

Dialogue with religions and cultures: the missionary path of Fr. Zacharias OCD

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Introduction

Reawakening of memory of a person who lived half a century ago is an act of discovering, creating, resting, nourishing, transforming and traditioning of a legacy. Fr. Zacharias OCD himself is a legacy. A Discalced Carmelite from Spain who came to India as a missionary and lived and spent himself out in India forty five out of his 70 years of life is above everything else, a living missionary tradition to be rediscovered, recreated and renourished in order to be retraditioned to the present generation. The process, naturally involves a dialogue between two contexts of life belonging to two periods of time. We shall let both interpret mutually so that the legacy will be highlighted with the help of the later and the later can be authenticated with the help of the earlier. Hence it is a synchronization of diachronic and katachronic approaches. Put plainly, our scope in this paper is, to show how the missionary path pioneered by Fr. Zacharias was an authentic foreshadowing of the II Vatican conciliar teaching and the revolutionary new path opened up in the Church thereafter. His missionary life and work were a pure and transparent concretization of the teachings of Jesus. His missionary tradition is a criterion and a point of reference for understanding the missionary path to be tread by the Church in India in a multi-religious and pluricultural context. His is a model of vision and a springboard for the evangelizing mission today.

We shall proceed in this way. We shall use as point of departure the contemporary situation and the emerging challenges in India regarding inter-culturality and inter-religiosity as essentials of our faith-tradition. Then we shall portrait the three dimensional personality of Fr. Zacharias centred on Christianness, Carmeliteness and Indianness, all the three as major influences in the missionary formation of Fr. Zacharias. In the next section, we shall reflect on the

inter-religious and inter-cultural visionary in the person of Fr. Zacharias having the foci on his uncompromising fidelity to Christianness, committed openness to Hinduism and unreserved openness to cultures.

Final section will present Fr. Zacharias as a model of vision and action today under the subdivisions: A live embodiment of evangelical vision, a transparent foreshadowing of II Vatican Conciliar teaching, a testimonial realization of Indian cultural values and life-witness as the most effective inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue.

Inter-religiosity and Inter-culturality: Challenges of Indian Missionary Context

The religio-cultural situation of India is comparable to that of no other nation because it is so complex multifaceted and polyethnic¹. One of the most ancient cultures, India's cultural identity has not been a fossilized fact but a dynamic growth², which involves a lot of influence both from within just as Buddhism upto 4th century and from outside just as Islam from 8th century and from Christianity from 15th century³. The Indian culture being open to assimilation and integration the various influences caused more and more enrichment through gradual and evolutionary process and resulted in such rich, vast and very often bewildering diversity. The diversity arises from ethnic differences, tribal groupings, regional divisions, religious and sectarian allegiances, linguistic variations, class and caste distinctions. And mysteriously enough, they have been held together by an undefinable "Indian-ness"⁴.

The danger we are facing now is that despite our history of being multicultural, multilingual, multireligious and multiracial for ages, there are now emerging powerful social movements that try to impose on India a mono-cultural Hindu identity, targeting the cultural extinction and submission of tribals, dalits and other linguistic or ethnic or religious groups⁵. The attempt to restate the Hindu culture

¹ D. ACHARUPARAMBIL, "Heritage of India's Religious Culture", in: *Faith, Culture, India Today* (Ed. A. Mulloor), Kalamassery, 1991, p. 11.

² *IBID.*, p. 12.

³ *IBID.*, p. 13-14.

⁴ *IBID.*, p. 14. We disagree with Dr. Acharuparambil who citing K.M. Panikkar identifies the source of Indianness as Hinduism. *Ibid.*, p.15. We do admit Hinduism is a predominant factor but not the source.

Cf. also S.M. MICHAEL, "Christianity and cultures, Authentic in dialogue beyond Relativism and ethnocentrism", in: *ITS* 40 (2003), p. 28-66.

⁵ Cf. S.M. MICHAEL, "Christianity and Cultures", p. 49.

as the fundament of Indian national unity and to reduce Indian culture to mere Hindu religious culture and to marginalize the minority communities as foreign elements⁶ is to consolidate an upper caste monolithic Hindu hegemony.

This is the development of politics of one-dimensional identity which is invariably religious. Reducing or confining a person to his religious identity is a negation as well as a denial. One's profession, passions, gender, class and many other things too define one's identity. This ghetto, narrow understanding of identity can lead to violence. So every expression of identity is accessorized by the gun and the Book⁷. Hence religion is being politicized just as or much more than being commercialized.

This situation evokes many challenges in the Christian understanding and realization of mission. The Church is challenged to go beyond ethno-centric model which promotes paternalism, triumphalism and racism. The Church has to transcend relativistic orientations which advocate that each culture has its own integrity, system of values and web of customs and traditions and therefore each culture must be judged by its own standard as no absolute measure is possible. The consequent position regarding religion is that all religions are same. Although a kind of dialogue is proposed as possible the presentation of uniqueness of Christ is considered an offense to other religions. Going beyond this should lead us to the extremes of fundamentalism or liberalization⁸.

The sharp distinction made by Amritya Sen, between "multiculturalism" and "plural monoculturalism" is pertinent. Plural monoculturalism implies the presence of many cultures but without a meeting point at all. All the various cultures will be moving in their own directions, parallelly to each other⁹.

