

ASIAN HERMENEUTICS IN THEOLOGIZING

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What makes theological reflection meaningful and challenging in a particular context seems to be determined by the world-view of the people who are engaged in the process of theologizing. The dialogue between the text and the context mediated through existential experiences of the theologian opens up the hitherto unknown depths of the text as well as the context. It challenges both the transformation of the theologian as well as her or his context. If theologizing is a meaning-making exercise, this meaning is filtered through the prism of the world-view of the theologian who engages himself or herself in the process of theologizing. Judeo-Christian theology from the beginning of its historical development tried to combine both the Hebrew and the Greek world-views and attempted to explain the foundational experience of God, Humans and the World revealed in through the person of Jesus Christ. The Asian world-view distinct from the Hebrew and Greek world-views but not separated from them found hardly any place in this process of theologizing. The Asian world-view with its distinctive hermeneutics has the potentiality to liberate theology itself from its exclusive confines and makes it more meaningful to those who do not share the Judeo-Christian world-view. Therefore, a genuine catholic theology calls for an Asian hermeneutics and other hermeneutical approaches to theology to liberate it from one-sided and sectarian hermeneutics claiming itself to be the only valid and legitimate approach to theologizing. This is also demanded by the Vatican II Council when it affirms that,

It is necessary that in each of the great socio-cultural regions, as they are called, theological investigation should be encouraged and the facts and words revealed by God, contained in the sacred Scripture, and explained

by the Fathers and Magisterium of the Church, submitted to a new examination in the light of the tradition of the universal Church. In this way it will be more clearly understood by what means the faith can be explained in terms of the philosophy and wisdom of the people, and how their customs, concept of life and social structures can be reconciled with standard proposed by divine revelation (AG 22).

In theologizing hermeneutics must facilitate interpretation and meaningful communication of texts, symbols and practices so that it can be received by the community for its own transformation and practical living of their faith-commitment.¹ In Asia theologizing is not for its own sake but its purpose is to evolve a "living theology"² in dialogue with various vibrant religions, cultures, struggles and suffering of millions of poor and the marginalized for a fuller human life. Therefore it needs a method of interpretation which goes beyond the traditional definitions of hermeneutics. This is legitimate according to the recent development in the understanding about the scope of hermeneutics. According to one of the recent definitions of hermeneutics, it is "the method of interpretation, first of texts, and secondly of the whole social, historical and psychological world."³ It is in this understanding of hermeneutics we discuss Asian hermeneutics in theologizing. Therefore, Asian hermeneutics can be described as both the art of interpreting the texts, symbols and practices of Christian Tradition of the past and the present from the Asian genius of viewing and relating to reality and the theory about the methods of such interpretation leading to praxis.

The Asian hermeneutics needs to be judiciously employed to deepen the understanding of the faith-experience in Jesus Christ and the vision of God, humans and the world revealed in and through him shared by the apostles and the early community. It is the duty of the church in Asia to take out its 'treasures both new and old' (Mt 13:52) to fulfill its mission by living and by

proclaiming Christ in a meaningful way. It is also imperative for the Christian theology in general that it becomes more and more inclusive and less and less exclusive and sectarian thus it finds its true nature and purpose. In this article an attempt is made to highlight the main characteristics of this hermeneutics and its consequence for theological reflection.

1. The Asian View of Reality

Theologizing being a systematic reflection and articulation of one's faith experience, both one's faith-experience and its articulation go through the window of one's own vision of reality. This vision of reality is experienced through the stained-glass window of philosophical presuppositions, myths, stories, socio-cultural relationships, struggles of life in a situation of poverty, exploitation and discrimination etc., that shape the view of life of a particular people. Beneath the mind-boggling varieties of philosophies and religious and cultural expressions in the Asian context there is a holistic or integral vision of reality that determines one's perception and relation to the text and/or context. All those who are born into any of the Asian cultures no matter whatever religious or cultural tradition may they adhere to, share this common vision that the entire reality is inter-related.

