

THE GOSPEL IN ASIA

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1. History

The Beginnings

In this brief historical sketch, I would like to draw your attention to some of the less remembered facts and events in the history of the missions in Asia. The evangelisation of Asia did not begin with St Francis Xavier. It did not begin during the Vasco da Gama era. It began on that glorious day when Christ came on the shores of the Sea of Galilee announcing, "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk1:15). It took another step forward when he sent out his disciples two by two saying, "Preach as you go... Heal the sick, raise the dead...You received without paying, give without pay" (Mt 10:7-9).

His disciples continued this mighty undertaking, beginning with Peter and the other Apostles on Pentecost day. Some of them fleeing persecution settled in Antioch, where they came to be known as "Christians" for the first time, and where again for the first time they

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began presenting their Master as “Lord Jesus” in order to make his figure intelligible to the Greeks. Early steps in Inculturation!

It is from Antioch that the Evangelisation of the world begins, the Christian community sending out Paul and Barnabas to carry the Good News to new areas. Paul was to become the first Asian missionary to Europe at the call of the Macedonian. And he was not the last. Peter went to Rome, James to Spain, Mark to Alexandria. In the same way, Bartholomew and Thomas came Eastwards to Persia and India.

The evangelical zeal of the first generation Christians was picked up in later times by persons of the monastic tradition. It was through them that the radical living of the Gospel, which the martyrs had stood for earlier, became visible again in the Church when a life of compromise made its way into the Christian community with the freedom that Constantine gave. In the monks we have also the prototype of the religious missionaries of later days. While the ascetics of Egypt withdrew into the deserts seeking isolation, those of Syria chose to become wandering missionaries. Even as early as 225, Syrian monks had reached out across the Persian Empire and set up Christian communities as far as today’s Afghanistan.¹

With these monks began various forms of *inculturation*. They “borrowed from the storehouse of indigenous languages, cultures, religions, and ideas that they found around them. The results were new and sometimes creative expressions of faith that reflected the living nature of the Christ whom they worshipped.”² They also advanced in theological thinking. The theological writers of this period were inspired mostly by a missionary motivation. And Christianity spread.³

Persia, India

It is said that Constantine wrote to the Persian emperor (Shah of Shahs) pleading for benevolent treatment for Christians. Whether the message was received or not, the declaration of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire made it appear to the Persians that the Christian religion was closely allied to Rome, Persia’s chief rival and enemy. An *image of having alien loyalties* would cling to the Churches in parts of Asia during the entire colonial period to our

¹Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004, 78.

²T. Irwin Dale & Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Bangalore: TPI, 2004, 115.

³Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 79-80.

own days, making it appear like an unrooted and unreliable community in the larger Asian society, to be constantly watched. As the Zoroastrian priests in Persia looked at Christian missionary endeavours with an unfriendly eye, religious and cultural zealots within Asian communities would warn their people to keep a strict watch on Christian activities. Hostile governments would victimise this minority community. Much misunderstanding would linger on to our own days.

Persecution, far more severe than the one in the Roman empire, weakened the Persian Church. Many fled East and West. A significant group of 400 Christians, under the leadership of Thomas of Cana, possibly a merchant of Armenian origin, migrated to South India (Kerala) around 350. Their arrival strengthened the existing community there, known as "*St Thomas Christians*". We have an account from an Egyptian monk of the sixth century, known as Cosmas the Indian Navigator, who noticed on the Kerala coast a community with strong Semitic cultural links under a bishop from Persia, and in Sri Lanka also Christians of Persian origin.⁴

China, Central Asia

In 635 an East Syrian missionary team under Alouben reached **Chang'an** (now Xian), the T'ang capital of China.⁵ The emperor financed the construction of the first Christian church in China. Other churches and monasteries came up in due course. Several Christian works were published, among them *Jesus-Messiah Sutra*. A certain bishop Adam was known for his proficiency in the Chinese language, and even Buddhist missionaries came to consult him. It is said that he helped a group of Indian and Japanese Buddhist monks to translate seven volumes of Buddhist Sutras into Chinese.⁶

This offers us a very early example of *inter-faith cooperation*. Undoubtedly Christian monks had to interact with Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Manichaeans, Taoists, Confucians, Hindus, Muslims, and leaders of tribal religions among the Turks, Huns, Mongols, during their peregrinations.⁷ There was much mutual borrowing. We find certain Buddhist and Taoist expressions being used to articulate Christian teachings.⁸ And the Christian community continued to grow.

⁴Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 104.

⁵Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*, New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 2001, 39.

⁶Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 105.

⁷Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*, 101.

⁸T. Irwin Dale & Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 314.

Under Islam

Within a century of the death of Muhammad, half of the world's Christians were under Muslim political rule.⁹ Christian leaders had little choice but develop the skill for dialogue. Caliph Mahdi of the Abbasid dynasty, we are told, invited the Persian patriarch Timothy I for a debate on Christology and the Christian understanding of Muhammad. Both approached the question with absolute seriousness and *mutual respect*. Indian emperor Akbar was to attempt similar inter-religious dialogue in later times. Living and working with people of many religious persuasions is nothing new for Asian Christians. That is the only experience they are familiar with. But they never failed to *witness to the Gospel*.

By 1000, Christianity had reached the Kerait Turks in Mongolia and probably Korea and Japan.¹⁰ However, with the fall of the tolerant T'ang dynasty, Christian fortunes waned. But the East Syrian monks continued to serve as a mighty force for evangelisation.¹¹ They did in the East what the Irish monks did in the West, whose "*Peregrinatio pro Christo*" took the faith to new areas and new ethnic groups. Carrying the Gospel to new people is not a by-product of colonialism nor a sign of a conquest mentality; it is a sign of the believers' love for the Lord and for people. The Syrian monks also offered medical, pastoral and educational assistance to Christian communities and to the neighbourhood, much like what missionaries do today in different parts of Asia.

The minority status of the East Syrian church in many nations, the need they felt for dialogue, and their *determination to preserve their identity* and share the Gospel with others in the face of all odds... offer great lessons for missionaries working in Asia today.

A Brief Sketch of More Recent Times

St Francis Xavier's mass baptism of fisher-folk on the shores of South India and Sri Lanka, his work among the people of the Malay Peninsula and Japan are too well known to be retold. He led some Buddhist monks in Japan to the faith, who provided leadership to the young Christian community there. With the *adoption of the local cultural models* of the 'ministry of the word' by Alessandro Valignano the community stabilised.¹²

⁹T. Irwin Dale & Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 271.

