

Community, Celebration, and Communion: The Future of Christian Ethics in India

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India has always been a land of deep religiosity, spirituality, and morality. The terms widely used in India to denote morality or ethics are *dharma* (that which holds together or that which supports) or *nīti* (that which leads or that which promotes). *Dharma* holds people together or supports the members of a community to attain their end. It is fitting to remember that the same term *dharma* means religion as well. Obviously, the term *dharma* states the inherent interrelationship between religion and ethics, spirituality and morality. The significance of the term *dharma* is not limited to the field of religiosity and morality, but it is a word that links every sector of life, including personal and public spheres of life. *Dharma* is that which supports and promotes the members of a community to attain their end, whatever the nature and structure of the community may be.

The imagery of *marga* (path or way) in India is usual and fruitful in the discussion of ethics, the code of conduct. The *aṣṭāṅgamarga* (the eightfold path) of Buddhism is popular. Whether the question is of spirituality or morality, it is presented as a path or way, which is an invitation to walk the way to and of life. This Indian perspective is in tune with the Eastern and Christian genius as well.

¹Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Second Edition, Vol. XI. New York: Thomson Gale, 2005, p. 7394.

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Hence, the future of Christian ethics in India is to be conceived and worked out in the framework of the way. A word about the term "the way" is in order here. Primarily and fundamentally, the image of the way is taken from the teaching of Jesus. He revealed, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (*John* 14:6). Jesus is the way to God, the Father. In all ages, ethical discussions were held in contrast to the way of light and darkness, the way of life and death, the way of salvation and condemnation. The age old prayer of the people of India "*asatoma sat gamaya, tamasoma jyotir gamaya, mrtyorma am^otam gamaya*" (lead us from unreality to reality, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality), demonstrates the significance of walking the way. Restoring the direction of moral theology, the John Paul II observes, "Following of Christ is the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality."¹ This simple and profound statement on morality regains two important aspects of Christian ethics: one, the centrality of Jesus Christ; and two, the necessity of following or walking the way of the Lord. In addition, the imagery of the way projects a programme of and progress in life which are presupposed in spirituality and morality.

This is in tune with the Indian, Christian, and Eastern focus on the way, which takes into account the trials, tribulations, and triumph of life, in which a humble attempt is made to delineate some of the basic traits of the future moral theology in India. Morality or ethics is discussed in dialogue with the context of reality. This reflection is organized in three successive moments, beginning with (1) the way to community; continuing with (2) the way to celebration; and concludes with (3) the way to communion.

1. The Way to Community

As far as the future of Christian ethics is concerned, it may be anchored on the way to community. The context of theologisation is the community, the ground reality for morality. It is in view of the common good or welfare of people in light of the wisdom of God, ethics becomes relevant and significant. In the years to come, it seems that there will be a greater focus on community, since the aspirations of people for the right to information, human rights, movements, struggles, etc., indicate the field of future moral theology.

It is reasonable, therefore, to imagine that the future of Christian ethics is on the way to conferring and consolidating a sense of community,

¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, § 19.

which could serve as a bedrock for doing ethics. Along the way to community, three areas can be picked up to demonstrate the direction of the development of moral theology, namely, (1) the sense of creation, (2) the sense of the context, (3) the sense of the covenant.

1.1 The Sense of Creation

In light of the ecological crisis of our times, people are becoming more and more aware of the interrelatedness of everything and everyone in the universe. This is the key to understanding the delicate and decisive web of community found in creation. All things are important and significant in their own place. Invariably, all contribute to the well-being of all. This is the foundation for the sense of creation and the sense of community of creation.

In his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, Pope John Paul II said, "Certain elements of today's ecological crisis reveal its moral character."² He admits that "we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations."³ In the changed and changing ecological scenario, there is a better understanding of creation as a community. Bede Griffiths remarks, "The problem of ecology involves the very existence not only of humanity but of the planet earth itself."⁴ The command of Yahweh to human beings, "to till and keep it" (*Genesis 2:15*) discloses the ministry of human beings on earth and proposes the responsibility to maintain the order and beauty of creation, the wider community.

In the wake of the ecological crisis, it is fitting to have a threefold relationship: vertical, horizontal, and radical. The triadic relationship could be characterized as follows: oneness with God, unitedness with fellow beings, and rootedness with creation.⁵ Such a triadic relationship is symbolically revealed on the Cross of Christ:

The Cross of Christ is the symbol and model of our threefold relationships: the Cross of Jesus planted on earth tells forth the close relationship Jesus

² John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*, Vatican City, 1990, § 6.

