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## QUEST FOR AGENCY IN AFRICAN AND INDIAN THEOLOGIES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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### **Abstract**

African and Indian theologies share much in common and an important point of interface is their quest for 'Agency' in doing theology. Decolonization, contextualization and inculturation are some successful attempts by both that have attracted the attention of universal churches in so far as they have adequately represented their voices. This identity-seeking has been spearheaded by Laurenti Magesa in Africa and Michael Amaladoss in India. However, the journey ahead looks very promising because theologizing attempts are quite interdisciplinary today. Catholic theological ethics in both continents has redefined the approach by its distinct claim for 'inculturation in ethics.' Its emphasis on the role of culture in ethics or ethical formation has given a new focus to the search in both continents. In sum, the 'Agency Question' that unites both discovers its root in 'inculturated Gospel' especially by attributing sacramental value to cultural forms and expressions in their respective cultures.

**Keywords:** African Theology; Agency; Contextualization; Decolonization; Inculturation; Indian Theology; Interreligious Dialogue; Inculturated-Ethics; Sacramentality

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## Introduction

African Theology's quest for agency is a history today. But, one cannot easily forget its relentless longing to arrive at where it is today with its own tools of theologizing the African reality, more in relevance and conformity to the gospel so that it is "truly African and fully Christian."<sup>1</sup> In comparison with African quest for agency, I find Indian theologizing attempts on the same footing with that of their African counterparts, mulling over ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse Indian reality while fervently looking for ways to have Indian identity in everything. In this attempt, just as I draw from Laurenti Magesa for the question of African agency, I rely on Michael Amaladoss for guiding my exploration and study on agency in Indian theological quest. Considering the scope and limit of the paper, I confine myself to a select few works of both that address the 'agency question.'

As far as back in 1978, Indian Jesuit theologian Varaprasadam had stated that, "We have been too long at the receiving end of theologies, movements, spiritualities, and heresies fabricated abroad and imported with docility and not always with due discrimination."<sup>2</sup> Asserting his views, he further commented on Indian theologies helping in the germination of ideas in the worlds that were interested in 'giving' rather than 'receiving.' I believe such empowering voices from both Africa and India have shaped the way theology is done in these two regions. Decolonization, contextualization, and inculturation are some successful attempts by both that have

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<sup>1</sup>Laurenti Magesa, "Truly African, Fully Christian? In Search of a New African Christian Spirituality," in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, New York: Orbis Books, 2016, 79-92. This article by Magesa epitomizes his search for African agency in doing theology in the continent. I was so impressed when I read his article on "Contextualizing HIV and AIDS in the African Reality" wherein unlike others who call for 'condomization' and 'ABC method,' Magesa, subscribes to Emmanuel M. Katongole's notion of cultural empowerment to change the worldview of Africans. The insights helped me realize what it is to be "Truly African" in contextualizing a problem. Magesa's view makes it clear that 'technical or managerial solutions' advanced rather reflect a superficial understanding of the problem and what one really needs to identify is the philosophy that drives one towards a particular behaviour. See Laurenti Magesa, "Contextualizing HIV and AIDS in the African Reality," in *HIV and AIDS in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation*, ed. Jacquineau Azetsop, New York: Orbis Books, 2016 (First Edit), 15-26.

<sup>2</sup>Varaprasadam, "Theology Must Happen," in *Theologizing in India*, ed. Michael Amaladoss, John T.K., and Gispert-Sauch G., Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981, 164-75.

attracted the attention of universal churches in so far as they have adequately represented their 'agency' and 'voices.' While these may be the points of interface for these continents, (Africa being a continent in itself and India being referred to as a sub-continent), the way forward and its trajectory are as important as what they have traversed thus far. Hence, this paper highlights elements and specificities of their respective agencies, points of intersection and the way ahead.

## 1. Quest for African Agency

I believe it is fitting to begin with the quest for African agency more through Laurenti Magesa's works as I find in him the quintessential example of the continent's search for its agency.

