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# The Reception of the Second Vatican Council in India in the Context of Dialogue

**Abstract**

This paper examines the reception of the Second Vatican Council in India, particularly through the lens of dialogue as a fundamental ecclesial mission. Vatican II's acknowledgment of religious plurality and its call to foster fellowship among all humanity provide the foundation for India's dialogical engagement. While the Council promoted openness to cultures, religions, and socio-political realities, its implementation in India encounters challenges such as concerns over Christian identity, suspicion of syncretism, and hesitancy toward other faiths. The paper highlights theological orientations rooted in the universal salvific will of God and the active presence of the Holy Spirit beyond visible Church boundaries. It also considers ecumenical dialogue, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' triple dialogue – of cultures, religions, and the poor – and the urgent need for a participatory and prophetic Church amid caste discrimination and pervasive poverty. Ultimately, the article affirms that genuine dialogue strengthens Christian witness and advances human liberation, unity, and peace in India.

**Keywords**: interreligious dialogue, Vatican II reception, Indian theology.

**Recepcja Soboru Watykańskiego II w Indiach w kontekście dialogu**

**Streszczenie**

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje recepcję Soboru Watykańskiego II w Indiach szczególnie przez pryzmat dialogu jako fundamentalnej misji eklezjalnej. Uznanie przez Sobór Watykański II pluralizmu religijnego oraz wezwanie do budowania wspólnoty wśród całej ludzkości stanowią fundament dla dialogicznego zaangażowania w Indiach. Podczas gdy Sobór promował otwartość na kultury, religie i realia społeczno-polityczne, jego realizacja w Indiach konfrontowana jest z takimi wyzwaniami, jak obawy o tożsamość chrześcijańską, podejrzenia o synkretyzm oraz nieufność wobec innych religii. Artykuł podkreśla teologiczne orientacje zakorzenione w powszechnym zbawczym planie Boga oraz aktywnej obecności Ducha Świętego poza widzialnymi granicami Kościoła. W tekście jest również mowa o dialogu ekumenicznym, potrójnym dialogu Konferencji Azji – z kulturami, religiami i ubogimi – oraz pilnej potrzebie Kościoła partycypacyjnego i proroczego w obliczu dyskryminacji kastowej i powszechnej biedy. Ostatecznie artykuł potwierdza, że autentyczny dialog wzmacnia chrześcijańskie świadectwo oraz sprzyja ludzkiej wolności, jedności i pokojowi w Indiach.

**Słowa kluczowe**: dialog międzyreligijny, recepcja Soboru Watykańskiego II, teologia indyjska.

The legacy and newness of the second Vatican Council is often termed as the New Pentecost as far as India is concerned. After sixty years of the Council there are cries from different parts of our country asking the questions: How we have imbibed the spirit of it particularly in India? How can we carry forward the spirit and legacy of it in the days to come? Unilateral understanding namely, as sets of teachings imposed from above is often shadowed in the reception of the teaching of the council. On the contrary, today we speak of the dialogical nature of the teaching amidst various phenomena intoxicating the modern human mind in terms of philosophy (post-modernism), pluralism in faith, death of God movements, consumerism, globalization so and so forth. As far as the Indian scenario is concerned in terms of dialogue, one may observe that we are still in infancy although there were many attempts over the years.

One of the important presuppositions found in all Vatican II documents is the reality of plurality: plurality of Churches, of world religions, of human races, cultures, world views so and so forth. Implicitly or explicitly, 'Fellowship' is an overarching theme expressed in almost all documents of the Council. It transcends and goes beyond the doctrinal and ecclesiastical boarders namely, unity from ecclesiastical alliance by patching up of the doctrinal differences to a unity and fellowship of the whole humankind. As it was observed by theologians and discovered in the Faith and Order Papers, the factors that divide the Churches are the same as those that divide the world[1] such as race, caste, religions, injustice, and unjust socio-economic structures etc. The short cut to this goal of fellowship is "dialogue". In the Indian contexts although the enthusiasm is in a declining pace in terms of wider horizon of dialogue, still the council remains as a beacon of light for the cause of fellowship of humanity in the 21st century. Hence, I have selected the theme of this paper as *The Reception of the Second Vatican Council in India in the Context of Dialogue*.

