

## **CHRISTIAN MISSION AS NEW LIFE IN JESUS**

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### **1. Advocacy of the Gospel of Life**

What is enthralling and absorbing while journeying through the narrative of the Bible is its bewildering array of literary trajectories, and its genre of authors. It is a mystifying anthology of poems, parables, psalms, discourses, stories, chronicle, laws, history, etc. Its authors richly range from historians, judges, Levites, kings, priests, theologians to prophets, seers, and saints. Even Yahweh ingeniously scripts his own autobiography as the Israelites take on their tryst with destiny through their intriguing history. The history of the Bible is exuberantly choreographed by its wide diversity of authors, themes, literary styles, and ever changing geography and the evolutionary historiography. Indeed, any valid exegetical study of the Bible should take into consideration the unity of *the whole of Scripture* along with *the living tradition of the Church* and the *analogy of faith*.<sup>1</sup> All these three norms can be brought together in a neat harmony on two accounts: its undergirding theme of Life and an ever engaging God of Life.

In the course of time this theme of "Life" went into oblivion as the idea of the other worldly salvation became the preoccupation in the Western Church. Sequentially, construct of a meta-salvation became the horizon of the Western Church's mission in Asia and in other

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<sup>1</sup>*Verbum Domini*, §34, p. 63. Also, Benedict XVI, "Fourteenth General Congregation: Holy Father's Intervention," <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/b16synod12inter.htm>

continents as well. While we engage in building up an Asian Theology, "God of life" and "Gospel of Life" offer an inclusive platform to configure Asian travails and trajectories of religious pursuits and would offer a credible praxis and paradigm. To start with, a reflection on the three metaphors which prevail in the world of Biblical literature will be useful to bring out the theme of Life as the "core-experience" of the Biblical religion.

1.1. **River of Life:** In the Biblical story, the "River of Life" is an all-round metaphor which offers character and perspective in the tumultuous historiography of the Israelites. If to speak metaphorically, the "River of Life" originated from the garden of Eden (Gen 2:10; 2:13; 2:14). As it courses meandering through the turbulent annals of the Israelite's history it gives birth to new cultures and civilizations on the shores of the rivers of Egypt, Euphrates (Ex 15:18), Jordan (Mt 3:6). Prophets saw the heavens being opened, and witnessed the visions of God on the banks (Ez11:1). The stream that gushed from the sanctuary of the Temple is ever flowing to the ends of the earth, and the trees on the banks will bear fresh fruit, and their leaves will heal the wounds (Ez 47:1ff; Ps.72:8), and will make the city of God glad (Ps 46:4). Above all, the river Jordan is a pivotal symbol as the "River of Life" flows deeper and wider into the mystery of Life. The "Baptismal-Waters" of the Old Testament and the "Waters (Womb) of New life" confluenced in the River Jordan when the prophet of the prophets and the Prophet of God together gave a revolutionary élan in the unfolding of the salvation history. The initiative that commenced in the waters of Jordan, climaxed in the second baptism on the Cross (Mk 10:38-39). The cross thus became the womb of rebirth of the Son of Man – "re-incarnation" in "Truth and Spirit." Now onwards, the Risen one who is the hidden Glory of God (Col 1:27) at the interiority of the restored reality is the very sustaining source of New Life and New Light. God is no more a God who outsources from the "heavens" but verily the source, "the spring of eternal life" (Jn 4:14) ever in-sourcing from the womb of reality towards the "fullness of life" (Jn 10:10) by being "all in all" (1Cor 15:28). And the River of Life flew further from the "womb of cross" through the rivers of "Tiber" and, now the "Ganges" and would continue to flow ever, and would become bright as crystal; the "Tree of Life" on its banks would feed the people with twelve kinds of fruit and would heal the nations with its leaves and would thus climax in restoration of reality (Rev 22:1-2).