The theistic world view of Christianity offers a way to transcend cultural ethno-centrism, relativism and pluri mono culturalism. That Jesus is Christ and God is the stable basis of all values for Christians. While communicating this essential message to the world we must approach other cultures and religions with sensitivity and respect and be a living alternative as "the salt of the earth" and "light of the

⁶ D. ACHARUPARAMBIL, "Heritage of India's Religious Culture", p. 28.

⁷ Cf. A. SEN, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Allen Lane, 2006.

⁸ Cf. S.M. MICHAEL, "Christianity and Cultures", p. 50-54.

⁹ A. SEN, *Identity and Violence*. He gives the example of a future multi-cultural Britain seen as a loose federation of different cultures or religions. Bangladesh is another example. Bangladesh is separated from Pakistan on grounds of language, culture, literature, politics and religion. They are overwhelmingly Muslim but they are not same as Pakistanis or Egyptians. Cf. D. MUKERJI, "I am Plural", (Interview with A.Sen) in: *The Week* (April 16, 2006) p. 66-67.

world”, to give direction and orientation in a situation of vagueness, cloudiness and confusion regarding values. Christians have to be present in a multicultural society with openness, charity and hospitality. They have to be “an oasis of stable values, peace and joy made up of persons firmly rooted in their faith, committed to Christ yet open to other cultures and religions”¹⁰. Then the Church functions as an interlocutor between cultures and religions.

Christianity was from the beginning dialogical because through the social and historical emphasis it has, it “shows how all religious traditions are involved in a common plan to transform the world into God’s kingdom”¹¹. So the promotion of dialogue is “part of Church’s evangelizing mission”¹² because by it “we make God present in our midst, for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we open ourselves to God”¹³ and it “seeks to discover, clarify and understand better the signs of the agelong dialogue which God maintains with humanity”¹⁴.

The relationship between the missionary task and the responsibility for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is articulated by Pope John Paul II in the following words, “In offering to others the Good news of the Redemption, the Church strives to understand their culture. She seeks to know the minds and hearts of her hearers, their values and customs, their problems and difficulties, their hopes and dreams. Once she knows and understands these various aspects of culture, then she can begin the dialogue of salvation, she can offer respectfully but with clarity and conviction, the Good News of the Redemption to all who freely wish to listen and to respond. This is the evangelical challenge of the Church in every age”¹⁵.

Jesus himself inspires us to opt for a dialogical relationship with the other religions in view of creating a fellowship, a “community of communities” beyond the boundaries of religions, cultures, and races and languages and thus to realize God’s universal plan for salvation through mutual enrichment and transformation¹⁶.

¹⁰ S.M. MICHAEL, “Christianity and Cultures”, p. 60.

¹¹ J.B. CHETHIMATTOM (Ed.), *Towards a More Fruitful Inter-religious Dialogue*, (Jeevadhara), Kottayam, 1998, P.338. Christians have a deep interest in dialogue. Hindus emphasize the personal realization of God. Buddhism, the emptiness of all phenomenal things, Islam the enforcement of God’s law in God’s world.

¹² POPE JOHN PAUL II, Red. Mess. 55.

¹³ POPE JOHN PAUL II, Speech at Madras, Feb. 1986.

¹⁴ POPE JOHN PAUL II, Speech Rome, Nov. 1992.

¹⁵ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *The Pope Speaks to India*, Bombay, 1986, p. 78.

¹⁶ Fr. K. PATHIL, “The Syro-Malabar Church in Theologizing: Context and Concerns”, in: *Syro-Malabar Theology in Context* (Eds. Mauakatt M., Puthenveetil J.), Kottayam, 2007, P.189; cf. also, J. RATZINGER, *Christ, Faith and Challenge of Cultures*, (FABC Papers – 78).

Hence the missionary task of Christians in India is to realize in themselves the essential quality of inter-culturality and inter-religiosity which is inherent in Christian faith by actualizing in their lives the demand of Jesus, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven" (Mt 5,16).

Fr. Zacharias, the Missionary

The missionary personality of Fr. Zacharias can be presented as a beautifully blended mosaic of three essential dimensions: Christianness, Carmeliteness and Indianness. All these three elements have creatively contributed to the formation of a very deep and dynamic missionary consciousness and spirit in Fr. Zacharias. By call he was a Christian and by consecration he was a Carmelite and by mission he was an Indian. In him all the three essential moments of his earthly pilgrimage – call, consecration and mission – were coordinated and integrated through his personal intimate relationship to Christ and faithful commitment to his dream, the kingdom of God. In fact, the personality of Fr. Zacharias was thoroughly pervaded by the missionary spirit. He came all the way from Spain to India in 1912 as a missionary and everything he did here in India upto his death in 1957, in various levels, as Professor, Formator, Vice Rector, Writer, Preacher, Social worker, Organizer, Spiritual Father, Consul-tor, Apologist, Vocation Promoter, Chaplain, Founder, Delegate Superior and so on are multifarious expressions of his missionary spirit and zeal. It flowed from his conscious living of Christian existence, Carmelite consecration and Indian identity.

An Authentic Christian

We are speaking of the Christianness of Fr. Zacharias not on the basis of the faith tradition of the family from which he comes, or on the reports we have of his religiosity expressed in faithful adherence to a set of beliefs, rituals, devotional practices and pious exercises. All these were really very much true regarding Fr. Zacharias through out his life, at home, in the Carmelite Order during formation and in his life in India as a missionary. They were expressions of a core-level experience of God as Abba attained through Christocentrism of life nurtured by ecclesial consciousness and revealed in integral and altruistic liberative mission.

