration together. Such images relate to our need for mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual openness in today’s plural world. Religious education and theology have the power to promote these values.

First, meal-table sharing can be a symbol of warm hospitality because of its inviting characteristic. Here in the Philippines, it is often the poor who would demonstrate such lavish hospitality. This is commonly seen during fiestas and birthday celebrations where preparation for the said occasion resorts one to borrow

²⁶Ibid., 71.

²⁷Ibid., 74-77. This rationalization is an appropriation. For the author’s version, see the aforementioned pages.

money just to prepare for the said occasion. (Of course, this gracious hospitality does not say that there is no deleterious side into it.)

Second, a meal-table metaphor describes a very open and inclusivist personality, again, a natural Filipino trait. In eating for instance, a Filipino etiquette of inviting anyone to partake in one's filling, however meagre the food one is having, is still being practiced. We hear this in the Filipino call of invitation, "*Kain tayo!*"

Third, the meal-table is a natural place for sharing and communion. Friendship is deepened and solidarity is forged in every moment we eat together. While it is true that Filipinos are eating-people (always hungry), as most Third World countries probably do, we enjoy eating as much as we enjoy the company of those we eat with. Close to meal-table sharing, there is this Filipino adage known to alcoholics: "*Ang alak pumapakla, o sumasarap, depende sa kaharap*". (The quality of drink (or meal) is dependent on the one you are sharing it with.)

Fourth, the meal-table sharing is also a precursor to reconciliation and peace-making. Reconciliation and peace-making can also be concluded with meal-table sharing. The "boodle-fight" is a meal-table sharing done without using any dining utensils, i.e., a long dining table is set using banana leaves as plates, rice and viands are placed altogether, and people partake from the meal-table in bare hands. This ritual truly shows fraternal equality and reconciling unity among its partakers.

Fifth, the meal-table sharing also symbolizes freedom. It reveals the real situation of the partakers. The quality of food that one serves on the table speaks to some degree the state of one's being and relationship, i.e. his physical health, financial state, or his relational disposition reflected in this social ritual.

Sixth, the meal-table sharing represents a sharing of gratefulness and a celebration of joy. Thanksgiving rituals are always topped with meal-table sharing. Birthdays and fiestas are again the best examples to this.

Seventh, meal-table sharing represents a vision, a hope, and a dream. While we commemorate our past and present states of affairs with thanksgiving meals, we also do this to pray for a better tomorrow. (We do not celebrate birthdays to mean that it should be the last.)

D.2 Framework

Meal-table sharing as argued above can be an ideal approach/model for interreligious understanding and dialogue. While Religious education (Theology), as also argued, is the milieu to begin with. Hope Antone continued by giving us a framework on how to bring about the meal-table sharing approach.²⁸

1. Preparatory Stage:

Facilitators and players need to develop the perspective, attitude and lifestyle of religious pluralism. In preparing for a genuine Religious Education, a critical commitment to one's faith tradition and a critical openness to other religious traditions must be included. The Religious educator should also be open towards those who are different, and must have an attitude of tolerance towards those who see life differently. He should be ready to take risk, to come out of his safeguarded exclusivism, to stand with the other and even to become vulnerable before the other, for this is the way to see God's image in the other, even as one affirms it in oneself.

2. Content:

Like food to be shared, pluralism dwells on variety, lavishness, and feast. It enriches the meal to be shared, like life itself by borrowing and modifying the recipe to suit the taste of the one who eats. It is through this that the identity of the meal as well as the partaker are enriched by the different ingredients and nutrients, while at the same time, the partaker of the meal is nourished by the life the meal-table sharing gives. The Religious Educator needs to be reminded that "just as food is there for all to partake and enjoy, the food of wisdom and spirituality is also there for people to experience and share".

3. The Enablers:

Religious Education in Asia is best carried out through the sharing and collaboration of educators from the different religious

²⁸Ibid., 90-101.

groups. It is by this sharing and collaboration that critiquing of what is oppressive in a religion, especially on one's own, while highlighting what is liberating which must be done with a lot of care, sensitivity and tact. Mutual critiquing becomes effective when made not by blame-pointing of each other but by an honest and voluntary offering of one's self-critique.

4. The Methodology:

To avoid the temptation of having "strings attached" in teaching Religious Education in a plural context, there must be a kind of transparency of the goals and purposes of the meal-table sharing. There must be a kind of checks and balance system because this is the very vision and purpose of Religious Education: to be a community built around the table. One way of doing this is through sharing of stories, i.e. of personal as well as communal religious experiences by the different faith communities. As C.S. Song suggested, stories unite while doctrines alienate, any teaching that deals with the Christian faith and the faiths of others should not be "laid on the table" through a set of doctrines and propositions but through stories. Stories that came from the wider world – "the world in which God is involved from beginning to end".²⁹

Another method in doing Religious Education is suggested by some Asian women who have participated in a number of programs on interreligious dialogue. They believed that defending one's faith community and its stand does not bring about real dialogue. They felt that unless participants in the interreligious dialogue transcend religion-centeredness and focus on life-giving values and issues like peace and justice, human rights and sustainable environment, religions will always be the religion they are not intended to be. It is by this that the Asian women believed, the participants will be able to lift up each other.

Likewise, the sharing of religious teachings from the different religions must be done in a confessional mode, like a pronouncement of love, not as declaration of dogmatic absolutes, according to Krister Stendahl.³⁰ It is when the sharing of religious teachings that personal experience of a believer to his religion

²⁹Ibid., 98-99.

³⁰Ibid., 99.

comes out. This is when we say that a dialogue with another tradition is a dialogue with oneself also. A meal-table metaphor where people gather together around it depicts the content and nourishment Religious Education seeks to prepare and serve that is, the education for life.

In the end, Hope Antone reminds religious educators that Religious Education should also be inviting. This is because invitation brings to mind beautiful educational practices such as enabling, encouraging, initiating, guiding, and “midwifing” (the birthing of something new). Religious Education must be open to all. It should be friendly, inviting, warm, and welcoming atmosphere, all of these should be reflected in the process and practices that Religious Education hopes to take.

CONCLUSION:

Overall, the image of meal-table sharing is what all religions and Religious Education should consider and value now that we are in a pluralistic world. Religions should be life-giving like food; they should bring communion like food being shared.

As food comes in different flavours, life as well is of colourful variety. They are countless, each according to the environment and cultures of communities they come from.

As food to be shared (communion), the sharing of life together entails an adventurous spirit, a willingness to try, to experience, and appreciate something different, an adventure into the unknown, a journey into the unfamiliar, a journey to the world of the other.

Still, real communion, like dialogue, only becomes real when there is compassion. To live in a compassionate life is the only way one could encounter what people called “God”, “Nirvana”, “Brahman” or the “Way”, for it is in compassion that one “de-thrones” oneself in the centre of one’s life, while at the same time, embracing the other as one’s own.³¹ This is what it means to have a genuine dialogue, a communion, and it begins with compassion. Jesus of Nazareth’s Parable of the Good Samaritan would be the best example for this compassion to be understood, while the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman would be our inspiration

³¹Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (New York: Random House, 2006), xiv.

for interreligious dialogue. All this being said this, I believe, is what theology should be amidst the plural reality – a dialogos.

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