

THE BIBLE AND INTER-SCRIPTURAL DIALOGUE

Dr M.D. Thomas

INTRODUCTION

The Holy Books, obviously, are those books that are considered sacred by some community or other in the society. They, may they have originated in any language, geographical area or cultural context, cannot, in any way, be considered the private property of any given community. They are the common heritage of the human society. They belong to each other as well as exist together. They are complementary to each other. Together they give a sense of completion to the sacred world of the Religious Scriptures.

The real holiness of the Holy Books is to be searched for in their inner capacity for universal application as well as in their mutually inclusive character. Universality of the Holy Books would mean one crisscrossing the other with similar implications. It would mean being permeated by each other and being overwhelmed by a spirit of togetherness. It would mean being inclined towards a centripetal process, in order to make a single effect of ameliorating the human life spiritually.

Approaching the universal spirit of the diverse Sacred Scriptures is necessitated by the dynamics of the dialogical way of understanding the texture of human life, which is fundamentally multi-dimensional. It is all the more a dire reality in the uniquely multi-Scriptural context of Asia, and especially of India. 'Intertextuality of the Holy Books' is the fundamental perspective, which is capable of making this integral, collaborative and comprehensive approach to the Sacred Scriptures successful. An honest attempt to re-read and re-understand one's own Sacred Scripture is the first step to this imperative and inevitable religious mission of life. Such a mission only can assure the possibility of a joint pilgrimage towards the divine.

Here is a humble attempt to re-read and re-understand the Christian Bible from a pluralistic and multi-Scriptural point of view. The general and particular dimensions of the Bible discussed below present a broader and a contextually applied understanding of the Bible. It also suggests immense scope for wider as well as comparative understanding of all the Sacred Scriptures, which only can usher in a relevant and auspicious spiritual future for the human society.

1. THE BIBLE IN GENERAL

'The Bible in general' attempts a symbolic understanding of the Bible. The symbolic implications of the Bible could very well be applied to any Religious Scripture. This perspective, certainly, would go a long way in situating the diverse Sacred Scriptures of the human society in a creative and harmonious relation to one another.

1. The Bible is the 'word' of God. The word 'Bible' comes from the Hebrew word 'biblos', meaning 'book' or 'the books'. This general meaning, of course, applied to the religious context, proposes broader alternatives and paves the way for Inter-Scriptural Dialogue. Even though it is the 'Sacred Book' of the Christian community, its content addresses the entire human society. The core message of the Bible stands in some way singular amidst other Sacred Texts, too. Its origin is

attributed to the same super-natural power, which can be expressed in a variety of ways, like 'the Infinite', 'the Ultimate Reality', 'the Absolute Truth', 'the Real', 'the Way', 'the Divine' and 'the Higher Power' as well as 'God'. The Bible, in sum, is a message from the divine.

2. The Bible is the 'written' word of God. When defined and documented, it acquired the status of a Scripture. But it is only an attempt to articulate the inexpressible experience of several individuals or a community, of its own time. The authors, undoubtedly, wrote it down, prompted by the divine power. Therefore, it is an inspired message. It is preserved in the written form and is communicated to the future generations. It is written by human authors, in human language; and so, it is limited as well as symbolic. It is conditioned by historical factors and remains in the need of being interpreted at all times and all situations. The reality it stands for is certainly much richer than the virtual expression of it. In other words, the God of the Scriptures is greater than the Scriptures! The Bible, as a written word, needs to openly and honestly dialogue with the written parallels of other religious traditions, in order to make it intelligible and relevant. This endeavour is required for doing better justice to the great reality expressed therein.

3. The Bible is the 'unwritten' word of God. Basically, it was an oral tradition. The promptings of the divine come very informally and in the natural context of life. Any tradition evolves from the womb of a particular culture, at a particular time. The Biblical message evolved from the Jewish religious culture, in close interaction with the Greek Philosophy. The content of the Bible was the experience of the people of the community of the Jews before the time of Jesus and of the community of the disciples of Jesus, with the fundamental experience of Jesus at the core. Only later, the above religio-cultural experience was interpreted, inherited, written and handed over. As an unwritten word of God, the Bible was a lived reality. It is the live story of the people of that tradition, here and now, too. It has inevitably to keep interacting with similar unwritten experiences and messages of God everywhere.

4. The Bible is the 'voice' of God. It is an unfolding of the divine mystery, in a given historical setting. It is the recorded or unrecorded form of the divine wisdom. It is a spiritual treasure, par excellence. It reveals, awakens, inspires, motivates, changes, transforms, re-creates, and saves the humans. It is an ulterior force, which liberates them from all that is enslaving, which helps them go beyond and which introduces them to eternity. It is a perennial source of insight and meaning in life. It is the basis of enlightenment and strength. It is dynamic and evolving. It is an ever-growing and ever-new 'good news'. It becomes the conscience of the individual or the community, which has known the essence of it from within. As an ever-speaking voice, it gives a sense of direction in life. All the same, the Bible has to remain tuned to other Scriptural voices of God received in the diverse spiritual traditions, in order to prove its *raison d'être*.

