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ASIAN CHRISTOLOGY – SOME STRAY REFLECTIONS

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Abstract

In the New Testament as well as in the tradition of the church we do not find one single Christology, but various Christologies. Depending on the concrete contexts and the addressees the various Christologies are, however, united based on the faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and the only Mediator between God and the humans. Asia being a vast continent of plurality of cultures, religions and existential problems, will and should have similarly a plurality of Christologies, which are Asian and at the same time Christian (based on the biblical faith and the tradition of the church). Inculturation is a valid concern of Asian Christologies, which should be pursued at the same time with sensitivity to the faith of the Christian community and also with due respect for the faith of the adherents of other religions. Already the Christologies of the New Testament are Asian Christologies. In the Indian religious, cultural and socio-political context we have to develop also other forms of an Asian Christology addressing especially the search of the people for justice, harmony and integral salvation. In this perspective we have to give due considerations to the patrimony of each individual church on the one hand and to the aspirations of the

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local contexts, especially of the tribals, women, Dalits and the subaltern cultures. Christology is not to be seen as limited to academic works and exercise, but is to be seen extended to every form and praxis of Christian spirituality and service and to the expression and appreciation of Christian faith in art, music and literature.

Keywords: Adaptation, Accommodation and Transformation, Ashram Spirituality, Asian Christology, Biblical Christology, Inculturation, Latinization, Lived Christology, Plurality of Christologies

Asian Christology?

By Christology we usually mean the systematic reflection of the Christian believers on their faith in Jesus as the Christ. This reflection takes place, of course, against the background and in the context of their life, but in the light of faith. This branch of systematic (dogmatic) theology deals with the question of the *person* of Jesus of Nazareth, namely, *who* he is, and also on what he has done for us. The latter part is called soteriology, since it deals with Jesus as the *soter*, the Saviour. While Christology in the strict sense is about the personal identity of Jesus, Soteriology is on his relevance and function for us. The former is hence called ontological Christology, and the latter, functional Christology. Christology in the broad sense comprises both ontological Christology and his Soteriology.

To what extent is the nomenclature "*Asian Christology*" theologically right and relevant? In the tradition of the church we have so far not named theology or Christology after a place (nation or continent), but according to authors (evangelists and fathers of the church, e.g., Johannine Christology, Pauline Christology, Patristic Christology); schools (e.g., Alexandrian, Antiochene, Thomist or Scotist Christology); ecclesial traditions of individual Churches/Rites (e.g., Oriental, Byzantine Christology) and individual theologians (e.g., Rahner's Christology). Against this background Christologies named after a locality, such as European, African or Asian/Indian Christology, etc. seem to be strange. This new nomenclature seeks its justification, however, on the grounds of inculturation and the theology of the local church, which are valid theological concerns today as ever. At the same time the question persists, whether local church can simply be specified by geography alone without reference to or taking consideration of its ecclesial and liturgical roots and traditions. Theology/Christology is reflection of the experience and celebration of the faith of a community/church, of course, in the light of the context. In so far as a local church or community of faith traces its origin to an apostle or an autonomous particular Church (*sui iuris*), not only the place where the new community has developed but also

its ecclesial tradition has a decisive part to play in its theology/Christology. This would mean that as there are in Asia many autonomous particular churches, there have to be correspondingly various Asian Christologies, and not a single Asian Christology. In other words, we cannot simply speak of an unspecific Asian Christology, but concretely of various Asian Christologies corresponding to the individual churches in Asia.¹

In addition to the various individual churches in Asia, there are also various cultures, religions and socio-political contexts in Asia, which differ from place to place. That means, even within the same individual church, there could be various Christologies depending on the local context. We cannot have, therefore, a single simplistic “Esperanto Christology” for the whole of Asia. This is especially true of India, where the context is manifold, from place to place. There are people belonging to various groups, from high caste Hindus to the Dalits, Tribes and the Untouchables, adherents of religions like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Bahaim and subaltern religions, and people of various economic classes from multimillionaires to those below poverty line. Oppression of women, minorities and the marginalized; high rate of illiteracy; corruption; mafia system; casteism; female foeticides; child labour; unemployment; fatalistic attitude to life; unhealthy influence of Western consumerist culture; etc. make the present scenario and context of Asia/India.

