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THE UNIQUENESS OF ALOYSIUS PIERIS' COVENANT CHRISTOLOGY IN LIGHT OF THE LATIN AMERICAN CHRISTOLOGICAL MODEL

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Abstract

Aloysius Pieris SJ through “Covenant Christology” constructs a new Christological paradigm that expresses a unique contextually liberational understanding of Jesus’ life, message, ministry, His death and Resurrection (Christ-event). “Covenant Christology” not only exposes a fresh search for a contextually liberational image of Jesus Christ in Asia, but also serves as a ‘unique trend-setter’ to do Christology in context. Pieris’ liberational hermeneutics on Semitic biblical categories couched in panoramic realities provide a promising methodology to do Christology. This paper explores the uniqueness of Pierisian Christological model in critical conversation with the Latin American Christological model. It also suggests that how Pieris rethinks of a contextual Christological model which is biblically faithful, anthropologically reconcilable, linguistically meaningful and contextually expressible.

Keywords: Covenant Christology, Context, Latin American Christology, Poor, Religions

Introduction

It is in conversation with, though not in dependence upon, what is thought in other contexts that one can attain ever greater clarity with

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respect to one's own context. Similarly, any paradigm or model is a result of an on-going conversation with concepts, theories, ideologies and praxis of various other models. This research paper is a conversation, a critical conversation, which involves a dialogic participation of the methods, contributory and foundational factors of Aloysius Pieris' Covenant Christology versus another liberational Christological model. Such a critical conversation has the deep purpose of retrieving the novelty and the efficacy of the Covenant Christological model as a unique liberational Christological paradigm in the Asian/Sri Lankan context.

Thus, my corollaries on the *Pierisian* Contextual Christological Model will be based not in a vacuum, but again in relation to another liberational contextual Christological model. Therefore, we stay primarily, in relation to the Latin American Christological Model. The rationale for such a preference of the Latin American Christological model is motivated by various factors. First, the Latin American liberation theological model pioneers all other liberation theologies. Secondly, Pieris himself appreciates this model as well as dissociates his liberation theological reflection. To understand properly, liberation theology requires a comprehensive exposition of its origin, contributory factors, major themes and branches, etc. While a discussion of such nature would be a worthwhile and informative study, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, we don't need to be bogged down in the murky waters of analytical scholarship of the whole of liberation theology, but suffice to stay primarily with features of the Christological Model about which a great deal of consensus exists among present-day researchers.

At the very outset, several delimitations need to be made lest this study become too expansive. First, liberation theologians themselves regard that there is no coherent, systematic Christology of Latin America¹ and "indeed it could be said that there are several christologies in liberation theology. Nevertheless, these Christologies share common elements that give them their particular liberationist character, and which can be said to constitute a 'Latin American Liberation Christology.'"² Thus, in our study, I am not going to

¹Juan Luis Segundo, *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics*, translated by John Drury, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985, 14.

²Carlos Raimundo Piar, "Jesus and Liberation: A Critical Analysis of the Christology of Latin American Liberation Theology with Special Emphasis on Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, and Juan L. Segundo" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Faculty of The Graduate School, University of Southern California, 1991), 6.

expound these commonalities per se, instead only the contrasts, ramifications and different implications of a Latin American Christological Model vis-à-vis the Pierisian Christological model will be fleshed out. This premised, where appropriate, we will follow the aforesaid critical conversational methodology.

Secondly, important hallmarks of a Latin American Christological model are distilled from the secondary sources on selected Latin American theologians whom those researchers have contrived. Thus, I have to stay only with the Christological perspectives examined through the lens of the pioneering attempts of Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino.

Finally, the most telling delimitation is that I, a Sri Lankan Catholic male cleric, am attempting to analyse and critique the Pierisian model in concert with a non-familiar Christological model elsewhere. Thus misinterpretations, misrepresentations, and missed interpretations are bound to happen; such is the nature of contextuality and the cross-cultural dialogue. Therefore, this paper is a critique, a test case and a contextual application of the Pierisian Christological model all in one.

An Exposition of the Christological Model of Aloysius Pieris

Through “Covenant Christology,” Aloysius Pieris constructs a Christology of a paradigmatic novelty that expresses a unique contextually liberational understanding of Jesus’ life, message, ministry, His death and Resurrection (Christ-event). Pieris explicated his ingenious Christological paradigm in a clear and succinct neologism as “Covenant Christology.” The new paradigm’s maiden appearance took place as result of a Jesuit concern for a new mission paradigm.

This New Christological paradigm was presented by Pieris as a background paper (titled as “God’s Reign for God’s Poor: Return to the Jesus Formula”) for discussion at the Meeting of the Jesuit Conference of South Asia held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in February, 1998.³ Later in August 1999 at the Jesuit Ecumenical Congress in Kottayam, India, Pieris develops the same thesis in detail, titled as “Christ beyond Dogma: Doing Christology in the Context of the Religions and the Poor.” The paper presupposed the paradigm shift

³Cf. Aloysius Pieris SJ, *God’s Reign for God’s Poor: A Return to Jesus Formula*, Kelaniya: Thulana Research Center, 1998, v. and Georg Evers, “A Self Portrait of Aloysius Pieris,” in *Encounters with the Word: A Festschrift Honouring Aloysius Pieris s.j.*, ed. Cruz, Robert, Marshal Fernando, Asanga Tillakaratne, Colombo: EISD, 2004, 643-670, 666.

that Pieris himself suggested in "God's Reign for God's Poor: Return to the Jesus Formula," yet substantiated the discussion with a method to do Christology in the Context. Hence this part of our study is a methodological inquiry into the implications of the two axioms and the *sutra* formula of the *Covenant Christology*. Within these two works, Pieris presents the two axioms, namely, "Jesus is God in collision course with Mammon" and "Jesus is God in a covenant relationship with the poor"⁴ and lately couches these axioms in his elaborate study of *sūtra* formulas.