## 1. Impediments to Dialogue

Many Indian theologians have already reflected on the increasing reluctance to dialogue[2]. One of the issues disturbing the process of dialogue between Christian faith and cultures, religions or ideologies is the fear of tampering Christian unicity. Questions arise on the very identity of Christianity. When the local faith categories raise

[1] Faith and Order Papers. 1971. *Series, II*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 56.

[2] Vincent Kundukulam. 2024. Challenges and Prospects in Faith-Culture Encounter. In *New Horizons in Theology: Ecclesiology – Ecumenism – Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Ed. Joby J. Kochumuttam, Shaji G. Kochuthara, Rajesh Kavalackal, 187–196. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications.

serious challenges to the ways of faith-living, those who are passionately attached to the external rituals and traditions of Church may doubt losing the ground of Christianity. "Identity is the relation that each thing has to itself and to nothing else is the explanation given in the Encyclopaedia of philosophy"[3]. It is true, one of the factors that constitutes identity is what makes something different from the other.

But there is also another important constitutive component in the concept of identity. It appears well in the etymological meaning of the French equivalent *l'identité* which means 'sameness of essential in diverse instances'[4]. Here, the emphasis is on the sameness in basic principles than on the differentiating elements. Identity consists both in sharing of the common essence and in differing from the other in the externals. This understanding is very close to the Indian mind according to which human identity consists in two factors: individuation and commonality. Hence, in the pluralistic world, a person can be fairly understood only through an integral approach.

Those who examine closely the history of the Church shall realize that Christians have ever been living their identity in diverse ways. Encounters with new spaces demanded from them changes in their old patterns of understanding and living faith. In this venture, the vision that helped them to keep a healthy balance between permanence and mutation was the belief in Trinity. The One God is a communion of three persons. While each person in Trinity has specific roles in the mystery of redemption, all the three together assume their responsibilities in mutual love and charity[5]. Another model before the Church was the mystery of incarnation. Religiously and culturally, Jesus was a Jew, but those features did not obstruct him from sharing the "human commonalities" with other religious cultures. He kept the godliness while being fully humane. "Unity in deposit of faith and diversity in the manner of expressing has ever been the principle followed by Church" (GS 62). This is possible due to the capacity of the gospel to ensure unity in diversity, says Dermot A. Lane. To him, to live in a communion of faith in a multiplicity of cultures is like the conductor coordinating an orchestra comprised of various instruments and singers[6]. From this vantage point of identity that we have encountered, we now need to look at the concept of dialogue.

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[3] Williamson Timothy. 1998. Identity. In *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward Craig, 676. London: Routledge.

[4] Thomas Thakidipuram. 2010. Identity. In *An Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 1, Ed. Johnson J. Puthenpurackal, 649. Bangalore: ATC; Kundukulam. 2024. Challenges and Prospects in Faith-Culture Encounter, 189.

[5] Sebastian M. Michael. 2015. *Christianity and Cultures*. Pune: 1SPCK, Ishvani Kendra, 35–36.

[6] Lane A. Dermot. 1993. *Religion and Culture in Dialogue*. Dublin: The Columba Press, 31–32.

## 2. Dialogue Explained

Indeed, with Vatican II dialogue has become a very popular term both in the Church and the world. The council documents *Nostra Aetate* where for the first time in the official document the Catholic Church took a very positive approach to other religions and their values, and it called for the promotion of dialogue among all religions. All the popes that came after the Council and Pontifical Council for Inter-religious dialogue have published several documents explaining the concept of dialogue. Since the whole of humanity has the same origin and destiny, God's plan for salvation is one and The Holy Spirit is present and active in the world, all authentic religions contain spiritual values, and it gives strong basis for dialogue among various religions. Dialogue is necessary for closer relations, growth, mutual enrichment, and mutual correction too. It is also an essential factor for the liberation of humanity, and for peace and harmony among nations.

In this age of mass communication dialogue opens up a refreshing space for widening the horizons of one's knowledge and perspective. In contemporary times dialogue can be understood in different ways. The Pontifical Council for inter-religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation" enunciate the term dialogue. Different forms of dialogue were clarified. 1. Dialogue of life: in today's life people of all religions and ideologies live together in society with openness in a spirit of collaboration sharing their joys sorrows and hopes for each other's mutual wellbeing. 2. Dialogue of action: people of all religions and ideologies work together in collaboration with each other for the development of society in areas of life such as social, cultural, economic, and political by undertaking common projects. 3. Dialogue of experts for theological exchange: specialists in different religions meet and discuss their respective religious heritage to understand and deepen them and to apply them to the actual problems of life. 4. Dialogue of religious experience: persons rooted in their spiritual and religious traditions share their experience of prayer, contemplation, faith and their search for the absolute. It is to be noted that it is in India that many of the world religions exist side by side since millennia and they have a better understanding of other religions and they practice dialogue in all these forms. Dialogue is a primary way of being in Church in India.