Besides the present situation, we have to be aware of the fact that the long history of colonial rule of the West in Asia (except Japan and Thailand), both politically and ecclesiastically, has left its wounds in the soul of Asia. It is also to be remembered that earlier attempts of some pioneers at inculturation and indigenisation of the Church have been officially scuttled as in the case of the Chinese rites (Matteo Ricci), the Malabar rites (Roberto De Nobili) and of Upadhyaya’s moves. At the same time there is currently a good number of Hindus in India who are fascinated by Jesus and his life, example and teachings and so regularly come to attend the prayer meetings at

¹ In India, for instance, besides the various non-Catholic churches and denominations there are three Catholic autonomous particular churches, namely, the Apostolic Church of St Thomas Christians of India, currently known as the Syro-Malabar Church (the original community tracing its origin to Apostle Thomas), the Syro-Malankara Church (a Uniate Church of St Thomas Christians who came back in 1930 from the Jacobite Church to the Catholic Communion after they had separated themselves from the original St Thomas Christians in protest to the Western Latin ecclesiastical hegemony) and the Church of the Roman Latin Rite (introduced in India by the European missionaries).

certain Christian spiritual centres. In Varanasi (Benares) there is a group of the devotees of Christ known as the “*Khrisbhaktas*.” An Asian/Indian Christology has to take note of all these elements as well, along with the specific ecclesial traditions proper to each church.

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* of John Paul II gives a short description of the Asian reality as follows:

Asia is the earth’s largest continent and is home to nearly two-thirds of the world’s population, with China and India accounting for almost half the total population of the globe. The most striking feature of the continent is the variety of its peoples who are ‘heirs to ancient cultures, religions and traditions.’ We cannot but be amazed at the sheer size of Asia’s population and at the intricate mosaic of its many cultures, languages, beliefs and traditions, which comprise such a substantial part of the history and patrimony of the human family. Asia is also the cradle of the world’s major religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It is the birthplace of many other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism and Shintoism. Millions also espouse traditional or tribal religions, with varying degrees of structured ritual and formal religious teaching...The people of Asia take pride in their religious and cultural values, such as love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, the spirit of hard work, discipline, frugal living, the thirst for learning and philosophical enquiry. They hold dear the values of respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety towards parents, elders and ancestors, and a highly developed sense of community. In particular, they hold the family to be a vital source of strength, a closely knit community with a powerful sense of solidarity. Asian peoples are known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Without denying the existence of bitter tensions and violent conflicts, it can still be said that Asia has often demonstrated a remarkable capacity for accommodation and a natural openness to the mutual enrichment of peoples in the midst of a plurality of religions and cultures ... All of this indicates an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul, and it is the core around which a growing sense of ‘being Asian’ is built. This ‘being Asian’ is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul.²

1. Biblical Christology, an Asian Christology

When we now speak of Asian Christology, for whatever reasons, it should not be understood as if there were no Asian Christology until

²*Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), art. 6.

now. In so far as Christian faith in Jesus as the Christ had its origin in Palestine and in the religious context of Judaism, the New Testament Christology of the early church is an authentic Asian Christology. The Jewish Old Testament terminology and the general narrative style of the gospels bear witness to the special Asian characteristic of the Christologies of the gospels, although each evangelist had his own special viewpoint and concrete audience before the eyes. Jesus is presented there in the Jewish-biblical categories: as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, the new Moses, the Teacher of the New Torah, the promised Messiah, the Son of Man, Son of God, the eschatological Prophet, the suffering Servant of the Lord, the Saviour, the Lord, the Word of God, God, etc. Also the term Logos that is used in the gospel according to John is not a piece of the Hellenistic (Western) philosophy; rather it is the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) equivalent of the biblical (Old Testament) Hebrew phrase *Dabar-Yahweh*, word of the Lord God and is to be understood against the background of the creative word and wisdom of God.

Also the Christologies of the Acts, Letters and the book of Revelation represent through and through the New Testament Asian Christologies in biblical categories. The key terms and motifs employed there go back to the Jewish religious experience and expectation. The central Christological confession of all this remains thus that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God, the Servant and the Saviour and that he has expiated humanity's sin and brought us justification and redemption by his self-sacrifice on the cross.

Not only with regard to the person of Jesus but also in view of his saving work we find in the New Testament the biblical categories of new creation, liberation, freedom, exodus, sacrifice, expiation, covenant, atonement, obedience, redemption, substitution (vicarious suffering), reconciliation, forgiveness, adoption, resurrection, revelation, peace, exaltation, glorification, judgement, justification, new heaven and new earth, divine filiation, sending of the Spirit, beatific vision, and eternal life.

The key idea of redemption in the New Testament is that Jesus saved us by his death on the cross. This so-called moral theory of redemption that focuses on the paschal mystery of Christ is later complemented by the physical theory by the Greek Fathers of the church who explains salvation and redemption in terms of deification of the human nature in that the Son of God by his Incarnation has appropriated the human nature and so elevated it to the divine status. The Son of God became man, what we are, so that we may become, what he is. The firm conviction of the New Testament is that

Jesus of Nazareth is the only mediator of salvation, for he is the only begotten Son of God become man. Therefore we have the statements such as: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12); "there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human" (1 Tim 5); "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6).