Formula 1: Love is God's own Self as well as God's own Word to us.⁵

Formula 2: God's Word to us is Jesus both eliciting and embodying our love for God and neighbour.⁶

Formula 3: (1) Jesus is God's Two-edged Word in Conflict with Mammon.⁷ (Love of God⁸ or Jesus is God in collision course with Mammon⁹).

(2) Jesus is God's Covenantal Word of Promise to the poor.¹⁰ (Love of Neighbour¹¹ or Jesus is God in a covenant relationship with the poor¹²).

Formula 1 and 2 serve as necessary precursors in view of the two main axioms. Pieris ambitiously builds up the reciprocity involved between the notion of *Love* and the Word as a necessary precursor within this new theological agenda. Thus, consequentially he is able to identify the centrality of Christ as the Covenant of God.

The primary implication of the first axiom is that "it is a universal spiritual dogma that defines the very core of practically all religions in Asia and manifests symbolically in the figure of the *monk/nun* or any of its many equivalents."¹³ In other words, according to Pieris, "'God-Mammon conflict' is the basis of the *common spirituality* of all religions, even if this spirituality is couched in a non-theistic language in certain religions."¹⁴ Pieris underscores the simultaneous

⁴Pieris, *God's Reign*, 69.

⁵Aloysius Peiris, "Christ Beyond Dogma: Doing Christology in the Context of the Religions and the Poor," *Louvain Studies* 25 (2000) 187-231, 192.

⁶Pieris, "Christ beyond Dogma," 193.

⁷Pieris, "Christ beyond Dogma," 217.

⁸Pieris, *God's Reign*, 35.

⁹Pieris, *God's Reign*, 68.

¹⁰Pieris, *Christ beyond Dogma*, 217.

¹¹Pieris, *God's Reign*, 36.

¹²Pieris, *God's Reign*, 69.

¹³Aloysius Pieris SJ, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988, 121.

¹⁴Pieris, *God's Reign*, 69.

expression of the 'conflict' in both biblical and extra-biblical idioms. Thus, the conflict is not "with atheism as such but with idolatry (*Mammon*-worship which manufactures masses of poor and destroys the face of the earth)."¹⁵ Therefore, even non-theistic religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, etc. though they uphold a liberation without postulating a liberator, "the path of liberation which they advocate is one of a radical self-renunciation, no less radical than denying oneself and taking up one's cross which Jesus laid down as the condition sine qua non of discipleship (Mk 8:34)."¹⁶ Here we find a radical stance of Pieris' theologizing as he posits that being non-theistic and atheistic doesn't imply one is anti-God. Instead even being non-theistic and atheistic one can remain anti-*Mammon*. Thus, "whoever is anti-*Mammon* cannot be anti-Yahweh."¹⁷ Pieris grasps these multiple versions of the *Renunciation of Mammon* (voluntary poverty) as *the common platform* where the inter-religious dialogical implications of the first axiom sprout from.¹⁸ Additionally, it should be noted that Pieris grounds the traditional concept of *the universality of Christ* in the first axiom. In other words, like the beatitudes are shared by all the religionists even by atheists, and Jesus being the embodiment/enfleshment of anti-*Mammon* and pro-God suggests that they all share Jesus. So, Jesus is no more a private property of Christians alone, rather a common inheritance of other religionists too.¹⁹

If the first axiom situates the Christological discussion within the *universality of Christ*, here the second axiom sheds lights on the *specificity of Christianity*.²⁰ Note the phraseology of Pieris. He ambitiously refrains from using the terms like *uniqueness* and *unicity* (vis-à-vis religion) for they carry in themselves the connotations of superiority of one religion over the other[s]. Thus, the contextual sensitivity takes precedence over the commonly used linguistic precision. Even if used, it is not in triumphalist terms or proselytizing motifs but in contributory and complementary concerns: "Jesus is God's defense-pact with poor" marks the unique contribution of Christianity to inter-faith dialogue. Such defense of the poor is an

¹⁵Pieris, "Christ beyond Dogma," 218.

¹⁶Pieris, "Christ beyond Dogma," 218.

¹⁷Pieris, "Christ beyond Dogma," 218.

¹⁸Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995, 149-151. See also Pieris, *God's Reign*, 70, where Pieris categorically says, "This is the common platform where every dialogue is possible."

¹⁹Cf. Aloysius Pieris, "Universality of Christianity," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 57 (1993) 591-595.

²⁰Cf. Pieris, *Fire and Water*, 159-160.

activity, which is not a threat to another religion nor is there a conversion to Christianity, instead a "conversion of chaos of induced scarcity into the order of shared abundance through greedless living. All religionists can join this struggle without compromising their faiths."²¹

Aloysius Pieris' "Covenant Christology" is born out of his close association and immersion in the Asian panoramic realities. Thus, "Covenant Christology" gets its authenticity and relevance from the context, of which Pieris still keeps himself immersed. It is consequential of his dissatisfaction with the Chalcedonian Christology which perpetuates the dualism and the highbrow idiom of the Greek philosophical abstractions, which also in itself lacks the Scriptural content. This dissatisfaction is heightened as Pieris finds the tautological nature of the definition when translated into the Asian linguistic categories. Thus, at the heart of the novelty of Pierisian critiques lies the contextuality and contextually influenced and motivated concerns compared to other general critics. The Pierisian alternative relocates Christology with profound implications on soteriology, missiology, without confusing missiology with the projects of proselytizing conversions. The implications of the Covenant Christological axiomatic formulations not only find a new promising ground to maintain the viable *via media* between the uniqueness and universality of Christ. Thus, "Covenant Christology" not only critiques the classical Christology with new eyes and replaces that with a new paradigm, but also expounds a new medium by which the Christological novelty be communicated to the Asian peoples.