¹⁰Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 109.

¹¹Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 121.

¹²Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 186.

Matteo Ricci's approach to Chinese scholars and Robert di Nobili's efforts to come to terms with the Hindu cultural forms in India have received much attention from mission historians. Likewise, Alexander de Rhodes' skill in *empowering lay evangelisers* in Vietnam is greatly remembered. It would be too long here to recount the achievements of Fr Lievens in Chotanagpur, the recent progress of the Church among the tribals of North-East India, and similar advance of the Christian Church in Korea, Indonesia, and mainland China. And much of this work was done by various religious congregations.

It must be admitted that during the colonial period, the national rivalries among imperial powers played an undue role in determining the fortunes of the infant Christian communities. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the present Church in Asia today (except for the oriental Churches) is the fruit of the apostolic labours of the very many generous missionaries of this period. Unfortunately there is a school of thought that is far too critical of this most dynamic era of Mission history, alleging that the evangelisation efforts in those days were too closely associated with imperialism. This is an unfair way of looking at things.

The reason is that the missionary team in that period of history lived and worked under several compulsions. We ought to judge people of an earlier era of history according to their own understanding of what was proper and good, and what was possible. Many of our missionary pioneers during the last half a millennium worked under hostile governments, anti-clerical authorities, heartless adventurers, and insensitive empire-builders. There were times when many of their missionary societies were *struggling for very existence* in their own homeland. It would have been impossible for them to move to mission territories, much less become effective in the field, without some measure of accommodation to the demands of those hard-hearted colonial authorities. In spite of all that, the miracles they worked under such tyrannical dispensations amazes us today.

Despite insurmountable difficulties, those heroic souls penetrated the most inaccessible places, confronted the most unwelcoming rulers, transcended immense cultural barriers, *announced the Gospel*, built up communities, put languages into writing, provided literature to linguistic groups, pursued ethnological studies, presented unknown communities to the wider world, created interest in *anthropological reflections*, intervened in behalf of oppressed communities, offered services in the field of health and education setting up impressive institutions, pressed for social reforms, introduced entire societies to

modernity, and planted ideas into the hearts of people to guide their society to freedom and offer leadership in the Church and in the wider society. They initiated theological reflection in different cultural contexts, with an edifying measure of self-criticism that laid the foundation of today's *missiological thinking*. We ought to be proud of these and other accomplishments. If the Church in Asia has emerged today as a force to reckon with, the credit is greatly due to these valiant men and women.

Conclusions

I would like to draw a few conclusions from what we have said above: 1. the need to enter into the world of other communities with respect, 2. to communicate with people in a way intelligible within a local culture, 3. recognise the Gospel values already present in that culture, and thus continue the tradition of Origen, Justin, Cyril and Methodius.

"While we witness to the Lordship of Christ, we also pay due respect to the wonderful power of *human reason, human experience and human culture*."¹³ It means listening attentively to cultures in order to notice the presence of God and activity of the spirit, to discover the hidden treasure of Christ in cultural patterns and values, to call cultures to their deepest identity through the message of the Gospel,¹⁴ to draw people to fulfil their deepest human potentiality, and answer their most profound desires. It means to keep learning all the time, which someone has described as 'mission in reverse'. This type of learning attitude implies a "*missio inter gentes*".

2. Evangelisation

What Evangelisation is not

There are so many misconceptions about evangelisation that I must begin by saying a few words about what it is not. *Evangelisation is not a form of political campaign, a commercial advertisement, an ideological propaganda, a refute-all debate, a ridiculing contest, an arrogant claim of superiority, a religious Jihad. It is not a spiritual boxing match to knock out every other person in the ring. It is not a threat to people's cultural heritage, ethnic identities, national heritage, healthy traditions, anthropological diversity, ancient wisdom, inherited bonds and kinships, heirloom of ideas, civilizational archetypes, nor people's native religious genius. Christ comes to affirm and uplift, to fulfil and perfect, to heal and empower; not to damage and destroy, to*

¹³Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 54.

¹⁴Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 60.

denounce and derail, to deny and reject everything of value. "He will not argue or shout, or make loud speeches in the street. He will not break off a bent reed, nor put out a flickering lamp. He will persist until he causes justice to triumph, and on him all peoples will put their hope" (Mt 12:18 - Is 42:1-4).

I do not deny that the work of evangelisation may be carried on in a hurtful manner. Therefore it is clear that *constant vigilance and self-criticism* are required when we are offering any kind of cross-cultural service, whether it be in the field of education, health or social assistance. The work of evangelisation, like any other human service, can be handled wrongly.

Evangelisation represents God's loving kindness reaching out to every person in human society through human agencies and his caring concern for the whole of creation. It is the hand of a loving friend stretched out in help; it is an encouraging and reassuring word from a brother/sister who cares. It is a privilege to be called to assist in this work.

Come into the Lives of People

The first thing to be done, if we are earnest about evangelisation, is to come into the lives of people. We cannot stand aloof and organize this important work from a distance. We may be able to keep a mighty organizational machine going by remote control, but that would be a lifeless structure. That is why some of our parishes and institutions have become lifeless. It is when things happen in this manner, that our works lack the vibrancy and energy of a living organism. They fail to grow, and they fail to yield the desired fruits.

We are amazed at the way that Jesus kept walking into the lives of people. He takes people by surprise. He enters into the lives of Andrew and Peter, James and John while they are busy fishing; he calls Levi from the tax-collector's desk; he summons Philip and Nathaniel on the wayside; he surprises Zacchaeus by inviting himself to his house. He is ever *sensitive* to the needs of people. He goes into the house of Peter and cures his mother-in-law. He calls up a man with a paralysed hand and cures him, unasked. He cleanses lepers, cures people of all kinds of diseases; he raises the dead. What stands out evident is his keen interest in the other person: his warmth, his relationship. It is not that he is offering help all the time, he also asks for help. He asks for a drink from the Samaritan woman. He seeks to stay with Zacchaeus. He relaxes at the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. He dines with Simon the leper. He accepts invitation from

Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7:36). He takes part in a wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2:1-2).

