

ASIAN HERMENEUTICS FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Part II

Hermeneutics in Decolonized Third World and Asia

This is the continuation of the article, "Asian Hermeneutics from a Historical Perspective," the first part of which was published in the previous issue of *Asian Horizons*. Having surveyed the salient features of the Syriac Symbolic hermeneutics with a special emphasis on Saint Ephrem in the first part, the author, in the second, takes up the task of exploring the hermeneutics in decolonised developing world and Asia. Dr Mundadan delineates different trends, struggles, and phases in the process of theological investigation and interpretation found in the Asian horizons. In this article, the renowned Indian Church historian, therefore, calls the readers' attention to the various resources of biblical and traditional teachings, combined with the Asian religious-cultural heritage. He concludes the article by making a clarion call to develop an Asian pneumatology which might provide elements to discern various spirits at work in Asia today towards a genuine Asian hermeneutics.

In the second half of the 20th century hermeneutics (understanding the Word of God) began to witness a great shift—an explosion, an entirely new turn, a radical paradigm shift. The context is the emergence of the free, independent nations in the wake of the phenomenon of decolonization. These nations arose with a new awakening of their cultural identity, with a new self-consciousness. Together with this positive aspect of the present context, a negative phenomenon also began to grow—the phenomenon of "economic and technical colonialism," a "new imperialism." Even the word "globalization" is used in this context. The "Third World" theologians understand this term to mean "a phenomenon bound up with the growth and expansion of capitalism and the integration of national economies into its system." Globalization has grown,

they think, from a mercantile slave-trading age and passed through an industrial colonial stage into a corporate new-imperialist stage that has resulted in unequal development and division of labour, "centre-periphery" dependency, and a one-way flow of world wealth.

The 'Aggressive' Phase

Here a word about the nuanced current understanding of colonization and decolonization would be quite appropriate. Colonization is the relegation of the Third World peoples to the periphery and their consequent marginalization. It is a method of physical and symbolic control characterized by the act of settling of a community into a region or country of a different cultural, religious and political ethos. Processes of colonization require the active control and dominion of cultures by the incoming power, which by means of superior military and political force can effectively exercise substantial power over others. These processes require more than military superiority; they also demand cultural, religious, and political erasure by acts of banning language used in the region as well as religions, dress habits and social organization. Role of religious thought and ideology is important in the processes of colonization.¹

Take for example the case of the *conquista* theology referred to above. According to one of its ardent propagandists, Paulo da Trindade, not only the preaching of the Word of God and the conversion of the "pagans" is a conquest for Christ but the very colonial expansion of a 'Christian' nation like Portugal and all its military operations in Africa and in the East are conquest for Christ. He sees in the discovery of India, for which God, the hand of Providence in more than one sense specially chose the Portuguese nation. The discovery brought to Portugal immense profit. Great as these gains were, there were even greater and more valuable advantages to be gained; it facilitated the preaching of the gospel by the religious so that the true God came to be acknowledged by the 'barbarous nations' which were till then adoring the devil. Many

Portuguese soldiers like Christoão da Gama, the illustrious son of the great Vasco da Gama, and many other heroic soldiers who died on the battle field at the hands of their enemies were really soldiers of Christ. By their glorious death not only did they honour their motherland, Portugal, but showed that it was by divine Providence that the Portuguese came to India, because their arrival was blessed and continues to be blessed with so many such sublime fruits, reaped for the glory of God.²

One of the most damaging legacy of colonialism is the colonized consciences. It is a second form of colonization that colonizes minds in addition to bodies and released forces within colonized societies that alter their cultural priorities once and for all. As a result, colonized societies are cut off from their roots in order to conform to the colonizer's values. Such a colonized consciousness is found in all former colonial territories of the Third World. Consequently there arose the need for developing a new hermeneutic process. The Western definition of decolonization—"withdrawal" of settlers from a territory, leaving it independent was insufficient for the thinkers of the former colonies. They see decolonization as "ridding" their country of the settlers, who more often than not, were invaders or illegal immigrants. These "settlers" acquired and maintained their colonies with a view to exploiting them, especially economically, precipitating swift erosion of the freedom, dignity, life, and culture of their original inhabitants. On the whole, colonists withdrew only when forcibly thrown out.

Like a colonized territory, theology in the Third World needs decolonizing, its theological landscape having been invaded, disturbed, and destroyed by theologies from the outside. The situation that prevailed in the former colonies is that either the theological soil of Christian existence has been used to grow foreign crops that they do not need or use, or it has been left fallow while theologies raised abroad were imported, but neither assimilated as nourishment nor welcomed as a force for social change. Decolonizing would therefore imply and demand rejection of

theological imports or imitations; reappropriation of native theological soil and its possibilities; sowing of this soil with their own needs, hopes, and struggles; and careful fathering of their theological harvest with which to foster human life and humanizing visions.