His personal relationship with Jesus expressed in the prayer-atti-

tude of life was the result of a deep conviction about the definitive and irreversible mutation in salvation history through the person of Jesus. He knew, he had not only to live this decisiveness of Christ event but also to proclaim it in its pure, undiluted form. Hence faith became a source of dynamism of love and hope led him to depend on God uninterruptedly and perseveringly. His life became “faith active through love” (Gal 5,6) “that was poured into his heart through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5,5).

The life of Fr. Zacharias was anchored on faith and love, the former, the light that led him to the knowledge, experience and conviction of Christ and the latter the life that blossomed from this experience on the horizontal level stimulating him to the knowledge and experience of the fellow human beings. Faith and love served as the pivotal energy centre on which revolved *enstasis* and *ekstasis*, experience and expressions, Bhava and Roopa. And this was not for him a “fait accompli” but a process which was always in progressive motion, a continuous coming to Jesus Christ and a persevering abiding in him¹⁷.

The missionary spirit and zeal of Fr. Zacharias is the result of an intimate interior relationship to Christ like a branch to the vine (Jn 15,1-17) and the realization of friendship with Christ and participation in the revelation of the Father through faith and love that resulted in abundant fruitfulness through missionary activities.

This particular dimension of the personality of Fr. Zacharias is a clear reflection of the personality and spirituality of St. Paul. The ardent missionary Zeal of Paul was the result of a christological experience on the way to Damascus. Once he recognizes the decisive value of the risen Jesus, he was burning with Zeal to proclaim the same and lead all to the same experience. The Pauline vision of Christian existence which is threefold – justification that is christological, salvation, that is soteriological and glorification that is eschatological (*dikaiosis, soteria* and *doxa*)¹⁸ was realized in the life of Fr. Zacharias. His “life in Christ” was articulated as “life in the Spirit”.

In Fr. Zacharias we see three various levels of fruitfulness of his Christian experience. First of all, Fr. Zacharias was a defender of faith. He was categorically uncompromising with regard to the basic

¹⁷ Here we are trying to interpret the Christian experience of Fr. Zacharias using the Johannine paradigm and find that these categories fit in very well to decode his experience. Cf. R. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. I & II, New York, 1981, M. VELLANICKAL, *Studies in the Gospel of John*, Bangalore, 1997; A. MULLOOR, *The Gospel According to John Vols. I & II*, Bangalore, 2006, 2007.

¹⁸ Cf. J.A. FITZMYER, “Pauline Theology”, in: *NJBC*, Bangalore, 1991, p. 1397-1401.

tenets of Christian faith, above all, Christo-centrism. This attitude is revealed both in his life and in his teachings. Two books are relevant here namely, *Synopsis of Lectures on Dogmatic Theology* (1941) and *Christianity Vindicated* (1944). The Christocentrism was beautifully reflected in his life through the attitudes of love, selflessness, service, hard work, humility, obedience, poverty, compassion, fatherly concern, tolerance and endurance in suffering¹⁹. The apologetic speeches he has given on different occasions especially in response to “The Supremacy of Pope” written by K.N. Daniel and Parur Conferences in reply to the atheistic views which were prevailing over the lives of many believers in Parur, creating confusion and skepticism in their minds and the famous rejoinder to the book of Diwan Sir. C.P. Ramaswamy namely “World Religions: A Study in Synthesis” published as “Christianity vindicated”²⁰ are outstanding and exquisite testimonies of the Christian experience and Christocentric life of Fr. Zacharias. He believed and esteemed all these as missionary activities.

A Passionate Carmelite

Another indelible imprint on the personality of Fr. Zacharias came from his Carmeliteness. The Carmeliteness is another source of the missionary spirit of Fr. Zacharias. It is as though from the beginning God had prepared him for Indian mission that his formation was providentially arranged, especially his meeting with Fr. Aurelian which initiated a bond between the Professor and the student growing into forty five year long collaboration as colleagues and partners in the Apostolic Seminary.

The Carmelite charism contains missionary spirit as its essential dimension coming from the experience and teaching of St. Teresa and continue through the history of the order. The present OCD constitutions synthesize this spirit in the following words: “the evangelization of the world, so intimately part of the very nature of the Church, in as much as it is to be accomplished primarily through love and prayer, has always been a priority in our Order’s apostolic work. Our Holy Mother St. Teresa passed on to the Order the ardent missionary Zeal that burned within her heart and it was her wish that her friars should also undertake missionary activity. This missionary zeal should be faithfully fostered, all should have the mis-

¹⁹ Cf. J. KUNNAPPILLY, *Fr. Zacharias*, Aluva, 1961, p. 196- 233.

²⁰ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 102-105.

sions very much at heart, and vocations to the missions should be encouraged throughout the Order”²¹.

The basic Christian missionary spirit in its seed form found in Fr. Zacharias a very fertile ground to sprout, to grow and to produce abundant fruits in the essentially missionary charismatic Teresian Carmelite way of life and way of mission. He was interested not only in being an active and authentic missionary but also to form such missionaries especially for India.

In fact, Fr. Zacharias is the formator who instilled in the hearts of Seminarians a burning zeal for mission work which in turn ignited first in some of them, later in many of them the desire to go as missionaries to North India, and even to Latin America and Africa²². In this process of awakening and nourishing the missionary consciousness of Kerala clergy, he was sharing his Carmelite missionary charism which had found a very fertile ground in his life and had blossomed fully and fruitified plentifully. This fruitfulness offshooted in concrete decisions to establish the “Mission Circle” to facilitate the deepening of mission spirit among the Seminarians²³, “Malabar Mission Seminary” that organized the formation of missionary priests²⁴, “St. Joseph’s Mission Home” that channelized the surplus vocations in the dioceses of Kerala to the mission dioceses²⁵, “Malabar Missionary Union” for nurturing mission spirit among the diocesan clergy²⁶ and to publish “Preshithakeralam”, the magazine that served as a news bulletin among the missionaries and as a bond of unity and “Katholikakudumbam” to promote the proper study of correct Christian doctrine²⁷.