1.2. **Tree of Life:** Another key biblical metaphor which resonates with "River of Life" is indeed "Tree of Life." "Tree" is a wholesome and composite symbol of life in all religious traditions. The inverted tree

of Jewish Kabbalah, Upanishads and Gita, Bodhi Tree of Buddhism, the mythological Banyan Tree with its aerial roots, the symbol *Sanatana Dharma*, all speak of the religious symbolism of a tree. A Tree brings about a nurturing space and a nourishing ambience which is non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal; its space is inclusive and open, and is without boundaries. In the rustic India, the life unravels and revels in the space that a tree generates. The shadowy space under a tree is a welcoming home for a wide variety of life's wants and wishes. It provides a motherly ambience for the village *panchayath* (assembly), market place, religious and social festivals, marriages, *pūjas*, educational space for the children as well as the elders, political and social discourses, etc. It is a common scene in India that the women folk make cradles out of saris and hang them from the branches so that their babies can sleep while they toil in the fields under hot sun! It is a resting place for cattle and other animals. Its branches are nesting place for the birds of the sky. To put it differently, its space is a biosphere that cradles and caters life in its all forms and variety. We can thus say that the tree generates an *ashram* space of an all inclusive and universal hospitality.

Now coming to the dynamism of the tree, it is ever creative, new and active and abundant with flowers and seeds. It is a presence of fertility and fecundity with its abundance of flowers and seeds. Besides, as it is vitally "rooted" in the earth while its branches spread out in the immense space of promise and possibility – ever in tryst with destiny. To phrase differently, tree, as a cosmic pillar brings heaven and earth together and it thus becomes a "cosmic tree" that connects all forms of life and fosters life in its variety and immense range.

If we look at the Christian legacy, the "Tree of Life" has a proficient place in its religious aesthetics and liturgical symbolism. For example the Eastern Orthodox Church interprets the tree of life in Genesis as a prefiguration of the Cross. Eastern Christianity depicts cross as a blossoming Tree which symbolizes more the risen Christ of New Life than the crucified Christ of vicarious suffering. For example the St. Thomas Cross is a "flowering cross" - Tree of Life which signifies the "New Life" and "New Light."

The biblical narrative is a vibrant movement from the "Tree of Life" (Gen 2:9) to "Tree of Life" (Rev 22:2). And the Cross ("Tree of Life") bridges and balances Genesis and Eschaton - the coincidence of source and destiny of Life. This harmony of life is realized *par excellence* in the Risen Lord, the ultimate awakening of New Life to which the whole existence evolves and in which the reality resolves itself to excel ever.

1.3. **Book of life:** The Bible is oft called as the “Book of Life.”<sup>2</sup> It is a mega narrative of life but recounted through numerous macro narratives. It is scripted through the skillful interplay of teeming small narratives of people, especially, of the non-people on the margins. Interestingly, Yahweh, the author of life, tells and retells his own story through his covenantal engagement as the people of Israel treads on the unbeaten pilgrimage path. The self revelation of God in and through the sundries of ordinary people’s sobs and songs makes the Bible, a “Book of Life.” God lives through them and dreams through them. God exists (*ex-sistere*) through them and they live their journey in the Life of God. The Biblical narrative is a paradoxical co-existence of the finitude and infinitude; it is as the waves in the ocean, and the Ocean needs the waves as much as the waves need the ocean to live out! This “covenantal” communion between the human and divine is the insight of the Biblical patrimony to the humanity. So the silent author of this Book of Life is “God of Life”!

## 2. Yahweh, the God of Life

The God of the OT is always seen as a “Living God” (1Sam 17:26; 2 Kgs 19:16); living God grows never weary (Is 40:28). He is oft contrasted with the pagan dull gods (Ps 115: 4-8). According to Yahwist tradition, the God of the Bible “Yahweh” is not a “God of Philosophy” but a God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”. (Ex 6: 6,7, 8). But the priestly tradition observes that God reveals his name when he commissioned Moses in the historic mission of liberation: “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). It interprets that the name Yahweh is the living God. He is not an abstract monad in his eternal aloofness but an engaging God in dialogue with Reality.

For, the name of God revealed to Moses points to a processive God who “incarnates” in the liberative struggles of people. According to the Jewish tradition, a name is not something accidental. While it identifies the person it also denotes the *meaning* of the person. For example, while we pray “hallowed be your name,” it means “hallowed be you” as well. The name implies *what* and *who* of the person. It is in this context that we have to understand the implication when Moses asked God’s name. That is to say, the new name “I AM WHO I AM” denotes a new presence of God of Israelites in their historical travails. There are varied translations of the word “Yahweh” and philological as well as philosophical speculations. The most common translation is “I am who I am.” But there are other translations as well, for example “I am he who is” and even “I am who I will be,” “I will be who I will be,” or “I will be who I am.”