## 3. Dialogue: Theological Reception

Any dialogue should be open on the basis of the *sensus fidelium* of the Church. The Vatican II documents signal towards this concern. "All men stern from one

stock and share in a common destiny, God, God's providence goodness and saving designs extend to all humans" (NA 1). Consequently, those who have not received the gospel are related to the people of God. Those who seek God with a sincere heart and try in their actions to do his will through the dictates of their conscience may achieve eternal salvation. (LG 16). With regard to the functioning of the Holy Spirit the Council says that without doubt He was at work in the world before Christ was glorified (AG 4). The activity of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to the Catholic Church; He directs the course of time and renews the face of the earth (GS 26). Subsequently, the church was understood as a worldwide reality rather than a merely European centred religion. Since the Spirit is active in the religions, it is the prerogative of the Church entering into dialogue with them in order to recognize the riches of God present in them and realize God's plan on earth. Those who do not possess an explicit knowledge of God, are also exposed to the presence of the saving grace of Christ. They become partners of the paschal mystery in a way known to God (LG 13, 15; GS 22).

In the light of these theological stands, the Council reiterates that other religions are not mere human enterprise, but a sort of secret presence of God. The Council Fathers advice that we should not reject nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. Although differing in many ways to the teaching of the Church in terms of teaching, she keeps high regard for the manner of life and function, precepts and doctrines of these religions. Often, they reflect a ray of truth which enlightens all people (NA 2). The Church calls all her faithful to enter with prudence and charity, into discussion and collaboration with other religions. Here we are reminded that the Church is moving from her old exclusive dictum of Outside the Church there is no salvation[7].

In tune with the CBCI Commission for dialogue is presented the guidelines for interreligious dialogue. Dialogue is not in any manner a superficial encounter being watered down by one's religious convictions. Instead, one reaches out from the very core of their respective faith. The attitude that should direct us in this genuine dialogue is prayer, commitment of faith, willingness to change, truthfulness, honesty, humility, spirit of forgiveness etc. Similarly, the Indian Theological Association has also reflected on it saying, like all realities dialogue also contains a paradox namely, commitment to one's own faith and acceptance of others. Genuine dialogue presupposes accepting the equality of others[8].

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[7] Kundukulam. 2024. Challenges and Prospects in Faith-Culture Encounter, 190.

[8] Indian Theological Association. 1988. *Statement of 12th Annual Meeting*, 133.

We should be aware of our own limitations and thus to recognise ourselves as pilgrims in Christ who try to attain the fullness of truth which is beyond all claims of expression and possession. According to one of the Indian theologians,

> Different religions may be seen different kinds and ways of human response to God's self-gift or different ways of approaching the mystery of God. The different religions manifest the different faces of mystery which is never exhausted. This does not mean that all religions are equally authentic, as the fact of human sinfulness can distort any religion. This is why it is said that all religions including Christianity are to be always renewed.

Dialogue is a means for mutual criticism and mutual encounters, mutual purification and mutual learning.

## 4. Dialogue in Ecumenical Concerns

Since India is the cradle of many denominational Christian communities, our dialogue shall cater towards the ecumenical concerns of the Council. In the introduction to the decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio,* the Church declares that the restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Unity is not uniformity, but unity in diversity – unity in faith and diversity in faith expressions, was often reduced to the content of classroom teaching. The early Chrisitan communities were not homogeneous or uniform but diverse with different forms of ministries, different patterns of organization, different formulations and articulations of faith and different ways of worship arising from their different historical, cultural and religious contexts. But the early Christians were fully conscious that the Church is one – one fellowship of all local Churches[9].

