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VERBUM DEI IN THE CONTEXT OF HINDUISM

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First of all, let me express my gratitude to Fr. James Swetnam and the organizing committee for giving me this opportunity to explore “*Verbum Mundo*” (*La Vita Cristiana in Dialogo con le Culture e Religioni*). As an Indian, it is my privilege to speak on Christian life or Christianity in India in dialogue with Hinduism.

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world whose origins go back to ca. 3500 BCE. The traditional name for Hinduism is *sanatana dharma* (eternal religion) or *arya-dharma* (the religion of the nobles). The term ‘Hindu’ was first used by Persians to refer to the people living around the river Sindhu in Sanskrit (Indos in Greek and Indus in Latin). India is called Hindustan (land or place of the Hindus). However, not every Indian is a Hindu.

India has been the cradle of many religions, such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism and a number of tribal religions. In addition, both Christianity and Islam came to India from outside. India is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, and religions still play an important role in the life and choices of most of its people.

1. Salient Features of Hinduism

Hinduism as a whole is not a single religion with a definite creed. Julius Lipner’s comparison of Hinduism with the ancient banyan tree of the Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) Botanical Gardens is revealing.¹ Lipner shows that the analogy of a magnificent banyan tree explains well the “polycentrism” as well as the organic oneness of the diverse religious traditions grouped together under the umbrella of Hinduism. Banyan trees send down aerial shoots which in turn gradually become individual trees as they reach the ground and resemble the trunk themselves. Just as a banyan tree is ‘polycentric’ by nature and has a web of many trees organically connected to one another, Hinduism is a fellowship of religions, believing in different paths to salvation and accommodating different doctrines, multiple sects and varying religious practices.²

Hindu Scriptures are in general classified into two categories: *Sruti* (literally, “what is heard”) and *Smriti* (literally, “what is remembered”). *Sruti* is considered to be normative. However, what is *Sruti* for one sect might be *Smriti* for another sect. The Hindu exegesis presupposes that *Sruti* has the full revelation, and the function of the *Smriti* and commentaries is to bring out the hidden meanings of the *Sruti* texts. It insisted on the continuity between the two – the implicit and the explicit. The pri-

¹ Julius Lipner, “On Hinduism and Hinduisms: The Way of the Banyan,” in *The Hindu World* (eds., Sushil Mitta; and Gene Thursby; New York and London: Routledge, 2004) 9-34, esp. 24-25.

² See R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (Oxford: University Press, 1966).

mary purpose of the exegesis is not the accumulation of information (knowledge *per se*) but spiritual experience and enlightenment.³ Most Hindu scholars claim that reason alone is empty and powerless when it comes to revealing and possessing the knowledge of the divine. The Sacred Scripture (*Sruti*) is necessary for liberation or salvation (*moksha*). Hinduism does not have a central authoritative 'magisterium' with universal jurisdiction to fix the canons of the Hindu Scriptures and to ensure their proper interpretation, unity of doctrines, rituals and religious practices.

The ethos of Hinduism is expressed in the verse (*shloka*) from the Rg-veda (1.164.46): *Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti* (Being is one; the wise call it by different [names]). Again the Rg-veda (1.89.1) declares: "Let good thoughts come to us from all sides." The scriptures of other religions are considered to be part of the *Smriti* – they are secondary revelations of the one Divine Reality. In principle, the Bible can thus be part of *Smriti*, and there are many commentaries written by Hindu scholars on the life and teachings of Jesus.⁴ Some Hindus regard Jesus Christ as an *avatara* (descent ["incarnation"]). More accurately, they mean to call him a secondary (*gauna*) *avatara* (i.e., a human being into whom God has entered for a special purpose), and not a primary (*mukhya*) *avatara* (God himself who has descended into a visible, real form of an *avatara*).⁵

In conclusion, we need to keep in mind that Hinduism differs in many ways from Christianity. Although there are different founders for individual sects, Hinduism as a whole has no single founder. It does not have a single unified canon of Scripture normative for all Hindus. Nor does it have a centralized authoritative teaching office with universal jurisdiction. Hinduism is open to assimilate diverse doctrines and beliefs into its system. It respects other religions as different paths to salvation. Hinduism has been continuously evolving in response to the internal reformations and external challenges. S. Radhakrishnan describes Hinduism as a "movement, not a position; a process, not a result; a growing tradition, not a fixed revelation."⁶ This inner dynamism might have been the reason for its survival for the past 5000 years or so without any centralized leadership and authority.