2. Western Theology

We have today the general impression that all theology, and for that matter, all Christology is Western/European! This has its own background and reasons. Although the Syriac fathers and theologians from the schools of Edessa, Nisibis and Antioch, such as Ephrem, Diodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, Theodoret, Narsai of Nisibis, Jacob of Serugh, Babbai the Great, Abraham De-Bet Rabban, Mar Aba I, etc. had developed a Syriac Theology/Christology, the Western colonial rule in Asia with its Latinization policy led to a complete eclipse of the Syriac-Oriental theology in favour of a Western-European (Latin) tradition in Liturgy, theology and discipline. Theology/Christology was taught in Latin or English in the seminaries, and not in the vernacular. Although this had its practical benefits, it was not helpful to promote an Asian Christology in Asia. This is all the more true of India. Western missionaries brought and taught Western theology. The Thomas Christians of India, who were following the East Syrian Chaldean Catholic tradition of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, were made to follow the Western model in the wake of the Synod of Diamper (1599). The Western missionaries of the colonial regimes naturally judged everything by their single norm of Western theology. Whatever did not suit this theology became suspicious and was condemned. Thus, for instance, the expression "Mother of Christ" used for Blessed Virgin Mary by the Thomas Christians in their liturgy was removed and replaced by "Mother of God." So, too, in discipline, the Latin canon law of celibacy was imposed on the clergy. All this had its negative consequences leading to schism among the Thomas Christians.

3. Asian Christologies

Since Asia is a vast continent with various cultures and religions, we cannot have one single Asian Christology. We can only speak of Asian Christologies in the plural. Just as we do not have one single biblical Christology, so, too, we may have several Asian

Christologies. As the biblical Christologies have a common basic datum that unites them all, Asian Christologies also can have a uniting common Asian characteristic along with a plurality of Christologies. In other words, there is nothing wrong about having and speaking of many Christologies, provided they all correspond to and conform with and do not contradict the original deposit and treasure of faith. In other words, local church and its theology cannot stand against the faith of the original faith and the universal church. This includes the teaching of the Holy Scriptures as well as the teachings of the official *magisterium* (councils and dogmas). Within these parameters we can have different theologies and so also of Christologies. One will have also to give due importance to one's individual church in developing theology. As the faith of each church is best expressed and celebrated in its liturgy the Christology of each church has to be developed in the spirit of its liturgy. This does imply that such a Christology is based on the Holy Scriptures as well as on the official teachings of the universal church. The same faith can be expressed and celebrated in various ways and forms.

4. Non-Asian Christology

A non-Asian Christology is a Christology in non-Asian categories and motifs. Western Christology may be a term to represent this type of non-Asian Christology. Although the original Christology in the New Testament was an Asian Christology, the later development of Christology in the wake of various heresies and controversies on the one hand and on account of the adaptation of Western philosophical categories there emerged the Western Christologies. Thus we have in the Nicean Council (325) the famous term of consubstantiality (*homoousios*) of the Son (Logos) with the Father in order to defend the true divinity of Christ and his equality in divine status with the Father. This was a valid and justified attempt against the background of the Arian heresy. The Platonic and Neo-Platonic influences on the thinking pattern of the early fathers of the church gave birth to a philosophical terminology in Christology in order to defend and clarify the orthodox faith of the church. The terms Logos, *ousia*, *physis*, *prosopon*, substance, *hypostasis*, nature, will, intellect, etc. found their way gradually into the Christological discussions and debates of the time. Discussions focussed on the person, nature and soul of Christ. In the Scholastic period and later this continued by making use of the Aristotelian philosophical system. Reflections were also made on the explanation of the constitution of Christ, on the nature of hypostatic union, the special feature of the person of Christ, on his consciousness, whether or not he has an independent act of existence

(*esse*), whether or not his person can be called a *human* person, etc. Discussions were centred also around the need of incarnation, nature of incarnation, the principle of union of the divine and human natures in Christ, his will, unity and duality in Christ, whether he has a human soul, his ne-science (“ignorance”) of Christ, the possibility of God to become man, God’s immutability, divinity and humanity of Christ, his sinlessness, etc. The themes and terminology of these Western Christologies were based on the controversies among the schools and theologians of Western cultural background.