5. The Bible is the common heritage of the human society. Its message has a universal significance. It is meant for the whole humanity and the whole creation. Its central message does not contradict but complements other Scriptures. It derives from a common foundation. It has to remain ever open to other Scriptural approaches to human life. It is the shared property of the human community. It is no way to be monopolized by the Christian community. To narrowly interpret the Bible would be nothing less than a crime against the comprehensive message of Jesus. Considering the Bible as belonging to the human society in a shared way would not only broaden the horizons of the Bible, but that of all the Religious Scriptures of the world. That would be the beginning of a new culture of religious dialogue and spiritual harmony through the Sacred Scriptures.

6. The Bible gains full meaning when it is in dialogue with other Scriptures. The interpretation of the Bible should not be in terms of myths and cults. It should be understood in a liberating sense. The understanding of the Bible should take one beyond all the boundaries. Its message should facilitate one to extend oneself in relation to the other, in a spirit of brotherhood. It has to be applied to the multi-dimensional context of our society, which has characteristically diverse languages, ideologies, castes, classes, creeds, faiths, cultures, nations, traditions, customs, practices, etc. in it. Inter-Scriptural study, comparative understanding and contextually applied interpretation need to be promoted. Commonalities are to be searched for. Such a multi-Scriptural approach will not only enrich one's own faith, but also make it relevant. The concept of life will become much broader then. The understanding of religion and spirituality will become more realistic and worthwhile, too.

7. The Bible is the 'symbol' of the word of God. Such an understanding of the Bible is more inclusive and respectfully accommodates other Religious Scriptures of the world as co-symbols. It also allows legitimate importance to the other Christian symbols, like cross and sacraments. The religious, moral and social traditions of the world have numerous Scriptural symbols, like Quran, Bhagvat Gita, Dhammapad, Guru Grandh Sahib, Avesta, Tora, Teachings of Mahaveer, Teachings of Baha Ullah, Teachings of Confucius, Tenets of Taoism, Tenets of Shinto, Atheistic Code of Behaviour and Tribal Beliefs and Practices. The symbolic value of the Bible is to be understood in relation to the symbolic value of these equally rich pieces of spiritual heritage, which the majority of the humans cherish and derive motivation and strength from. Respect has to be paid to and inspiration has to be drawn from other 'Scriptural Symbols' of the society. A genuine and really spiritual search in life can, in no way, compromise with such a holistic understanding and approach to 'Sacred Scriptures'.

THE BIBLE IN PARTICULAR

'The Bible in particular' would mean concentrating the attention on the key message of the Bible. This would highlight its core message and underline its genius, in such a way that its singularity can be more effective as well as be understood as brighter and broader. Besides, it would facilitate a creative dialogue with the core messages of other Religious Scriptures, which will be helpful in promoting the universal implications of the human and spiritual values inherent in them.

1. The Understanding of God proposed by the Bible is 'God as Father'. This understanding is based on the personal experience of Jesus. Although the term 'father' used is that of the male gender, the implication is beyond the scope of the gender mentioned, meaning parent (father and mother both). This is clear from the fatherly and motherly qualities reflected in the person of the 'Father' as understood by Jesus. This concept is based on the 'dualistic' concept of life, i.e., the Creating Reality and the created realities, and makes it easy for the humans to relate to the divine in a personal way. The word 'father' highlights a relational approach to God. Among the relational ways, this is the widest and the most sober concept. It is like a large umbrella, which can gather the whole humanity, even the whole creation, together. This concept has a personal touch and offers a sense of elevation, security, other-oriented love, and the like, to the one who pursues it.

But, there is no one single, uniform and fool-proof understanding of God possible in this large human society of incomprehensible diversity. There may be, perhaps, so many shades of understandings as there are human beings. There is also a 'non-dualistic' concept of life, quite different from the dualistic one, i.e., there is only One Reality. That concept admits a non-relational understanding of God. 'Self-realization' is the response to this concept. This concept is the most basic and leading

concept of God found in the Indian sub-continent. This concept has its singular standing in the world context, too.