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<sup>2</sup>See Ex 32:32; Daniel 12:1; Lu 10:10; Phil 4:3; Rev 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; 22:19.

These are interesting nuances.<sup>3</sup> The former expression, Yahweh Elohim (Ex 9:1) connoted more an abstract meaning of the divinity. Now the revelation of the name of God implied that the God of the Bible would be a living God, not an Idea but Person, ever creative and innovative, interactive and incarnational God. In the Bible, "to live" always means "to live with," or "to live for," "to be present to others." Then the meaning of Yahweh is "I am he who is with you; I am life."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the form *yahwi* is causative: "makes to be." In the text we read "I AM has sent me to you" (Ex 3:14). On the one hand, it means God is the origin or source of life. On the other hand this absolute God stays put in the journey of humans; he revealed his name while he commissioned Moses in his historical mission. By revealing the name, God makes it loud and clear about his decision to intervene into the history. The divine being belongs to the course of history. The eternal becomes present in time, the "absolute in history," the core paradigm of the Biblical God.<sup>5</sup>

It leads us to say that God is not mere a meditative presence in time, but one who *acts* in history. He is *Deed* and *Event*; God wills to liberate and to give life: "I have decided to lead you up out of the misery of Egypt into... a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 17); "I am the Lord. I will free you from the forced labour (Ex 6:6). Psalmist muses, "He rescued me because he loved me" (Ps 18:20).

If I take a leaf from Meister Eckhart's mystical musings on the name of Yahweh, the repetition that we infer in it ("I am that I am" ) points to a turning or churning of Being within. A radical and optimum movement within the God-Head. Sequentially it leads to a boiling (*bullitio*) up and pouring out of itself in time and space. It is the Life energy bubbling in itself and eventually blossoming out. Yahweh is a God of Life in its abundance.<sup>6</sup>

What we infer in the name of God ("I am who I am") is a mutually clarifying equation of the Absolute Holy Other and the "the Lord, the God of ancestors." That's to say, God is transcendent as well as present in history. The Absolute and active principle, the origin of all things, is also the God of past, God of the patriarchs of the people to

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<sup>3</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation, History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Ind and John Eagleson, 2ed., Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 1988, 95.

<sup>4</sup>G. von Rad says: "Yahweh" means "I will be there (for you)": *Old Testament Theology, I*, trans. D.W. Stalker, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 180.

<sup>5</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, ch.1.

<sup>6</sup>The original reference of this Latin writing is missing. See Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, city: publisher? 189.

whom Moses is sent. The Israelites are ordered to invoke this God of Life. This "Holy Other" is wholly Immanent "here-now."

In sum, the vibe that weaves the eventful scenario of the political, religious and cultural happenings unfolded in the rich tapestry of Israelites' history is *Life*. All the three biblical symbols, "River of life," "Tree of Life" and "Book of Life" along with the idea of God as "God of Life" offer an aesthetic whole and an organic unity to the kaleidoscopic Biblical narrative. The vibe of these metaphors is the aura of Life, ever throbbing and bubbling in manifold ways in the mystery of history geared by the Lord of life.

### 3. Jesus, the Lord of Life

One of the Christological titles given to Jesus is "Lord." When the Jews called Jesus the Lord they implied the meaning of Yahweh, who, as it is interpreted above, saves them here-now. In his second sermon, Peter refers to Jesus as "author of life" (Acts 3:15). The Greek word *archegos*, which is translated as "author," can mean "leader, guide." The word is used twice again in Acts (5:31, 7:35) in which Jesus is referred to Moses as the one who gave life to this people by rescuing them from the Egyptian slavery. Again it is in Christ's name that Peter gives life and health instead of alms to the crippled man at the gate of the temple. "I have neither silver nor gold," he tells, "but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, [rise and ] walk" (Acts 3:6). Money, no, but life, yes. A little earlier, in his first sermon, he applies Psalm 16 to Jesus and tells his listeners that Jesus has "made known" to us "the paths of life" (Acts 2:28).