The Western Christologies have, of course, brought out and clarified many aspects of the complex mystery of the person of Jesus Christ. It is not, however, right to think that everything in Christology has been now said and exhaustively elaborated with the Western Christologies. There is much more to be brought to light regarding the mystery of Christ, his person, work and relevance. Inculturation of Christian faith also demands that each culture and context has to develop its own Christology that is understandable to the people of that context. Since Asian peoples have different existential concerns and categories other than the European and Western issues, an Asian Christology is a need and challenge of the times. This holds good also for other Christologies, such as African Christology and South American Christology. Pope John Paul II pointed out in his apostolic exhortation that the Asian Synod expressed “encouragement to theologians in their delicate work of developing an inculturated theology, especially in the area of Christology.”³

Taking into account the cultural contexts of the local church in Asia, an Asian Christology is in place, in order to express the authentic faith of the Church. This is the mission and challenge of the church in Asia and its theologians or theological schools. When we now speak of Asian Christology, we mean an Asian Christology in the context of each Asian country. As there is no Asia in the abstract, so, too, there cannot be an Asian Christology in the abstract, but an Asian Christology in a concrete country with its real life context. Below we shall speak of such an Asian Christology in the religious, social and cultural context of India. Pope John Paul II gives us some general guidelines in this regard as follows:

Theological work must always be guided by respect for the sensibilities of Christians, so that by a gradual growth into inculturated forms of expressing the faith people are neither confused nor scandalized. In every

³*Ecclesia in Asia*, art. 22.

case inculturation must be guided by compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the faith of the universal Church, in full compliance with the Church's Tradition and with a view to strengthening people's faith. The test of true inculturation is whether people become more committed to their Christian faith because they perceive it more clearly with the eyes of their own culture.⁴

5. Characteristics of an Asian Christology

An Asian Christology should be both Asian as well as Christian. The core of Christian faith is that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ (the Anointed, the Messiah) of God. This means in general terms that he is the saviour (redeemer) of the world, the mediator of salvation between God and humans. The term saviour or redeemer implies a wide range of meanings depending on what is meant and understood by salvation/redemption/liberation. The task of an Asian Christology is hence to translate the idea of saviour and redeemer in the Asian "language." Language here means both language in the usual sense of the term as well as the cultural matrix of Asia, which is formed by the experiences and expectations of the people in their socio-religious-political context. This does not mean that there is an exclusively Asian "language" that has nothing to do with the general human experiences and longings. The longing to love and to be loved unconditionally, the wish to live, to be forgiven, desire for peace, hope and reconciliation, joy and happiness, truth, justice and freedom – these are all experiences of every human being, irrespective of country, continent and context. Every human being makes also contrast experiences in this regard. In other words, an Asian Christology can have some elements in common with other Christologies when it is a matter of universal human experiences.

As the desire for life and the longing to overcome death are common to every living being, an important term in biblical language for salvation is life. This is expressed also by the associated terms like eternal life and resurrection. When we see in the Gospel according to John as the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25) it means that in him we have the fulfilment of our greatest longing, that he is our salvation/saviour. This message is not merely proclaimed as a theoretical statement, but illustrated in the story of raising Lazarus from the dead. The gospel narratives are meant to serve to bring to light who Jesus is and what he can do for us. Asian Christology can very well adopt this narrative style. Since in Christian faith we have to do with an *event*, the historical Christ-event, which happened in

⁴*Ecclesia in Asia*, art. 22.

time and place, Christology cannot dispense with what once happened. The gospel narratives retain therefore their place and significance in any Christology. An Asian Christology cannot hence invent new stories about Jesus. But it can translate the message into Asian terminology of the expected redeemer, sometimes also in going beyond the Asian expectations.

Applied in the Indian context of Hindu understanding of salvation as liberation (*mukti* and *moksha*) from the chain of births and rebirths (*samsara*), Jesus can be represented as the one who liberates us from the recurring series of births and rebirths by making us participate in his resurrection. The Indian soul has expressed the human longing in terms of the prayer for reality, truth, immortality, light and knowledge, as is expressed in the prayer of peace (*Shanti mantra*) from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* I.iii.28: "Lead us from unreality to reality, from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from death to immortality." Jesus redeems or liberates us from sin, death and the evil one and his hosts (powers of darkness) and gives us sense and meaning to our life. Besides the basic desire for immortality, every human being is in search of unconditional love and acceptance which also implies forgiveness of sin and guilt. Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God and to one another and has revealed to us the love of God. He brought us atonement for our sins and provided redemptive value to our suffering. He enables us to love God and our fellow human beings and promises and provides us with integral salvation of body and spirit, already here on earth and at the end he makes us share the eternal life with him. His resurrection is the guarantee of this divine gift. In order that we may become incorporated and united with him he has instituted his church and the sacraments through which we receive his grace. This strengthens us in face of all the negative powers that are at work in this world and provides us with hope and confidence. In Jesus Christ we have the definitive and unsurpassable answer of God to our existential question of meaning and search for salvation.