³ John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator*, § 6.

⁴ Bede Griffiths, "Nature, Technology and the New Society," *Jeevadhara* 18 (1988) 23.

⁵ Paulachan P. Kochappilly, *Celebrative Ethics: Ethics: Ecological Issues in the Light of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1999, 338-357.

had with Nature; the outstretched hands of Jesus on the cross embrace all humanity and prove himself truly human in his outstanding and overwhelming compassion and love for fellow human beings; the prayer of Jesus on the cross reveals the intimate and personal relationship he had with God, the Father. Following the footsteps of Jesus Christ on the Cross – rooted in Nature, stretched out to Neighbours, and in the unconditional submission to God the Father – we shall attain life and happiness.⁶

A theological and sacramental approach to creation will generate a sense of community, which is urgent for our times. The insight of Saint Ephrem on Nature and Scripture as two books of revelation adds to the understanding of creation as a manifestation of God:

Both Nature and Scripture
Might bear witness to the Creator:
Nature, through man's use of it,
Scripture, through his reading of it.⁷

1.2 The Sense of the Context

Another area of research and reflection on the future of Christian ethics in India may be the context. Theology is always contextual. The investigation or interpretation or understanding of faith takes place in the context. This is all the more true in the case of moral theology. The code of conduct is to be explored and explained in the background of the ethos of the people and place. As ethos, so ethics. It means that ethos houses the values and vision of a community and ethos plays an important role in shaping ethics.

The future of Christian ethics in India has a challenge to address the interreligious texture, cultural diversity, poverty of India. Vatican II instructs us to have wider dialogue in addressing moral problems, "Through loyalty to conscience Christians are joined to other men in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships."⁸ This presupposes the need to join hands in addressing the ethical issues of contemporary times. Cultural diversity challenges man to acknowledge and appreciate the dignity of human persons and teaches him how to live in harmony through co-existence and cooperation. This has been a lived tradition of the Saint Thomas

⁶ Paulachan P. Kochappilly, *Celebrative Ethics*, 357.

⁷ Saint Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, V, 2. CSCO Vol.174-75 scr.Syr.78-79. English Translation from S. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 102-103.

⁸ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §16.

Christians of India. In order to guarantee peace on earth, the disciples of Christ are duty bound to accept the truth, to do justice, and to do charity. In the context of the poverty of people, it is a necessity to develop an ethics of virtue, well-knit into the fabric of theological ethics. The prayer of the people of India, "*loka samasta sukhino bhavantu*" (let all be happy) can serve as its starting point.

The context of India is characterized by many other factors. For instance, the predominant tribal settings, the vast majority of dalits, the resurging subaltern groups in the subcontinent, the perennial caste-ridden mentality of the people, etc., are some of the contexts which need to be acknowledged and addressed adequately. The equality of the dignity of all human beings is to be recognized, respected, and responded to by moral theologians as well.

A few other contexts of India which need to be assessed and addressed are the widespread corruption, gender discrimination, high rate unemployment, evil face of terrorism, menace of fundamentalism, cutthroat competition, introduction of genetically modified food, politicization of religion, the emerging working hours and places, the blossoming of hi-tech super-specialty hospitals, business minded educational establishments, etc. All these contexts are different faces of the community.

1.3 The Sense of the Covenant

It is the sense of the covenant which goes to make a community. The history of salvation unfolds in the image of covenant. It is the covenant which gives its members a vision and a sense of mission, which in turn spell out the ethical code of conduct. The role of the Ten Commandments in shaping the behavioural patterns of the people of God is beyond doubt. A person is born to a community; one's being depends on a community; one belongs to a community; and one becomes a member of a community. The greater the belongingness, the deeper the bonding. The covenant was the context of Jesus' moral living. It was in reference to the covenant community that the life and teaching of Jesus took shape and found their full flourishing. In the new dispensation, the Church is the covenant community, to which Christians belong and grow to maturity.

The Church is the mystical Body of Christ. It is the Church which gives Christians necessary direction and certainty in walking the way of the community. The future of Christian ethics in India has to be rooted in Christ and his Church, the sacrament of salvation. The ethos of the redemption in Christ – redeemed and in need of redemption – should be reflected in Christian ethics.