When Jesus himself says: "I am the life" (Jn 14:6). Its roots are to be traced in the OT legacy as discussed above. Johannine metaphor of "light" embodies the same nuance. Jesus quite astutely articulates the core and content of Biblical revelation in his mission statement, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). As the Father gives life to the dead the Son gives life (Jn 5:21). Above all, the ultimate rationale of *Missio Dei* is "eternal life" of the whole world (Jn3:16).

It is through the Kingdom that Jesus translates his vision and mission in his journey of life. Obviously, Jesus' Kingdom is neither a polity, nor a political ideology, nor an economic system nor even a religion. But it is at the same time political, social, cultural and religious in terms of priorities, policies and options. He is crucified on a political reason though he was through and through seen as a religious prophet! It is in this paradoxical witness and ministry that we have to see the integrity of Jesus. The paradoxicality of Jesus' Kingdom ministry is resolved in the totality and all inclusiveness of life. The

core paradigm of Jesus' Kingdom is life and its exuberant diversity and his acceptance of its manifoldness. He was a celebrant of life among the "non-people" as well as an agency of empowerment and solidarity in their life-struggles. He engaged in the spontaneity of life with a passion. Jesus was always on his heels moving around the villages and towns proclaiming the good news of liberty to the poor and captives (Lk 4:18ff) and healing the sick (Mt 9:35). His being was a liturgy of life both in style and substance till he bled his life out. Even his death was a celebration of new life. Thus he became an ultimate metaphor of "Life" in its plenitude and fullness. The insight of Jesus' Kingdom vision and praxis is primarily to be sought in Jesus' self understanding charged with life and the passion for "Fullness of life." Jesus is the King in Kingdom of God as the Lord of Life. His Kingdom ministry of "healing" and "saving" profusely speak of him as the sacrament of life. Above all the resurrection of Jesus is God's ultimate gift of life. It signifies the absolute death knell of death. The Lord is alive and he should not be sought among the dead (Lk 24:25; Acts 1-3).

Jesus' Kingdom of God offers us a challenging vision of life and his kingdom ministry shows "paths of life." To start with, the word Kingdom, *malkuth* is a verbal noun; it implies Kingdom as an ever unfolding organic Reality, not a closed and immutable ideology or mega or meta system. It embodies the ever creative and innovative nature of Life. Jesus' metaphors of the Kingdom of God, like sower, mustard seed, wheat, salt, talent, yeast, bread, hidden treasure, lost coin, banquet, etc (see Mt. ch 13, Lk ch.14), speak of the ever unfolding dynamism of Life. His parables like those of Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1), the Father of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11ff) and Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25) speak only of the Gospel of life. His numerous engagements – the woman at the house of Simon (Lk 7:36ff), Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1ff), etc. – are social parables which on the one hand frustrate the prevailing life negative social and religious bias and on the other hand they speak of new proactive alternatives full of life and promise. His parables, metaphors, social interactions generate open and welcoming spaces and call for a positive participation and partnership so that the Reign of God is being realized. Above all Mark brings about an equivalency between Kingdom and life. To enter the Kingdom is to enter into life (Mk 9:43-47).

The very advocacy of Paul's faith and mission is the event of Resurrection (1Cor 15:14). The empty tomb has become the womb of new life. The Lord's messengers counter the question of Mary Magdalene and the apostles: "Why do you seek the living one among the dead?" (Lk 24:5). The very message of Resurrection is that life triumphs

ultimately. This message has gone deep into the Apostles. That's why the resurrection was the core of the first Christian preaching. The disciples were bold enough to declare themselves as witnesses of this foundational event in the adversary contemporary situations. To prove Jesus' Resurrection Peter argues in the house of Cornelius that they "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:41). Food is a powerful symbol of life. Both in the pre and post Easter events, "table fellowship" had been a powerful metaphor and a narrative of life in Jesus mission. The "table" generates a welcoming space of hospitality founded on equity, justice, fraternity, care, friendship and sharing. The "Lord of Life" whom we encounter in the Gospel stories calls us to a radical option for life when the culture of death prevails over today's world in manifold manifest and unmanifest forms and ways. We are reminded of Karl Barth's famous statement: "The Holy Other" is the Wholly Other."<sup>7</sup> If we re-translate the Barthian statement, it can be stated, the "Holy Other" of the OT is now verily the "Wholly Within" in the mystery of New Life accomplished in the "First Fruit of Resurrection" in whom, as Paul says at the Areopagus, "we live, and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). It is the urgency of the present threatening scenario of tsunami, people's uprising for freedom in Middle East and North Africa, global financial scams and scandals, violence and war, etc. that the Lord of Life is to be invoked and proclaimed with a sense of urgency so the whole of reality unfolds in the "Holy Optimism" (Karl Rahner) of God, the Creator, Sustainer and Restorer.