A negative but necessary aspect of the starting point is a critique of Western theology, which has comfortably cohabited with imperialism, the slave trade, genocide, plunder, and mammon worship. Since theology is a critical reflection on life in the light of faith, the first step in decolonizing theology is to re-examine the colonially imposed definition of theology and to redescribe it. Theology will then no longer be an attempt to explain away suffering, including that caused by colonialism, nor to promote resignation to oppression.

Decolonizing theology and building authentic Third World theologies thus means helping theology spring from the underside, letting faith articulations arise from the search of the marginalized for relevance; being faithful to the theological method of the primacy of praxis over theory; taking seriously women's contributions to faith and life and community, so that theology ceases to be colonized by patriarchy; addressing indigenous, tribal, *burakumin* and *dalit* concerns; stepping with Jesus into the people's religion and culture and identifying with the righteous poor of the land; engaging in a deep, cutting critique of the feudal-capitalistic system, without which no effective decolonization is possible; listening to God's word spoken outside the Judeo-Christian tradition; and celebrating theological pluralism.

Theology, in its beginnings, processes, and conclusions, must be open to challenges. Thus theology is always on the way. In brief, Third World theology aims not at being a perfect system but at being nourishment for life and a plan of action for people who seek meaning in life and freedom.³

Agencies of New Conscientization Process

The decolonizing consciousness, though not new, received a great boost with founding of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in 1976. It announced a radical decolonization of theology through a Copernican revolution in theology's method, as well as in its concept, content, and goal. The primacy of praxis over theory was affirmed, along with the primacy of social analysis and involvement over detached philosophical speculation.

An agency for concretization specifically for Asia is the 'Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference' (FABC) established in 1970. The documentation it publishes under the name 'FABC Papers' is of great importance.

Many associations, centres, and institutes were ushered in for the new hermeneutics, e. g., Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS), 'Indian Christian Theological Association,' 'National Biblical Catechetical Liturgical Centre' (NBCLC), 'Carey Institute,' 'Church History Association of India' (CHAI), 'Indian Theological Association' (ITA), and so many others. Together with this, innumerable books and periodical literature also came to serve the cause.⁴

'Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference' (FABC) is an agency established for the conscientization process in the whole of Asia, mainly East and South East Asia. Primarily it is a coming together of the bishops of Asia "in search for new ways, through which we could be of greater and more effective service to our Catholic communities and all the peoples of Asia." They convinced themselves that the basic mode of mission in Asia must be dialogue - dialogue with Asian religions, Asian cultures, and the immense multitude of the poor in Asia. Thus dialogue and the identification with the poor, in terms of struggle for human rights, liberation, justice, and full human development, are in Asia a task, which calls for special attention to the characteristic spiritual and religious

vision of Asian peoples. This is a task, which must be accomplished even more increasingly with neighbours of other faiths recognized as partners in the building up of a truly human community in Asia.⁵

There is any amount of literature relevant to the new Asian hermeneutics, authored by the Third World theologians and others as well. Here it is enough to consider two of them. One is the documentation FABC publishes under the name 'FABC Papers.' By now there must be over a hundred of them. Another is *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* edited by V. Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah and published in 2000. It has so many entries specifically related to Third World issues and to its theological or hermeneutic concerns.¹ The editors declare:

A quick glance at the current lexicographical works on theological and biblical disciplines shows that they tend to be Western-oriented and written from a Eurocentric perspective. The Third World concerns listed in them are either added as an afterthought or tailored to suit Western protocols and expectations. This dictionary, in a way, redresses the balance, viewing everything through the prism of a Third World lens.⁶

The contributions are by men and women of the Third World. This dictionary inhabits a transitional moment, a moment in which the former recipients turn into dispensers of their own knowledge. In this sense, no theological dictionary of this kind exists, it is claimed.

Some 'New' or Renewed Theological Terms

In the wake of the decolonized hermeneutic atmosphere a few terms, either new or with renewed meaning, have come into common use: contextualization, inculturation, indigenization, and so on. It was in 1972 the 'Theological Education Fund' (TEF) of the 'World Council of Churches' (WCC) introduced the designation 'contextualization' for what was understood by earlier usages such

¹Each of the entries gives reelected reference material books and articles published by scholars.

as 'adaptation,' 'accommodation,' 'indigenization,' etc. The idea is not new; all hermeneutics from very early times were contextual. It attained a specific nuance when used as a conscious effort in the emerging Third World national awareness, to designate ways of expressing indigenous hermeneutics, utilizing native cultures and thought forms. The term, without discarding the importance of traditional cultures, is understood to give in a dynamic way special attention to such contemporary phenomena as the struggles for justice and the changes wrought by technology, which are part of the Third World reality today. Moreover, while contextualization stresses local and situational concerns, "It draws its basic power from the Gospel which is for all people." The generally accepted understanding of the term is taking a critical look at the local context (with its historical, socioeconomic, political, cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious dimensions) as well as the impact of outside forces (such as the imposition of a global market and a homogenized culture) on the people.