### 1.1. Unhappy Encounter Between Gospel and African Culture

Laurenti Magesa is an ardent promoter of African "agency"<sup>3</sup> in doing theology and his quest commences offering a corrective to how missionaries, upon their arrival, compared the continent's *practices* (its real culture) to the *ideals* of Europe (its ideal culture) and concluded African culture inferior.<sup>4</sup> "And so they relegated African Religion to a system of "old facts," whose meanings were no longer valid. Misguided, they thus failed to perceive the new in the old and the old in the new. They failed to see authentic inspiration in African Religion and its importance for humanity's search for God."<sup>5</sup> In consequence, the vast majority of the early evangelizers were antagonistic to the "marriage"<sup>6</sup> between the Gospel and the various cultures, and what happened in the place of such sacred meeting was purely "spiritual marginalization" of African values from which African identity has not recovered yet.<sup>7</sup> Magesa strongly condemns the disrespect and superiority ideals of

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<sup>3</sup>Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, New York: Orbis Books, 2004, 160. Magesa makes use of Tinyiko S. Maluleke's expression "rediscovery of the agency of Africans" to refer to Benzet Bujo's quest for a personal voice in doing theology in Africa. However, I was inspired to apply it to Magesa himself for his love of a "Truly African, Fully Christian" church.

<sup>4</sup>See Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 12.

<sup>5</sup>Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 11.

<sup>6</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 139.

<sup>7</sup>See Laurenti Magesa, "On Speaking Terms: African Religion and Christianity in Dialogue," in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, New York: Orbis Books, 2011, 32.

missionaries in what he reckons as, “The grand story that most Christian evangelizers have presented to Africa can generally be placed in the chauvinistic camp as a narrative of superiority.”<sup>8</sup> Going forward, because the Council of Trent stunted the growth of the church in Africa especially in its inculturation and brought in a “form of doctrinal and structural universalizing process in a most absolute and vicious way,”<sup>9</sup> he concludes his article saying, “The Catholic Church in Africa is essentially a Tridentine church.”<sup>10</sup> The ‘culture-shaming’ abuse experienced by Africans at the hands of missionaries reminds me of what Asian theologian Lúcas Chan wanted scholars to have in mind while finding themselves in cross-cultural endeavours. Making use of Aaron Stalnaker’s coinage “chastened intellectualism,” Chan means that “it calls for a certain humility in learning how to understand and how to read the texts of other traditions; to be mindful of the biases inherent in our very selves; and to be careful that we not overlook the dissimilarities as we search for commonality.”<sup>11</sup> But unfortunately, such respect and humility were unheard of for African reality at the hands of foreign missionaries.

In as much as Magesa is indignant at and disappointed with the way missionaries conceived of African religion, he is also persuasive about what can become a constructive approach in the African context. Magesa’s own insights on inculturation are incredible not just because they help Christianity authentically express itself in African culture but also because they can enlighten similar gospel-culture encounters in other regions of the world. In putting forward an agenda for the church’s missionary nature, he rightly speaks to other contexts like India, in my case, in order that doing theology in India can adopt itself to the diverse cultural patterns. To this end, I believe Magesa’s quest for agency educates and is in turn educated by the Indian method. As such, I focus on Magesa’s rationale for and methodology of inculturation.

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<sup>8</sup>Laurenti Magesa, “The Council of Trent in the African Experience,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics: Past, Present, and Future: Trento*, ed. James F. Keenan, New York: Orbis Books, 2011, 49.

<sup>9</sup>Magesa, “The Council of Trent in the African Experience,” 57.

<sup>10</sup>Magesa, “The Council of Trent in the African Experience,” 57.

<sup>11</sup>George Griener and James F. Keenan, eds., *A Lúcas Chan Reader: Pioneering Essays on Biblical and Asian Theological Ethics*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 148.

## 1.2. Magesa's Rationale for Inculturation

*Ecclesia in Africa*<sup>12</sup> states that "Inculturation includes two dimensions: on the one hand,

The intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity" and, on the other, "the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures." The Synod considers inculturation an urgent priority in the life of the particular Churches, for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa. It is "a requirement for evangelization" "a path towards full evangelization" and one of the greatest challenges for the Church on the Continent on the eve of the Third Millennium (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 59).