To be is to be related. Therefore, there are no isolated realities. Thus the Asian vision of reality overcomes the crude dualism that necessitates the fragmentation of reality and the tyranny of monism that destroys differences and distinctions. It transcends both these extremes. In its vision reality is neither one nor two. Reality is indeed *advaita* or *not-two*. It is also *not-one* either. This *advaitic* intuition though recognized as one way of experiencing and understanding reality explained by one of the philosophical systems of Indian philosophy, it may not be too much of a generalization to say that it is an all-pervading Asian attitude. Therefore, the Asian emphasis on the need to experience or encounter reality and be transformed by it is considered unscientific and confusing by those who insist on a cognitive

approach to reality. When the former uses an evocative language in articulating experience and expressing it through myths, symbols and metaphors the latter employs systematic and clearly identifiable concepts that would appeal to the intellect. In fact, both these approaches to interpret reality must be seen as complementary. Such an attitude of seeking complementarity itself is typical of Asian hermeneutics. Theologizing in the Asian context can also be done by employing the hermeneutics evolved from the life-struggle of the majority of the people of Asia for a fuller human life. Their myths and stories, symbols and rituals reveal to us how they interpret the mysteries of life in relation to God, world and other humans. In this article an attempt is made to show one of the systematically developed principles of hermeneutics to understand and articulate mysteries of Christian faith that can contribute to a theologizing relevant in the Asian context.

2. Epistemological Principle Determining Hermeneutics

The principle of identity and the principle of contradiction are the epistemological principles that govern our knowledge of reality. While the western tradition gives more importance to the principle of contradiction leading to an analytical understanding of reality, the eastern tradition gives more importance to the principle of identity. When the former principle seeks what makes the difference and distinction the latter seeks what makes relationship and unity. While the former is analytical in its approach to interpret reality the latter is synthetic in its approach. Again these are not exclusive statements about these two approaches. But it indicates the emphasis each tradition lays on a particular principle. However, this emphasis determines one's vision of reality and subsequent interpretation of reality. When the principle of contradiction determines hermeneutics it limits the horizon of understanding reality while it excludes everything that it sees as contradictory to its affirmation. This has serious consequence for theologizing. Theological statements can be made using particular categories of thought that emerged from a certain world-view and a

philosophical system that excludes other ways of thinking and understanding. This has happened in the past and it has its influence even today. In the beginning any theological reflection on the mystery of Christ was articulated in Hellenistic thought patterns. Some may consider it providential that the Greek philosophical categories could systematically articulate the theological interpretation of the Christian mysteries to preserve and further explain the Christian faith-experience. But it must be admitted that in the course of the development of theology unwittingly the Church was caught up in the thinking that it could express its faith-experience only in Greek philosophical categories or any thought patterns that evolved from the Greek philosophy.⁴ This probably cannot be considered providential. God does not provide a blue-print for human reflection and action. He gives only a vision. Humans are given the capacity to work out that vision following the genius of their authentic culture and thought patterns that have their ultimate source in God himself. From time to time this one-sided and exclusive approach to the interpretation of the Christian faith-experience was shown to be lacking universality by those who belong to other cultures and follow different world-views. But it takes time for human mind to evolve from particular to universal attitudes, from the security of an illusory catholicity to real catholicity. The signs of such a need to embrace true catholicity and the realization that the interpretation of the Christic-mystery cannot be exhausted by any one method of hermeneutics are felt by almost all theologians of today. In this context the Asian hermeneutics can assist the birthing of a new and a deeper understanding of the Christic experience and its articulation complementing, completing and opening up further new vistas of the Christian vision of reality. Such an approach would have far-reaching consequences for Christian life and its commitment to world.

The epistemological principle that is at work in the Asian vision of reality and its hermeneutics mainly, though not exclusively, is the

principle of identity. When one's vision of reality is influenced by the principle of identity the entire reality is seen from its inter-relatedness because the principle of identity gives emphasis to what unites various dimensions of reality than what separates them. In this synthetic vision distinctions and differences among the various dimensions of reality are not eliminated but they are transcended. At this higher level a new and wider horizon of vision emerges that would lead to a deeper and transforming understanding of reality. It is no more the *either/or* approach which excludes one or the other but it is an approach of *not only but also*. Here what is sought is the inter-relatedness of the various dimensions of reality. This epistemological principle of identity has a tremendous influence on the Asian hermeneutics.

In the process of theologizing in the Asian context of diverse religions and diverse cultures the question raised is: how to interpret meaningfully the relevant texts of the Scripture and Christian doctrines which were articulated in another culture shaped by a particular world-view? The Asian hermeneutical approach challenges any exclusivistic and narrow understanding of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and its consequences for the entire world and the human society. The Asian hermeneutics does not concern itself, for example, with the question about the uniqueness of Christ or the Church which is a Western pre-occupation. Whatever the issue of theological discourse may be, it must be seen in its relationship with other aspects of reality itself and never to be seen in isolation. Therefore, the question of uniqueness of Christ or the Church is not at all an issue that can be raised as it would reduce Christ to be someone who can be compared with others and reduce Church to a mere sociological entity. It would be limiting the Mystery of Christ and the mystery of the Church that surpass all definitions.