While contextualization is popular among Protestant thinkers, 'inculturation' is more in vogue among Catholics. The basic thrust this word implies is the mutual interaction between the gospel and a people with its particular culture whereby both are enriched. Used as a missiological term inculturation gained universal currency in theology only after it was introduced at the Synod of Bishops in 1977. It soon became widely used, not only in reference to the church's evangelizing mission, but also in other theological disciplines and aspects of Christian life such as liturgy and catechesis. Although the usage may appear restricted to the aspect of culture and not so much concerned about the people's socio-economic and political realities and the struggles arising from them (these are considered to be emphasized in 'contextualization'), in fact its use at present is more comprehensive. Inculturation finds its model in Incarnation, which means the Word assumed everything human, not only culture in its restricted sense, but every aspect of human life, "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and

anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted", everything "genuinely human."⁷

The Gospel read (and lived out) through different cultural lenses is broadened and enriched. This reciprocal process not only allows for pluralism but actually encourages it. Inculcation thus becomes an imperative for the Church, not just for the benefit of the local community of believers, but for the universal Church itself, making its catholicity more verifiable and authentic. Inculcation implies some six assumptions: First, culture is seen as comprehensive, taking into account the tension between the influences of modernity and Westernization as well as the traditional ways of life. Second, as a dialogical process, inculcation takes into account the antilife components in both the local culture and the gospel (its patriarchal orientation, for example), which must be critiqued and transformed. In this sense, inculcation is liberative. Third, today inculcation is mainly the responsibility of the local community and evangelizers, not of expatriate missionaries or of local experts alone. Fourth, inculcation is an ongoing process since culture is dynamic and continually evolves. Fifth, inculcation cannot be so local that the faith is no longer recognizable by others within the communion of Churches. Sixth, the Holy Spirit has an essential role in the work of inculcation.

Certain priorities have to be taken into consideration in the process of inculcation in accordance with specific contexts. In Asia, serious consideration is to be given to its multireligious reality and the divergent forms of interreligious dialogue. What makes inculcation problematic is the plurality of cultures and subcultures, not only on each continent but in almost every country within each continent. For authentic inculcation, however, it is not the "dominant" culture of the few but the "popular" culture of the many that should take centre stage. Thus, inculcation cannot ignore the popular religion of the people. Without doubt serious inculcation will produce new forms of Christianity, for example not only a broad Asian Christianity or Indian Christianity but even

much less local forms, e.g., in India, *dalit* Christianity, tribal Christianities of different kinds ('Khasi,' 'Manipuri,' etc.). These new forms, many believe, will be less structured, less dogmatic, and less juridical; more spontaneous, more experiential, and more personal. The "new" church will be a veritable and credible sign of God's reign as inaugurated by Jesus.⁸

Multifarious Hermeneutics in Asia

In various parts of the Third World various forms of hermeneutics or theologies began to emerge from the late 1960s. As the Church became quite open to the indigenous peoples and respected their freedom of expression, all forms of indigenous theology entered the scene, speaking and acting in a manner unheard of previously. EATWOT in 1987 summarized the emerging characteristics of indigenous theologies. There are as many indigenous theologies as there are indigenous peoples and communities. They account for the relationship of the peoples to the land where the Creator has put them and account for their sense of the aliveness of trees, rocks, rivers, mountains, birds and animals, and even the land itself. While indigenous theologies reflect the interrelatedness of all creation as well as peoples' cultures, histories and experiences, necessarily they are theologies of resistance and oppose ecclesial hegemony and cultural imposition, political and economic marginalization, and all forces of globalization. In Asia itself many varieties took shape as already indicated early. We may now illustrate this fact with some examples. We start with the indigenous approaches to Bible.

Approaches to Bible

In the changed decolonizing context the ex-colonies are appropriating the Bible especially because its scenarios parallel their own existential concerns and interests. The book is being *reread* from the perspective of the blacks, women, the tribals and other indigenous peoples, the poor and the victims of society. It means to take a fresh look at the biblical data and to *reperceive* the

message. The old traditions are constantly being renewed in the light of the new situations and new demands.

Third World biblical interpretation has been eclectic in its methodology. It has profitably employed various methods, ranging from indigenous modes of reading such as the Indian *dhvani*, to Western semiotics, in order to unravel the text. It has introduced a number of reading practices such as "militant reading," "guerrilla exegesis," "cross-textual reading," "dialogical imagination," "calypso exegesis," and so forth. However, the method that still holds sway is the historical critical method and its various manifestations.

It has been said that there is a love-hate relationship among the Third World biblical scholars towards the historical critical method. On the one hand, they are fully aware of its colonial intentions and how it was used to degrade other peoples' texts and stories; on the other hand, they themselves have used that same tool to release the text and empower their own people. The supreme examples are Ahn Mung Bu's reading of Mark's Gospel in the light of *minjung* experience, and Hisako Kinukawa's appropriation of the same Gospel from a Japanese feminist point of view.