The persevering commitment of Fr. Zacharias to the realization of the missionary goal is so extra-ordinary as to remind us of St. Paul, the apostle of gentiles and St. Francis Xavier, the Apostle of India.

A Real Indian

The third dimension of the missionary personality of Fr. Zacharias emerges from the Indianness to which he identified him-

²¹ *Constitutions of Discalced Carmelites*, No.94. Cf. also *Decisions of General Chapter 1605; Acta Cap. Gen. Ns.I (1605-1642)*; Cf. *General Chapter of 1630; Teresa of Avila, Foundations I*.

²² Cf. J. KUNNUPILLY, *Father Zacharias*, p. 40-65.

²³ Cf. *IBID.*, p.45.

²⁴ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 47.

²⁵ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 47-48.

²⁶ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 49-51.

²⁷ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 72-75.

self completely. India was not a foreign country to this Spaniard from the day he arrived here till the day he left India for the heavenly abode. He came to India as Spaniard and a Carmelite Missionary, but forty five years he lived, and tirelessly laboured here as an Indian Missionary, because through strenuous personal asceticism of both scholarship and life, he had rooted himself in Indian soil, in Indian cultural tradition, in Indian religious heritage and in the social milieu. In every sense, it was as though India had replaced Spain for "his homeland". It should be remembered that throughout the years of Indian struggle for independence and the first decade after independence Fr. Zacharias lived in India.

Fr. Zacharias, a linguist as he was, had mastered Sanskrit language and thus had easily found access to the most important door to Indian cultural heritage namely the ancient Indian Scriptures. Delving deep into the spiritual and philosophical traditions of India, both as a Professor of Indian Philosophy and as a spiritual person, he was never satisfied with a superficial or mediocre knowledge, but insisted on a thorough and complete knowledge. He had thus become an authority on the subject. It is pertinent to remember at this juncture that the major part of the writings of Fr. Zacharias cover the themes concerning Indian Philosophy, Hindu Spirituality and Indian culture with around 7 books and more than 30 scientific articles²⁸.

Fr. Zacharias imposed on himself the duty to learn Malayalam because he knew the language is the primary door to a culture and to a society. He wanted always to be close to the people, especially to the poor. From his attitudes it was clear that interiorly he was carrying in his heart the simple and poor people of India. His scholarship and intellectual pursuits were not in any way alienated from the actual social and cultural context, but rather blended beautifully with it.

Fr. Zacharias had got actively involved in the secular situations of the society of India then, which implied materialism, communism, atheism and so on, without any fear and with sincere openness.

Hence in all levels he can be called a real Indian in the perfect sense and hence an authentic missionary who became an embodiment of inter-culturality and inter-religiosity.

²⁸ Cf. "Fr. Zacharias' Literary Productions" (Supplement).

Fr. Zacharias: An Inter-religious and Inter-cultural visionary

Viewing closely the personality of Fr. Zacharias and comprehensively evaluating his multifarious activities, nobody can deny the inter-cultural and inter-religious character that pervades and penetrates them. In other words, with the key of inter-religiosity and interculturality we can decode his person, life and mission, revealing uncompromising fidelity to Christianness, committed openness to Hinduism, and unreserved receptivity to cultures.

Uncompromising Fidelity to Christianness

The primary sign of authentic inter-religious and inter-cultural attitude of a person is the clear vision about, sincere passion for and authentic living of one's own religion and culture. Inter-culturality is possible only when one is rooted in one's culture and inter-religiosity is possible only when one is footed well on one's religion. If so, this is undoubtedly true of Fr. Zacharias and then his roots are very deep and the footing is very firm.

An extra-ordinary trait of the thinking and writing of Fr. Zacharias is the crystalline clarity of ideas and formulations. This is the result of an uncompromising standpoint he had take concerning his relationship with God in Christ through the Spirit, mediated by the Church²⁹. He had manifested and unquestionably identified his position within the stream of the Trinitarian involvement in the human history finding its climatic juncture in the Christ-event as the Risen Jesus said to the apostles, "go to the whole world, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit..." (Mt 28, 18-19). He identified his place in the salvation – historical horizon through a foundational experience of the uniqueness of the place of Christ and being convinced about it in an unprecedented faith and being conformed to it by seeking, reflecting upon and knowing that "Christ is absolutely original and absolutely unique"³⁰. This experience and the resultant conviction enkindled in him a deep consciousness of being called by God, for a mission of leading people to the Trinitarian life in the historical situ-

²⁹ Cf. The Synthesis of Faith is given by Late Pope John Paul II. "This revelation is definitive. One can only accept it or reject it. One can accept it, professing belief in God, the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ, the Son, of the same substance as the Father and the Holy Spirit, who is Lord and giver of life...". *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*; London, 1994, p. 10.