An important trait of Asian Christology is that it has to be oriented to spirituality rather than mere academics. Asia is in search of spiritual insight. Only spirituality can satisfy the Asian soul. Jesus Christ has fascinated and captured the Asian heart with his spiritual wisdom combined with his life that put it into practice. Asian Christology has to be hence more spiritual in content than speculative. Spirituality will be more concerned with presenting the Gospel embodied in life-witness rather than in verbal proclamation, knowing that people pay greater attention to witnesses than to

teachers. It will seek to practise divinely right living, loving and relating.⁵ As Rayan puts it,

Mission in Asia will weep with Jesus over the death of Asia's children from starvation and deprivation caused by the development policies of the greedy and the powerful. Missionaries will gather into the chalice of their heart the tears of Asia's poor, and hold it up for God to see and bless and transform into a cup of abundant life. Meanwhile we shall miss no opportunity to name the Name of him who opted to be poor with the poor, to be homeless, to be a rejected stone, and the suffering Servant of all. Name the Holy One who is present and gives meaning and value to people's wounds and sighs, who plants the seeds of the resurrection in the heart of our death. We name him with humility; we present him as our love and our treasure, and not as a hammer with which to threaten people and smash skulls. We present Jesus in his kenosis and his love and in the solidarity of the Resurrection, as a friend of the people and a giver of freedom, and not as a religious Julius Caesar out to conquer, destroy and dominate.⁶

Asian Christology has the task and challenge of presenting and representing Jesus Christ as the man for others (pro-existence) who emptied and humbled himself for the service of the others, especially the poor, neglected and marginalized.

6. Adaptation, Accommodation and Transformation

While adopting and adapting the Asian language an Asian Christology has to in some points go beyond (transcend) the original meaning and fill it with new and added meaning and content, sometimes even against its own original intention and understanding. In other words, an Asian Christology can contain a message that *contrasts* with and also *exceeds* the original meaning. This can be compared with a kind of terminological baptism, whereby the original Asian terminology dies to itself and rises with a new meaning. This is an important aspect of Asian Christology. An example in this line is the use of the term *avatar* (*avathara*) for incarnation. Originally *avatar* means in the Indian (Hindu) understanding the temporary descent of a deity (usually Vishnu or Ishwar) in an apparent (illusory) body for a specified period of time in order to restore the *dharma*. After the mission is achieved the *avatar* returns to its original form and status, to come again when there is the need. In this way there are a number of "incarnations" to restore *dharma* (righteousness, principles of religion), to punish (annihilate)

⁵ Samuel Rayan, "A Spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context," <https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/rayan2.htm>.

⁶Samuel Rayan, "A Spirituality of Mission in an Asian Context."

the wicked and reward the upright.⁷ The Christian understanding of incarnation is, on the contrary, that of a real and once for all incarnation that takes place at a historical point of time in order to seek the sinners, the least, the lost and the last and save all. The importance and seriousness of this earthly life which is only once, is also implicitly announced in this message. An indefinite series or cycle of births and rebirths takes away or lessens the seriousness of this life on earth, although it apparently consoles one to have one or many more chances for correction and improvement.

An example of *contrast* is manifested in the case of the Hindu understanding of salvation in terms of justification and atonement. The *karma* theory does not allow a third party as redeemer who could atone for someone other's sins. Justice demands *self*-redemption. There is in this sense no room for a mediator of salvation. Each one is responsible for his action and has to mercilessly bear the fruits of his work, without being able to draw benefit from someone else's good deed. The idea of Jesus' death on the cross as atonement for our sins is hence unacceptable to the basic Hindu mind. The biblical idea of solidarity and vicarious (representative or substitutionary) suffering has to be therefore incorporated in an Asian Christology, even against the typical Hindu notion. The message that one need not undertake the full and huge burden of atonement which is almost humanly impossible, but can invoke and count on the infinite merit of Jesus' life, obedience, suffering and death is a liberating message and a good news, precisely in face of the thought of self-redemption. In the Christian proclamation we have thus a contrast message of justification by faith based on God's mercy and love. God himself became man to bring about the reparation, which otherwise no human being could have achieved. In this case Jesus Christ as the redeemer has to be presented as the one who exonerates us from a big burden by being the lamb of God who takes away our sin by taking it upon himself and dying for it (Jn 1:29). He has come to serve and give his life as ransom for the many (Mk 10:45). In this way he has fulfilled the Isaiahan prophecy of the suffering servant of the Lord who makes the many righteous for he bore the sin of many (Is 53:11-12). This idea of one for the many, the message of solidarity and unity is a new factor that can be made conscious to the Asian soul against all individualistic way of thinking. We are all one and belong

⁷ *Bhagavad-gita*, 4,8: "*paritranaya sadhunamvinasaya ca duskrtamdharma-samsthapanarthayasambhavami yuge yuge*" = In order to deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to re-establish the principles of religion, I advent Myself millennium after millennium.

to a single family in such a way that one person's deed has consequences for the rest of others. This will also do good against the fatalistic ideas of salvation in which one must undergo oneself the punishment of one's own evil deeds in such a way that no one else can offer here any help. This has also its inner worldly repercussions affecting social life. In Christian understanding based on the life and teaching of Christ, salvation begins also here on earth and each one is responsible for the good of the other. Love of God and love of neighbour are intrinsically related and the latter is the test of the former. Asian Christology will have to make it clear that the bond of solidarity based especially on the real Incarnation of Christ the Son of God puts us in great obligation to help one another, not merely with regard to spiritual but also physical (material) needs. This is very important in the present scenario of poverty and injustice on the one hand and discrimination and oppression based on caste, creed and gender. Jesus as the Liberator is the good news for the poor of Asia also in this special sense.