If you wish to be a good missionary, you must be involved in the lives of people. You will be happy to welcome people into your house, make them feel at home. You will be equally happy to visit them, enter into a *dialogue* with them, discuss matters of common interest; you will be interested in their children and their education, their fields and their crops, their economic problems and their uncertainties, their domestic tensions and their search for peace, their spiritual struggles and their religious aspirations. Your conversation may move to deeper levels and to areas of self-understanding, and the presence of God in their lives. It is at such moments that *God reveals his face* quite unexpectedly to new persons and communities. And miracles take place.

Remove Barriers

When you are initiating a work in a new place or coming into contact with a new community for the first time, some people may look hostile. But when you enter into dialogue with them, you realize that they are just ordinary people with ordinary human goals and ambitions. If you are planning some beneficial work in their area, you may be sure that they too are interested; they too want their place and their community to develop. However, they want to know what this 'outsider' is all about. You need to explain to them your intentions, associate yourself with the good they are already doing in the neighbourhood, recognize the role of the local leaders and keep up a stimulating dialogue with the local community as your work develops. There is a dialogue that is meant to solve the immediate problems. There is another form of dialogue oriented towards joining hands with people of different cultures and religions for the development of the local community and for the promotion of genuinely human values. There is still another type of dialogue at a deeper level in *search of what is true and good*, ultimate sources of your inspiration and strength, with an eagerness to discover God present in various cultures and operative in various societies, and active in human hearts, with an openness to where he will lead us.

Dialogue is a learning process. Francis of Assisi was deeply impressed with the prayer habits in Islamic society. Charles de Foucauld rediscovered his Christian faith in the Sahara living among his Muslim friends. But you also have an opportunity to share your own perception of truth, your own understanding of God and His plan for the wellbeing of the human race. Dialogue ultimately is

about relationship, common commitment to what is good, *not about argumentation*, ideological subtleties. It is oriented towards a sense of *mutual belonging* which everyone is longing for.

When you begin discussing with them more at length, you discover that their starting point is different from yours. Their mental makeup is not influenced by Aristotelian intellectual discipline, Thomistic theology, Catholic Catechetical tradition, or the type of spiritualities and metaphysical concepts that you have inherited from a Christian tradition. The *words* you use, especially about religious realities, have other connotations. The *symbolisms* you are familiar with may not evoke the same response. The *hymns* you sing may not stir the same religious sentiments. If you refer to the mass and other sacraments, they may remain nebulous realities to them. Some of the rules of the Church may appear to them arbitrary and unrelated to anything religious (e.g. Church contributions, records, regulations regarding marriage, etc.). Words like "Catholic", "Apostolic" have different meanings in the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant traditions. Christian concepts of God and afterlife differ from those of our Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist brothers and sisters.

Build Bridges

Some recent converts have seen a relationship between the Buddha's eightfold paths and the Beatitudes. Today what we need most are people who can build bridges between communities and their varying visions of realities. As the world is globalizing itself, we are becoming acutely conscious of the sharp differences of points of view, collective interests, political perceptions, cultural identities, philosophical outlooks, civilizational mental slants. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences encourages dialogue with the "*cultures of Asia*". We remember how even in the early Church there were differences between the Hellenist and Hebrew Christians (Acts 6:1 ff). We need people who can interpret one to another, who can cross such barriers with ease, and help others to negotiate their way through the contradictory stands that people often take, and lead them to mutual understanding. We in Asia have to deal simultaneously with people of different religions (in dialogue with the different "*religions of Asia*").

Words have different meanings, ideas have different connotations, images provoke different responses in different situations. St Paul insisted in his own times, "Your speech should always be pleasant and interesting, and you should know how to give the right answer to everyone" (Col 4:6).

The evangeliser needs to adapt and shape ways of approach which he has studied and read about, or heard described or seen with his own eyes elsewhere. After working with one ethnic group when he moves on to another, he may have to learn all over again how to relate with this new community and how to offer effective service to its people. In India we have to deal simultaneously with people of different religious and cultural traditions.

Give Attention to the Needs of Individuals and Communities

Solidarity with the needy is central to the work of evangelisation. One should consider it the path to *egolessness* and to God. A true evangeliser seeks to keep close to the suffering, the sick, old, handicapped, prisoners, exiles, migrants, slum-dwellers, orphans. He attends to alcoholics, drug-addicts, AIDS victims. He enjoys the mysticism of generous service.

As you will find individuals in special need, so you will also come across communities that are under undue stress. St Francis Xavier came to the aid of fisher-folks who were being exploited, Fr Lievens to the rescue of Chotanagpur tribals who were losing their land. Today *dalits* and tribals are under great pressure: loss of land, weakening of identity, damage to culture, diminishment of dignity, alienation from tradition, sense of rootlessness, marginalization in society, lack of space in economy, a sense of being used by the powerful as a tool for their own ends. An evangeliser cannot remain indifferent before such a situation of tribal/*dalit* helplessness.

People crowding into the great cities of Asia call for attention and assistance. John Naisbitt says that *seven of the thirteen mega-cities in the world are in Asia*. These people, uprooted as they are from their own specific culture in the villages and being herded together into urban agglomerations, have a psychology of their own. They are hungering for solidarity. In the same way, *Migrants* (sometimes called 'illegal') in search of better fortunes, land up in similar situations of helplessness. They too seek solidarity and guidance. The evangeliser can help them in their effort to eke out an existence and struggle for justice. Political *refugees*, likewise, need encouragement and assistance.

This *sense of responsibility* will lead the evangeliser to enter into a vast variety of activities. What they ought to be can only be determined by the needs of the situation. Among the tasks that have received central attention in recent years are: peace initiatives in contexts of inter-ethnic and communal tensions (Mt 5:9; Col 3:15; Phil 4:7; Eph 2:1 ff); ecumenical collaboration; struggle against local forms of unfairness; support of development programmes; activities of advocacy;

assistance to schools that don't run; health programmes; intervention for government efficiency; work for gender equality, struggle against female foeticide.¹⁵

Among the other pressing needs that call for special attention in Asia are: peace initiatives in contexts of inter-ethnic and communal tensions; education to prejudice reduction; ecumenical collaboration; inter-religious dialogue and collaboration in local issues; building up the self-esteem and self-confidence of marginalized communities; activities of advocacy; assistance to neighbourhood schools and health centres that do not function properly; intervention for government efficiency; intervention against corruption, state violence, abuse of human rights, kidnappings, extortion; promotion of prisoners' rights; strengthening of civil society (contribution to a democracy that works!); defence of life, opposition to euthanasia; work for gender equality, struggle against abortion, female foeticide and infanticide, child marriage, dowry system, domestic violence, trafficking in women; care of unwed mothers and neglected children; service in schools, hospitals, old age homes, social centres, literacy centres, places of prayer; education to ecological concerns like deforestation, extermination of living species, pollution, disposal of toxic wastes, global warming, deterioration of the ozone layer; cleanliness drives; assistance to AIDS/HIV patients; promotion of street children; assistance to physically and mentally challenged persons; counselling for those suffering from depression, victims of violence, persons who attempted suicide; literacy programmes, slum work, self-help groups, micro-financing schemes, economic empowerment; promotion of culture; encouragement to freedom struggle, anti-caste struggle, human rights struggle. However, the struggle should not grow into hostility and end up in conflict.