³⁰ *IBID.*, p. 42.

ations. He knew for sure, he had to be “light of the world and salt of the earth” (Mt 5, 13-16), he had to listen to Jesus and understand the mysteries of the kingdom (Mt 13), he had to be terribly tolerant to all even to “the weeds” (Mt 13, 24-30), to be a person of radical faith and not little faith (MT 8, 23-27), and to be a vigilant servant living always under judgment, but committed to love in action in favour of the marginalized (Mt 24-25). Fr. Zacharias accepted all the consequences of clinging to this faith, knowing that he was thereby depending on the truth. In his own words, “God Himself knowing our weakness, deigned to reveal to man gradually the way or the manner in which he desired to be honoured and revered by men. But such a revelation in many places was obscured in course of time, so God lastly, revealed His mind to men through Jesus Christ, the only real and historical incarnation of God. Thus the full and complete revelation of God is contained in the Christian Catholic Church in its integrity and purity”³¹. Elsewhere he writes, “... Christian revelation is an independent and historical revelation made by God to humanity through Christ Jesus the incarnate God”³².

As Fr. Zacharias had informed himself thoroughly and clearly about the foundational principles and the detailed development of the Christian doctrine and theology, he could enunciate well the distinct element of Christianness in comparison with the doctrinal positions of other faith traditions³³. So complete and perfect was his familiarity with the “Summa Theologiae” of St. Thomas Aquinas, that he would not let any shadow of confusion or obscurity to fall on any formulation or presentation of Christian doctrine³⁴.

An authentic son of St. Teresa who died declaring “I am a daughter of the Church”, as he was, his ecclesial consciousness, was evident in his perfect and humble submission to the magisterium of the Church, in his positive fidelity to the Church’s tradition in everything he wrote and also in the absence of any presumptuous or critical statements in relation to the teachings of the Church.

Further, the fidelity of Fr. Zacharias to Christianness was expressed on the praxis level, in the way he lived, prayed, interacted with the community members, seminarians and the people. In everything he said or did he used to purify himself from selfish motiva-

³¹ Fr. ZACHARIAS, *Christianity and Indian Mentality*, Aluva, 1952, p. 204.

³² *IBID.*, p. iv.

³³ The themes such as incarnation, grace, sin, Sacraments, sacrifice, etc. are treated in comparison with their counter parts in Hinduism in: *Christianity and Indian Mentality*.

³⁴ This evident especially in the “Religious Conferences” of Fr. Zacharias. Cf. *Is there a God?*, Ernakulam, 1934.

tions of name, glory, profit etc and remain solely motivated by the glory of God and the edification of the Church. He would spend himself for fulfilling his responsibilities and finally, like Mary the handmaid he would give all the credit to God and say, "I am an unworthy servant. I have only done what was my duty" (Lk 17,10). His heart would go compassionately to the people who suffer and are poor. He was not affected by the spirit of hypocrisy, duplicity and spiritual arrogance. Hence the authenticity of life, transparency of heart, delicacy of conscience and simplicity of life of Fr. Zacharias were the loud testimonies of his Christianness.

Committed Openness to Hinduism

That Fr. Zacharias was designated to teach Indian Philosophy and Hinduism to the Seminarians was only a coincidence. That means to say that it was not any external force that led Fr. Zacharias to the committed study of Hinduism. Instead, this dimension of the scholar-personality of Fr. Zacharias was just a natural off-shoot of his faithful and authentic Christian commitment and a spontaneous outcome of his prophetic missionary responsibility. He was well aware that he had to be personally acquainted with and sensitive to the multifarious dimensions of the real situation of the people, religious, cultural and social. Hence it was by an inner compulsion of a vocation that Fr. Zacharias ventured into this field. It was like a life-pursuit in which he persevered till the end of his life. His writings on Hinduism, that make up the most bulky portion of his literary contribution reveal immediately, the depth of ideas, vastness of knowledge clarity of concepts, comprehensiveness of meaning, mastery of languages and high literary quality. This was recognized as such by others as expressed in the words of the then Internuncio of Vatican to India introducing him to the Papal Delegate to the Plenary Council of India in 1950: "great writer who has done deep studies on Indian Philosophy"³⁵. That he, a European missionary from India was chosen to speak in the Congreso Internacional de Filosofia at Barcelona in 1948, on Indian Philosophy is indisputable confirmation of the erudite and authoritative scholarship of Fr. Zacharias on Indian Philosophy and Hinduism³⁶.

³⁵ Cf. J. KUNNAPPILLY, Fr. ZACHARIAS, p. 118.

³⁶ The paper presented by Fr. Zacharias was on "Un estudio Sobre filosofia India". It was a study on the cosmological theory of Snakaracharya. It was published in: *Congreso Internacional de Filosofia*, Vol. II, Madrid, 1949, p. 441-465.

An outstanding quality of any treatise of Fr. Zacharias on any theme of Hinduism is the objective approach he adapts and the sincere attempt he makes to understand everything from the perspective of Hinduism itself. His openness was unbiased and so he was willing to appreciate and to learn and to respectfully state the differences. In his own words taken from the introduction to his book, "... care has been taken to be objective in our studies allowing texts and contexts to have their own say with a minimum of subjective interpretation..."³⁷.

Fr. Zacharias writes, "no surprise should be shown for instituting a sort of comparative study between Hinduism and Christianity because both are venerable, the one for its "antiquity" and the other for its "nobility". Hinduism has controlled and guided the lives of hundreds of millions of Indians for 4000 years, while Christianity has elevated and perfected whatever it has touched, in India or elsewhere. Besides, Indian culture as a whole contains much that is useful and good. There are in it lofty philosophical thoughts and many ascetico-mystical speculations that have great apparent similarity with those of Christianity and which could be treasured up and rendered Christian to the great advantage of all. One is inclined to say that they need only the complement of Christianity in order to be perfectly wholesome and beneficial to humanity. By this we do not mean to say that Christianity is the historical continuation and the essential fulfillment of the highest religious aspirations of Hindu India"³⁸.