Although Hinduism has been known for its spirit of tolerance and religious harmony, in recent years, it has been infected by the virus of religious fundamentalism and communal violence. Communal riots are on the increase in India. The conflicts between Hindus and Muslims (e.g., the massacre of innocent Muslims in Gujarat in 2002) as well as between Hindus and Christians (e.g., attacks against Christians in Kandhamal [Orissa] in 2008-09) bear this point out.

2. Christianity in India

Christianity arrived in India about 2000 years ago. According to the tradition, one of the Apostles, St. Thomas, arrived in Kerala (South India) in 52 CE and converted local Indians to Christianity. His converts were called Syrian Christians who inte-

³ Harold Coward, *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988) 128.

⁴ For example, Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within You* (Vols. 1-2; First Indian Edition; Kolkata: Yogoda Satsanga Society of India, 2007).

⁵ On a theological comparison between *avatara* and incarnation, see Noel Sheth, "Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison," *Philosophy East and West: A Quarterly of Comparative Philosophy* 52:1 (January 2002): 98-125.

⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (New York: MacMillan, 1927) 91.

grated Christian faith and the local social customs and rituals, and lived in harmony with their Hindu neighbours for many centuries. They remained as a small Christian community in Kerala until the 15th century, until the arrival of the missionaries from Europe.

The large-scale conversions to Christianity took place when the missionaries came to India with the European colonizers. With the arrival of the Portuguese to India in the 15th century, the visits of Roman Catholic missionaries to India became more organized. Later on, vigorous Christian missionary activities continued. In 1544 CE St. Francis Xavier began his massive evangelization work in Goa which made significant marks in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries both Catholic and Protestant missionaries taught Christian doctrines as well as made important contributions to education and social development in India.

During the middle ages, the presupposition was that there was no salvation outside the Church. So the missionaries were zealous to convert non-Christians and non-Catholics to the Catholic Church (the true Church) for the salvation of all. The missionaries looked upon Hindus as devil worshippers. However, after the Second Vatican Council, there was a paradigm shift in our attitude towards the cultures and religious traditions of India.

Many attempts have been made to build up an Indian Church through the process of inculturation. Seminaries included courses on Indian philosophy, taught contextualized Indian Theology; celebrated Indian Mass integrating traditional Indian rituals such as *arati* (waving of lights) and Indian *bhajans* (hymns). Regional languages were encouraged and Indian names were adopted. Indian architecture was used to construct Christian churches. Many Christian monasteries followed the life-style of Hindu ashrams. Christians practised Yoga and Buddhist meditations such as *vipasana*.

According to the census of India (2001), Christians are only 2.3% of Indian population (about 30 million) and remain a minority community in India. Although the majority of Christians in India are Catholics and Protestants, there are also other denominations such as Syrian Church, Armenian Church, and Anglican Church.

3. The Task Ahead

I conclude my Paper by presenting some challenges for an enhanced presence of the Church in India today. Christians in India are challenged to reflect seriously on the significance of the Incarnation of Jesus in a multi-religious context. For a harmonious living and better partnership with the fellow-Hindu-citizens, we need to be more open and cultivate a positive attitude to other religious traditions. We need to profess the basic presupposition that God's creative, liberative and salvific presence is visible in all cultures and religious traditions.

Christians in India are called to engage in a dialectical dialogue with Hindu traditions and Indian cultures. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Dialogue is a sign of hope that the religions of the world are becoming more aware of their shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family. This is a crucial part of the globalization of solidarity that must come if the future of the world is to be secure."⁷ It is the need of the hour to clarify the vision and objectives of the Church's mission in India

⁷ Pope John Paul II, "Dialogue with World Religions," *Origins* 29/24 (1999): 398.

today. We need to be engaged more in people's conversion to God than conversion from Hinduism to Christianity.

Indian biblical exegetes can also learn a lot from Hindu traditional approaches. The primary purpose of biblical exegesis should be an encounter with God which results in personal *metanoia* and brings about social transformation. This personal experience of God, in the process of exegesis, empowers the interpreters to share in the life of God leading them to life eternal.

It is my hope that the Indian Church's dialectical dialogue with the people of India following different religious traditions will bring about greater reconciliation, mutual respect and better collaboration in building up a more just and less violent human society in the context of the Reign of God.