In this unique theological hybridity, the roots of Pieris' mature thought extend as deep as into his family's religious heritage, his acquaintance with the Belgium Jesuits, immersions with the poor and his experience as a seeker in India, Sri Lanka and beyond. Pieris' fascination and encounter with the poverty and religiosity of Asia could be cartographically located at every juncture of his theological journey. Thus, these dual panoramic realities turn out to be decisive pointers which direct Pieris in that journey, both find a promising ground of meeting in Covenant Christology. Like "Covenant Christology" is born out of conversation of various context-based contributory factors, Pieris' Tulana Research Centre itself appropriates this conversational approach to theology and life,

²¹ Aloysius Pieris SJ, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation: An Autobiographical Excursus on the Art of Theologizing in Asia*, Kelaniya: Thulana Research Center Publications, 2013, 182.

whereby, Tulana becomes the meeting place and an authentic expression of the Kingdom of God.

As the contextual foundations and building blocks of “Covenant Christology,” Pieris, methodologically commits to set aside or suspend a *Logos*-Christology to develop a *Dabar*-Christology. Preferring a concept of person of a soteriological Christology, he also tries to avoid ontological categories of theandric harmony and expounds a concept that is mostly preoccupied with an eschatological-corporate perspective – a God-poor corporate personality. Pieris’ intra-conversational approach employed between *Dabar*-Christology, Corporate personality and Asian linguistic vehicles on the one hand, and poverty and religiosity on the other finds a symbiotic expression of contextual Christology. Another primary methodological device that Pieris employs is his enterprising resort to replace the concept of dogma with *sutta* or *sūtra*.²² Pieris’ Covenant Christological project employs it as a new vehicle of driving home the truths of a religion to the Asian mind. The primary objective of such employment of *sūtras* instead of dogmas is nothing, but to abandon the route that led to the formulation of Christological dogmas, to trace an alternative path for encountering, understanding and expressing the mystery of redemption with our own eyes on Calvary and the world we live today.²³

Aloysius Pieris versus the Latin American Christological Models

At the very outset, it must be acknowledged that, Pieris never condemns any contextual model as incorrect or invalid. Because he too believes what Bevans says that “there is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only contextual theology.”²⁴ Thus, the contextual flavour, seasoned with the conceptual preferences one makes breed a contextual theology. One always resorts to the contextually accessible tools and experiences in one’s theological reflection.²⁵ This granted

²² Cf. Michael Fuss, *Buddhavaccana and Dei Verbum: A Phenomenological and Theological Comparison of Scriptural Inspiration in the Saddharmapundarika Sūtra and in the Christian Tradition*, Leiden: E.J. Brill Indological Library, 1991, 17-18. The difference between the two terms is that the former is Pāli version of Theravada Buddhist tradition, while the latter refers to the Sanskrit usage of the concept in Hindu Scriptures. Nevertheless, henceforth we observe that Pieris’ usage of the concept finds favour with the latter, i.e. Sūtra, for which the reasons will be discussed in the coming pages.

²³ Cf. Pieris, “Christ beyond Dogma,” 187.

²⁴ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Revised and expanded version), Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2002, 3.

²⁵ Cf. Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 19-20.

starting from the New Testament Christologies to the Patristics, to the Medieval, to the Scholastics, to the Protestants, and to cut short the list, to the Latin Americans and Asians, the contextuality is central in their Christological make up. Nevertheless, overlapping of the same concepts in various loci is uncontestable.

Likewise, Pieris' Asian liberation theology shares many commonalities with Latin American theology. Although our focus is on contextual Christological models, it is pertinent that we mention Pieris' relation to the Latin American liberation theology. Pieris acknowledges with high esteem that Latin American Theology pioneered by Gustavo Gutierrez finds favour with him and many other Asian theologians in general. Pieris outrightly rejects the alleged and common misleading over-simplification upheld even by Catholic hierarchy's well-known writings, i.e. Latin American Theology as "an attempt at a synthesis between Catholic Theology and Marxism."²⁶ Instead Pieris argues that though there could be a basis for such misapprehension, namely, due to the tools of analysis associated with Marxism that were resorted to by many of the liberation theologians to diagnose the roots of societal inequalities, "the truth of the matter is that 'Liberation Theology' in Latin America as well as in Asia is the direct result of a *lectio divina* made by theologians in the company of the poor and the powerless."²⁷ Pieris upholds the far greater relevance of liberation theology, though originated in the Western part of the Third World, nevertheless, Pieris importantly recognizes, for Asians to insist upon the primacy of praxis over theory namely, "spirituality, for instance, is not the practical conclusion of theology, but the radical involvement with the poor and the oppressed, and is what creates theology."²⁸ Yet, Pieris recognizes the complementary role that the Eastern emphasis on interior liberation inextricably plays in Asian theology of Liberation.

Thus, Pieris critically distances himself from the theological model of the Latin American liberation theologians. Mainly because, as Paul Knitter puts, "the Latin American (and North American) liberationists [have] been too much influenced by the two 'mighty Karls' of the dialectical fame – Marx, whose dialectical materialism failed to see that there is indeed revolution in religion, and Barth,

²⁶Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and War on Religion*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007, 31. Cf. Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 100.

²⁷Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 102. See also Aloysius Pieris, "Jon Sobrino and Liberation Theology," *VJTR* 17/8R, (August 2007) 626-628, 627.

²⁸Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 82.

whose dialectical theology failed to see that there is *revelation* in religion?"²⁹

Pieris criticizes Latin American liberation theology (especially Jose Miranda) for a species of 'Christ-against-religions' theology that sees religions as evil to be destroyed, because religion is 'a justification of the status quo,' 'a projection of one's own self' and 'an escapist objectification of the Absolute'. Pieris finds the same strain of thought yet in a sober tone even in Jon Sobrino, though the perceptive pioneers such as Gustavo Gutierrez and nuanced systematizers such as Luis Segundo, have always viewed religion as an ambivalent phenomenon. Hence, Pieris' major criticism is that some Asian theologians have too easily adopted Latin American theology without appropriate adaptation to the Asian context.³⁰ It is against this background, that we launch our critical conversation of the two Christological models.

A Critical Conversation between the Pierisian and Latin American Christological Methods, Contributory Factors and Foundations

In this critical conversation, we bring out at least seven themes under which the Pierisian Christological model is employed in dialogue with the Latin American Christological model[s]. It should be noted here that we don't compare the two models of theology per se. Instead, only the commonalities, meeting points, divergences and unique implications that sprout from the Methods, Contributory factors and foundations of their Christological models will be treated.