The future of Christian ethics in India depends heavily on the responsive and responsible members of the covenant community. It is important for Christians to be, to belong to and to become the Church. It is from this deep-seated experience of Christ and the Church that the faithful respond to the needs and demands of the time, which are guided by the indwelling Spirit of Christ. The Church is a missionary community; it exists to continue the mission of Christ in the world towards its total transformation into the image of God.

The life of the community leads to the way of celebration of life. Hence it is appropriate to have a discussion on the way to celebration.

2 The Way to Celebration

The Christian way is the way to celebration. India is a land of celebrations. The image of celebration is quite attractive and appealing to people of all times, especially for the youth of our contemporary times. Celebration can capture the imagination of all people, of all cultures, and of all times. Celebration is the fountain, force, and focus of ethics. The function of ethics is to help people celebrate their life. Celebration which takes into account one's inherent relationship with God, human beings, and creation could be considered a norm of morality. Celebration which takes place in the present and has its link with past and the future is a measure of morality concerning what is good and evil, right and wrong, virtuous and vicious, praiseworthy and blameworthy.

Joy or happiness was the goal of the proclamation of Jesus. "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (*John* 15:11). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus unveils the secret of bliss or happiness in everyday life in reference to the Beatitudes (*Matthew* 5:3-10). "Be glad and rejoice," is the watchword of Jesus. The evangelists also took up the same mission of joy, "We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" (*1 John* 1:4). Saint Paul joins the array of those promoting the joy of life, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice" (*Philippians* 4:4). Christian ethics has to rediscover the core of Christian life: joy and happiness.

Going a step further, it is right to describe Christian ethics as the study of the way of celebrating life in Christ. It is the same as "following Christ," which is the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.⁹ This celebration supports and promotes the

⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §19.

members of the Christian community in rediscovering the image of God in the transfiguration of life in Christ through the Holy Spirit, towards the glorification of God by establishing peace on earth and extending hope to human beings through concrete acts of charity.¹⁰

In this search for celebration, three areas may be focused upon: (1) the gospel of love; (2) the gospel of life; and (3) the gospel of light.

2.1 The Gospel of Love

The future of Christian ethics in India depends on the celebration of the gospel of love. Love is the source of Christian ethics. God is love (1 John 4:8). "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Jesus invites his disciples to be compassionate as the heavenly Father is compassionate (Luke 6:36). Love or compassion or mercy should be the core of Christian ethics. This is what is seen, heard, and experienced in the life and ministry of Christ.

Jesus, in his new commandment, made love mandatory for all his disciples, "Love one another. Just as I have loved you" (John 13:34-35). The love of Christ – the sacrificial love for the salvation of the other – is to be restored in the discussion of moral theology. All that is done out of sincere and sacrificial love will accelerate the celebration of life – life in Christ, for it is the magic of the gospel of love proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The gospel of love should pervade and permeate all areas of ethical discussion; it should guide and govern the being and behaviour of Christians. The celebration of the incarnate love – the sum and substance of the gospel of love – will be the future of Christian ethics in India.

2.2 The Gospel of Life

The gospel of love unfolds the gospel of life. The gospel of life is central to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus revealed the purpose of his coming in terms of life, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* of 1995 is an ethical discussion on the value and inviolability of human life. The opening statement of the encyclical is noteworthy, "The Gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' message."¹¹

¹⁰ An earlier version of the description of Christians ethics is given in Paulachan P. Kochappilly, "The Cross and Christian Ethics," in *The Folly of the Cross*. Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Dr Varghese Pathikulangara, CMI, ed. Paulachan Kochappilly, CMI, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000, 178.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, § 1.

The whole world is marching towards having a fuller and better life. India is also making every effort to ensure a decent life to its citizens. Life is a gift of God; it has a dignity of its own. Therefore, there is the need to attend to the dignity of human life always and everywhere.

The future of Christian ethics in India is in the hands of those who think, talk, and walk the way of life: all for life and life for all. All the different branches of moral theology are to be revisited from the perspective of life. The scope of Christian ethics is from tube to tomb. In the midst of a culture of death, the voice of pro-life should be foremost. India, a land known for *ahimsa paramodharmah* (non-violence is the supreme *dharma* or righteousness), has a distinct role in the promotion of the gospel of life and to check the culture of death by accelerating the celebration of life. Christian ethics has a future, if it focuses on the gospel of life and promotes the way of celebrating life in Christ.