According to one of the noted Indian Ecumenists, Kuncheriya Pathil defines the origin of the Church by a process of *Ecclesiogenesis*. It is a dynamic process. Church emerges from a genuine encounter with Christ and gospel with the soul and culture of the people in a specific situation, and it is not merely an external adaptation. The seed of the word of God is sowed and produces fruits in the given context and time; *logos spermatikos*. In India this vibrant interaction with different Christian

[9] Kuncheriya Pathil. 2012. *Unity in Diversity: A Guide to Ecumenism*. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 31.

Churches through the ecumenical movement brought to light the facts of gradual but radical change in the attitude of self-consciousness of the Churches – a change from self-righteousness and self-absolutization to repentance self-questing and mutual recognition as the factors which facilitate an effective encounter in a different religious tradition. In the Catholic Church during this last decade all the attempts to have dialogue with an openness to embrace others is very extensively and concretely expressed through the Papacy of Pope Francis. The entire world recognized the face of a Church that does not reproach humans for their fragility and their wounds but treats them with medicine says the Pope[10].

In our engagement with the dialogue between the different denominations of Christianity today with much vigour and vitality we need to place emphasis on a witnessing Church.

> The Churches come together not to discuss their internal disputes and differences, but to witness together as Christians in the world to promote peace and fellowship among the nations torn apart by war and conflicts, and to establish justice and lawful or in society on the Christian principles of truth justice and love[11].

All the ecclesial dialogues such as ecumenical dialogues, inter-religious dialogues, dialogue of life, dialogue of action and dialogue of theological exchange foster collaboration, affection, relatedness creativity, unity and peace.

## 5. *Ad Extra*: Tripple Immersion

As far as the Indian context is concerned the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) made a pivotal role to enhance the process of dialogue. After Vatican II FABC took great interest in the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue. FABC calls for a triple dialogue or triple immersion which has become the 'catch word' and 'watch word' in the Asian Churches today. Most of the Asian countries experience three realities, their ancient cultures, ancient religions, and massive poverty of the people. It is an important concern of the Indian theologians how they articulate the true Catholicity of the Church by searching for the specific identity of the Indian Church. The Asian Bishops made a strong appeal to Asian/Indian Christian Churches to respond to this threefold reality and enter into dialogue

[10] Francis, 2016 *The Name of God is Mercy*. Vatican: LEV, ix.

[11] Pathil. 2012. *Unity in Diversity*, 204.

with them. Only by the immersion into these realities by a triple dialogue or threefold baptism will the Asian Churches become really authentically local.

> Such dialogue has become urgent in many Asian countries where amidst conditions of oppressive poverty and increasing social conflicts there is quest for an integral liberation. The pluralism and religions and cultures while demanding collaboration among the peoples of various religions in the common task of community building, especially the face of secularizing forces has also become source of increasing division and tension[12].

In addition to that the documents of the Council reiterates that the Church should dialogue with the experience and life situation of the communities. Their anxieties, aspirations, daily struggles and even successes are to be taken into consideration under the umbrella of dialogue. The dialogue between the Church and the world shall be anchored on a strong bedrock of *metanoia* and on effective action in favour of the unfortunates in terms of social justice.

What makes the Indian situation more complex is the interplay of dialectical interaction among the three realities of poverty, religions and caste discrimination. The pervasive inequality is often cumulative namely, the underprivileged becomes underprivileged perennially. The majority of poor in India belongs to the lower caste or Dalits. They are denied the fruit of development and all the same they are condemned by the Hindu Caste system to live as less dignified humans because they are born in a lower caste or Dalit family. There is always a religious sanction to this injustice. Theologising in this complex situation and responding to these challenges by means of dialogue is itself a difficult and painstaking task.

## 6. Dialogue: Reception Poses the Challenges

I admit that the challenges of this magnitude are not based on any scientific study but in the light of reflections by experts in the field who are involved in the interreligious dialogue. As far as theology of dialogue is concerned there are many paradigms in India in terms of Ecclesio-centrism, Christo-centrism, Theo-centrism, Regno-centrism. Which should be adopted in theology is a pertinent question in India. In the pluralistic context today the hierarchy and the faithful alike subscribe to a positive attitude of the Council towards other religions. Since pluralism has be-

[12] FABC Papers. 1991, 122.

come a normative and irreversible phenomena people come out to recognize other religions as ways of salvation to their respective believers. This is in tune with Karl Rahner's anonymous Christians. But in the confines of Christianity the theology of accomplishment runs its course, i.e., all religions are natural religions, and Christianity is the supernatural religion. Shall we follow the models of exclusion, aggression and absolute truth claim? Is a real and honest dialogue possible for the church while holding its absolute claims? If we possess the fullness of truth why do we need dialogue when we only have to give to others and nothing to receive. In this case genuine dialogue seems to be impossible. Can we continue the aggressive colonial policy mission in India? Shall we hold on to relativism, indifference or passive co-existence? Indian theologians declare that "traditional triumphalism of the Church is to be replaced today by listening and openness".