In these words we can identify Fr. Zacharias the open scholar, docile learner, positive appreciator, careful and prudent discernor, fearless and respectful opiner and a tolerant and listening dialogue partner. Fr. Zacharias considered this, the duty of all missionaries. That is why he was an influential inspiration in integrating studies on Hinduism into the Seminary Syllabus³⁹. After having cited the words of Pope Pius XII⁴⁰, he comments, "Christianity is not going to destroy their true culture and civilization which are venerable both for their antiquity and nobility. The mission of Christianity is to perfect and complement them and thus make India one of the most glorious and cultured nations of the world..."⁴¹.

The language he employs may look rather outdated. A presupposition regarding the superiority of Christian Revelation may seem to

³⁷ Cf. *An Outline of Hinduism*, Aluva, 1956, p. iv

³⁸ Cf. *Christianity and Indian Mentality*, P. III-IV.

³⁹ Cf. J. KUNNAPPILLY, Fr. ZACHARIAS, p. 107.

⁴⁰ *Evangelii Praecones*.

⁴¹ Cf. *Christianity and Indian Mentality*, p. 2.

be taken for granted in some statements. However given the historical context of the writing namely in the fifties and the openness and flexibility of the author in the actual life, his position may be interpreted as very revolutionary. Yet not superficially liberal. In fact he has developed a Christian theology of religions in the article "Are all religions equally good?"⁴²

Unreserved Receptivity to Cultures

While dedicating himself to a faithful Christian life, and a committed search into Hinduism, Fr. Zacharias kept himself open to the other naked realities of Indian society of the time. He was a person with deep historical consciousness and a very sensitive antenna to receive the cultural movements of the society, such as those related to the social developmental programmes, organization of students in the colleges, intellectual discussion clubs organized by the elite of the society, communists, Agnostics, atheists and factory workers.

He was the spiritual guide of the catholic students' union, of U.C. College, Aluva, and a member of the Kerala Round Table Group that was organized in 1947 to give expert advice to the Government concerning the economic, social, industrial and agricultural situation of Kerala. Once he had presented a paper on "co-operative societies" in this circle⁴³.

The "Religio-philosophical Conferences" he delivered at N. Parur⁴⁴ are testimonies of his openness to persons who were belonging to totally different cultural backgrounds such as agnostics, atheists, communists, materialists etc. In these lectures his deep knowledge in various disciplines such as science, philosophy, History, Sociology, Psychology, Spirituality, Theology and Bible becomes impressively plain. His dialogical, inter-disciplinary approach to various questions is pertinently unusual and striking. Introducing these lectures, he writes, "... I thought that the best thing I could do was to base all my reasoning on objective truths and historical facts. My guiding stars, therefore, have been philosophical principles and scientific facts"⁴⁵. Concluding the discussions on "Is there a God" he summarizes: "Real atheism, if any, is generated within minds that have never deeply and seriously examined into the evidences presented by history, reason, science and common sense in favour of the

⁴² Cf. *Christianity and Indian Mentality*, p. 139-204.

⁴³ Cf. J. KUNNAPPILLY, Fr. Zacharias, p. 130-132.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Is There God?*

⁴⁵ Cf. *Is There God?*, p. xi.

existence of God or in hearts that have been warped by moral delinquency. Philosophical shallowness and scientific narrowness brought first religious indifferentism and then negative atheism"⁴⁶.

His involvement in the activities for the welfare of the factory labourers brought him to Aluva Standard Potteries and Aluva Settlement as mediator⁴⁷.

While being terribly busy with these multiple activities which were intellectual, formative or social, Fr. Zacharias was shouldering ecclesiastical responsibilities too. He was for many years in the Seminary Commission as well.

At this juncture, it is very relevant to record the unique service he has rendered to Manjummel Carmelites as the Commissary General facilitating mediating and coordinating the process of amalgamation of the Congregation to the Order of Discalced Carmelites. This was one of the last responsibilities he shouldered in his life because the declaration of the amalgamation was on March 25, 1957 and the demise of Fr. Zacharias was on May 23, 1957⁴⁸.

Fr. Zacharias: A Model of Vision and Action Today

Fr. Zacharias: A live embodiment of Evangelical Vision

Now, we must show how the teaching, vision and attitudes of Fr. Zacharias, as a missionary in relation to various religions and cultures make a live representation of the vision and attitudes of Jesus himself. Jesus announced a religion for community and communion. The new revelation of God as Father which Jesus gave cannot be understood as an individual faith, but it is to be seen as faith of the community of believers. Jesus demanded not merely love of God to be lived individually but also love of neighbour to be lived in a new relationship towards others in the society. God is the Father of Jesus. And God is the Father of all the disciples of Jesus. The love of God and love of neighbour form two sides of the same coin. And this principle of love is the source from which the principle of inter-religiosity and inter culturality is drawn⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Is There God?*, p. 314.

⁴⁷ Cf. J. Kunnapilly, Fr. Zacharias, p. 149-154.

⁴⁸ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 144-146; J. PALLATH, *Majummel Karmelitha Sabha, Innaleyum Innum*, Manjummel, 1975, p. 222-229.