The Third World use of the Bible has certain distinctive marks. The Bible's authority depends on a proper preunderstanding; because the starting point for reading the Bible is not objectivity but commitment to eradicate oppression, neutrality is discouraged. The Bible is read not primarily to solve intellectual queries but to come to grips with the everyday problems people face, such as malnutrition, sexual harassment, and rape. Thus, there is a link between study and life. Along with individual reading there is a communitarian reading that is undertaken in collaboration with professional and ordinary readers. The important thing is not to theorize but to set hermeneutical goals that will have an impact on the lives of the people.

The critical question often addressed is the place and function of the Christian Bible amidst the presence of other sacred texts, such as the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, the Confucian *Analects*, and stories of African and Native American cultures. The earlier answer of projecting the New Testament as fulfilling the expectation of these scriptures was based on the missionary hope that the Christian Bible would eventually replace other peoples' sacred stories and writings. At a time when these various texts coexist, coalesce, and interact with one another, what is proper is to undertake a cross-textual or parallel reading that will not undermine or privilege one text over the other. While such a reading celebrates the common liberative thrust, it can also expose the gaps, silences, and omissions in the texts. The Christian Bible's place amidst the other sacred writings depends on the acknowledgement that no scripture conveys the full divine-human experience, and that any scripture can help us to see the traces of that experience, if one approaches the sacred writings with openness and sensitivity.⁹

As far as Asia is concerned the postcolonial appropriation has two phases. The first is the decolonizing hermeneutical practices that took place during the colonial occupation, and are still being continued even after the exit of invaders. The second is the recent appropriation of current postcolonial theoretical practices for biblical hermeneutics, e.g., Hong Xiuquan's altering of biblical texts during the Taiping revolution in order to proclaim himself as God's chosen. This is what they call resistant reading of the Bible. It is practised, after independence, by Indian *dalits*, Japanese *burakumin*, Asian women theologians, and the tribals, whose history has so often and for so long been one of pain and neglect. This time it was not against the missionaries or colonizers, but against their own interpreters whose hermeneutical output was seen as pollution-based and hierarchically and patriarchally influenced. In the Philippines, a predominantly Christian country, an attempt is being made to read the Bible using an important but often neglected tool,

namely, the eyes of the conscientized poor, to recover the sense of the texts. This exegetical practice has come to be known as taking a "third look" at the biblical narratives. The postcolonial biblical interpretations address the colonizing tendencies in both biblical texts and interpretation and the way they collude or subvert the process, and offers rereadings from postcolonial circumstances such as Diaspora and hybridity. More important, it turns to the Bible not so much for finding answers but for narratives that remind us about the diversity of human beliefs and experience. In a continent that brims with sacred texts, both written and oral, what postcolonialism tries to do is to enable the Christian Bible to shed its Western pretensions, to rediscover its West Asian roots, and to find a respectable place among them.

Approaches to the Phenomenon of Christ

Asian hermeneutics is attempting to articulate Christologies that take into consideration the massive and acute suffering of the Asian people, the widespread poverty, injustice, ethnic, caste, racial, and religious differences, and the increasing violence that characterize Asian communities. Against this backdrop, Asian theologians have articulated Christologies within a theological paradigm with a liberative stance. Hence, we have Jesus identified as "pain-love" – embodying the pain of the Asian people through the passion of his own pain on the cross (C. S. Song); Jesus as the centre moving towards those at the periphery (Kosuke Koyama); Jesus as the prophet, a subversive-creative individual (Sebastian Kappen); Jesus as the hope and the way to liberation (Michael Rodrigo); and the *minjung* Christ as one who is not the Christ of the kerygma but the historical Jesus who associates and lives with the *minjung*. For the *dalits* in India, Christ embraces them in their suffering, rejection, and shame. Jesus, by virtue of his humanity, his roots, his solidarity with the outcastes, his total identification with the poor, his being the servant God and the suffering servant, and most of all because of his dying on the cross and exemplifying brokenness, for allowing himself to be crushed, split, and torn, by virtue of his

experience of Godforsakenness is the prototype of a *dalit*. Jesus is therefore a *dalit* in the fullest sense of the term, one who belongs to the realm of the outside, the region of carcasses and defilement.