As a staunch believer in gospel-culture encounter, Magesa declares that "Reception [of the faith] cannot occur except according to the perception of the receiver."<sup>13</sup> To this end, he requires "language" of the incarnation<sup>14</sup> (here incarnation implying being "at home" with cultures and becoming part of them)<sup>15</sup> of Christianity for Africa. Positing the claim for a church "of" Africa as against a church "in" Africa,<sup>16</sup> he writes:

Religious discourse in sub-Saharan Africa has for a long time remained unrelated to African experiential story. This accounts for the malaise of the dichotomy between Africanness and Christianity. Theological language in Africa that is incapable of following to its internal conclusion the logic and spirituality of witchcraft, polygamy, divination, traditional healing practices, and so on, except to condemn these beliefs and practices, fails miserably to engage with the African person historically.<sup>17</sup>

Terming his proposal of gospel-culture encounter as religious-cultural correlation and symbiosis, he opines that the church "should not fear inculturation as an attack against the integrity of the faith."<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, what Magesa holds as inculturation needs observation:

From the Christian theological perspective, inculturation is understood to be the process whereby the faith already embodied in one culture encounters another culture. In this encounter, the faith becomes part of this new culture. It fuses with the new culture and simultaneously transforms it into a novel religious-cultural reality. In practical terms, this

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<sup>12</sup>John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (14 September 1995), [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_14091995\\_ecclesia-in-africa.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html)

<sup>13</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*.

<sup>14</sup>See Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 2.

<sup>15</sup>See Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 138.

<sup>16</sup>See Laurenti Magesa, "Truly African, Fully Christian?," 82.

<sup>17</sup>Magesa, "Truly African, Fully Christian?," 87.

<sup>18</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 3.

process involves the interaction of mutual critique and affirmation. It entails acceptance or rejection of thought forms, symbolic and linguistic expressions and attitudes between the faith-cultures in question. This process is usually primarily instinctive and popular, without much systematic planning and arrangement to it. But it can also be promoted and enhanced by institutional study and direction.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, in Magesa's view, inculturation as a real gospel-culture encounter can have both informal as well as institutional outlook depending upon what one sees fit. Here again, the gospel as a "cultural reality,"<sup>20</sup> is embodied in culture, so that inculturation, far from being an intellectual imagination, is a lived practice.<sup>21</sup> As such, he argues, "The process of inculturation in general takes what we can call, for want of a better expression, a dual activity. It involves assimilation on the one hand and transformation on the other."<sup>22</sup> Comparing the dynamics of inculturation to that of food and drink becoming part of one's body while transforming it in a number of different ways, he emphasizes, "as the Christian church and faith encounter new cultures they transform them even as they themselves are transformed, sometimes in very radical ways."<sup>23</sup> In Magesa's view, inculturation is truly 'gospel-in-culture' in every place it enters and seeks to implant itself. His explanation and rationale for inculturation also follows a methodology by which inculturation becomes an implanted, enrooted reality in a particular culture. To this end, he suggests some pointers for methodological evolution for gospel-culture encounter.

### **1.3. Magesa's Methodology for Inculturation**

Magesa designs the shape of gospel-culture integration from the perspective of liberation as its goal. Inspired by Latin American Theologian Diego Irarrazaval, he affirms that "if the primary purpose of mission is evangelization, and the aim of evangelization is neither "to share a culture" nor "to evangelize culture" but to share the good news, mission can only mean the "discovery" or "re-discovery" of the Spirit within culture."<sup>24</sup> Hence while negating terms like 'concordism' and 'adaptation' as superficial attempts towards inculturation, he stresses on radical inculturation as implying

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<sup>19</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 5.

<sup>20</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 6.

<sup>21</sup>See Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 5.

<sup>22</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 87-88.

<sup>23</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 88.