⁴⁹ Cf. F. LENTZEN-DEIS, "Jesus the Authentic Bringer of Faith. Evangelical Studies on the Gospels for different Cultures", in: *Faith, Culture, India Today: Perspectives*, (Ed. A. Mulloor), Kalamassery, 1991, p. 108-113.

In the Gospels we have a message of love and respect. Jesus did not call for violence, war and violation of commandments. He built on what was already existing, namely the Jewish faith. He recognized, for example, the prophetic message of John the Baptist. Jesus was a Jew but in the course of his life and ministry he also reinterpreted and changed Jewish religion. Thus Jesus became the first Christian. His religiosity was different from that of other Jewish traditions. That was not acceptable to the Jews. Hence they wanted to get rid of him⁵⁰. So in the life of Jesus itself we see how he is open to other traditions and receives from them; and that he also transforms other traditions into more authentic and credible forms.

There are not many narrations in the Gospels dealing with Jesus' relationship to the non-Jews or gentiles. However, the few narrations we have, can provide us with a paradigm for right relationships between Christians and non-Christians or between religions. Here we can see the process of learning and transformation. The one God Jews believed in, is accepted by Christians but they believe in one God, the creator of heaven and earth and also redeemer of mankind in the person of Jesus Christ, thus fulfilling events of salvation and liberation foreshadowed in the history of Israel. This faith has a further dimension added to it through the teaching and practice of Jesus, namely, that God is the Father. Further learning process and transformation reinterpreted the redeeming work of God towards human beings in terms of Trinity⁵¹. This process of learning and transformation is always based on love, dialogue and cooperation⁵².

In the encounter between Jesus and centurion (Mt 8, 5-13; Lk 7,1-10; Jn 4, 46-54) there are various impulses for such cooperation and dialogue. Jesus did not go to the gentile places to convert the people there. The gentiles could approach Jesus without any fear of being rejected or discarded because they are pagans. Jesus transcended the tradition of ritual and ceremonial purity of Jewish practice. The Jewish elders mediate with Jesus for centurion. So there was a kind of appreciation for the centurion from the part of Jews. The centurion had high regard for the Jews and expressed it in helping to build a synagogue. The attitude of the centurion expressed in the words, "I am not worthy that you come under my roof..." shows that he had respect for and sensitivity to the Jewish tradition of purity. He knew his house is unclean for Jews and with respect did not want Jesus to get defiled. He also expressed his faith in Jesus' authority drawing conclusions from his own experience, the highest form of

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 93-95.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 102-104.

⁵² F. LENTZEN-DEIS, (Gen. Editor), *Images of Jesus*, Bombay, 1989, p. 56-59.

reasoning he could have reached from his own experience. So it is clear that “Cooperation between different religions is possible when and in so far as each part tries, with the means of its own faith and religious experience, to understand and to assist sincerely the other part”⁵³.

Jesus’ encounter with a demoniac at Geresene or Gedara, part of Decapolis with the cultural background of Hellenistic paganism (Mt 8, 28-34; Mk 5,1-20; Lk 8,26-39) is another model of action. Jesus is ready to help the man irrespective of his religion or origin. Jesus however, respects the will of the community of the place that demanded him to go away from there. So openness and readiness to help must be combined with respect for the reservations in the transmission of a religious message. Above all, the will of God, who is the Lord of history and master of salvation must be respected⁵⁴.

In the story of syro-phoenician woman (Mk 7, 24-30) or Canaanite woman (Mt 15,21-28), we see how Jesus was compassionate, kind-hearted and merciful to the non-Jews in their needs, transcending the reservations of the laws, traditions and even his own consciousness of the God-given mission “to the lost sheep of Israel” in the special moment of salvation-History⁵⁵.

Jesus was open to Samaritans and presented the goodness in them in contrast to Jews in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10, 25-37) and in the healing of ten lepers (Lk 17,11-19). Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4,1-42) is interesting from the point of view of religious dialogue although that is not the main purpose of the narration. Jesus and the woman belonging to two different religious faiths through respect for each other’s religious experiences and moral values and through dialogue transcend their faith. Jesus has, by initiating this dialogue, transcended already the Jewish, discriminatory, narrow-minded communalistic perspective of life. The woman, while sharing her traditions learns to go beyond and to a deeper level of faith and moral life too. In this process, there is the emphasis on the salvific plan of God which is above human strength and activity. Jesus respects a woman as equally as any man and a Samaritan as equally as any Jew. The submission to God and to his plan is the core of dialogue which can bring unity⁵⁶.

Jesus’ attitudes may be summarized as – openness to all who believed in God, who wanted to fulfill the will of God even when they

⁵³ F. LENTZEN-DEIS, “Jesus the Authentic Bringer of Faith”, p.122.

⁵⁴ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 123-124.

⁵⁵ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 126-127.

⁵⁶ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 127-134.

are branded as sinners by the religious authorities, regardless of their being a Jew, a Samaritan or a gentile.

– Those who attacked him were set right with sensitivity, based on the given facts of the situation.

– Those who were in need were helped beyond any discriminatory walls of religion, race or sex.

– Jesus was respectful and paid attention to the differences of culture.

– Jesus acknowledged what is good and valuable.

– No reproach is made by Jesus. He does give prophetic messages.

– Jesus respectfully said ‘No’ when it was required and said ‘Yes’ to all that is good and helpful to walk with God who wants to walk with human beings⁵⁷.

Now, placing all that we said about Fr. Zacharias in the preceding section against this ideal of Jesus, the dialogue with religions and cultures as lived dynamically by Fr. Zacharias is an embodiment of Evangelical ideal and the historical realization of the same. He was open, respectful, firm and loving in his relationship with other religions and cultures.