However, we must remember that

The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.¹⁶

¹⁵Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 89.

¹⁶Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 28 a.

Zeal for doing good should not lead us into exaggerations: for example, during the early colonial period over-zealous people went in for conversion by force or for holy wars; during late colonial era colonial propagandists justified imperialism with the professed intention of 'civilizing' the 'natives' through conquest and imperial rule; currently human rights are invoked to camouflage various forms of egoism, personal and collective; self-interested leaders take communities to violence voicing justice claims, leaving no room for compassion and with the exclusion of the transcendent.

However, the evangeliser's intervention in behalf of communities differs from that of the social worker. He feels the power of God acting through him. He seeks to be an icon of God's love for His people. *He dialogues with the thinking and dynamic element in a community and addresses the Gospel to its soul.* It is the evangeliser with a profound grasp of the inner identity of a community that knows how to get close to its deeper self and stir it to life with the power of God's word and the touch of Jesus Christ.

Developing Strategies and Plans, Media

In this paper, my emphasis is on the spirit that should invest the entire effort for bringing the message of Jesus to people. I do not intend to go into the organizational dimension of announcing the Gospel through parish work, schools, hospitals, social work, etc. Specialized attention to catechists, teachers; services to women, family; mobilizing the services of associations, lay volunteers, SCC's; tapping the resources of youth who form two thirds of Asia's population; taking evangelisation to the universities, the world of sports, business, professions... These activities have great importance. Remembering that what thinkers, writers, artists, poets and other intellectuals think today, society will think tomorrow, it is most exciting for evangelisers to dialogue with them; they will be able to address the Gospel to the collective psyche of a nation. It will include exploring the universal spiritual values inherent in various religious traditions and opening out to secular ideologies.

A great role is played by the media in sharing the Gospel: news agencies (like UCAN, SAR News), literature, correspondence course, Radio (like Radio Veritas), TV, Internet. On-line evangelisation has been announced. Possibilities are enormous.

As those who exercise authority should exercise it with a sense of responsibility, as people who command material resources should administer things in the spirit of Christian stewardship, those who control media ought to have a great sense of responsibility to society

as well. Power today is more in media hands than political hands. Objectivity and balance are important. Over-concentration on the rare and the exceptional may not contribute to the emergence of a balanced point view. Demonisation of people of other perspectives and promotion of polarisations are not helpful activities. Sensationalism in journalism, or ideological or theological speculations may be a commercially effective, but can distort the vision of the readership. Ideas that de-motivate individuals from what is good and fragment societies cause damage. But on the contrary, the media can inform, educate, build up, heal, reconcile, and evangelise.

Building up a Future for People who Suffer Injustice

With all our proud boast of rapid development in parts of Asia, we notice that power and resources come speedily to be concentrated in the hands of a few. This happens in situations of state socialism, liberal capitalism, or monarchic/oligarchic rule. For the weaker sections in society, ethnic and religious minorities, life means a constant struggle against injustice under regimes that may be described as semi-military, civil-authoritarian, elitist-democratic, or majoritarian.

But *even in fighting for what is right, there is an evangelical style*. God's justice is a justice that defends, not destroys. Zeal for justice that is not an expression of love can become an untameable monster. Denunciation that does not end with a word of blessing can prove to be effectively a curse. Severe criticism, even when well deserved, should have a touch of encouragement somewhere. Accusations will end well only if there are words of affirmation as well. True prophets are not inspired by anger, but by love. Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of Liberation Theology, says that if the task of the Church is denunciation, it is also annunciation.

In our struggle for justice then, one form of collective selfishness is not fought with another form of equally selfish collective self-affirmation, but the spiritual energies that proceed from the 'mystical blending' of strong self-assertion and claim for rights with gentle self-renunciation and eager concern for others; fierce loyalty to one's own community with radical commitment to the long term good of the larger society. So, to take a small example, Euro-centrism is not confronted by Indo-centrism or Sino-centrism or Asia-centrism, but by universal brotherhood/sisterhood.

A happy blending of what looks like opposites is neither impossible nor undesirable. It is generally considered a part of the Asian genius to harmonize opposites. It is the failure to work out a happy synthesis and attain a new harmony, a new balance in thought, that leads

human processes to swing from one exaggeration to another, from one radical position to another. It was Paulo Freire who said, that, once liberated, the oppressed becomes an oppressor. The pendulum will keep swinging as long as there is a calculated imbalance on either side. One has to plant moderating influences into the mechanisms built up for pressing for one's rights or fighting for one's community's interests. Such an attitude springs from one's concern for others and firm confidence that the *future belongs to the 'victims of history'*.

The Beatitudes offer the most reliable assurance of better times to history's victims. Blessed are those who suffer....But when the victims seek to punish the oppressors too severely instead of entering into critical dialogue with him, and begin to act aggressively with the aggressor, 'the future' slips too fast from their hands in favour of the new victims of history. In other words, unless we work out a situation of "*stimulating harmony*" and usher in a "*culture of responsibility*" to each other, society will not take a single step forward. One group will keep dragging the other behind.