Adaptation of certain specifically religious symbols can be misunderstood by the Christian community as well as the non-Christians. This can cause scandal and controversy. The use of OM in Christian prayers as a kind of inculturated Asian Christology has its risks, since the term is a sacred sound and spiritual icon in Hindu religion. This is in itself an impersonal sound, a mantra and one of the most important typical spiritual and religious symbols in Hinduism. In no way it can represent the God of Christian faith or Christ who is the Son of God, for at least four reasons. First of all, the symbol has no *personal* attribute which is very much essential in Christian understanding. Secondly, it is as if we Christians misappropriate and make requisition of the typical religious symbol of Hinduism and use it in a way that does not suit at all the basic thought related to it. Hindus themselves have often complained about this. Thirdly, the symbol cannot represent the mystery of Christ in any way, be it regarding his pre-incarnate or post-incarnate phase. While the Christian believers (especially who are converts from Hinduism to Christianity) would understand its use as improper and as a practice of purely Hindu religious cult, the Hindus can feel its use by the Christians as an unwarranted and disrespectful religious requisition (confiscation) of their sacred symbol. Finally, the symbol OM is the religious symbol of a *living* religion that is lived and practised today. It cannot hence *per se* contain the religious significance of another living religion. All this would mean that an Asian Christology should discern things properly in the light of the

religious sensitivities of Christians as well as of others in employing or adopting terms of other living religions. This kind of a risk and need of caution does not exist when it is a matter of spirituality and service.

7. Addressees of Theology

Theology is determined not merely by the agent/subject but also by the audience/the addressees. In other words, in doing theology we have to consider also to whom it is addressed. Matthew the evangelist, who writes his gospel for the *Jewish* Christian audience, has a different approach from that of Luke and Mark who had in mind the Gentiles as audience. In the same way a Christology meant for a Hindu audience will have to be different from an already Christian community. In the multi-religious-social-cultural context of Asia, especially in the Indian scenario, we will have to hence conceive of different Christologies depending on the audience. The Synod for Asia has hence rightly pointed out that “the faith which the Church offers as a gift to her Asian sons and daughters cannot be confined within the limits of understanding and expression of any single human culture, for it transcends these limits and indeed challenges all cultures to rise to new heights of understanding and expression.”⁸ Hence the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking. Such an inculturation of the faith involves rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus and identifying ways in which the cultures of Asia can grasp the universal saving significance of the mystery of Jesus and his Church. The penetrating insight into peoples and their cultures, exemplified in pioneers like Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili, serves as good models.

The Apostolic exhortation refers to the suggestions of the synod for Asia that the “presentation of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour needs to follow a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery.”⁹ Following the suggestion of the synod Jesus Christ could be presented the fulfilment of the yearnings expressed in the mythologies and folklore of the Asian peoples. A suitable way would also be the narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms similar to the narrative theology of the gospels. Stories, parables and symbols are of great help in this regard. As the synod suggested, certain images of Jesus which would be intelligible to Asian minds and cultures and, at the same time, faithful to Sacred

⁸*Ecclesia in Asia*, art. 20.

⁹*Ecclesia in Asia*, art. 20.

Scripture and Tradition are the following: Jesus Christ as the Teacher of Wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual Guide, the Enlightened One, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the Obedient One.¹⁰ Further, “Jesus could be presented as the Incarnate Wisdom of God whose grace brings to fruition the ‘seeds’ of divine Wisdom already present in the lives, religions and peoples of Asia.” As Asia is a continent of various kinds of suffering, the synod rightly observes that Jesus might also be proclaimed as the Saviour ‘who can provide meaning to those undergoing suffering.’

According to Christian understanding which is confirmed in the experience as recorded in the Holy Scriptures God is seen in relation to human beings and the human being in relation to God. This is articulated by K. Rahner in his statement that the history of God experience is at the same time the history of human self-experience and vice versa.¹¹ This interlacing has its consequence: theological statements have to be formulated in such a way that the human beings can notice how the contents of these statements are related and linked to their self-understanding and self-experience.¹² This is a permanent challenge to theology in general.