The relational concept of God includes also a variety of dimensions of the relation. They are different relational ways that are humanly experienced, but applied to the divine context. The Semitic traditions, like Jewish, Christian and Islamic, and some Indian traditions consider 'God as Male'. The Sufi and some Indian religious streams conceive 'God as Female'. Ganga Maiya, Mahalakshmi and Durga/Shakti/Kali are some of the female deities. God is understood as a 'Composite of Male and Female' by the main-stream Indian tradition. Shiv-Shakti/Parvati, Laxmi-Narayan, Sita-Ram, Radha-Krishn, etc. are some examples for the same. There are also other relational understandings of God, either in male or female form. Krishn in relation to Balram reflects 'God as Brother' whereas Krishn in relation to Sudama, 'God as Friend'. The 'Child form of God' is highlighted by the relation of Jesus to Mary and Joseph and the relation of Krishn to Yashoda and Nand and to Jankee and Vasudev. The disciples of Jesus find in him God as 'Guru'. The saint poet Kabeer sees the divine mainly as his 'Guru'. There are also other relational ways of understanding God, which do not come under the category of gender. Japanese and Chinese traditions conceive and relate to the divine in yet other ways.

These pluralistic ways of conceiving the Divine/God, which are experienced and defined by the diverse religious cultures of different times and places are not contradictory to each other. They are mutually inclusive and complementary to each other. Together they attempt to draw the picture of the divine, which is much larger and even incomprehensible. The humble fact stands that the divine is still much more beyond all these perceptions and experiences of all the human cultures put together. Hence a dialogical interpretation of the Christian understanding of God as 'Father' is required.

2. The filial experience of God was the core experience of Jesus (Mk 3.17; 17.5; Jn 5.19; 14.9, 10,11; 15.1; 17.10,11; Lk 10.22; 14.36; 23.34, 46). This filial experience is the natural response to the understanding of God as Father. Experiencing oneself as the son of God by Jesus is fundamental to the Christian understanding of God as Father. Filial experience is a very deep and meaningful way of experiencing the divine and it is open to all (Lk 22.34-40; Mt 6.4, 6,8,18,26,30, 32; 10. 29-31; 12, 7; 20.1-16). A spirituality of freedom evolves from this experience (Jn 18.35). This filial experience is beyond the boundaries of gender and it includes also experiencing oneself as a daughter of God. This filial spirituality has immense scope for an extensive application in the society, beyond the boundaries of caste, class, creed, gender, profession, language, culture, and the like. This filial spirituality is charged with great possibilities of multi-religious interaction and unity. The Biblical understanding needs to be broadened.

3. A fraternal way of life logically follows the above filial experience. The filial experience of Jesus spontaneously found its expression in a fraternal fashion of thought and behaviour. Considering the other one's brother or sister in a universal manner is a new way of being human. Loving the enemy, as if he is a friend, is the beginning of a revolutionary movement. That is the new culture that was initiated by Jesus. It surpassed all boundaries (Mt 5.43-48). The radical values of social commitment proposed by Jesus are capable of taking the humans towards total liberation (Lk 22.34-40; Mt 7.12; 5.9; 25.31-46). Jesus lived a life of preferential concern for the oppressed and the marginalized (Lk 19.1-10; 16.19-31; 15.1-32; 5.30-32, 23.24; 23.34; Mt. 5.43-48; 18.1-5; Jn 8.1-11; I Cor. 1.26-29). Establishing a loving relationship with every human being one meets in life and being of all possible service to him or her across all the boundaries is what is meant by the culture of love

and service, which is implied by the fraternal way of life Jesus inaugurated. This fraternal way of life has unlimited universal possibilities as well as implications.

4. The trinitarian style of life is considered the mainstream tradition of Christianity. 'Three-in-one and one-in-three' is the reality reflected in the terminology of 'Father, Son and Spirit' or Trinity in the Christian tradition. This concept has its clear roots in the Gospels and is grounded in the experience of Jesus. This concept, as interpreted as a superb model of self-giving, other-orientedness, love and communion, is a source of great inspiration for human life. It proposes a democratic and communitarian style of human life. It suggests a relational and spiritual approach to one-another. It not only agrees with the cultural genius of India, i.e., 'diversity in unity and unity in diversity', but gives a new meaning to it. It upholds religious pluralism and dialogue between different spiritual streams, irrespective of geographical and other considerations. The communitarian style of human life, emerging from the Trinitarian concept, is capable of a great deal of multi-Scriptural and multi-religious understanding and communion.

5. The 'God-centredness' was the foundational vision of Jesus. The basic aspiration of Jesus is found in the prayer Jesus used to constantly utter, i.e., 'Your will be done' and 'Your kingdom come'. Both his God-centredness and Kingdom-centredness are clearly expressed in this prayer. He relied on God totally and was committed to establishing his kingdom. The 'I' sayings of Jesus do not ever smack of a self-contained and self-centred attitude, not even in the least. His God-centredness is obvious from his constant reference to the Father. The self-emptying attitude to life expressed in his suffering and death is ample proof to the above fact. A common belonging to the divine is the underlying message for all. People of all Scriptural persuasions and religious affiliations should be able to realize the common foundation of life as well as the common origin and destiny of all human and other forms of life.