Tapping the Creativity that Shows Itself at the Periphery

We are in search of creative and innovative ways of sharing the Gospel. Amazingly, in many areas of life, *creativity does not lie with the dominant groups or intellectual leaders, but with people at the margins of society; not with the elite who are in search of fulfilment or suffer from hurt egos, but with the feebler groups who are striving for sheer existence and are serenely confident of their destinies; not with those who present ready-made answers, whose reflections are lost in stereotypes and worn-out jargon, but with those who are contending with actual human problems in real life with their multi-faceted manifestations; not with those who are rule-bound and contended with established patterns of functioning, but with those who take risks and venture out in new directions; not with those who place all their trust in their abundant resources and limitless resourcefulness, but with those who simply fall back on God.*

When engaged in justice-struggle, one need to remember that the *creativity of the poor is expressed most of all not in anger and aggressiveness, but in forgiveness and faith.* It is the ability to forgive that enhances the personhood of diminished persons, invests them with special dignity, and equips them with a sense of equality with even the mightiest powers on earth. The cry of the poor is not a war-cry spurred on by social activists, but the expression of a spiritual hunger, of trust and confidence in the One Who, they know, will intervene in their behalf without fail. It is the creativity of the poor

that gives new directions to human history. Arnold Toynbee in his voluminous '*A Study of History*' continuously refers to the creative contribution of the poor ('internal proletariat' as he calls them) in the field of religion and the growth of civilization.

Call People to the Central Concerns of Humanity

Give Attention to the Core Values of Religious Faith

Whatever great service you render to society in the material order, people are touched ultimately only by the respect you show to their person, to their dignity. They may admire your efficiency or financial sturdiness, but they are moved only when you manifest the ability to lead and guide them along life's uncertain ways to humanity's nobler ideals. They will go with you when they see that you are not lost in the midst of theologies, ideologies, structures, laws, traditions, practices; that you do not absolutize your pet theories or devotions or favourite programmes; but that you have at heart central human concerns: *justice and peace, mercy, love and forgiveness, family values so typical of Asia, neighbourhood relationships, honesty and uprightness in a corrupt society, sincerity and authenticity, solidarity and generosity, faith and prayerfulness, respect for life and concern for the poor and a profound sense of responsibility for human affairs*. These are virtues that have a universal appeal, they provide us with the language everyone understands, they have a marvellous motivating power.

When we divert too far from these central concerns, we are moving on unsure grounds, no matter how well motivated we may look. As soon as we are aware of the distance that has grown between us and these core concerns of humanity, we must hasten to correct ourselves. Jesus himself severely rebuked the leaders in Israel who allowed people to bypass their obligations to care for their parents by having recourse to pious-looking religious legalism, or to get rid of a spouse adhering to the letter of the law.

It is equally important that every form of religious fervour keeps referring back to the central concerns of religious faith: *encounter with God, repentance, sacrifice, renunciation, faith, fidelity, prayer experience, authenticity, love*. If we are not careful, we may be lost in the midst of theologies, argumentations, social struggles, fashionable trends of the day and even a multitude of devotions, and find ourselves distant from *true God experience, spiritual depth, Christian authenticity, earnest religious search, transparent charity, genuine zeal, spiritual unction, evangelical persuasiveness*.

Resist Inner Secularisation

Recently a book has come out studying the internal secularisation of the Church.¹⁷ The study is immediately a reflection on the experience of the Church of England, but it has lessons for all Churches. The author argues that the Church is in decline in the West due to “its own internal secularisation, from its voluntary and largely unconscious adoption of the ideas and practices of the benign adversaries who came to it with friendly countenances and largely innocent intentions.”¹⁸ The reasons he gives is that “in modern times culture has become secularised, and the leaders of the Church, in persisting to follow its ideals, are becoming themselves secularised in the process.”¹⁹ He warns us against accepting Secular Humanism in an inarticulate and unrecognised form as a permanent orientation of life and thought. He feels that Church leaders are making a big mistake in trying to present “secular enthusiasm for humanity as core Christianity.” And so, he says, that the Church now has little to declare that is distinctive in a secularised society, “Institutional Christianity has lost the capacity to influence the culture on the one hand, and the culture is progressively secularised on the other.”²⁰ He calls it “death by one’s own hand.”

Edward Norman points out that a little earlier this weakness was expressed in the politicisation of the Church, today it may be in an exaggerated enthusiasm for welfare materialism and other secular goals. The eternal destinies of human beings hardly ever receive attention. Apparently we are moving towards total blindness to the transcendent. Even for pre-Christian Greeks and Romans, the finer aspects of human culture included the intellectual, moral and spiritual. Today we are caught up in a discourse of the most pragmatic nature, mere material welfare, economic development, egalitarian property distribution, as though those who are already developed in the material sphere and enjoy somewhat equitable sharing of wealth have attained bliss. On the contrary, the real fact is that the global society has reached the age of vulgar materialism, consumerism, possessiveness, hedonistic self-interest, fierce competition for immediate satisfaction, leading to war and violence in every form. There is much opportunism and self-interest in religious persons ardently advocating secular humanism. What

¹⁷Edward Norman, *Secularisation*, London: Continuum, 2002.

¹⁸Edward Norman, *Secularisation*, ix.

¹⁹Edward Norman, *Secularisation*, 33.

²⁰Edward Norman, *Secularisation*, ix.

remains ultimately is a religionless religion, and for us Christians a Christless Christianity.²¹

Norman noticed that Church leadership remained in the hands of persons who attached importance to tradition and education (training of clergy) was slipping into the hands of liberal thinkers. This has led to tension within the Church. But the direction is clear: movement towards a sort of neo-puritanism with justice-issues dominating the discourse, combined with liberalistic dogmas, and the consecration of a secularised view of life. Once we thought that if human hearts were changed, life would be changed for better. Then we thought if structures were changed, the world would rid itself of all evil. Today we have come to the point of not believing in evil at all; what was considered evil is taken to be just normal.²² Missionaries too can come to think that rhetoric about the poor can compensate for values missing in their lives. We can escape into self-seeking secular humanism quite unconsciously.

The word spirituality once referred to human capacity for a "communion with the divine". "Now it is employed to describe merely human aesthetic or emotional experience, the celebration of human artistic or literary accomplishment, an exposition of the finer qualities of individual perception of creativity."²³ Once cathedrals and churches were considered embodiments of faith, today they are merely symbols of cultural heritage (catering to middle class aesthetic taste). For some again, religion is no more than a therapy.

If Jesus was concerned about justice and welfare, he was also concerned about sin and corruption. We in India have noticed that, while we are developing economic skills and apparently making a convincing breakthrough to modern life, we are unable to contain the rapid growth of violence and corruption. Corruption is a universal phenomenon, said Indira Gandhi, as though it is normal. Value-systems have collapsed. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, speaking at the Red Fort on Independence Day 2004, called for an 'ethics code'! Khuswant Singh attempts an answer, "I have come to the conclusion that the only hope for a poor people to remain immune to corruption is *the revival of the right kind of religion.*"²⁴ This would be valid for all.