#### 4. Lessons from History

The history of the Church tells that the Christian mission has, by and large, not embodied the idea of "kingdom" as Jesus has interpreted it in the paradigm of the Gospel of life in its totality and inclusiveness. The mission history reveals that 'kingdom' was often misconstrued in imperial cultural and political idioms and policies. Today also people, especially the people of other religious traditions understand "kingdom" as the prolongation of colonial past in the continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America. To highlight how the Bible was deftly used for anti-Kingdom values, let me quote from a quite famous open letter of various indigenous movements of South America addressed to the late Pope John Paul II when he visited Peru in 1988:

John-Paul II, we Andean and American Indians, have decided to take an advantage of your visit to return you your Bible, since in five

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<sup>7</sup>See, Graham Ward, *"The Revelation of the Holy Other as the Wholly Other: Between Barth's Theology Of The Word And Levinas's Philosophy Of Saying,"* Modern Theology, 9, 2 (April 1993) 159-180.



centuries it has not given us love, peace or justice. Please take back your Bible and give it back to our oppressors, because they need its moral teachings more than we do. Ever since the arrival of Christopher Columbus, a culture, a language, religion and values which belong to Europe have been imposed on Latin America by force. The Bible came to us as a part of the imposed colonial transformation. It was the ideological weapon of this colonialist assault. The Spanish sword which attacked and murdered the bodies of Indians by day and night became the cross which attacked the Indian soul."<sup>8</sup>

The stories in Africa, Asia are not different from the Latin America. For example, the practice of Apartheid and slavery are mandated by the Bible!<sup>9</sup> Because of the militant and political underpinnings of the "kingdom" what is now preferred is "reign of God" in theological discourses in Asia. Today, maybe "the Gospel of life" is more comprehensive, inclusive and acceptable idiom in these continents for it is without any tag of Church's past militant mission.

However there is no need of a retrospective judgment on the past militant colonial history of the Church. It is enough done in the church. The Hindutva people are now doing this abundantly both on print and electronic media in India! If we engage in a polemical defence of the past in the present global politick it will only boomerang on the Church especially when a new historiography is being written in the frame of cultural nationalism and religious chauvinism in the former colonial continents. Besides a credible argument is a remote possibility because historical data of the crimes committed on behalf of Christian mission are simply indefensible in the present ethos of dialogue of religions. What is needed is a retrospective critique at the intra-religious level so that we *return* to Jesus' Gospel of life with a proactive agenda and vision.

Somehow the church missed or lost Jesus' bio-centric vision and agenda in the Augustinian soteriology which made a theological caricature of the wretchedness of human soul and the sinfulness of the world. It is high time to recapture an ascending Christology which is narrated in the Gospel stories while the Church is losing its leadership and credibility worldwide. A Christology explained through the Chalcedonian formula or Greek philosophical categories and

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<sup>8</sup>Pablo Richard , "Liberation Theology: A Difficult but Possible Future," in Ellis, Marc and Otto Maduro, eds., *Expanding the View: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990, 64-65, in Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism, A Moral Critique*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, 68-69.

<sup>9</sup>See Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold, Europe's Conquest of Indigenous Peoples*, New York: Grove Press, 1998.

anthropological dualism may not be palatable in the present epoch of Post-modernism. A renewed understanding of Christology in terms of contextuality is imperative in Asian theology. In this context, what is more helpful would be a Jesus of faith rather than a Christ of faith or Jesus of history. It entails a shift from a descending Christology (revelation and salvation from above) to an ascending Christology, which is built up from Jesus' earthly life and work. The image of Jesus' prophetic personality and his Good News to the poor (Lk 4:18) should increasingly have more sway in our Christian life today.