Firstly, we treat the methodological priority of the historical Jesus of the Latin American Christological model versus "Covenant Christology." By suggesting the historical Jesus as 'the starting point'³¹ and 'the norm'³² for Christology, Latin American Christologists, explicitly Boff and Sobrino, seek to bring the present-day problems into a dialectical hermeneutic process, whereby a new reading of Jesus and his message and consequently a new Christology is produced.³³ They believe by beginning with the historical Jesus,

²⁹Paul Knitter, Foreword in Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, xii.

³⁰Cf. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 90.

³¹Cf. Benedito Ferraro, "Jesus Christ Liberator: Christology in Latin America and the Caribbean," in *Getting the Poor down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation*, International Theological Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians EATWOT, Second Digital Edition (Version 2.0) 2007, 113-122, 114.

³²Cf. David Carey Dixon, *A Critical Analysis of Liberationist Christology in the Writings of Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino*, Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988, 236.

³³Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus And Liberation," 35.

Christology can avoid becoming an abstract discourse, on the one hand, or a tool of ideology, on the other. The historical Jesus can serve as a hermeneutical check on either of those two extremes. Additionally, Sobrino says that the totality/universality of Christ can best be accessed, both in terms of knowledge and of praxis, through the 'historical Jesus.'³⁴ Sobrino's concept of the 'totality/universality of Christ' has no place for eschatological realization, instead minimalizes the Christhood to mere knowledge and praxis conditioned by the present.

In contrast, Pieris does neither resort to such an exclusive binary of the 'historical Jesus' and the 'Christ of Faith' nor seeks to prioritize one over the other. Pieris' Christological discourse is not *a speculative possible dialectic* between a 'historical Jesus' and the 'Kerygmatic Christ.'³⁵ Instead he wants to situate Jesus Christ in whom God's irrevocable covenant with the poor and antimony against the *Mammon* meet. In Jesus, the Covenantal Word promise of the old as well as the eschatological movement towards Christhood is operative. Thus, the common critiques levelled against the Latin American Christologists, i.e. adoptionist orientation, intra-historical reduction of soteriology and eschatology, minimized self-consciousness of Jesus about his mission³⁶ are withstood in Pieris' Christological model, for the aforesaid binaries find a promising synthesis without extreme conflation or distinction.

Secondly, most of the liberation theologians commonly uphold, the praxiological primacy over theory.³⁷ The aim of such primacy assigned to praxis is to 'offer a critical counter-discourse of traditional Christology'³⁸ and is oriented towards a primary social, efficacious, and total transformation.³⁹ Thus, liberation theology "is involved in praxis; it is a theology praxis; it is directed for praxis; and it operates from praxis."⁴⁰ Like the Latin American Christologists who stress that the action precedes theologizing,⁴¹ the Pierisian Dabar Christological model too legitimizes that "praxis is the first formulation of a

³⁴Cf. Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978, 10. See also Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus And Liberation," 35.

³⁵Cf. Pieris, "Christ beyond Dogma," 206.

³⁶Cf. Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus And Liberation," 29, 31.

³⁷Cf. Dixon, *A Critical Analysis of Liberationist Christology*, 237.

³⁸Cf. Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus And Liberation," 95.

³⁹Cf. Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus And Liberation," 99.

⁴⁰Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989, 33.

⁴¹Cf. Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus And Liberation," 95.

theory.”⁴² In common, Latin American theologians agree, that the epistemological gap between theory and praxis must be bridged by means of the most “famous” practical method “see-judge-act” of the Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967).⁴³ “The phase of ‘seeing’ refers to a socioeconomic analysis of the situation of oppression, ‘judging’ looks at this analysis from a biblical perspective and asks, ‘What does the word of God say about this situation?’ and ‘acting’ defines liberation theology’s fundamental grounding in and orientation toward action that transforms reality.”⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Pieris calls for a reversal and a replacement of the formula as “listen-act-see.”⁴⁵ Pieris’ reversal and replacement are motivated by the Gospel idiom read in fusion with the Semitic sense of *Dabar*, in which “it is by following him in love that we come to know him.”⁴⁶ Thus, praxis is primarily a way of life, a spirituality of

⁴²Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 39.

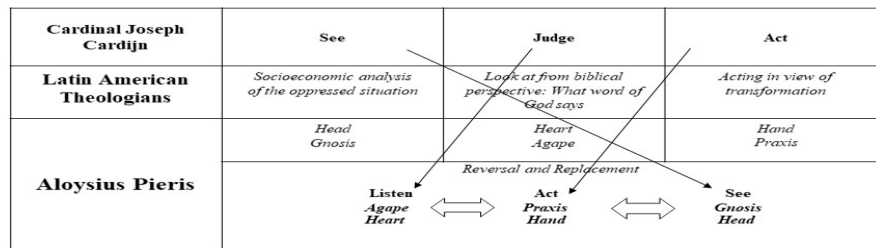
⁴³Cf. Kristien Justaert, “Cartographies of Experience: Rethinking the Method of Liberation Theology,” *Horizons* 42, 02 (12/2015) 237-261, 240; See also, Michael Lee, *An Introduction to Liberation Theology*, 13 https://s3.amazonaws.com/NowYouKnowMedia/StudyGuides/Introduction_to_Liberation_Theology.pdf, [accessed July 20, 2017] “historically, liberation theology fused Vatican II’s call to read the “signs of the times” with the methodology coming from Catholic Action (the see-judge-act method) to give voice to a theology that authentically reflected the reality and struggles of Christians throughout the Latin American continent.” The usage of the methodology within the official Catholic teachings started in 1960’s and 1970s cf. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, § 263; Paul VI, *A Call to Action*, 1971, § 4. See also Cf. <https://thetablet.org/see-judge-act/> [accessed May 15, 2017] “Cardinal Kasper suggests that the method developed by the founder of the Young Christian Workers, Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1881-1967), had a strong influence on Pope Francis before he became pope. The method of the Young Christian Workers was to observe, judge and act.” And such influence was very much resonant with the methodology of *Laudato si* too. See also Leonardo Boff (English translation by Rebel Girl), “The Magna Carta of Integral Ecology: Cry of the Earth - Cry of the Poor: An analysis of Pope Francis’ Encyclical,” *Jornal do Brasil* (em português) June 18, 2015. <http://iglesiadescalza.blogspot.be/2015/06/the-magna-carta-of-integral-ecology-cry.html>. [accessed May 15, 2017]; see also, Robert Lauder, “See, Judge, Act,” July 30, 2015. *The Tablet*. <https://thetablet.org/see-judge-act/> [accessed May 15, 2017]. “The encyclical’s structure follows the methodological ritual used by our churches and for theological reflection linked to liberation practice, now assumed and consecrated by the Pope: see, judge, act, and celebrate.” With the *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis called for an attitudinal improvisation of the same methodology as ‘listening’, ‘understanding’ and ‘accompanying’!