²¹Edward Norman, *Secularisation*.

²²Edward Norman, *Secularisation*.

²³Edward Norman, *Secularisation*, 2.

²⁴*Sentinel* 6.11.04.

Avoid Theological Sensationalism

We have often seen media persons who are all eager for cheap, controversial, and hurtful sensationalism in reporting events. We can carry such an attitude to theological reflection as well. While speaking to the faithful or teaching our juniors we may be more eager to surprise (and even shock) people than to edify and build up their faith. This is mere sensationalism. The last article or book we read or the latest opinion expressed by a maverick thinker need not be presented as the core substance of our next week's teaching. As ideas mature, we graft the new to the old. We emphasize the continuity of thought in the collective thinking of the believing community than the contrast. Even what is new, has a rootedness in the old. Such teaching, such religious instruction builds up the community, strengthens further sturdiness in faith, and completes and corrects what needs to be completed or corrected.

In the same way it is not a helpful thing to discredit the Christian past. Everyone knows that there are lights and shadows in our collective history. As no family is made up of heroes only, so too no human society is made up of only exceptionally great men/women of ability and virtue. Every nation, ethnic group, civilization, and religious tradition is trying its best today to depict its past in glowing terms and is eager to explain the less glorious events in its history with immensely persuasive power. Even what looks like archaic or obscurantist in its tradition is being so interpreted in today's vocabulary as to be intelligible to modern society. In this context, it is a sad thing to see Christian intellectuals being hyper-critical of the Christian community's past and holding the entire community responsible for its failure in some distant part of the world in the distant past. Many of them were due to the weaknesses of a particular community or the mentality of the times.

Totally discrediting the past can shake the self-confidence of weaker communities. It can weaken the faith of juniors and kill the enthusiasm for sharing a message which, if lived out in reality, brings salvation. It is the depth of faith that communicates, persuades, convinces. If we are embarrassed and apologetic about the Church, her teachings, her history, it is impossible to draw people closer to her.

3. Communicating the Message

It is an immense joy for an Evangeliser to speak about God and his wonderful plan in Christ for the ultimate good of his people. That is what Asians expect from a religious teacher.

Have Answers for those Who Ask Serious Questions

In spite of a growing appetite for superficial things in life (money, pleasures, excitement, continuous change), humanity has not lost taste for something more serious: *something deeper in meaning, higher in destiny*. That is precisely the area where missionaries are expected to be specially competent. If you know how to come on the wavelength of individuals and communities, you win a hearing. Speak of something that touches their lives closely, no matter how serious the topic, there will be listeners. Even as some seek distance from such messages because of their own superficiality, others draw close. Even in the very rejection of the transcendent by some, you will notice a hunger for the invisible in their deeper selves.

The age of religion is not over, it is just beginning. When people give up formal religious practices, reject excessively organized forms of religion, and go for religious experiences and devotional thrills, they are not giving up religion; they are only manifesting their *religious earnestness and spiritual hunger for what constitutes the core concern of religion*. Unconsciously they are also exposing the lack of authenticity and seriousness in too many of our religious practices. Give these practices and traditions depth, meaning and relevance, and people will return. They will rush back when they actually find genuineness and true encounter with God in our traditional observances. Asian pilgrimage places are crowded. New temples and mosques keep coming up.

People Search for Depth, Admire Renunciation

In Asia, we are not living in a secularised world, but in a society that takes religion seriously. It is not a "death-of-God" theology that is gaining ground here, but "God-is-alive" conviction. What we have to struggle against is not godlessness, but the misuse of religion for political and partisan purposes. Our task is not to plant faith in human hearts (it is already there), but to channel people's faith-fed energies towards human growth the way Jesus did. For, this, we point the Jesus way. For he is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Certainly, one universally accepted trait of a committed person in Asia is a measure of renunciation. In Eastern cultures, this is considered the touchstone of the genuineness of a man of God. *Silence, self-possession, calm inner serenity, gentleness, quiet joy, humble service, respectful approach to persons and traditions* - these and many other qualities are expected in the lives of "God-realized persons". How else would you describe the religious? Even the busiest missionary must make space, like Mother Teresa, for contemplative

closeness to God. If people expect *spiritual depth, religious seriousness, detachment, apartness, sacrifice*, there is no way of bypassing these without renouncing our identity.

Announcing the Message through Symbols

Becoming ICONS of God's Love for His People

Missionaries are the prophets of our age, and visionaries of the future. This mission we fulfil by becoming ICONS of God's love for his people. There is something unique about *Icons*. *They speak to the collective unconscious of communities. They speak to illiterates. They speak to the masses. They speak to poetically sensitive persons. They speak to religiously open people. They influence culture at a very deep level. They address the Gospel to the human psyche. That is why the Icon of Mother Teresa was unbelievably intelligible and acceptable to the Indian masses. That is why too John Paul II has emerged as a meaningful and appealing icon in our days.*

Images mean much to a society in which non-verbal communication has the privileged place, where non-argumentative sharing is the more desirable mode of communication in the area of religion. We Asians are specially gifted in communicating through images. Mahatma Gandhi was a wizard at image-creation: the loin cloth, the spinning wheel, the salt march, inter-faith meetings, stay among the humbler caste people, periods of silence... all these had powerful symbolic meaning that appealed to the Indian population. He stirred millions of inactive and passive crowds to action as few people in history have ever done. It was from the Jain and Hindu traditions that Mahatma Gandhi drew his inspiration for symbols, while often giving a Christian message. In fact, Hinduism communicates and propagates itself more through the use of symbols than catechisms and creeds: feasts, fasts, figures, numbers, colours, sacred rivers, cleansing dip, holy mountains, hallowed trees, forms of asceticism.

When Mao said that half the heavens were held up by women, the meaning was powerfully clear. Or, when Deng said that it did not matter whether the cat was white or black as long as it caught mice, he was clearly emphasizing the unimportance of the Communist system in preference to the Capitalist, as long as the prosperity of the people could be ensured.

Jesus spoke in pictures: light, salt, lamp, net, coin, mustard seed, fig tree, living water, straying sheep. The Church too uses images in educating people in the faith: water, fire, oil, ashes, candle, change of colours, the use of art, architecture, stained glass windows.