Fr. Zacharias: A Transparent foreshadowing of II Vatican Conciliar Teaching

Fr. Zacharias lived in the pre – II Vatican period. However, in his theological vision and missionary life and faith praxis, he had anticipated many revolutionary approaches that would be part of the conciliar teaching. II Vatican Council was a paradigm shift in ecclesiological understanding. It was a movement from vertical unity to horizontal Catholicity or universality. The new ecclesiological vision, with a very strong Christological thread underlying it, presented Church in herself, in relation to other Christian Churches, other religions and other persons in general and then in relation to the actual world. In Spirit it was a widening of horizons from the ideological to the mystic, from absolutistic to relational, from triumphalistic to ministerial, from dialectical tensions to creative polarities⁵⁸.

Two relevant documents are naturally “Nostra Aetate” and “Gaudium et Spes”. “Nostra Aetate” states: “For all peoples comprise a single community and have a single origin since God made the

⁵⁷ Cf. *IBID.*, p. 136-137.

⁵⁸ Cf. D. VELLIATH, “Vatican II: A Council in Quest of a Theology”, in: *Jeevadhara*, XXVII/161 (1997), p. 348-352.

whole race of men dwell over the entire face of the earth... One also is their final goal: God" (N.A.I). The most important statement of the document that synthesizes the attitude of the Church to other religions is as follows: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflects a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.... The Church therefore, has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions and in witness to Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men as well as the values in their society and culture" (N.A. 2).

It is "Gaudium et Spes" that opened up a new dimension in the mission of the Church as a Sacrament of hope in the actual situations of the society characterized by anguish, changed social order, psychological, moral, religious changes, new searches of mankind, deeper and critical questionings and so on. Church could not be passive and indifferent to the socio-cultural realities of the society but had to get involved and contribute to the building up of a just and loving community fundamentally centred on the spiritual values.

Fr. Zacharias has lived the spirit of the message of the 2nd Vatican Council perfectly as he engaged in dialogue with so much sincere and deep love for other religions especially Hinduism with appreciation, respect, openness, receptivity, firmness, authentic and witnessing life. His words anticipate the words of "Nostra Aetate" as he writes, "It is good to bear in mind that Christianity distinguishes three main elements in non-christian religions namely, the natural, the supernatural and the human... Christianity admits that many scattered seeds of "divine word" may be traceable in all the religions of this world..."⁵⁹.

His active involvement in the cultural situation of the society then, by addressing himself to communism, agnosticism, atheism, materialism, poverty, injustice, labour problems, developmental programmes etc. shows that he had in his praxis, anticipated the message of "Gaudium et Spes". It is relevant to ask now: Is not the missionary spirit of Fr. Zacharias really proleptic living of that missionary thrust of the Church underscored by II Vatican Council?

⁵⁹ *Christianity and Indian Mentality*, p. 192-193.

Fr. Zacharias: A Testimonial Realization of Indian Cultural Values

In our attempt to identify the fundamental values that serve as the fulcrum of the missionary personality of Fr. Zacharias, we found how he was uncompromisingly faithful to his relationship to God, through a singular commitment to Christ and a constant docility to the Spirit and unfailing attachment to the Church. This is the expression of Christian God-centred life which empowered him to be open, respectful, dialogical, universalistic, cooperative, friendly, tolerant, creative and dynamic. He was the living example of universal love, radical reconciliation, all embracing fraternity and unconditional cooperation. In fact, thus he had become an authentic manifestation of Indian world vision that is centred on God or sacredness from where emerge the various essential aspects, namely, inclusive, cosmo-centric, symbolic and practical perspectives of life. This is because Fr. Zacharias had experienced the depth dimension of all religions namely the God-centredness which is the sand bed that links all the islands together at the depth level. The more Christian he was, the more Indian he became. And when he sought the depth of Indianness, the more Christian he became.

Life-witness of Fr. Zacharias: The most effective dialogue

At the end it must be said, by obligation, being compelled by the powerful and magnetic personality of Fr. Zacharias, that his dialogue with the religions and cultures was most effectively fulfilled through his life itself. It was a witnessing life, a life in which the thoughts corresponded to the words, words concurred to the actions and actions have become authoritative teaching. Everyone who came in contact with Fr. Zacharias was impressed by this irresistible inner authority that came from the unusual agreement between his heart and tongue, the “ekstasis” and “enstasis”. Hence his authentic, transparent, simple life was the most effective missionary path of dialogue with religions and cultures.

Conclusion

At the end of our journey, we are in every way challenged by the unique and charismatic personality of Fr. Zacharias. Inter-religiosity and inter-culturality, understood and misunderstood, interpreted and misinterpreted, being the very context of our missionary life and task, here is a very daring and unusual pioneer who has cut a beautiful path before us. He is an authentic model of vision and action for

us today. He was convinced about his Christian faith and therefore he was open to religions and cultures. He knew deeply the tenets of Christianity and therefore he could learn from religions and cultures. He had depth-level experience of religiosity that became personal spirituality and therefore he could dialogue with religions and cultures. He authentically lived his faith and therefore he could daringly proclaim it. The more Fr. Zacharias lived his Christianness, the more inter-religious and inter-cultural he became. The more inter-religious and inter-cultural Fr. Zacharias was, the more Christian he became. And thus he became an authentic missionary in whom the harmonious blending of openness to diversity and fidelity to communion and universality is perfectly realized.