3. Potential of Asian Hermeneutics in Theologizing

Asian hermeneutics has the potentiality to widen the horizon of theological reflection by re-reading the texts of both Scripture and

Tradition in dialogue with the Asian context. It can make theological reflection relevant to the context as well as enrich Christian theology by opening up new vistas for Christian living and commitment. The unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ and its articulation in the Scripture and Tradition, and the living of that Christic experience in the community of the believers need this new and challenging interpretation to be more faithful to the Christian vocation.

Many of the misunderstandings and subsequent rejection of the Christian claim about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only saviour of humankind and the necessity of Church for salvation etc., to a great extent can be attributed to the lack of understanding the Asian world-view which does not accept exclusiveness on any such matter of absolute importance to one's life. How would one interpret God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the meaning of the Church employing Asian hermeneutics? How is it possible to overcome the exclusivistic and triumphalistic language of Christian proclamation that is rejected by the Asian mind? This is possible if we use the Asian hermeneutics in the re-interpretation of Christian faith articulated in the texts of dogmas and doctrines of the Church. However different Asian method of interpretation may be from the traditional hermeneutics the articulation arrived at must be relevant to the Asian context as well as it must be faithful to the content of Church's authoritative teaching on the Person and mission of Christ.

We could take the above mentioned important questions about the uniqueness and universality of Christ and the necessity of the Church for salvation for our discussion. We attempt only at giving some indications how the Asian hermeneutics could gainfully employed in explaining these mysteries in the Asian context. We could inquire about the way one can transcend these most fundamental questions about the uniqueness of Christ and his Church without compromising the truth that is handed over to us through the apostolic tradition and the constant teaching of the

Magisterium of the Church. We can show that it is possible to overcome those contradictions inherent in such claims according to the Asian/Indian mind and which cannot be perceived by those who follow the traditional hermeneutics based on the principle of contradiction. In fact, the problem is that what is claimed to be obviously universal is not obvious to the Asian way of interpreting the content of the text of Christian tradition. Therefore, what is considered to be traditionally universal can be deconstructed and be shown that by the way it is articulated, though well-intentioned, it cannot convey to the Asian mind the universality of the claim but unfortunately only its particularity. According to R. Panikkar, "the meaning of 'catholicity' is not geographical universality, but internal completion"⁵. In the Asian context if the traditional hermeneutics is used in articulating who Jesus Christ is, instead of being the universal saviour of the Christian faith, he would be considered one among the many saviours and mediators of God, and his Church would be considered no more catholic as it claims to be but a sect or a religion among many other religions. This is what the Church's Magisterium calls relativism and rightfully shuns it but unwittingly communicates such relativism to the Asian mind though the opposite is intended. It can be shown that the Asian hermeneutics would be able to overcome such perceived distortions of those basic Christian truths in the Asian context.

The Christian experience is that this Jesus of Nazareth, though lived at a particular time and place, is Lord and God. However, one cannot and should not absolutize this historical existence of the Son of God as if it were the only dimension of the reality of Christ. In fact, all Christological affirmations emphasize both historical and trans-historical dimensions of Christ. The Christian tradition guarded the truth of the Gospel concerning the person of Jesus Christ against all heresies which tried to affirm his humanity by negating his divinity or negating his divinity by affirming his humanity. The Church constantly believed and proclaimed that He is not only divine but also human. He is Logos became human as

John would affirm (cfr. Jn 1:14). There is *no-thing* that by which the reality of Jesus Christ can be compared or contrasted with. He cannot be defined by using the epistemological principle of contradiction or a hermeneutics that has an underpinning of this principle. The reality of Christ or the mystery of Christ transcends any exclusive statements about him. He is neither totally 'the Other' that transcends everything nor totally part of this world that he could be totally identified with it. One cannot logically speak of his uniqueness because he is neither comparable with others nor any other reality. From the point of view of an Asian hermeneutics it is an absurd question to ask whether Jesus Christ is unique or not. If one speaks about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ he/she would reduce Jesus to a mere historical existence that can be compared or contrasted with. You cannot stand outside the reality of Christ and speak about his uniqueness as if you were a separate reality though you are distinct from him. If everything is created in him, through him and for him (Col 1:15f) and if he is the Alpha and the Omega of the entire creation, if *no-thing ex-sists* outside him, we cannot speak of his uniqueness as we generally do. The question of uniqueness can be raised only if we reduce the mystery of Christ to his historical existence. Then he would become like other founders of religions who can be compared and contrasted with them and then his uniqueness can be discussed and debated. If one follows the Asian hermeneutics the absurdity of such questions about the uniqueness of Christ is obvious. But this issue is of paramount importance for those who are only familiar with the traditional Western ways of hermeneutics.