8. Models of Asian Christology

When we speak of Asian Christology we would like to specially emphasize that in Asia it is the lived theology that is more appealing than any theoretical theology. Mahatma Gandhi is reported to have said: “My life is my message.” In this sense the life of Mother Theresa of Kolkata was a lived Asian Christology. We have many other such examples of a lived Asian Christology in India. This is not merely limited to the Catholic Church, but also to other denominations. The life of the Australian missionary Graham Stewart Staines who was burnt alive along with his two sons in 1999 in Orissa is an example in this regard. He was working for the tribal poor and leprosy patients. His wife Gladys forgave the culprits unconditionally. She underlined in an interview the importance of forgiveness with the following words: “In forgiveness, there is no bitterness and when there is no bitterness, there is hope. This consolation comes from Jesus Christ.”¹³

¹⁰*Ecclesia in Asia*, art. 20.

¹¹K. Rahner, “Selbsterfahrung und Gotteserfahrung” (=Self-Experience and God-Experience), *Schriften zur Theologie*, 10, Zürich, 1972, 133-144.

¹²K. Rahner, “Theologie und Anthropologie,” *Schriften zur Theologie*, 8, Zürich, 1967, 43-65, 60.

¹³ <http://www.southasianconnection.com/articles/341/1/Graham-Staines-and-His-Two-Young-Sons-Burnt-Alive-Wife-Forgives-Unconditionally/Page1.html>.

Besides a lived Christology we have also in India attempts of Asian Christologies in many other ways: in art, painting, sculpture, music, dance, literature, ashram life and systematic thinking. The names of Jyothi Sahi, Sr Claire, Joy Elankunnapuzha, CMI,¹⁴ etc. are some of the pioneers in the field of art, painting, and sculpture. In the area of music we have the classical and popular songs and *bhajans* that express an Asian Christology. Arnos Pathiri (Johann Ernst Hanxleden) with his *puthanpana* (Malayalam); Paul Poovathingal, CMI with his Carnatic musical programmes and performances; George Proksch SVD, with his musicological society of India; Kattakayam Cherian Mappillai with his epic poem (Malayalam) *Shreeyeshu Vijayam*; Bede Griffiths,¹⁵ Abhishiktananda,¹⁶ and Francis Acharya¹⁷ and recently Sebastian Painadath, SJ,¹⁸ Francis Vineeth, CMI¹⁹ and many others with their *ashram* movement have contributed very much to an Asian (Indian) Christology. Besides the Christian *ashram* spirituality F. Vineeth has made a significant contribution by presenting Christ as the manifestation of Ishwara in name and form, by making use of the Indian (Hindu) thinking of the theory of *nama-rupa* (name and form) and the Advaita theory of *Avarana-viksepa* (concealing and revealing).²⁰

At the level of systematic thinking we have the Asian (Indian) Christological models and contributions of K.C. Sen, Brahmabhandhab Upadaya, Sadhu Sundar Singh, V. Chakkarai, P. Chenchiah, etc. who tried to present Jesus Christ using the Indian philosophical categories.²¹ Contemporary authors like Raimon(d) Panikkar,²² Aloysius Pieris,²³ S.J. Samartha,²⁴ Samuel Rayan,²⁵ D.S.

¹⁴Cf. J. Vadakumcherry, ed., *Icons of the Unseen: Asian Theology through the Eyes of Artist Joy Elankunnapuzha CMI*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2002.

¹⁵Cf. *Marriage of East and West*, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1982.

¹⁶Cf. *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1984.

¹⁷Cf. *Ashramiya Adhyathmikatha: Cistercian Parambarythil*, Kozhikode: Irene Books, 2016.

¹⁸Cf. *Solitude and Solidarity. Ashrams of Catholic INITIATIVE*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2003.

¹⁹Cf. "Recapturing the Asian Image of Christ," *Third Millennium* 11, 1 (1999) 72-84.

²⁰Cf. *Asian Vision of God*, Bangalore: Vidya Vanam Publications, 2004.

²¹For details, cf. M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, London: SCM Press, 1969 (*The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance*, Bangalore, 1970).

²²Cf. *Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1964.

²³Cf. *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Faith Meets Faith Series, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988.

²⁴Cf. *Lordship of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism*, Madras: CLS, 1981.

Amalorpavadass,²⁶ Cyriac Kanichai, CMI (J.M. Jnanaprakasam²⁷), etc. have made their attempts at an Asian Christology in the context of India and Sri Lanka. J. Dupuis includes also the names of S. Kappen, M.M. Thomas, G. Soares-Prabhu, F. Wilfred and C.S. Song.²⁸

In addition to the above various models, we may also point out the possibility of developing an Asian Christology in terms of the Indian thought of the Primal man (*Adipurusha*), described in *Rgveda* 10,90 (*Purushasuktam*), which describes the creation and existence of this world as the result of the sacrifice (*yaga*) of the Primeval Man. The message corresponds to the biblical message of Jesus Christ as the New Man (the second Adam) and his self-emptying (*kenosis*) and sacrifice on the cross as the basis of a new redeemed world. So, too, the Indian vision of God as *sat-cit-ananda* (being, consciousness and bliss) can be adapted to present an Asian Christology within the framework of the Holy Trinity, whereby Christ as the Logos (Word, Son) represents the *cit* (consciousness). Also in this model there is the need of a certain Christian baptism in the sense that *sat*, *cit* and *ananda* have to be understood not as mere modes of subsistence, but as three *persons* in mutual *relationship*.