Asian women have generally found the traditional images of Jesus as the suffering servant, Lord, Emmanuel, Messiah, or the representative human being to be most meaningful. But attempts are also being made to reinterpret some of these images, particularly those affirmations that seem to glorify suffering so much that suffering becomes a value in itself, and thereby a trap for women which ensnares them. In their struggle to overcome their oppression and experience liberation, women are using religio-political symbols and motifs to understand Jesus and see him as the liberator, the revolutionary, and the political martyr (Philippines); the mother, woman, shaman, and worker (Hong Kong and Korea); the bread of life that keeps women alive; the Tree of Life (Lucy D'Souza); and the cross (Judith Sequeira). More recently, Asian women are looking into the goddess traditions and making linkages between them, the biblical wisdom tradition, and Jesus. This allows for connections between Christian feminists and other goddess-centred feminists, and between historical and mythological worldviews, and provides Asian Christian women with wholly feminine symbols and images as possible alternatives for understanding Jesus.¹⁰

Asian Approaches to the Reality of Ecclesia

Two significant issues for Asian Christians are how to live as a Christian community amidst other religious communities, and how to supplant the Western institutional practices of the different denominations. Despite the fact that the post-colonial atmosphere is conducive to a pluriformity, some common orientation are discernible. One of these common traits is the emphasis on the local Church, the idea that the body of Christ is realized in a particular people, their traditions, cultures and life situations. We have already referred to an early expression of this kind—the St Thomas Christians of India calling their Church tradition as *Marthoma*

Margam. From this perspective the evangelizing mission of the Church as the “intersection” of the Gospel with a people. Another emphasis is on dialogue. It is being progressively realized that the mode of mission for the local Churches in Asia is dialogue: dialogue with the poor, the cultures, and the religions of Asia. An Asian theologian affirms that liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue are thus the three concrete forms of mission. This triple dialogue does create an attitude of deep respect for openness, listening, and attentiveness to the partners in dialogue. It will pervade the missionary approaches and the very style of life of the Churches in Asia. There is growingly an awareness of the Church as discipleship of Jesus in the service of life in Asia. This awareness leads to a concern that Christian discipleship must afford to Asia peoples, especially those of other faiths, an experience of the kingdom of life inaugurated in the ministry, death, and rising of Jesus. In this context, the disciples of Jesus are called to be truly the *church of the poor*, serving, nurturing, enhancing, and protecting life, especially of the teeming millions of Asia’s poor. Linked to the emerging Asian ecclesiologies is the idea of communion—the new way of being Church in Asia is to be being communion of communities. Communion resonates with the value of harmony, prized by most Asians.

Some Specific Examples

Here we may refer to two or three specific samples from the many varieties of theological or hermeneutic approaches ushered in in Asia during the post colonial era: *dalit* theology in India, *minjung* theology in Korea and ‘theology struggle’ in Philippines. Between two-thirds to three-quarters of the Indian Christian community are *dalits*. There is a resisting current and a constructive strand in the *dalit* interpretation of the Word of God. The former empowers *dalit* Christians to say no to the dominant theologies of the Christian West and the Brahmin or the upper class East. The constructive strand asserts the epistemological judgement that “pain-pathos” is the birthing place of theological knowledge; it taps into the

symbolic representations of this experience that are available in *dalit* culture and religion. Substantive themes of *dalit* theology are thus imaginatively worked out by correlating the knowledge of suffering *dalit* communities of the faithful presence of the Divine One (the God-with-us) with the knowledge of striving Christian *dalit* communities of the unfailing presence of Jesus Christ (the God-for-us). *Dalit* theology thus is a contextual rendition of Indian liberation theology.

Minjung is a Korean word for the people, the politically oppressed, economically exploited, culturally marginalized, the poor and powerless. Activists like Ahn Byung Mu and many others, who actively participated in the people's movements, reflected on their experience in the 1970's. The result was what came to be called *Minjung* theology. The *ochlos* (downtrodden) of the Gospel of Mark are looked upon as the *minjung* of Jesus' time. Jesus is for them a *minjung* and friend of *minjung*; the Jesus event of the cross and resurrection was a collective event of *minjung* in their struggles for liberation. The issues of peace, justice, and the reconciliations of a divided Korea are matters of reflection for the proponents of this theology. So too is the financial crisis that loomed large in Korea at the close of the 20th century and the consequent threat of sudden unemployment, deprivation, and a new economic exploitation resulting from globalization.¹¹

Theology of Struggle is the name for the theology that emerged in the 1970's in Philippines. Though its deep roots may be sought in the struggle of the Filipino Christians against foreign and domestic oppressive forces ever since Spanish colonization, the movement as well as its name became popular at the height of the Filipino struggle during the years of martial law. It is then some theologians began to reflect upon the meaning of their involvement in the national struggle. It belongs to the genre of liberation theology with a distinctive emphasis of its own. The struggle is not simply the process directed toward the goal, but the struggle itself is constitutive of the goal. Struggle is an expression of deep

spirituality; hermeneutics itself is looked upon as the domain of struggle. It is a struggle for interpretation. Moreover, as being the theology of struggle it is "people's theology," people being understood as all people, without any gender consideration. It takes into serious account the significant and active role that women played in the struggle and its hermeneutics.¹²

A More Peaceful Approach

The Third World hermeneutic approaches described above are rather of an 'aggressive' or 'militant' type. Parallel to this a more 'peaceful,' dialogical current can also be noticed developing in India and elsewhere in Asia. Of course these efforts are very much concerned about the aspirations and expectations implied in the Third World theologies. But the style of expression is more moderate and subdued. Here we may first take up the trends taking shape in India and then the common Asian trends analysed by some of the FABC papers.