<sup>24</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 145.

signification, the dynamic of the production of social meaning, feelings and attitudes. It brings about and celebrates a perspective and a worldview, a way of looking at things and a way of living life. It aims at making Jesus and his life and teaching concrete among a people, so that God's intention and power, which Jesus represents, are to the highest extent possible appropriated in the manner of a particular locality.<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere, commenting on the formation of principles for African moral theology, he argues,

In the process of constructing principles of morality and ethics for Africa—an African fundamental moral theology—what is desirable pertains to the dynamics of incorporating the values of the gospel into the African culture at the same time as these values discover themselves already embedded, even if imperfectly in the message of the gospel.<sup>26</sup>

Here one cannot but be inspired to find Magesa guiding the search of African theology. Offering some clarifications about the intrinsic interrelationship between inculturation and liberation in the continent, Magesa elucidates that

Inculturation is an aspect of the total liberation of the continent, and liberation cannot be comprehensive without inculturation. It has been a failure in coordination, but it is slowly being overcome. Also, African theologians have perhaps been too “academic,” by which I mean that they have not integrated themselves enough into the lives of the people. In this way, they have perhaps unwittingly perpetuated the elitist attitude they should have resisted with their words and actions.<sup>27</sup>

Indian Jesuit theologian Michael Amaladoss has a similar warning for African Christian theology that it should resist the attempts to become a science because an appropriately inculturated theology would be for the people and would adopt forms of expressions that are accessible to the people.<sup>28</sup> Hence, for Magesa, inculturation leads to a joyful experience of finding oneself in the other. However, based on this profound encounter, this inculturation should then script personal and social transformation. Therefore, Magesa in spearheading an authentic way of doing African theology in full conformity with Christian faith and its roots, also champions the

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<sup>25</sup>Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 146.

<sup>26</sup>Laurenti Magesa, “Catholic Ethics and the Construction of Social Reality in Contemporary Africa,” in *The Catholic Ethicist in the Local Church*, ed. Antonio Autiero and Laurenti Magesa, New York: Orbis Books, 2018, 119.

<sup>27</sup>Laurenti Magesa, “Locating the Church among the Wretched of the Earth,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church Padova*, ed. James F. Keenan, New York: Continuum, 2007, 55.

<sup>28</sup> See Michael Amaladoss, “Cross-Inculturated of Indian and African Christianity,” *African Ecclesial Review* 32, 3 (1990) 168.

cause of the continent by focusing on liberative and transformative dimensions.

## 2. The Quest for Indian Agency

Indian theologians have been at the forefront as far as the quest for Indian agency in doing theology is concerned. Exemplifying the search for Indian Christian theology, Amaladoss sheds light on Swami Abhishiktananda's restarting of ashram movement and Raimon Panikkar's comparative theology.<sup>29</sup> Dyron B. Daughrity and Jesudas M. Athyal also point out some nine theological trends in Indian Christianity.<sup>30</sup> Going forward, we can identify several important claims made by Indian theologians as representative of doing theology in India. I would like to highlight four of them in the following passage.

### 2.1. Inculturation

Pope John Paul II welcomed the insistence of Synod Fathers in presenting Jesus to the people of the continent in images familiar to their sensibilities. He wrote,

The Synod Fathers stressed many times the need to evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples, and they suggested images of Jesus which would be intelligible to Asian minds and cultures and, at the same time, faithful to Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Among them were "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 (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 20).<sup>31</sup>

The various images adapted by the Pope following the recommendations of Synod Fathers have been well integrated and further added on by Michael Amaladoss in his book *The Asian Jesus*, a seminal work portraying the Asian 'faces' of Jesus that both appeal to

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<sup>29</sup>See Michael Amaladoss, *Quest for God: Doing Theology in India*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2013, 50-52.

