CHRISTIAN FAITH AND WITNESS IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES

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We are living in a country where religion is a central of everything, from personal to public, social to geographical, economic to politics, everything is influenced by Religion. But moreover every religion should respect each other and should grow in mutual religious maturity. Religion interested in progress, development, peaceful and joining. Help and not fight, assimilation and not destruction, peace and not dissension, joining not for separation. J. Krishnamurthi wrote, feel perfect tolerance for all and a heartily interest in the beliefs of those of other religion, just as much as in your owns. For their religion is a path to the highest, just as yours is. You must understand all. This subject ‘Christian faith and witness in pluralistic societies’ will help us to understand the challenges and implication of the multi faith context for Christian faith and also it will give a broader understanding in dealing with other faith people in a matured way.

UNIT 1.

Missionary encounters with world religions

Many missionaries came to India and work hard to spread the Christianity and share the Gospel to maximum, along with it they also contributed in the development of India because it leads to the Indian renaissance which provided a new outlook to an Indian civilization. They impacted through education, medical mission, and stood against social evils like sati, female infanticide etc. but at the same time they presented Christianity in a western cup. They believed that it is impossible to live in their own social locations, the converts were forced to moved from their roots and replaced to the mission compounds.

Study of religion or comparative religion

Study of religion or Comparative study of religions attempts to understand and appreciate various themes in religions unlike philosophy of religion, comparative religion is a non – normative(norms) discipline because it is not a set of rules which could be used to make a judgment on the truthfulness of each religion or each religious phenomenon. Comparative study of religion is not a deposit of laws which could help to examine what is false or right in the fundamental questions raised by different religions. That is why this discipline is considered in the area of phenomenology because it only analyses the phenomena just as they are, situate them in their contexts(in this case, each religion is a context), bring out the importance of each theme in a given religion and then compare or contrast it with similar themes found in other religions.
Factors Responsible for the Emergence of the Study of Religion

The study of religion in a non-theological, academic setting is a modern phenomenon. It has its roots in the Enlightenment, the development of the physical and cultural sciences and the discovery of other cultures. It was born in the ethos that allowed scholars to study religion from an observer’s point of view that was not necessarily religious or anti-religious. The goal was to describe, compare, and explain the history and evolution of religion, its diversity and its persistence in all cultures. Various factors constituted towards the emergence of science of religion such as:

i) **Reformation/ Renaissance:** E. O. James and Waardenburg identified the reformation’s impact on the study of religion such as Christian rituals or church practices or critical analysis. Julius Welhausean confronted the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and fixing a specific date. David F. Strauss summed up that the existence of Jesus was a myth: who never existed.

ii) **Geographical Discoveries:** Geographical discoveries of the 16th and 17th centuries enabled the West to come in contact with other human civilization causing them to broaden their view of human nature, culture and religion. The term *nature* and *natural* became normative for right and truth. These centuries saw the popularization of the idea of natural religious quality of humanity/natural religion against the prevalent notion of revealed religion.

iii) **The Deists:** The Deist during the 17th -18th centuries claimed the goodness and purity of original religion which was corrupted later by the priests and popularized the natural religious quality of humanity against the prevalent idea of revealed religions. Despite the authority of the church, deistic thoughts contributed the fundamental insight the ideal of natural religion –to the specific study of religion.

iv) **Scientific and Intellectuals Developments:** During the 17th – 18th centuries inspired innovative methods to the study of religion. Darwin’s theory of evolution, linear development of things, influenced many intellectuals especially the supporter of anthropological approach.

v) **Travellers:** During the 18th century religion was given descriptions, though unsystematic, by travellers. Charles De Brosses’ opined that Fetishism was the earliest form of religion in all nations followed afterwards by polytheism and monotheism.

vi) **Decipherment of Ancient Texts:** Decipherment of Ancient Texts Contributed towards investigating many unknown religions. William Jones uncovered structural similarities between
Sanskrit and European languages, between the Indian Myths and Greek, Roman and Biblical. Jean Francois Champollion decoded the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script. Philological research eventually instigated the scientific study of religion.

vii) **Studies in Myth and Folklore**: The early part of the 19th century witnessed several studies in mythology. Often the history of religion was compared to the study of myth and comparative religion with comparative mythology. Along with myth, studies in the folklore also influenced the study of religion.

**World Parliament of Religions**

- World parliament of religions held in 1893, it was the first global efforts for the meeting of world religions on one mega platform.
- It was held from 11 Sep. to 27 Sep. 1893 in Chicago.
- It was a part of world Columbian exposition to celebrate the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.
- The representatives in this historical event where dominated by English speaking Christian representatives, who presented 152 topics out of total 194 papers.
- The opportunity for the leaders from other religious traditions was limited but significant; 12 speakers represented Buddhism, 11 Judaism, 8 Hinduism, 2 Islam, 2 Parsi religion, 2 Shintoism, 2 Confucianism, and 1 Taoism and 1 Jainism

**Parliament of World Religions: Swami Vivekananda**

The parliament of Religions was one of the most important functions in the life of Vivekananda. It was held at Chicago in 1893. There are different opinions about the visit of Vivekananda to the West. Some says that attending the parliament was not the main objective of Vivekananda and the primary purpose was to go to West to earn money for the uplift of the Indian masses. Vivekananda speech was on 11th September and He is perhaps best known for his inspiring speech beginning with “Sisters and Brothers of America.” Thereafter he conducted hundreds of public and private lectures and classes, disseminating tenets of Hindu philosophy in America, England and Europe. In America Vivekananda became India's spiritual ambassador. His mission there was the interpretation of India's spiritual culture and heritage. He also tried to enrich the religious consciousness of Americans through the teachings of the Vedanta philosophy. He established the Vedanta societies in America and England. He was a key figure in the
introduction of Indian philosophies of *Vedānta* and *Yoga* to the western world and was credited with raising interfaith awareness, bringing Hinduism to the status of a major world religion in the late 19th century. After a comprehensive tour of four years in the West he returned to India in 1897. Later he became a major force in the revival of Hinduism in India and contributed to the notion of nationalism in colonial India.

**Ecumenical Discussion On Interfaith Dialogue**

The word ecumenical comes from the New Testament word oikoumene, The word is combination of two Greek words ‘oikos’ means house and ‘meno’ means to live and thus it communicate the meaning of living in a house. The New Testament used this word in different manner. Firstly, to refer entire inhabited world (Matthew 24:14;Luke4:5,21:26; Acts 11:28, 17:31; Rom10:18;Heb 1:6 Rev 3:10;16:14)Secondly, it also conveys the political meaning of Roman Empire.(Luke 2.1;Acts 17.6).Thirdly it also means Universal human community expressed in Heb 2:5.The word ecumenical was preferred by the church to portray the council where different representatives of different churches gathered. It was in 20th century that the word ecumenical got prominence and used widely. Plurality is part of the social fabric of Indian society and now due to globalization it is reality all over the world and here ecumenicity transcends the Christian boundaries and embraces people of all community having different faith tradition and practices. People from various religio-cultural orientations are coming together and there is an unofficial real life inter-faith dialogue is taking place and this lead to understanding the other. But there are factors and groups not willing for compromise and create avenues for confrontations. It is precisely hear that we need inter-faith dialogue.

Indian context of religious plurality requires a sense of identity but if this is expressed in terms of superior or inferior community in culture, history, tradition and even to the loyalty to the nation, it can lead to conflicts and communalism. This is a reality whereas various communities are confronting with each other to legitimize their social space consequently inter-religious becomes a necessity for harmonious living in Indian society.