In India the encounter of the Gospel has produced various currents and undercurrents, different trends and approaches as reflected in the recent and contemporary Indian Christian literature. However, three major trends seem to stand out: The spiritual-contemplative, the philosophical-theological and social-political. Of these the last trend may be more or less identified with aggressive or militant hermeneutics of the Third World theologies.

The main emphasis is on the social and national concerns of development. It advocates: the meaningfulness and adequacy of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ have to be made concrete and proved efficacious in the midst of the present social, economic, political and religious ferment within Asia, particularly in India. It is only as we share in struggles and conflicts and tragedies of our national life, and in that context seek to answer what it means to affirm Christ, crucified and risen, as the Lord of all life that we can hope to make the Gospel thrustingly relevant to human needs in contemporary India. The more important exponents of this

approach, to mention only a few, were Devanandan, M. M. Thomas and Sebastian Kappen. All the three have left their imprints on Indian hermeneutics and passed away. But a new generation of Christian thinkers have arisen in India and their number is ever increasing who follow the footsteps of the three pioneers and courageously help to sustain the movement.

The late Swami Abhishiktananda (Fr Le Saux OSB) was the *acharya* of the spiritual-contemplative trend. After a long study and reflection on the Christian and Hindu scriptures and traditions he came to two important conclusions:

1. The Lord is already in India...Our role is to help the holy seed, which has been sown by the Spirit in the hearts and traditions of India to germinate...
2. India has received from her creator a special gift of interiority, a unique inward orientation of the spirit.

Abhishiktananda stressed, time and again, the need to receive the message of the Upanishads with the heart of a child free, open and full of trust, rather than seizing upon what is lacking from a Christian standpoint. As the Christian penetrates the Upanishadic experience, and with its help sets free the fullness of the treasures contained in the Christian faith experience.

This mission of the Christian in relation to the Hindu is therefore to transmit to him the fullness of the experience of the Spirit given to us in Jesus: to make him realize that there is in man something even more ultimate and profound than the interiority discovered by the sages and mystics, a *guha* [cave] more secret than that of the depths of the heart of man—the abyss of the heart of Christ, into which no one can enter save by undergoing a death of the spirit.

To do this the Christian must begin by himself entering this essential interiority. He must himself die to self and know the Paschal night before he can ask his Hindu brother to experience this death, through which he will find resurrection and transformation.

Fr Jules Monchanin, a senior colleague of Abhishiktananda, and Dom Bede Griffiths, Rev. Murray Rogers and Fr D. S. Amalorpavadass all gave great support to this development. Sister Vandana and two of her other colleagues were close followers of Abhishiktananda and Griffiths. The trail these pioneers blazed is being kept burning by the several *ashrams* spread over the country.

The third type of approach is the one followed by many leading theologians of India. It may be compared with the pioneering work of the theologians of the Patristic era, like Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, the Cappadocians, St Augustine, or the Scholastics of the Middle Ages. A few of such Indian theologians are concerned with the sources of non-Christian religions, the *Śruti* and *Smṛiti* literature of Hinduism and assess their value for developing an Indian theology. Others are interested in the great Indian philosophical systems and schools of thought including the Neo-Vedantic and modern Hindu writers and the relative value of these for an Indian interpretation of Christian revelation. Still others consider the various *mārgas* or certain terms such as *Brahman*, *Isvara*, and *Saccidānanda* with the same end in view. Various Christian topics have appeared on the Indian theological scene, e. g., Inspiration, Trinity, God and the World, Christ, the Spirit, Church and Sacraments, History and Fulfilment. The noted international theologian, Raymond Panikkar, seems to take the lead in this attempt. There are many others who are equal partners. John Britto Chethimattam needs special mention as he was struggling till the end of his life (d. 2006) with the problems involved in the theology of interreligious dialogue.²

The Asian Scene Today: FABC Papers

Many of the FABC documents call attention to the Spirit at work in Asia today and seek to bring out the implicit pneumatology relating to interreligious dialogue, local Church, Church and politics, and the hermeneutics of harmony. These documents help to widen the

² For more details on all the three trends or approaches see Mundadan 1998.

horizons so as to follow the working of the Spirit of God both in the experiences of Christians within the Church as well as the wider context in which they live. FABC Paper No. 81 published in 1997 is of particular interest. The document analyses the Asian contexts: the other religio-cultural traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and primal religions, and Islam), the socio-political realities (movements for liberation, process of modernization, chronology, signs of the times, ideologies and theologies, challenge of the young, the suffering), the biblical tradition (creation and the cosmos, the spirit of God and the spirit of man, the struggles between good and evil, religious and cultural traditions of the peoples, the Spirit and the Word, Christ, the Church, Charisms—services and ministries, activities of the Spirit, Spirit and discernment), the Church (Church history, Vatican II and FABC, various spheres of the contemporary Church) trying to see the working of the Spirit in all these phenomena. Finally the document delineates the elements that go to develop a theology of the Spirit in Asia.