⁴⁴Clodovis Boff, “Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation,” trans. Robert R. Barr, in Ellacuría and Sobrino, *Mysterium liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 57-85, 79. See also Kristien Justaert, “Cartographies of Experience,” 240.

⁴⁵Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 39.

⁴⁶Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 39.

obedience to the creative Word (Dabar).⁴⁷ The same triplet



methodology is alternatively employed by Pieris by means of various anthropological and contextual categories to delve into the Mystery of Salvation as “head, heart and hand working in unison”⁴⁸ or “gnosis, agape and praxis forming an inseparable trio.”⁴⁹ To highlight the commonalities and the contrasts of the usage of the method in two Christological writings the following diagram helps us.

Figure 1

Nevertheless, Kristien Justaert has critiqued the employment of this methodology, for it creates an epistemological gap between the theological reflection and praxis, thus calls for a new method to do liberation theology. I do not intend here to enter the critique and her alternative proposal in depth. Nevertheless, I want to bring in the gist of Justaert’s critique whether Pieris could withstand it. According to her, Latin American theologians and political theologians like Edward Schillebeeckx have got caught themselves in a conundrum of centre-periphery, theory-praxis by “idealizing the margins.”⁵⁰ Perhaps such a dualistic conundrum occurs due to their extreme separation or competitive primacy assigned to praxis. Yet in Pieris’ method, three aspects are operative in unison, thus, such idealizing of the margin causing the persistence of an epistemological gap is lessened. However, Pieris is regarded “a contextual theologian who employs a ‘method of correlation,’ so as to relate theological theory to praxis in a way where each influences the other.”⁵¹ Assessed in that point of view, while Latin American liberation theologians are concerned about the application of what the word of God and Christian belief say and act on it in a given *situation*, Pieris, seeks to correlate the same in a *new context*. Thus, he is interested in

⁴⁷Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 39.

⁴⁸Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 132.

⁴⁹Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 132.

⁵⁰Kristien Justaert, “Cartographies of Experience,” 249.

⁵¹Monteiro, “Christian Revelation and Non-Christian religions,” 19.

contextualizing the Christian beliefs in the Asian context. This new paradigm which is far from the understanding of most of the Asian churches will find enormous difficulty in actualizing ecclesiastically. We are aware that the Latin American Christological models have been explicated ecclesiastically in many parts of the third world. And that has also affected positively to liberate the ecclesiastical landscapes from oppressive structures of injustice. But, the Pierisian model has not been ecclesiastically realized yet. On the other hand, how would Pieris' Christological model help the wealthy Asian church discern between its present generosity in Asia and voluntary poverty?

Thirdly, association with Marxism or use of Marxist Categories within Latin American theology, particularly in Christology is a hallmark.⁵² Nevertheless, "no liberation theologian is Marxist in strict sense or orthodox sense of the word,"⁵³ instead, "they see Marxism as an irreplaceable tool for a 'scientific' understanding of poverty in Latin America."⁵⁴ Nevertheless, official Catholic hierarchy have regularly criticized, denounced and restricted the output of the aspects of liberation theology, including its openness to Marxist concepts.⁵⁵ Pieris outrightly rejects such over-simplified misapprehension. Nevertheless, "although some are more explicit⁵⁶ than others, they all feel that a leftist ideology, a revisionist Marxism, is what best provides the analytical tools."⁵⁷ Consequently, "Christology is re-

⁵²Cf. Donald E. Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies of Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino: Latin American Contributions to Contemporary Christology*, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994, 6.

⁵³John Milbank, "Liberation Theology," *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology* 2, New York: Routledge, 2005, 913-915, 914.

⁵⁴B.T. Adeney, "Liberation theology," *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990, 648-650, 650. See also Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies*, 6. Liberation Theologians do not apply uncritically these categories. But with a critique. Its target is timely, a particular point of time: Latin America today.

⁵⁵Cf. Andrew Bradstock, "Liberation Theology," *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, Routledge: Taylor & Francis, 2013, 567.

⁵⁶Cf. Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus and Liberation," 137, 149. Leonardo Boff espouses a revisionist Marxist conception of historical materialism, lest he has to deny the involvement of God. Even though Sobrino doesn't resort to Marxist ideologies, his Christological reflections resonate with the Marxist thought.