<sup>30</sup>See Dyron B. Daughrity and Jesudas M. Athyal, "Some Theological Trends in Indian Christianity," in *Understanding World Christianity*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016, 260. They explore evolution of Indian Christianity through nine theological trends. 1. St. Thomas Christians: Permeation as Mission, 2. De Nobili's Path of Accommodation, 3. Protestantism as Liberative Theology, 4. Roman Catholic Mission: Indigenization and Liberation, 5. Orthodox Perspective, 6. Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal and Independent Movements, 7. Marginalized People Theologize, 8. Hindu Christians and Non-Baptized Believers, and 9. Indian Presence in the Ecumenical Movement.

<sup>31</sup>John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (6 November 1999), [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_06111999\\_ecclesia-in-asia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html)

the 'sensibilities' of the Asian peoples while also presenting the Christian faith 'intelligibly' to their minds.<sup>32</sup> In essence, these images of Jesus engage with people and their faith resulting in authentic dialogue and evangelization. Illustrating the import of the book, Amaladoss writes,

As an Indian and an Asian Christian I feel that Asian cultures and religions are not foreign to me. They are my heritage. They belong to my ancestors. I am in dialogue with them within myself. When an Indian image like guru is used, Hindus can claim it as their own, and Christians too may think of it as Hindu. While I do not deny its use in Hindu contexts, I think that it is more Indian than Hindu, being more cultural and linguistic than religious.<sup>33</sup>

Pope John Paul II had indicated that India must emulate the "penetrating insight into peoples and their cultures" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 20) set by Jesuit missionaries Mateo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 20) who worked in the continent. From the distinction the two missionaries showed between religion and culture, Amaladoss indicates, "Cultural symbols are available for use by people who belong to other religions. They may be adopted by people belonging to other cultures too."<sup>34</sup> It is in order to arrive at integrating our faith with culture, Amaladoss reiterates that

inter-cultural encounter is the way of history. But to encounter another culture fruitfully we have to be rooted in a culture. We will only be alienated and rootless if we seek to abandon our own culture and take on another. An inter-cultural dialogue is welcome, but not the domination of one over another culture.<sup>35</sup>

A reiteration of 'religion meeting culture' has been advanced before time by Pope John Paul II as he taught that

Evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other. The Gospel and evangelization are certainly not identical with culture; they are independent of it. Yet the Kingdom of God comes to people who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building of the

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<sup>32</sup>Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, New York: Orbis Books, 2006. Amaladoss catalogues various images of Jesus in Christian history that include 'Lord,' 'High Priest,' 'King of Kings,' 'Liberator,' etc. Also he explores ones that are familiar to Asian minds such as 'Moral Teacher,' 'Avatar,' 'Satyagrahi,' 'Advaitin,' and 'Bodhisattva.' In addition, he highlights some others that are unique to the understanding of Asians. They are 'Jesus, the Sage,' 'Jesus, the Way,' 'Jesus, the Guru,' 'Jesus, the Satyagrahi,' 'Jesus, the Avatar,' 'Jesus, the Servant,' 'Jesus, the Compassionate,' 'Jesus, the Dancer,' and 'Jesus, the Pilgrim.'

<sup>33</sup>Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, 6.

<sup>34</sup>Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, 6.

<sup>35</sup>Amaladoss, *Quest for God: Doing Theology in India*, 43.

Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing elements from human cultures (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 21).

Here it is good to remind ourselves of what Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*<sup>36</sup> as “the split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time” (EN 20).

Thus, while gospel-culture dialogue is the focal point for theologians, ethicists argue for “Inculturation in Ethics.” In a novel attempt, Indian ethicist Shaji George Kochuthara propounds that “The importance of culture, the need for respecting its uniqueness, and its role in theologizing have been increasingly recognized in the recent decades. However, often, the role of culture in ethics or ethical formation has not received much attention, since ethical values and norms were considered universally valid.”<sup>37</sup> Through his bridge-building approach between theology, culture and ethics, Kochuthara implants a tri-focal agenda, making inculturation as not just theological and cultural but also ethical.

In sum, development of inculturation theology in Asia in general and in India in particular owes much to Amaladoss as a trend-setter and forerunner, especially as he envisions ‘inculturated Gospel’ not just from theological speculations but more in connection to the reality of people and their life situation.