2.3 The Gospel of Light

The gospel of light points to the way of righteous and upright living. In fact, the gospel of light is to shed its light on the path of *satyam* (truth), *æivam* (goodness), *sundaram* (beauty). The gospel of light refers to Christ, who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (*John* 14:6).

Christian ethics is an invitation to walk the way of light – the way of the Spirit. It indicates the need for further search for truth, for the Spirit of Christ "will guide you into all the truth" (*John* 16:13). The spirit of openness should be the hallmark of Christians in their search. It is, therefore, essential for Christians to live according to the promptings of the Spirit – the light and the spirit of the way to celebration.

The hymn of the early hours of the day, "*tat savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi, dhiyo yo nah prachodayat*" (We meditate on the glory of the Creator; Who is the embodiment of Knowledge and Light; Who is the remover of all Sin and Ignorance; May He enlighten our Intellect)¹² discloses the disposition of the people of India concerning the inner urge for the gospel of light which can dispel the darkness. A Church tuned to the promptings of the Spirit – capable of reading the signs of the times – can be a genuine agent of transformation and the sacrament of salvation. It is the Spirit – the light of the Word and of the world – which requires and enables the Church to go beyond

¹² <http://wahiduddin.net/mantra/gayatri.htm>

the boundaries and to engage in the dialogue of life. It is the gospel of light – the Spirit and Truth – that can set people free from all kinds of enslavement.

3 The Way to Communion

The way to community and the way to celebration emerge from and lead people to the way to communion. Communion ensures joy and peace to the members. The future of Christian ethics in India has to focus on the theology of communion and the life of indwelling. The parable of the vine and branches illustrates it vividly (*John* 15:4-5). The proclamation of Saint Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (*Galatians* 2:20), depicts the truth of communion. The future of moral theology depends on this fundamental communion. Saint Augustine illustrates the thirst of human beings for communion in his *Confessions*, "You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."¹³

The salient areas of the way to communion are (1) Person, (2) Reason, and (3) Revelation. A brief discussion on these foundations of Christian ethics is in order.

3.1 The Person

The future of Christian ethics depends on the elaboration and illustration of the person, the subject or agent of moral action. In this connection, it will be useful to know the literal meaning of the term person. Christos Yannaras gives an etymological and practical meaning of the term, "Man is an existential fact of relationship and communion. He is a person, ὁ ἄλλοθι, which signifies, both etymologically and in practice, that he has his face (πρὸς) toward (ἐπί) someone or something: that he is opposite (in relation to or in connection with) someone or something."¹⁴

The person, created in the image of God, is required and enabled to establish relationship, union, and communion with the Other, the Neighbour, and Nature. The moral agent is to be understood as a person, who has an existential openness to the self-disclosure of the ultimate reality and every reality in the universe.

The most significant aspect of this approach would be to consider morality in terms of relationality. It is relationship which describes

¹³ St Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1, New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1992, 21.

¹⁴ Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996, 20

or defines a person. The future of Christian ethics will be developed along the perspective of a person – in-relationship-with – God, fellow beings, and creation.

3.2 The Reason

Doing things intelligently and reasonably is an essential characteristic of Christian ethics. Reason is one of the three foundations of Christian morality. In the past, rationality was given overemphasis, sometimes to the neglect of other foundations. The quality of the decision depends on the grade of knowledge and the amount of freedom one experiences in doing something or avoiding something else.

Christian ethics studies the way of celebrating life in Christ. The discernment of the way of the Lord requires the use of reason. John Paul II describes moral theology as “a science which accepts and examines Divine Revelation while at the same time responding to the demands of human reason.”¹⁵ Moral scrutiny is possible and valid only when human reason functions properly. Mental or nervous disorder is an obstacle to a human act. This is not only true in the moral plane, but holds good in the practice of civil law.

3.3 The Revelation

The revelation in Christ gives specificity to Christian ethics.¹⁶ As noted above, Christian ethics is the study of the way of celebrating life in Christ. It is the life and teaching of Jesus Christ which shape the ethical imagination, intention, and motivation to live an upright life. It is in Christ, through Christ and for Christ, Christians find meaning and significance and organize their life and activities. If the revelation in Christ is not given central stage, there is no reason to name ethics as Christian. Christian ethics, essentially and fundamentally, is following Christ – walking the way of Christ; walking the way of the Cross. In other words, Christian ethics has to be Christ-centred:¹⁷ the life-in-Christ and the life-like-Christ should shape Christian moral investigations and reflections. Faith in Christ is to be given its due place in Christian ethics. “The mind of Christ” has to challenge and change the mindset of Christians in doing moral

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §29.