In **Hinduism** the document identified some six concepts (*atman*, *prana*, *antaryamin*, *ananda*, *sakti* and *agni*), which evoke resonance in meaning with the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit. *Antaryamin*, *ananda* and *sakti* have deeper resonance. The section concludes:

Surveying the contemporary scene of Hinduism, we see both positive and negative signs of Hindu revival. Many Hindu religious leaders, thinkers and artists move in the direction of a humanist renaissance of Hinduism suited to the religio-cultural pluralism of India. Christians can discern the Spirit at work in these movements and aspirations and become open to generous co-operation with the stirrings of the Spirit who blows where He wills. Harmony and communion between religious believers is also a fruit of the Spirit.

The section on **Buddhism** describes the four ‘noble truths’ (1. *sarva dukha*; 2. *trsna* or all consuming “desire” burning at the core of our being, which is insatiable; 3. *nirvana* or ‘extinguishing’ resulting

from the running out of the oil and going out of the flame that is *trsna*; 4. the “eight-fold path” summarised under three headings: *prajna* or knowledge, *sila* or discipline/morality, *samadli* or meditation). Then there are four sublime states (1. *upeksa* or tranquillity/peace of mind/equanimity; 2. *maitri* that seeks the benefit of others without expecting anything in return; 3. *karuna* or compassion for others in their failings and sufferings; 4. *mudita* or sympathetic joy at their success and good fortune. The key is *maitri*, for without love, compassion turns to contempt, sympathetic joy to vicarious satisfaction, and equanimity to heartless indifference). It is noted that for so many centuries Buddhism has nourished the spiritual life of almost the whole of Asia bearing the fruits of sympathetic love, compassion, joy, and peace of mind in the lives of millions of Asia’s people. As Christians come to share something of the vision and experience of the Buddha as lived out in the lives of the people with whom they share the Asian heritage, what can they perceive but the work of the Spirit which they too have experienced?

Lunyu (Analecta Confuciana) is the record by the 72 closely related disciples of **Confucius** of the conversations they had with the Master. The respect and veneration paid by Confucius’ disciples after the Master’s death surpassed by far all other school founders. In this sense *Lunyu* is similar to the Christian gospels both in content, mainly the relationship of a master with his disciples, and in the way of becoming a book, a living memory of a master of deeds and words recorded and preserved by a group of faithful disciples. In the view of the authors of the FABC document a reading of *Lunyu* in a way similar to the reading of the gospel is inspiring and mutually enriching. It is mutually enriching in the sense that as the Old Testament is not only fulfilled by the NT, but also illuminates and complements the NT (Vat. II, *Dei Verbum*), so *Lunyu* is saying many things about teacher-disciples not said in the gospels. This is made possible because the same Spirit was and is

working in the OT, in the Gospels and in the ancient sages, especially before the Christian era.

Whether **Lao Tzu** is the founder of **Taoism** or not, his ideas are contained in the book *Tai Te Ching*, which continues to inspire those who seek for an authentic spiritual liberation. The philosophy of Taoism, says the article, reflects the workings of the Spirit in human-kind's attempts to seek for harmony and meaning in existence. Tao is the Path or the Way, more specifically the Way of the Cosmos. Living out the Tao in one's daily life implies: (1) seeking unity with the ultimate reality; (2) living a life *wu wei* or non-action (an altruistic life, a peaceful and non-violent life, a non-ambitious but creative life, a life of relativizing all values but at the same time embracing all values, etc.).

The conclusion arrived after the analysis of Confucianism and Taoism is the following. Just like the *yin* and *yang* (two creative forces or principles), Taoism and Confucianism represent two opposite but complementary ways of looking at life. Taoism being more akin to the *yin* element stresses the virtues of docility, receptivity and withdrawal whereas Confucianism as the *yang* element gives emphasis to social responsibility and action. Still another difference is that whilst Lao Tzu promotes ordinariness and spontaneity, Confucius teaches discipline and character. Thus, if Confucius forms our human spirit, Lao Tzu leads us beyond our human spirit to the universal spirit. Indeed, the Chinese say that Confucius roams within society but Lao Tzu wanders beyond. It is claimed that in the light of the analysis made we cannot but recognise the lofty moral and spiritual values that these two philosophies of life offer to humankind's search for peace, harmony and meaning. In many ways, they reflect the workings of the Holy Spirit in the Cosmos and particularly in humanity and its history. The Taoist virtues of docility, trust, humility, non-violence, detachment, equanimous love, and the Confucianist virtues of responsibility, honesty, loyalty and fidelity are but manifestations

of the fruits of the one Spirit of God working in all sorts of different ways in different people in the world.