### **5. Challenging Scenario**

Today's world is a mind boggling mix of contradictory forces and movements. What we find in the present history is a strange simultaneity of a "culture of death" and "culture of life." On the one hand the modern violence, terrorism, violation of human rights and dignity, infringement of gender and social justice are overtly or covertly promoted by the consumerist hedonism and capitalist greed, and its agencies of market and media. On the other hand, more than ever before a new initiative is seen for a vibrant corporate identity of humanity especially in the context of ecological crisis and owing to the cultural phenomenon of globalization. A new "culture of life" is on rise in the collective unconsciousness; inclusive cultural identity constructions are spontaneously happening owing to the cyber network, and the enormous mobility of people across the hitherto closely guarded geographical boundaries. This extensive mutation and permutation of ideas, ideologies and systems without being monitored by any centralizing authority embody immense potential for greater global solidarity and harmony.

A new culture of partnership and dialogue is increasingly becoming a reality because of political, social and economic motifs, cultural flows, and spiritual movements in the new brave world. What is aspired for is a corporate and pluralistic personality, and what is in formation is a responsible world-citizenry. For example, the recent people's uprising happening in the Middle East and North Africa (what is called "Jasmine revolution" of civil resistance) must be interpreted in this broader frames and visions. Globalization and media help to channelize the human goodness and tremendous emotional and ideological support to such liberative happenings. No more people can be kept in the name of obsolete ideologies under "bamboo curtains" or "iron curtains" in the present era of knowledge revolution which is sustained and promoted through the cyber media. In this regard, the empowering and transformative role of the modern media is amazing in bringing about a revolution of consciousness among the people of this part of the world, who have

been suppressed for centuries by tenacious dictators. What is needed is a radical paradigm shift in our theology to make the Gospel more competitive, credible and culturally rooted in the present epoch of globalization and informatics.

## 6. Decisive Paradigm Shift

Now, the core and code that gears and supplies integrity and integration to these vast and vivacious synergetic movements is the sure shift toward Life in the collective consciousness while interpreting the reality and processing the events and incidents worldwide, whether they be political, cultural, religious or ecological. What is transpiring is a paradigm shift from a theocentric and anthropocentric world to a Bio-centric world at the collective unconscious and identity constructions. The bio-centric vision offers us a common and inclusive platform on which everybody can partake in a futuristic horizon without being deterred by their so called identity moorings. Indeed, this present history is verily the *kairos* for an animated advocacy of Jesus' Gospel of abundant life in the post-modern globalized world.

Such a paradigm shift entails that Jesus' Kingdom is to be increasingly interpreted as New Life in the present globalized world. Jesus' Kingdom ministry is, by and large, seen anthropocentric in the ambience of a theocentric horizon. His parables, social interactions, violations of Sabbath laws, etc. strikingly speak of Jesus' inclusive anthropocentricism in which no segment of people of the Jewish society is left out. Human being was the measure of his new religious movement. But when his pre-Easter teachings and social interactions are corroborated with post-Easter ones, especially with his Eschatological banquets, and his call to proclaim the Gospel to the whole of creation we infer a new articulation of anthropocentricism in terms of bio-centric world (wider ecumenism). What we find is a shift from Jewish Catholicism to an eco-Catholicism. That's to say, Jesus' Gospel of "abundance of life" acquires a larger eco-horizon and a wider ecumenical platform of dialogue and partnership. Such a paradigm embodies a greater appeal to the sensibilities of the present epoch.

It all means that increasingly we have to interpret God as Life and Life as God. Such an equation transforms the idea of God in the sense that it becomes more inclusive, dialogical, universal and concrete than a divine of human constructs and idioms which are oft seen as normative and absolute. An anthropocentric God is innately constrained by cultural and philosophical xenophobism whether be it Greek, Syrian, or Latin or Orthodox. A bio-centric God immediately

and instantly earns universal support cutting across all cultural, religious and social barriers.