6. The harmony model of creation 'One body, many parts' is the fundamental key to human life (1 Cor. 12.12-28). This is a common place example. Paul elucidated its details from different angles and highlighted its radical implications. The parts of the body are different in their identity as well as many in number. But they exist as one body. The different parts have equal duties and equal rights. They all have their own singular importance and dignity, which is not only shared by all but is beyond the scope of comparison. One part cannot be replaced or superceded by another. Joy or pain and achievement or failure of one part is felt and shared by all the parts. It is an existence in togetherness. In other words, it is unity in diversity and diversity in unity at the same time. There cannot be a more powerful model for harmony. This natural example for harmony speaks volumes for multi-Scriptural dialogue, which, in its turn, will enable a multi-dimensional style of life for the human family and the whole creation.

7. Biblical values are the sum and substance of the Bible. Christian values derived from these Biblical values. The narrative and descriptive element of the language is at the service of the communication of the message. The mythical setting of the stories is for the purpose of situating the message. The spiritual values, human values, social ethics and living policies of life that emerge from the Bible are intended to enhance the personal and social quality of life. Evolving a mission statement, based on the Biblical values, and living it with a sense of commitment would be the most worthwhile endeavour of a Christian. Attempt to single out the universal values from the Bible by the Christian should be a source of motivation for other believers to search for similar universal values in their own Sacred Scriptures. This will definitely go miles and miles in initiating a creative and on-going *dialogue of values*, which emerge from the diverse religious Scriptures of the world

CONCLUSION

The humans of today are greatly privileged to live in an age, when the society has a large variety of Sacred Scriptures. All these Sacred Scriptures are the common heritage of the human culture. To follow one of them exclusively and to remain totally untouched by the others would be a very naïve understanding of the one in hand. It would be as if not following any of them. It would be equal to being totally atheistic in life, with no faith at all! It would be a negation of all fraternal human sentiments, too. That is, undoubtedly, pathological and tragic as well as irreligious. One should be firmly rooted in the Sacred Scripture of one's own affiliation. There is no compromise to this. At the same time, one should be creatively related to the Sacred Scriptures of the other traditions. 'One is mine in special; the others are mine in general'—that is the multi-Scriptural perspective, which is certified by a genuinely spiritual and human outlook in life. Therefore, a culture of multi-Scriptural studies should be the normal attitude to religion, especially in the third millennium we are shouldering the responsibility of.

Besides, in addition to the classical Holy Books, there are several 'holy books' of different levels, which emerge from the diverse historical events as well as from the great men and women of all communities (who are considered saints and sages), at different times and in different places. The concept of holy book gets updated and broadened as newer editions of the traditional Holy Books appear. They present a more relevant interpretation of the socio-spiritual values of life. One needs to be spiritually tuned enough, in order to discern the worth of them and to imbibe the best from them. One has to update one's heart and mind, in order to appropriate a more creative, experiential and relevant approach to the diverse editions of the Sacred Scriptures of the society.

A Christian believer, to be genuine, has to re-read the Bible with an open mind. He or she has to recognize, first and foremost, the symbolic character of the Bible as its most significant message. The understanding of the same has to be such that it liberates and elevates the believer, in every way. It should facilitate him or her to go beyond, to go higher and to go across to the other humans as well as to the other Sacred Scriptures. The basic filial experience and the fraternal mission of Jesus are to receive the right focus once again. The Biblical message is to be interpreted in terms of the inescapable multi-dimensional context of the human society. Inter-Scriptural study should be encouraged and comparative understanding of the emerging unifying elements should be promoted. The human and spiritual values of life, commonly found in the diverse Sacred Scriptures, are to be duly highlighted. The right vision and spirituality of the Bible is characteristically dialogical and that needs to govern the destiny of a every Christian. Students and disciples of the Bible have to honestly attempt understanding its core message in relation to other Religious Scriptures. The multi-Scriptural understanding of the Bible will, certainly, usher in a culture of '*united human spirituality*', which, in its turn, will facilitate the spiritual art of living the human life. This is the challenging but glorious future the humans are inevitably to travel towards.

Dr M.D. Thomas

Founder Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies

Floor 1, A 128, Sector 19, Dwarka, New Delhi 110075

Tel.: 09810535378 (p), 08847925378 (p), 011-45575378 (o)

Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com (p), ihps2014@gmail.com (o)

Website: www.mdthomas.in (p), www.ihpsindia.org (o)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mdthomas53>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mdthomas53>

Academia.edu: <https://independent.academia.edu/MDTHOMAS>