

Letters to the Editor

Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue

Sir, Recently Pope Francis exhorted the Catholic faithful to redefine the meaning of being Christian. He sees the Church as inclusive where the lay person is on an equal footing with a consecrated person; he wants the Church to consider the baptised and the non-baptised as one in the eyes of God. This is interreligious dialogue at its best. The Pope's recent exhortation should be taken seriously by the Catholic Church, especially in India since we live within a polyphony of religions.

Before I proceed further, I must confess that historical and spatial exigencies prevent me from experiencing the pain of being a Catholic in a Hindu nation. Each religious community is trapped by historical wrongs done by one against the other. We cannot go back in time but taking the cue from Pope Francis, I have to rethink my role as an initiated Shakta Upasak whose roots are in the tribal matriarchal jungles of Assam and whose loci are at Tarapith, Birbhum and Kamakhya in Guwahati. Very few Hindus are initiated fully into Shakta worship and in the ways of Aghora. The Pope had earlier apologised for historical wrongs done by the Church which he leads; I know and not merely think, that it is high time that as an initiated worshipper of the Mahavidyas, we decry all wrongs done by us against Christians. This is to be truly Hindu. We Hindus are not tolerant of other religions in a pejorative way; we are respectful of other religions. Unless there is considerable healing of historical wounds on both sides, all interreligious dialogues will fail. I fail to live up to my vocation as one called to Tantric liturgical practices unless I apologise for the past. Then only will I be able to authentically live as an Aghor practitioner within Shakta Tantra. Hatred destroys both the hater and the hated.

Pope Francis finds that all people are equal in the eyes of God and the Church is also for those who do not formally belong to Her - I think we as Faith

communities must reflect further on what Pope Francis wants the Church to be. He had earlier spoken in a different context, that we should get our hands dirty serving God. Can one get one's hands dirtier than in serving God in charnel grounds meditating on the transience of life? This contemplation is the main vocation of an Aghor Tantric. And now he speaks of not distinguishing between those formally within the Church and those outside the Church - so I wonder whether I am a crypto-Christian? Or, whether many Catholics are crypto-Hindus? This is an entirely different stance than the one posited by Karl Rahner. Rahner from his historical situatedness saw Hindus as 'anonymous Christians'. Rahner's position was sadly condescending. Here I am using the prefix 'crypto' in the sense that Acharya Gaudapada (circa 6th century A.D.) is thought to be a crypto-Buddhist. In no way is either Acharya Gaudapada a Buddhist; nor is the Mandukya Upanishad a Buddhist text. Nonetheless both the Mandukya Upanishad and its greatest commentator, Gaudapadacharya, are definitely crypto-Buddhist. In this sense Hindus and Catholics should rethink their religious foundations. To what limits are we both willing to go and transcend our self-imposed boundaries? In India, can we ignore each other? We have to be on our guard always - that historical wrongs are not repeated; stereotypes are avoided, and we work together in creating an authentic Indian spirituality which is not rigid. We must learn to live outside religious ghettos and journey with one another in pain. Interreligious dialogue is painful since ground realities are often very harsh - most Catholics misunderstand my marga of Aghor Tantra and many Hindus are scared of Christianity.

Heeding both Acharya Gaudapada and now, Pope Francis; we may be able to come out of clericalism and the hunger for recognition which consumes many religious leaders within both our religions.

**Yours truly,
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