### **7. Import of the Hermeneutical Shift**

The very existence of the mother Earth is being threatened and there prevails a collective phobia that the very subsistence of "life" is at stake. Owing to these the core concern of all nations, irrespective of their ideological underpinnings or cultural identities is life itself. "Life" has become the crux and core of all political, economic, social, cultural, and religious discourses today. There was a time when the earth was considered an inexhaustible source. Now a collective conscientization is happening that the Earth is to be treated as a mother and she should be cared and protected. Earth has become the new symbol of unity and harmony. Mother earth is transformed into to a symbol of God's motherhood. Increasingly all religions are taking a turn towards a spirituality that is earth centred. We begin to speak of eco-spirituality, ecosophy, eco-justice. Thus Kingdom of God is acquiring a new translation in a biocentric world in which reverence to Life has become a new religiosity.

Vibrating with this paradigmatic shift Christian mission needs a new hermeneutical turn in our theology. That's to say we need a theological shift from a crucified Christ to the risen Christ who is the iconic symbol of New Life. It is only a missional (pedagogical or methodological) preference which does not exclude the soteriological import of the crucified Christ. That is to say, the mission is to be increasingly seen as an invitation into the New Life and the celebration of life in the glorified body of Christ. And the scars that the risen body still carries symbolize the brokenness of the present day humanity; it calls for a responsible praxis of Christian faith - an engaging Christian mission which nurtures and sustains a life in its abundance and totality.

What is advocated is that Jesus the Risen must prominently be proclaimed as an empowering figure for the teeming millions on the margins especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America, who are sidelined on account of various reasons of caste, race, displacement from the ancestral lands in the name of market and the development of infrastructures for the multinational enterprises. Once in an interreligious conference one Hindu scholar commented: the failure of Christianity in Asia was due to the fact that the Christian missionaries projected a "crucified Christ," a victim God; Christianity was seen as a religion of *crossianity* which was naively engrossed with the idea of sin and guilt. Moreover, the Crucifix has become a convenient image for the transference of our fragility and infirmity, and a self- inflicting, victimizing and passive spirituality was

mistakenly fostered. It has silently toed the line of Augustinian dualism and got mandate in the misinterpreted vicarious suffering of Jesus. We stopped at the crucifix and the Risen Christ (the Awakened) is not enough proclaimed. In Hindu tradition victimhood is justified as indispensable in one's path of salvation in the name of past *karma*. Religious life is interpreted as something separate from this world of *maya*. Sequentially an understanding of other worldly salvation is upheld. In Christianity also this tendency is not less present. The exaggerated emphasis on the sin consciousness and sinfulness of this world is quite obvious in our prayers, rituals and ascetic practices. Moreover, in all religious traditions there is a tendency of divinizing victimhood and indulging in and eulogizing suffering. In the case of Jesus, even though he was conscious of the sins of humanity, he took on this problem through a creative and proactive engagement in the life. He did not divide the life between this worldly and other worldly. He transformed the sin and its different forms like injustice, violence, etc. as tools (*upaya*) and contexts to reveal the God of Life. It means that Jesus and his Gospel stood for a salvation in and through the world, not outside the world. It makes Jesus different from the other contemporary religious leaders and his Gospel from other religious traditions. He emphasized the salvation through the engagement with the life not by opting out of life and eloping to Himalayas and desert but through a fundamental option for the Life. He took anti-life forces by horns through his life and mission. He bridged secular and sacred in the Reverence of Life. Religion is given a new translation as the celebration of Life and a religious person is a celebrant of life in his vision. His life was a Liturgy of Life. This is what we see quite strikingly in Jesus and in his Gospel.

We need an emphatic hermeneutical shift from a crucified Christ to the awakened Christ especially in Asia. It will generate a proactive and creative understanding of salvation; it calls for an engaging presence in the "joys and sorrows" of this world (GS #1) and to become an agency of life. In Asian pantheon of innumerable gods and goddesses not a single victim-god can be figured out. All gods and goddesses become victors ultimately; all gurus, be it Buddha, or Mahavira, or sages like Rama Krishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, are looked upon as awakened ones, and thus they remain always as inspiring and empowering presence in the Asian religious scenario. As the mission history shows, the Chinese accepted Jesus the Crucified in the beginning but eventually they lost fascination to a victim God. Indeed a crucified Christ symbolizes a God who shows solidarity with the oppressed and the exploited. But the fallacy comes when we absolutize the "cross" and the victimhood

and are stuck with a victim God, and fail to see the Risen Christ who emptied the tombs of human travails and tragedies and who has now become the inner source of empowerment in our journey of life. The "passion" of Jesus in the holy week was "passion for life"! It was an ecstasy of life. There was an aesthetics of Jesus' suffering in the sense that there transpired a creative correlation between "art of dying" and "art of living". The "break-down" on the cross was verily a break-through of new life! It is the rapture in the rupture of the 'seed' while becoming the "the tree of life."