Primal religions in general have a clear belief in One God or Supreme Being, called by different names as the Great Spirit, the Great One, Heaven, the One who lives above or other designations. There is also a belief in other beings which are above humankind but are less than the Supreme Being. They are sometimes called spirits and considered to be part of the divine world. Cult or worship in primal religions is directed to the spirits and the ancestors in the form of prayer, worship at shrines and communal sacrifices. The attitude towards the world of the Supreme Being and the spirits is on the one hand awe and confidence, but there is the other element of fear of the evil spirits present as well. Thus we find different religious rituals for venerating the well-meaning spirits and asking for their protection and blessings, as well as practices of exorcisms to ward off the influence of the evil spirits. The beliefs and religious practises are handed down as matters of custom and way of living within the family structure among people bound together by community or kinship ties. With their festivals, cycles of annual observances, rite of passage, ceremonies of exorcism and the like, primal religions put the greatest emphasis not on ideas but on rituals. Among the rituals, particularly numerous are those that serve the aim of securing tangible benefits such as fertility, growth, prosperity, protection from danger, healing of diseases, that is , immediate, concrete benefits in this world. The role of primal religions can best be described as providing the matrix for many phenomena of popular religiosity.

In the past it has been primarily ethnologists who have taken an interest in the phenomena of primal religions rather than theologians. In missionary practice and theory the primal religions, their leaders and adherents were normally considered to have been under the influence of evil spirits rather than under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The Christian message was presented to them as the liberating force. In the wake of the positive attitude of the

Second Vatican Council Asian Christian thinkers brought about a rescinding of these negative general judgements. Reflecting on the hermeneutical significance of the heritage of the Asian primal religions, they proposed new ways of responding to them. For the first time the Christian Churches in Asia acknowledged that in the past the religious traditions and practices of indigenous peoples were treated unjustly and their adherents marginalised within the Church. Considering the fact that the Christian Church has grown and continues to grow among indigenous peoples, need began to be felt not only to evangelize them but to be evangelized by them and learn from them new insights in areas such as ecology, community life and the celebration of life's joys and tragedies. Since much of the indigenous people's world view and ethos is compatible with the Christian faith, traditional beliefs, rites, myths and symbols of indigenous peoples provide material for developing indigenous theologies and liturgical ceremonies.

Islam is powerful in a number of Asian countries. It is most powerful in West Asia. Serious dialogue between Islam and Christianity is going on in these regions.³ The FABC paper tries to show that what the Christian scriptures claim to be fruits of the Spirit are found in the Quran: love (*mahabba*), joy (*sara'*), patience (*sidq*), and so on. Love and compassion are specially manifest in two institutions: *waqf*, a religious benefice to be used for the good of the community; *zakat*, better translated "poor tax", a percentage of each Muslim's income to be used for the poor of the community.

The word *Islam* indicates the act of submitting the whole of one's life to God. *Jihad* is linked to this process of whole-hearted submission to the will of *Allah*. To accept fully God's sovereignty over every aspect of one's life is a lifetime struggle, which they call *jihad*. Consequent to this there is the struggle to make God's will the will to be done in social life. There may be need to oppose actively all forms of injustice and oppression even, when necessary,

³Cf. e.g. two very good articles in the latest issue of *Proche-Orient Chrétien* (Tome 56 [2006] Fasc. 3-4, p. 277ff.; 290ff.).

by force. It is this last and, in actual practice, the rarest form of *jihad*, which has erroneously given rise to the misconception of "holy war" in Islam. In all these positive aspects of Islam the creative presence of the Spirit can be discerned.

The Spirit at Work in Socio-Political Realities

Just as in the religions mentioned above, the Spirit is actively present in the various socio-political movements for liberation, and movements for preserving environment (ecological balance), of workers, of women, of minority groups; in mass media and education in the process of modernization and technology; in ideologies and new hermeneutic processes, in the challenges of the young, and so on. Asia is facing a crucial time of extraordinary changes in all areas of human life. The spiritual forces at work in these upheavals and the new developments they bring forth are challenging all people in Asia, regardless of their ideological or religious adherence. The Asian churches find themselves in the midst of these often wild currents and are struggling to provide guidance and help for discernment for their believers. Asian theologians are, therefore, called to make use of the various resources of biblical and traditional teachings, combined with the Asian religio-cultural heritage, to grope for elements of an Asian pneumatology which might provide elements to discern the various spirits at work in Asia today.

Notes

¹V. Fabella, and R. S. Sugirtharaja, eds., *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000, p. 57.

²A. M. Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998, 57.

³Cf. V. Fabella, pp. 65ff.

⁴A. M. Mundadan, pp. 18-22.

⁵S. W. Sunquist, ed., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001, pp. 283ff.

⁶Fabella, Editors' Note.

⁷Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1.

⁸Cf. Fabella, pp. 58f.; 104-106.

⁹Cf. Ibid., pp. 13-15.

¹⁰Cf. Fabella, pp. 49f. also 64f. and 238f.

¹¹Ibid., p. 143.

¹²Ibid., pp. 201f.

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