⁵⁷Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus And Liberation," 150; see also Kristien Justaert, "Cartographies of Experience," 247. "As I already indicated, there exists a tendency within liberation theology to separate the "see" phase from the "judge" phase within liberation theology's method. This is partially a consequence of the critique leveled by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at liberation theology's use of Marx's theory of historical materialism as a mediation to analyze situations of oppression and structural injustice: if we use only a certain interpretation of Marx in

ideologized; Christological discourse finds itself complemented by a particular sociological discourse, a preferred sociology: Marxism."⁵⁸ Liberation theologians borrow Marxist concepts, like *praxis*, *ideology*, *structural change* from Marx and *hegemony* and *organic intellectuals* from Gramsci. These concepts are used like heuristic structures, which enable them to penetrate beyond the surface appearances⁵⁹ in view of a Christological "paradigm of liberation or which suggest concrete ways of actualizing liberation."⁶⁰

On the contrary, though similar concepts and terminology are also operative within Pieris' Christological paradigm, like the Latin American Christologists, he too prefers a contextually distilled form of Marxist categories. Through his encounter with the local rural youths of Marxist movement in Sri Lanka (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* [JVP]) and such other liberative forces whom he engaged with, he discovers a unique truth like some Marxists whom he met in Naples, that "the religiosity of our rural youth could often be combined with but never displaced by an ideology."⁶¹ This contextually distilled form of Marxism which Pieris found in JVP is 'evangelistic' in Pieris' terms, for "it won converts because it spoke to the hearts and mind a message of liberation that stirred one to action rather than address the brain with a mere doctrine."⁶² Pieris reminisces about a young man whom he met, thinks of having been killed during the insurrection, visualizing Christologically the image of his face hanging from the Cross. This makes Pieris to resolve deeply to live a life of evangelical poverty, earning his money with the sweat of his brows.⁶³ Thus, Pieris finds at least theoretically, Marxism in contrast to capitalistic technocracy, stands *antimammon*, enabling certain parallel implications of the 1st *sūtra* of the formula 3 *Jesus is God's two-edged Word in conflict with Mammon*. Fused with the religiosity of Asia, Marxism has got a certain Asian sense within the Pierisian Christological model. Nevertheless, today even in Asia, such liberative forces like JVP have changed their position regarding

the "see" phase, this materialist, atheist philosopher can no longer influence or (negatively) affect the (purity of the) Christian narrative that eventually urges us to react against this injustice and to transform it according to the vision of the reign of God."

⁵⁸Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus And Liberation," 150.

⁵⁹McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics*, 161.

⁶⁰Dixon, *A Critical Analysis of Liberationist Christology*, 184.

⁶¹Aloysius Pieris, *Prophetic Humor in Buddhism and Christianity: Doing Inter-Religious Studies in the Reverential Mode*, Colombo: EISD, 2005, 17.

⁶²Pieris, *Prophetic Humour*, 18.

⁶³Pieris, *Prophetic Humour*, 18.

religion or religious affiliation,⁶⁴ so how can we compromise Pieris' positive remarks about the earlier forms of local Marxism with the present day, neutral/ areligious stance?

Fourthly, in both Boff's and Sobrino's Christology, "the poor constitute a privileged locus of encounter with God, or a historical mediation of his presence."⁶⁵ Thus, the theme of the 'preferential option for the poor' is a common theme which came to the fore. And "since Medellín, there is a tradition of the option for the poor."⁶⁶ Therefore, 'preferential option for the poor' forms a core characteristic of liberation theology. Thereby theology starts from the experiences of the poor, for in their faces Christ is encountered and God reveals himself in relation the poor.⁶⁷ Within the Christological paradigm of the Latin American theologians, "the death of Jesus is inseparable from his option for the poor and his critique of those responsible for a religion basically exterior and not in solidarity with the poor."⁶⁸ Therefore, the option for the poor denotes "an option for the God of the Kingdom that Jesus announces to us."⁶⁹

Pieris doesn't want to treat the 'option for the poor' in se, instead within the biblical context of the covenant, and thereby avoids romanticizing being poor and situates it within the discipleship of Jesus or the voluntary poverty as the common denominator which interconnects Christianity with non-biblical religions. Also by situating it further within Incarnation/kenosis, as Jesus opting for the powerless and embodying them in his body as a corporate personality. In that sense, within the Pierisian Christological

⁶⁴Cf. People's Liberation Front (JVP), *Our Vision: Policy Framework Adopted at the 7th National Convention of the JVP*, Battaramulla, Sri Lanka: Niyamuwa Publications, 2014. Also JVP Manifesto, General Election - 2015 *Herdashakshiye Sammuthiya: Jathika Wedapiliwela*, Battaramulla, Sri Lanka: Niyamuwa Publications, 2015. In both these recent manifestos, there is no single statement regarding religion. Wouldn't that suggest they prefer to remain areligious or atheistic or agnostic?

⁶⁵Dixon, *A Critical Analysis of Liberationist Christology*, 236; see also on page 61 of the same source.

⁶⁶José Comblin, "Reflections on the Notification Sent to Jon Sobrino," in *Getting the Poor down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation International Theological Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians EATWOT* (Second Digital Edition) (Version 2.0) 2007, 71-78, 77.

⁶⁷Cf. Kristien Justaert, "Cartographies of Experience," 242.

⁶⁸Victor Codina, "The Poor, the Church and Theology," in *Getting the Poor down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation International Theological Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians EATWOT* (Second Digital Edition) (Version 2.0) 2007, 63-70, 66.

⁶⁹Ferraro, "Jesus Christ Liberator," 117. See also, Gustavo Gutiérrez "Pobres y opción fundamental," in *Mysterium Liberationis. Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, tomo I, San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1991, 309.

paradigm God's option for the poor is not an option; "poor" is really who God is, for he bears poor in His body. So, what does the "option" refer to? Can that mean God's freedom? "[I]f God opts for the poor, it is God who takes the initiative, seemingly leaving the 'poor' in a passive position."⁷⁰ Then doesn't the Pierisian paradigm tend to be deductive? Pieris' strategic employment of the hermeneutics on the category of *Mammon*, as the common enemy of both God in Jesus and the Poor, of *agapeic* and *gnostic* religionists and of the cosmic and the metacosmic religions alike makes the Pierisian model successfully withstand the inductive-deductive models of debate. In the Pierisian model, it is God who opts *for* the Poor against the *Mammon*, and simultaneously, He too is the option *of* the Poor. The meeting place of these two options is Jesus. The story doesn't end there, those who are forced to be poor because of the *Mammon* become the 'Vicars of Christ' today, while those who voluntarily embrace the poverty become the 'Followers of Jesus of yesterday.' This way Christo-centrism remains a *conditio sine qua non* for both the types of the poor. One would argue whether Pieris too insinuates a duality of levels where the option is made: On divine level and human level. Thus, "God's initiative coincides with the poor's initiative."⁷¹ Pieris' treatment on the *Magisterium of the poor* makes him anticipatingly survive the critique, i.e. "many of the liberation theologians think that option for the poor is task of the theologian, a privileged person rather than the people who are poor."⁷²

In the fifth place, we consider the relationship with traditional Christology and the use of traditional Christological categories within the two Christological projects. Latin American liberation theologians "unanimously agree that the dogmas of classical theology are secondary definitions and cannot function as starting points for Christological reflection."⁷³ Thus, they commonly call for "a 'deconstruction' of traditional, orthodox Christological discourse"⁷⁴ though not a complete destruction but "apply hermeneutic criteria to show how traditional Christology is inadequate to move to praxis and fulfill liberative aims."⁷⁵ For instance, dissatisfied with the

⁷⁰Kristien Justaert, "Cartographies of Experience," 244.