The Christian God is the Risen Lord. The Risen God is now the Lord of New Life. Crucified Christ is only a passing phase of the Christian victorious God. Now he is simultaneously the *utopia* and *topia* of salvation. This is the very basis that makes our faith, as St. Paul advocates throughout his letters, credible and veritable. Christian mission is to trust and obey the Spirit of the Risen God, who is the new potential, delight and pure energy deluging the whole of reality. He is the transcendence of reality and the spontaneity of life. The advocacy of this paper is that Christian mission is to ignite the possibility of this new life accomplished in the Risen Lord who is unbound, ubiquitous, and universal and is now the very pulse and "breath" of the whole reality. He is the "the spring of water" (Jn 4:14) which should well up and become the rivers of "Ganges," "Yangtze," "Amazon" and "Nile" to transform the "land" into a "promised-land" of "righteousness and peace and joy" (Rom 14:17). The mission of his disciples is to help the crucified Jesus who is buried in the human tragedies and the groaning of the earth to resurrect and lead the people into a new scenario of the "abundant-life" as accomplished in the "first fruit of Resurrection"!

## Conclusion

The agenda of Christian mission is to be increasingly seen and interpreted in this inclusive paradigm of New Life in the present world of dialogue, media, multi-culturality and globalization. Some of the vital sites and our thinking patterns which call for a radical revisit to do the Christian mission in the bio-centric world are pointed out by way of conclusion. An elaborate discussion may be taken up eventually.

1. A Paradigm shift towards a Bio-centric Age is the waking call of the present scenario of ecological crisis in terms of earth quakes, tsunamis, floods, landslides and depletion of natural resources due to consumerist policies and priorities. We have to make a shift from "human being as the measure" to "Life as the measure": it calls for a fundamental option for Life in its all variety and diversity in a Bio-centric world. Theologically speaking we need a shift from "Sky God (Father) to an Earth God (Mother)". The mystery of Incarnation

embodies immense potentials and promises for engaging in such a theology of feminine God in which a planetary identity of Antropos can positively constructed and fostered.

2. Mission is to be seen more a cultural discourse. Inclusive and dialogical identity constructions at the personal as well as at the collective levels are underway in the present scenario of globalization; humans are increasingly seen as "cultural-beings." It calls for a dynamic understanding of culture in the sense that human beings are always in a process of exploring their identity. It implies that human identity is not a given identity but an evolving identity; it is to be constructed through contests and confrontations while humans are in a continuous search for meaning (logos). Religion must naturally happen in this process of seeking meaning rather than imposed from outside. Religion must then be a "culture-thing." Credibility and competency of the Gospel is to be situated in this cultural context. Indeed the Gospel of Life will be a competent paradigm and path in this understanding of religion and Christian mission.

3. The site for Gospel of life is verily the secular space. The credibility of a religion in the present age of "market of religions" is sought in the public meaning of religious credentials. Jesus' praxis of religion was done in the civil space, especially at the margins. Only in the context of religion becoming an agency of life, the present trend of deserting religion can be arrested. Today the secular space is deluged with people's movements for justice and human rights. Then Christian mission must be reconceived in the frame of "the public meaning of the Gospel" so that Jesus' Gospel becomes a vital catalyst of social transformation and integral liberation. The radical revolution that Jesus brought out is that religion and the understanding of salvation is not a private or individualist affair but a social and communitarian event; conversion is to the community and salvation is through the community. To regain the credibility of Christian mission the Gospel of Life has to be practised right on the inclusive platform of the civil society, where the role of religions is increasingly recognized and relied upon to bring about peace and harmony in the present political and economic resolves and policies.

In sum we have to revisit our roots of faith so that we can rediscover our God as primarily "God of Life" and "Lord of Life" and mission as becoming the agents of New Life in the Risen Christ.