Making of our Works Symbols of Transcendent Realities

A religious person who is a social worker witnesses to God's caring love for his people; a doctor or a nurse to his healing touch. Persons belonging to different cultures living and praying together in a religious community witnesses to the unity of humankind and to its eternal destinies; it is a sign of God's presence and action in the world that cannot be resisted; it translates the Gospel into life and writes its achievements into human history.

According to some studies, those Churches, at the service of a mere "social Christianity" in certain countries of the world, went on the way to decline, once their social goals were attained. In fact, those who rejected the Churches first were precisely those who had benefited most from the Churches' social programmes. On the other hand, those Churches that offered a "pastoral Christianity", that is, those that offered the element of "mystery" in their life and organization, while not neglecting the community's social needs, continued to grow. They served social goals, but they pointed beyond to the human beings' eternal destinies. These findings offer us many lessons.

Developing Ability for Personal Encounter, Personal Relationships

Services in the field of education, health, development, social change - these are all possible contexts of encounter. Unless a genuine encounter between the Evangelizer and the person(s) to be evangelised takes place, the service bears no fruit. This encounter cannot be mechanized or made in an impersonal way through mass contact, for example, TV appeals, though such contacts can serve as a starting point. What is important is that the Spiritual Enquirer be exposed to the living faith of the Believer, not to a lifeless list of doctrines, opinions, rules, practices. A personal encounter makes all the difference.

It is through frequent interactions, close collaboration in common endeavours, or through the sharing of ideas and ideals that relationships are built up, friendship fostered and faith communicated. The evangelizer is the "universal brother" (/sister) of whom *Redemptoris Missio* speaks. This universal brother must reach out in sympathetic understanding, human warmth and caring love. There is no doubt that persons who are able to make *warm, intense, personal contact, and are capable of deep and lasting relationships*, work great missionary miracles. Warmth kindles warmth, trust generates trust, concern stimulates concern... and faith gives birth to faith.

Giving Attention to the Young, the Old and the Sick

Young people between the age of 18 and 25 (say, even 30) are the main initiators of new things in every society. They adopt new dress. They experiment with new types of food. They play with new concepts and try out new life-styles. They set in motion new cultural trends. They go for new ideologies. They strike out on to new religious paths.

Some go on and become revolutionaries. Others turn reformers. Others may launch a vigorous renewal programme. Some may become enthusiastic carriers of a new faith for which they are willing to lay down their lives. Timothy, Titus, Silas and others were just young people who chose Christ with enthusiasm. Missionaries who knew how to tap the resourcefulness of youth have worked wonders.

Your interest in the old is something people will take note of. Old people feel that all their life achievements are forgotten once they have retired; and so, they become diminished personalities. Give them recognition for what they have done in the past, sympathize with them in their present sufferings, and you will restore their youthfulness once again. The sick call for attention. So often a quick change of heart takes place when a person of faith prays over the sick and brings healing. It is Jesus who heals and it is he who transforms human hearts.

Searching for Relevance

The question we pose is not therefore whether the Gospel has something to offer the people of our times, but how we may make it intelligible and acceptable; how it can be made to address the problems of the day and point to greater human possibilities. It is said that the reason for the success of Lincoln's 'Gettysburg Address' and Kennedy's inaugural speech was that they summed up the nation's feelings and reflected the people's mood at a given time. The Gospel needs to be addressed to a people (tribe, caste, community, ethnic group, society) in a way that it responds to its needs, aspirations, and longings in a particular period of history. And then indeed the message truly comes alive. Such an announcement of the Gospel is not merely a matter of academic performance, oratorical or demagogic skill, but the right interpretation of history, correct understanding of the era in which one lives, an ability to re-interpret such an understanding for the specific area where one works, a firm grasp of the diverse social trends and conflicting forces at work, a sober search for one's role in this complex situation. Over-simplified, ideology-laden, jargon-loaded, answers and theologies can only mislead.

Evangelisation in our times should go therefore beyond mere routine preaching, repetition of platitudes, and denunciation of what evidently stands condemned. These are no doubt necessary, but not sufficient. Offering the Gospel today should include *exerting a moral influence on society in such a way that it feels challenged to revise its basic assumptions, review its value-system, remodel its living norms, and reorganize its self-improvement energies according to certain universally acceptable codes of human behaviour*. Any struggle for justice that does not contribute significantly to this form of cultural regeneration, reaffirmation of moral values, recognition of the need for greater transparency, resistance to a culture of death, fostering a sense of mutual belonging and mutual concern will not be found adequate.

Searching for God

We notice a gap constantly widening between religion and irreligion. Here we are not speaking of legitimate forms of secularism. We rather are referring to a form of slavish consumerism, a soulless materialism and a type of Ego-centrism that seeks to marginalize and even crush out the 'Other' from existence. Before this Spiritless and 'Other'-less vision of life and realities, every form of religion is under threat. It promises to spare no faith, or philosophy, or ethical code, or society or civilization. That is why every religion, and consequently every civilization, is in crisis today.

The future polarizations will not be between religions as Hans Kung argues; nor between civilizations as Samuel Huntington contends; but between those who promote the human spirit and those who seek to put it out. Beginning with a healthy and legitimate form of secularism, large segments of human society are becoming totally alienated from anything that has reference to religious faith. The barrenness of materialism and self-seeking nihilism do not offer any hope. "*If men thought of God as much as they think of the world, who would not attain salvation?*" asked an ancient Indian.²⁵

A time is coming when believers in religion will need to join hands together to preserve and strengthen their faith in God and *promote those values that will sustain the human spirit*. They will have to keep supporting an on-going struggle against the forces of irreligion which are trying to establish their dominance over human history. During this struggle, it will become evident, one will need to contend with totally secularised perspectives even within the ranks of the religious,

²⁵Maitri Upanishad 6:24.

persons in religion's service, and in one's own heart. Hence, struggle within one's own ranks and conflict within one's own heart!

For one thing, criticism of religion by secular critiques purifies our understanding of religion, rids us of superstition and collective egoism. And criticism of Christianity by persons of other persuasions (and from within) purifies the Christian society. Only those with the highest motives and firmest faith will endure. But having been purified inwardly, they will become irresistible witnesses to the Truth and convincing announcers of the Gospel. Such persons will truly be the *God-experienced messengers that Asia is waiting for*. They will be sharing realities that they have personally experienced at the depths of their hearts. They will repeat with John, "Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands; the Word, who is life – this is our subject...What we have seen and heard we are telling you so that you too may be in union with us, as we are in union with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:1-3). And they will carry the world before them!