⁷¹Kristien Justaert, "Cartographies of Experience," 245.

⁷²Kristien Justaert, "Cartographies of Experience," 254.

⁷³David Cavanagh, "Latin American Liberation Theology and the Attempt to Develop a Genuinely Contextual Christology," *Academia* ©2017, 1. http://www.academia.edu/11566201/Latin_American_Liberation_Theology_and_the_Development_of_a_genuinely_contextual_Christology. [accessed July 10, 2017].

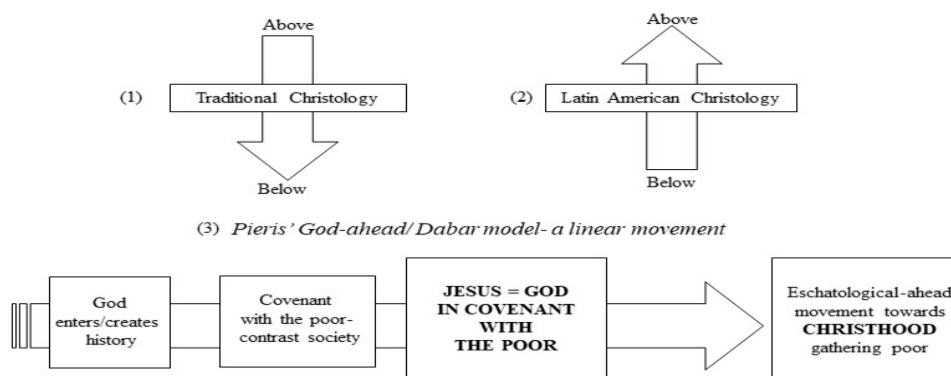
⁷⁴Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus and Liberation," 2.

⁷⁵Carlos Raimundo, "Jesus and Liberation," 2.

concept of person and the hypostatic union, while Boff calls for a reversal of the logic of Chalcedon, a Christology similar to Schoonenberg, “one which begins with Jesus’ Humanity and ends with his divinity,”⁷⁶ Sobrino, concerned rather with the methodology than content, calls for a reinterpretation of Chalcedon, for the dogma lacks concreteness and historicity of the definition.⁷⁷

In contrast, though Pieris also expressed his dissatisfaction about the inadequacies of the Chalcedonian formula, Pieris’ purposeful avoidance to work from within and rethinking instead a new Christology, a ‘*Dabar*/Covenant Christology’ prevents him, whereas Boff and Sobrino fall into the same trap of the debate what comes first, humanity or divinity. In attempting to strike a balance between the criticism and the reconstruction of Chalcedon haven’t Boff and Sobrino also failed to discontinue the dualism which Pieris insinuates in his critiques on Chalcedon? Nevertheless, the Latin American theologians have taken up the challenge to remain within the purview of Catholic tradition and to reconstruct a liberational Christological discourse. On the contrary, Pieris has become more unconventional by discontinuing with the tradition overridden by the Semitic Biblical categories and contextual linguistic concerns. Consequently, the continuity with the Christian tradition is more at issue or in question in the Pierisian model compared to the Latin American Christological models. Nevertheless, the following diagrams would reassert the different shifts of emphasis of the three Christological models.

Figure 2



⁷⁶Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies*, 38.

⁷⁷Cf. Waltermire, *The Liberation Christologies*, 74.

In the sixth place, a discussion on the popular religiosity of Latin America versus the cosmic/popular religiosity of Asia as found in the two Christological models fits here. Like in Asia, the popular religiosity in Latin America is marked with its massive character.⁷⁸ The Popular Catholicism (most numerous form), Afro-American syncretic sects and Protestant Pentecostalism mark the popular religiosity in Latin America, which is in effect, "to a certain degree, the protest of the indigenous and mestizo consciousness submitted to a foreign culture, religion, and morality, which reconstitutes under their [foreign] names and forms the elements of its own proper religious and cultural identity."⁷⁹ Nevertheless, most liberation theologians would agree that such popular religiosity due to its conformism and passivity has been put to "political use." Thus, popular religiosity has been deprived of its transforming potential⁸⁰ and is alienated and alienating and in need of a true *metanoia* through the praxis of liberation.⁸¹ Nevertheless, popular religiosity (or "popular Catholicism") is numerically extensive and interwoven closely with the life of the masses, whereas the popular Christian (or ecclesial) communities are less extensive numerically and more intense and prophetic, thereby creating elites.⁸² This premised, we observe, even though Gutierrez, Boff and Sobrino are not totally indifferent towards popular religiosity,⁸³ their hesitance to recognize its liberative potential could have divisive consequences within the Church as minority prophetic-elite ecclesial communities and majority popular Catholic religion.

By embedding the popular religiosity which is interwoven with the quotidian affairs of the 'ordinary masses' and strategically improvising the term '*cosmic*' to dismiss the religious-secular debate, Pieris legitimizes the indispensable role that *cosmic* or popular religiosity plays within his liberational Christological paradigm. If Pieris' 'helicopter theory'⁸⁴ is deployed in the Latin American context,

⁷⁸Michael L. Cook, "Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 44, 2 (1983) 258-287, 278.