Another similar Christological interpretation would be with the help of the designation of Brahman (God) as *nirguna* Brahman (the Ultimate Reality, God in the absolute sense, without any attribute or relationship) and *saguna* Brahman (God with attribute, God as related to the world). In Christian understanding we could think of the absolute God as *the* God (*ho theos*) as mentioned for example in Jn 1:1, referring to God the Father.²⁹ The Son (Logos) is God as related to the world on account of his incarnation; he is the visible image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Connected with this idea is the *avathara* conception of the *bhakti* tradition in which Vishnu, the second one of the *Trimiurthis* (Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva) assumes different forms and names and appears in this world to restore dharma. In contrast to the *sat-cit-ananda* vision, where the unity of God is safeguarded, but not his trinity or triune nature, the *Trimurthi* vision emphasizes the trinitarian aspect, but at the cost of the unity in Godhead, precisely

²⁵Cf. "Doing Theology in India," J. Parappally, ed., *Theologizing in Context. Statements of the Indian Theological Association*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2002, 11-22; "Jesus and the Struggles of the Masses in India," *Third Millennium* 11 (1999) 1, 18-31.

²⁶Cf. *Indian Christian Spirituality*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1980.

²⁷Cf. *Kristopasana*, Thrissur: Jyothi Book Centre, 1982.

²⁸Cf. J. Dupuis, "Jesus with an Asian Face," *Third Millennium* 11 (1999) 6-17, 15.

²⁹Cf. K. Rahner, "Theos in the New Testament," *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1, London, 1961, 79-148.

because it envisages three different gods. In each case the Christological model has to make immediately a critical and differing note of clarification in order to be authentically Christian.

A very common Indian Christological representation views Jesus Christ as the *Guru* (master, teacher, spiritual guide) or *Sadguru* (good teacher). In the Indian tradition *Guru* is at times even considered as a manifestation of God. Jesus as the *Guru* is an acceptable model to all the Hindus, for he is considered as a great spiritual master and guide, who teaches spiritual wisdom and leads us from ignorance and darkness to the light of truth and knowledge. This term corresponds to the biblical image of the prophet. In so far as Jesus by his self-sacrifice on the cross has achieved the atonement for our sins, he is the great *purohit* (Brahman priest). At the same time the idea of sacrifice performed by Christ is entirely different from the usual sacrifices in Hinduism, where the sacrifice is meant to pacify and appease the gods for obtaining some benefits or averting some mishaps. The sacrifices are also meant as offering to the gods for their nourishment. Jesus' self-sacrifice was not intended to appease an angry God, but as the expression of obedience and adoration from the part of the humans to re-establish the disturbed order in creation because of human sin.

As Jesus has claimed to be one with the Father (Jn 10:30) an Indian Christology can present him also as the Great Yogi. He can well be presented as *Jnana Yogi*, *Karma yogi* and *Bhakti Yogi*.³⁰ Jesus' compassion for the poor and suffering is another quality that attracts the Asian soul. An Asian Christology can hence describe Jesus as the man of compassion (*daya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). His life and teaching bear witness to his love and non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi has drawn inspiration from Jesus for his motto of non-violence. In association with Gandhi, Jesus could be presented also as a true seeker of truth (*satyagrahi*).

In the context of the misery and suffering of the people in Asia, Jesus as the real liberator is an important motif. He is the liberator both in the spiritual as well as physical sense. The spiritual sense consists in his role as the one who liberates the people from their sins (Mt 1:21). This liberation is extended also to the liberation from death and evil powers. The physical liberation that Jesus brings about is

³⁰Recently Paulcy Thelakkadan has excellently presented St Paul as a true Yogi in her doctoral dissertation: *I live, not I; it is Christ, who lives in me (Gal 2:20): A Study on Paul's Christ Experience from a Yogic Perspective*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2017.

through his uncompromising stress on the equality of all human beings and hence on the importance of love of neighbour, which he has made the condition of final salvation (Mt 25:34-40).

9. Conclusion

We have tried to indicate the importance of developing an Asian Christology and to sketch some of the possibilities of such an Asian Christology. The task lies ahead before us. This demands also the development of a Christology in the local languages of Asia. Besides such a systematic and theoretical Christology Asia would appreciate, perhaps more, a Christology that is lived and practised. Witness is more demanded than mere theory and teaching. This requires from the part of the church that she does not give the impression of an arrogant and affluent church, but give the example of a poor and serving fraternity of disciples, trusting in the providence of God rather than in mammon and power.