Based on the principle of identity the Asian hermeneutics can interpret the mystery of Christ as proclaimed by the Gospel and Christian tradition as fully God and fully human overcoming the tendency of limiting the reality of Jesus Christ to his historical existence, however important it may be. In the same way the mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ can be interpreted as the community which transcends the boundaries set by a tradition that sees it as a definable and identifiable sociological entity.

Employing the principle of contradiction in interpreting the mystery of Church one may be tempted to define her in terms of 'we' and 'others'. "This offers a variety of ways in which one can show that the Catholic Church can be differentiated from non-Catholic, and the Christians from the so called non-Christians. Even when one holds that the true *communio* in the Church is founded on *totus Christus*, the total Christ and on the Trinitarian communion one can develop a sectarian or tribal Ecclesiology that excludes the possibility of ecumenism and rightful place of authentic religious traditions in God's mystery of salvation."⁶ In fact, an Asian hermeneutics is implicit in the interpretation of the Church as the Body of Christ that cannot be limited by any definitions. The Church as the dwelling place of the Spirit too indicates the invisible dimension of the Church that goes beyond the narrow limits of the visible structure of the Church. Augustine's Church of Abel and Origen's cosmic Church point to this method of interpretation that is not exclusive and sectarian. If ecclesiology is determined by Christology, a narrow and sectarian understanding of the Person of Jesus Christ will determine the self-understanding of the Church. If Church is the sacrament of the highest possible actualization of the communion between God and humans in Jesus Christ, in whom the whole cosmos and all humans are included, and then the Church will be truly catholic and cosmic. It goes beyond its structures and definitions to embrace everything that is godly. Such a vision of the Church would demand a paradigm-shift in Church's understanding of its mission which has already begun in the Vatican II council.

Conclusion

The application of the Asian hermeneutics is already present in interpreting some of the central truths of Christian Tradition like the doctrines of Trinity and incarnation and the mystery of the Church though it is not recognized as such. Unfortunately, this method of interpretation was not followed in the course of the development of theology. The Western method of interpretation was thought to be the only way of interpreting the mystery of

Christ and the Church. This method of interpretation has the underpinning of the principle of contradiction which makes one among many founders of religions or one of the mediators and saviours and his Church a religion or sect from the Asian world-view. However an Asian hermeneutics can liberate theology itself from its narrow understanding and articulation of Christian faith in an exclusivistic and triumphalistic language which limits the mystery of Christ and his Church. It is imperative for the Church that it recognizes this method of interpretation in its theologizing to understand the length and breadth, the height and the depth of the deposit of faith entrusted to it and to proclaim it meaningfully to the Asians who have a world-view different from the Western world-view.

¹ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics, Faith and Order Paper*, 182. No.5, 1998

² C.S.Song, "Living Theology: Birth and Rebirth," *Doing Theology with Asian Resources*, J.C.England, A.C.C.Lee, eds. (Auckland, New Zealand: Pace Publ., 1993): 6

³ *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford, 1995.

⁴ Benedict XVI says: "In the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, it is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was a preliminary inculturation which ought not be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it anew in their own particular milieu. This thesis is not only false; it is coarse and lacking in precision." "Lecture of the Holy Father at the University of Regensburg, Tuesday, 12th September, 2006," *Petrus* 28/10 (October, 2006): 34. However, John Paul II in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* says: "Certainly the Church's Magisterium does not intend to impose upon the faithful any particular theological system, still less a philosophical one." *Veritatis Splendor*, No.29.

⁵ R.Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross-Cultural Studies* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979): 326

⁶ J.Parappally, "A Church without Walls: A Theological Reflection on Church's Being as Communion," *Dreams and Visions: New Horizons for an Indian Church – Essays in Honour of Prof.Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ, R.Rocha & K.Pandikattu (Eds.)*(Pune: JDV Publ., 2002): 129