⁷⁹José Míguez Bonino, "La piedad popular en América latina," Trans. by Michael L. Cook in "Jesus from the Other Side," *Concilium* 96 (1974) 440-447, 442.

⁸⁰Bonino, "La piedad popular en América latina," 442.

⁸¹Cook, "Jesus from the Other Side," 278.

⁸²Segundo Galilea, "Liberation Theology and New Tasks Facing Christians," in *Frontiers* 163, 174. As quoted by Cook, 278.

⁸³Cf. Dixon, *A Critical Analysis of Liberationist Christology*, 53.

⁸⁴Pieris explains the concept in following terms in Pieris, *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation*, 121. "History of the spread of metacosmic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam in Asia indicate that the cosmic religions had served as the 'helicopter-pad' on which the metacosmic religions had

Christianity is the first metacosmic religion which landed first on the *cosmic* religiosity of indigenous and mestizo peoples. The irony is that Latin American Christologies have failed to take it seriously, consequently, most of the poor masses of the popular religion. In contrast, the Covenant Christological model is the meeting point of the biblical poor, Jesus – the God who became, lived, died a poor yet rose against the power of the *Mammon* – both followers of Jesus and vicars of Christ, those who are forced to be poor as well as voluntary poor, poor of both the *agapeic* and *gnostic* religions and the poor of the *cosmic* religion and *metacosmic* religions alike. This stands the Pierisian Christological novelty of which even some of the Latin American theologians have recognized that it offers remarkable possibilities for discussion for an indigenous Christology for Latin America.⁸⁵ Thus, the Latin American liberative locus of the ‘basic ecclesial communities’ finds a promising contextual expression in the Pierisian alternative, i.e. ‘basic human communities’ where Christian and non-Christian members strive together for the dawn of a full humanity. He thus offers an alternative method of theologizing for Asians in search of a liberation theology that is distinct from the models of Western liberalism and from the Marxist liberation theology of Latin America.

Conclusion

In the light of the foregoing critical conversation between the two Christological models, I am enlightened to conclude, that Pieris’ Christological model revolves around and advances at least on four purposes: a corrective purpose, an apologetic-critical purpose, a biblically resonant purpose and a contextually applicable purpose. This premised, I perceive Pieris’ art of doing Christology, in the light of an insight dropped by Jacques Haers as an *obiter dictum*, during a lecture on the contextual theology and the *signs of the times* at KU Leuven. It is therefore, with gratitude that I repeat here Jacques Haers’ lapidary concept and statement: “the task of a contextual

‘landed,’ so to say. Where the helicopter (i.e., a metacosmic religion), had alighted on a landing pad (i.e., cosmic religiosity), another cannot. This explains why Christianity swept through the Philippines during the same centuries in which a similar form of colonial Christianity failed to convert India, Sri Lanka and other countries where already Buddhism or Hinduism had arrived earlier and sunk their roots in the cultures permeated by cosmic religions.”

⁸⁵Cf. Cook, “Jesus from the Other Side,” 281. Recently Pieris also forwarded an email to me which carried the impressions of an Indian missionary Jesuit working in Latin America (Brazil) that how Kraista-Sutra (Covenant Christology) as way of doing ministry would help overcoming the devastating effects of the unity of the church here in Latin-America (Pieris’ email to me on Thu, May 18, 2017 at 5:18 AM).

theologian is to *descry* the signs of the times.”⁸⁶ The term “descry” comes from the nautical phraseology. In a sailing ship one climbs up and sees a broader horizon. But one’s view is not stopped at oneself. One *describes* or catches the sight of the farthest horizon as well as the nearest movements of the view to the extent of creating a visualization in the mind of those who wait below. So, one’s soaring high to catch the sight is not only for oneself but for the others too. In that way, isn’t what Aloysius Pieris as a contextual theologian does also a type of “*descrying*?” To “*descry*” as a contextual theologian one must be sharp enough to capture the emergent waves here closer and far away, it also requires a sort of familiarity and proximity with the wind that blows (Wind/*ruah*-the Spirit!) from all directions. Furthermore, one who “*describes*” needs to have a legitimate authority to do so, that what s/he “*describes*” may be found authentic in the visualization of the hearers or receivers. I find Pieris has epitomized such an authoritative and authentic “*descry*” as a contextual theologian. He has not only academically trained himself, but also has panoramically immersed himself with the lives of the poor masses of his context and dialogically involved with predominant religiosity of the Asian context. His tools are unique, for he has mastered the canonical languages of Christianity and Christian Scriptures (Latin, Hebrew and Greek) and of Buddhist and Hindu scriptures (*Pāli* and Sanskrit). Thus, Pieris not only relocates, reorients and rethinks Christology in context, but also provides a unique method to do so in the context. Pieris’ methodological commitment on *Dabar* Christology in place of Logos Christology, Pieris’ concept of person, i.e. corporate personality and his replacement of linguistic medium of the dogma with *sutra* and the two perennial foundations, i.e. poverty and religiosity serve as his theological methodology. Indeed, those who read him would best find him to be diffident about describing in detail how he does theology. In Pieris’ case the sheer scope of his literary productivity and variety of contextual topics that became the objects of his reflections make even more perplexing any attempt to distil from his vast writings a possible methodological key to read him correctly. Nevertheless, with our inquiry into his methods and foundations, we discover that Pieris wants to reframe and reorient his contextual Christology by means of biblically faithful, anthropologically reconcilable, linguistically meaningful and contextually expressible tools and categories.

⁸⁶Jacques Haers, “Contextual Theologian and the *Signs of the Times*,” Class lecture notes, Faculty of Theology, KU Leuven, October 27, 2016.

Further, Pieris is more popular because he fits the *Zeitgeist* better. His pattern of thought is more congenial to the Asian spirit, especially in the light of the plurality of its cultures. In fact, the whole world today lives in a heterogeneous culture. Heterogeneity necessitates a conversation or a dialogical involvement. A critical conversation of various models proves the fact that, heterogeneity of factors, preferences, contexts, methods, hermeneutics and heuristics breed unique and novel models to rethink and re-present the image of Jesus Christ.