¹⁶ Vatican II, *Optatem Totius*, § 16.

¹⁷ See Paulachan Kochappilly, “Celebration of Life in Christ: The Focus of Christian Ethics for the Third Millennium,” *Vidyajyoti*, 65 (2001) 340-350; “Christ-Centred Ethics and the Celebration of the Divine Liturgy,” *Ephrem’s Theological Journal* 3 (1999) 99-125.

theology. Christian ethics, to be worthy of its name, should be anchored in the person and revelation of Christ.

Christian revelation in Christ is channelled through the Church – the mystical Body of Christ and the sacraments – the celebration of the mysteries of salvation, and through Tradition and the magisterium. All these disclose the revelation in Christ and the significance of a sacramental moral theology. These are the ways in which the faithful can celebrate their life, of course, in fidelity, with identity and liberty.

The future of Christian ethics in India and elsewhere depends on the celebration of the mysteries of salvation. Celebrative ethics must be the roadmap of Christian ethics. In essence, celebrative ethics indicates:

an event of manifesting values, intensively and extensively, through live-transmission, which leads to the transformation of persons participating in the celebration through appreciation and appropriation of them from within, springing from a lived and living tradition capable of facing the challenges ever old and ever new circumstances, conferring on them a global orientation and a particular perspective for decision-making and moral action.¹⁸

In other words, celebrative ethics seeks to demonstrate that a community celebration involves a live-transmission of the values of the community contained in the shared story for a present appreciation and appropriation of them. This leads to a fundamental transformation of the participants, through a sense of community and common identity, that gives a proper perspective for discernment, decision-making, and concurrent action. Celebration of the community is a blueprint for life: “As one celebrates so one lives; as one lives so one celebrates.”¹⁹ In an age of celebration, Christian ethics has to discover a method suitable and sustainable in supporting and promoting people to follow the footprints of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. Celebrative ethics is a step in the right direction to focus the way of celebrating life in Christ.

Sacred liturgy is the source and summit of Christian life,²⁰ teaches Vatican II. Indeed, Eucharistic celebration in general, and the *Qurbana* of the Syro-Malabar Church in particular, is an authentic and symbolic participation of the people of today in the progressive

¹⁸ Paulachan P. Kochappilly, *Celebrative Ethics*, 257.

¹⁹ Paulachan P. Kochappilly, *Celebrative Ethics*, 4.

²⁰ Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §10.

programmatic process of the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. Such celebration is an opportunity for the participants to have a personal encounter with Christ in the present context of the community to be in communion with the Lord, united with the people, and to be rooted in creation. In the context of the celebration of the Eucharist, the gospel of love, the gospel of life, and the gospel of light become experiential, expressive, and effective.

Conclusion

Indeed, as seen above, the future of Christian ethics in India is promising. There are numerous ways to engage in making the future of Christian ethics, since India is still a land of spirituality and morality, inseparably interconnected. Christian ethics, primarily and fundamentally, is a way or *marga* of celebrating life in Christ. The future of Christian ethics is bright, if it moves in the direction of the way to community, the way to celebration, and the way to communion. Life in Christ is the common ground to walk the way of community, celebration, and communion, making a single whole. On this road to live a life in Christ, the sense of creation, the context, and the covenant will help moral theologians to march towards the community; the gospel of love, life, and light will accelerate the community to celebrate its life in Christ; the emphasis on person, reason, and revelation will lead people to live a life of communion in the Lord, with fellow beings, and creation. There is a growing awareness concerning the reality, rationality, and relationality in the development of Christian ethics, which is a very healthy sign of a bright future. Equally, there is an increased consciousness regarding the importance of fidelity, identity, and liberty, which take theologians to a wider horizon. Christian community through its celebration leads members to deeper communion and commitment to the glorification of God, to the establishment of peace, and to rendering hope to human beings, the quintessence of the joyful hymn sung by the angels at the Nativity of the Lord. *Celebration* of the Eucharist in the *community* is an occasion par excellence for the experience of the *communion* with the Other, the Neighbour, and Nature. All these prepare the stage for the play of the *dharma* of Jesus for the future of Christian ethics in India.