Trusting in God's Word

Something amazing happens when people are confronted with God's word. How it touches human hearts remains always a mystery. If it has touched your heart, it will touch others' as well. Each in its own way, in its own time. We know of instances when just one line from the Scriptures has transformed the lives of people. If chosen passages from Bible are easily available to people; if notice-boards, picture-cards, wall posters, printed leaflets, dance, songs, dramatized stories carry God's word in attractive forms, somewhere someone will be touched. Never underestimate God's word...in others' conversion and in your own as well.

Place art at the service of the Gospel. Encourage the communication of the Christian message through art. *The world can be won for God only by beauty*, not arguments. Search for beauty in its billion forms, and place it at the service of God's message. Religious art teaches. Music evangelises. We should always encourage musicians and composers to carry God's word to the depths of human hearts.

4. Presenting Christ

We do not intend to deny the difficulties that the Evangeliser experiences in Asia. The word "conversion" has acquired a negative connotation in many countries on this continent. Not rarely people associate the word with a change of religion under duress, deceit or

enticement. We know that genuine conversion is something different. However, if this word or any other gives offence, we should opt for other expressions. Nonetheless, it is legitimate to claim, on the one hand, the right to choose one's religion, and on the other, the freedom to share one's faith.

The fiercest opposition to such claims is likely to come from those who have an ethnic notion of religion. Some countries in Asia manifest this tendency. A universal religion, like all truly human ideals, knows no boundaries. No nation or ethnic group that respects human freedom has ever attempted to interfere in the religious choice of members. It is the most personal of all choices. Compared with political, economic, or cultural options, it is the most sacred of all rights.

It is not true that a missionary spirit is proper of Christianity only and that it is a sign of intolerance. Every universal religion has had among its chief traits the desire to share its message with the whole of humanity. The *Rig Veda* said, "This message ensuring the ultimate good has to be conveyed to all men." The Buddha ordered, "Go you now, monks, for the benefit of many, for the welfare of mankind, out of compassion for the world. Preach the doctrine which is glorious in the beginning, glorious in the middle, and glorious in the end." The Koran instructed, "And we do not send the messengers but as bearers of good tidings and warners. And whoso shall believe and amend, there is no fear on them nor shall they grieve. But whoso shall charge our communications with falsehood, on them shall fall a punishment of their wicked things."²⁶ So with other religions. It is quite unfair to say that Christianity alone believes in self-propagation.

The Unique Figure of Christ

Of late, there is a growing anxiety in the mind of some Christian believers that, while Christ's teaching about human brotherhood is welcome in Asia, his unique person is an obstacle. Such a fear is largely entertained by those who have never had a lived experience of presenting Christ to a Searcher. We are absolutely certain that the person of Christ is not an obstacle, but the most attractive force and the most inspiring figure.

Anyone who has the experience of sharing the Faith knows that arguing about the uniqueness of Christ is an idle exercise. Bringing theological contentions to the ardent Searcher only dampens his or her enthusiasm. Persons at the service of the Gospel must stop being wranglers and keep away from sterile apologetics. Let us present

²⁶Koran VI, 48,49.

Christ as he really is, as he is presented in the Scriptures. That is sufficient. Let them find out for themselves. Let them be the judges. "Come and see," Jesus said to the disciples of John the Baptist (Jn 1:39). Know for yourselves: Christ, his life, his love, his gracious words, his help, his healings, the style of his dealings, the rare way he accepts sufferings, the unique manner in which he gives up his life. Forgiving! Is he not unique? If not, who is!

Asians of different religions have painted the figure of Christ, composed poems, written novels, acted in dramas, produced films, interpreting his personality and message with skills that amaze the Christian believer. They have acted as though Christ belonged to them. He does. Christ belongs to all.

Veteran evangelisers in Asia tell us that certain evangelical approaches are in bad taste: arguments in general; going across cultures and "convicting people of sin"; aggressive evangelistic crusades and campaigns; claims of numbers. In the same way, we must be cautious of over-using certain images, even when they are theologically correct. The justice of the Father that calls for the shedding of the blood of an innocent victim looks unfair to many searchers. On the contrary, Jesus' love and compassion that led him to the uttermost sacrifice is inspiring. The offering of his blood as a drink is a terrible thought. The gift of his life for the redemption of humankind is far more intelligible. Miracles do not make an impression on communities that are already over-credulous of wonders performed by their holy men and their deities. But the teachings of Jesus always make Asians sit up in amazement. They treasure his words. Indeed, "Nobody has ever talked the way this man does" (Jn 7:48). Is he not unique?

The Definitive Opting for Christ is always a Miracle

We are living through troubled times. Nations are in conflict, economies go erratic, world-power patterns are changing, societies keep breaking up, ethnic groups collide, disrespect for traditional ethical values is mounting, and old points of references are fast vanishing. There is uncertainty, confusion, despair, but also, thank God, *expectancy*. God is "shaking the nations once more". The hour has come again for the Gospel. People are looking for God's powerful intervention in human history and his reconciling Word. There is a growing hunger for God, of which many Christian thinkers and pastors are little aware. New religious movements, rebirth of traditional religions, and emergence of new forms of spiritualities (related to ecology, tribal traditions, indigenous identities, healing,

esoteric experiences) are telling us something. Missionaries are waiting with improved ideas and programmes, with mission statements and vision statements, but unfortunately not with God and his message. Would that they would develop the unique skill to offer God's transforming message to a God-hungry world!

To decide to whom to whisper the Gospel directly, when and how to do it, whom to invite to a definitive choice and decision...is a spiritual skill an evangeliser should daily pray for. Asia's soul awaits this message!

A definitive choice of Christ is always a wonder. It is nothing short of a miracle. How it happens no one can tell. But it happens. It happens through you and me. It happens in spite of me...and yet, it happens through me too. I have an irreplaceable role in this divine economy. If I fail, that God-given role will not be fulfilled. No one else can fulfil the task assigned precisely to me. May the Lord enable me to discover that irreplaceable role. May he enable all of us to do so. "Do great things for us, O Lord, for you are mighty, and holy is your name."