Another obstacle in the way of dialogue is the fear and suspicion of Christians in India. They fear that any appreciation for other faiths and joining celebration of the land may dilute or betray the Christan faith. They see a sort of syncretism in the ministry of dialogue. They consider dialogue as a means for propagating Christian religion and they feel that dialogue is compromising to the revelation of God. Another challenge on the way is directly from the adherents' other religious traditions. They consider dialogue as a new tactic by Christians for conversions. Even inculturation efforts are seen as new way for conversion – the old wolf in a new sheepskin.

In the ecumenical sphere, amidst all kinds of scandals of rivalry and sheep stealing wider ecumenism is a question. Doctrinal dialogues were a failure although we advance a little further. The passion for socio-political collaboration is in a declining stage. Spiritual ecumenism and Witnessing life get its course of action today. But still we need to strive for a comprehensive and inclusive approach since our faith is complementary and all these approaches require a healthy balance, mutual enrichment and correction.

The situation of pervasive poverty and exploitation call into question our faith in loving God for whom humans are more valuable. The situation of unjust structures that condemns people of India to poverty and misery challenges the Church to have dialogue with the world in terms of dehumanizing tendencies. Indian theologians are aware that the situation of poverty calls for repentance and atonement from all Christians as we have either sided with the rich and mighty or failed to denounce the powers that perpetuates the exploitation of the poor. A participatory, prophetic and praxis-oriented theologizing becomes an imperative rather than an armchair theology to commit ourselves to creating a just society. In India the institutionalized inequality such as caste, which continues to disfigure the image of God calls

for the conversion of the Church in India. It is estimated that 50 percent of members of the Church in India are Dalit. However, the Church in India has not always been a light to these nations. She has often compromised with the oppressive caste system and became an anti-witness to the liberating message of Jesus. We need to amplify the voice of few who have broken their silences against oppression injustice and discrimination.

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To sum up, dialogue in the wider sense leads us to see the need for complementary thinking in the Church's relationship with others. Identity and complementarity are two aspects of realities which together constitute fullness and fulfilment. As we have seen, identity can be understood either as an individualized or as relational and complementary. As far as religion is concerned it is true that there is no question of surrendering one's religious convictions and identity and becoming indifferent to one's own religion. But there is a dimension in which people can maintain their own religious identity and authenticity and at the same time open themselves to relate with other religions and thereby experience a new vitality and dynamism in the realm of their own religious experience. Dialogue offers this possibility.

Vatican II's declaration on the relationship with the Church with other religions and the Catholic Bishop Conference of India with separated commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue call for a dialogical mission of the Church in India. Both in theological reflection and in actual dialogue proves that many positive steps are taken to bring about harmony between religions. But there is always a fear of taking risk of surrendering Christian uniqueness and relativizing Christian claims. This is a theological tension and this hesitation seems to be in tension with spiritual hospitality within the heart of the Indian Church. Engaging in a new encounter with others consequently results in a new experience of transformation. That is precisely intended by the teaching of the Vatican II documents and still the Church has to travel long to acquire this spirit. In the words of Raimundo Panikkar, what the Roman Catholic Church needs is not a Vatican III but a Second Jerusalem Council which will clearly articulate the role of the world religions in relation to the plan of God, which is to be done with renewed commitment to the very principle which guided the discussions of the first Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15: 1-12.

In the contemporary culture of corruption and exploitation, the Church as the sacrament of Christ has the responsibility to establish unity, equality, justice, and

holiness. Through active dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange and dialogue of religious experience each Christan is called to establish the Gospel's value of joy and peace in the world. It invites the members of the Church to understand people by entering into their life, their problems and suffering. Hence dialogue respects others and tolerates the contrast of the economy that can create exclusion and inequality. Authentic dialogue powerfully witnesses a Church of Christ and aims at integral human development, genuine social justice, and total human liberation.

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