## 2.2. Interreligious Dialogue

Closely connected to inculturation is also interreligious dialogue and again it depends on Amaladoss for insights. For him, if ever Christianity can meaningfully converse with Indian culture, it is only through dialoguing with various religions of the land. Hailed as an interreligious theologian par excellence, Amaladoss visualizes such dialogue happening primarily at two levels; at one level the focus is this-worldly and on the other, it is otherworldly. He believes that “It is when religious freedom and pluralism are

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<sup>36</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html)

<sup>37</sup>Shaji George Kochuthara, “Challenge of Doing Catholic Ethics in a Pluralistic Context,” *Religions* 11, no. 17 (2020): 1-15. As editor of *Asian Horizons*, Kochuthara has brought the issues of interreligious dialogues and inculturation to the fore. Similarly, he has edited, always with an eye to India, *Moral Theology in India Today* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2013), *Doing Asian Theological Ethics in a Cross-Cultural and an Interreligious Context* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016) along with Lúcas Chan and James F. Keenan, and *Gender Justice in the Church and Society* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016).

accepted at the social and civil level that dialogue between religions at the metacosmic level becomes socially meaningful. Nothing stops two believers from coming together and dialoguing at the level of belief and experience.”<sup>38</sup> Amaladoss holds interreligious encounters at the realm of respect and dialogue. For him, interreligious dialogue is any activity where we take the faith of the other seriously. It is only through such a respectful encounter, that we can “acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture” (*Nostra Aetate*, 2).<sup>39</sup> A positive view of other religions is for Amaladoss obligatory. He states, “One of the starting points for Asian theology of inter-religious dialogue is the acceptance of the reality and legitimacy of other religions as social-symbolic mediations of divine-human encounter.”<sup>40</sup> Here, it is important also to acknowledge the triple category suggested by Indian Jesuit theologian Stanislaus Alla to make interreligious dialogue vibrant and meaningful. Sufficient knowledge about other religions is essential before entering into conversation with them. This will facilitate our shedding of bias and preconceived notions about those religions. Thirdly, constitutional education becomes a must in order to protect ourselves from the onslaught of nationalistic and fundamental forces. Interreligious dialogue in the Indian context is sure to benefit from these helpful suggestions.<sup>41</sup>

Moving further, one is to become conscious of the accusations of conversion suspected in interreligious dialogue. Regardless of their truth and falsehood, Amaladoss refutes strongly any implication of conversion in these interreligious encounters and reinforces his view that

We do not realize that a person who feels that he is an object of an effort at conversion may feel hurt that he or she is considered religiously inferior and may resent such an implication as an attack against him or

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<sup>38</sup>Michael Amaladoss, *Interreligious Encounters: Opportunities and Challenges*, ed. Jonathan Y. Tan, New York: Orbis Books, 2017, 140-41.

<sup>39</sup>Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* (28 October 1965), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html)

<sup>40</sup>Michael Amaladoss, “Inter-Religious Dialogue: A View from Asia,” *Landas* 8 (1994) 209.

<sup>41</sup>See Stanislaus Alla, “Interreligious Dialogue: An Indian Way,” in *Building Bridges in Sarajevo: The Plenary Papers from CTEWC 2018*, ed. Kristin Heyer, James F. Keenan, and Andrea Vicini, New York: Orbis Books, 2019, 65-70.

her and against God. In such a situation any dialogue that goes on without any reference to interreligious suspicion, fear, and violence seems hypocritical.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Amaladoss is not just leading the way but shaping it along setting the standards for future interreligious encounters.

### 2.3. Contextualization

Contextual theology is about situating the gospel in the context. When the question of context comes in, there are some critical views about inculturation movement that must be taken into consideration. Contextual theology in India is more about Dalit theology that struggles to find its agency within churches that discriminate and exclude them. For this reason, they have come to view inculturation as upper-caste attempts and therefore they express little enthusiasm for 'Sanskritic' and 'Brahminical' brands of upper-caste Christians in liturgy. Representing the aspirations of Dalits in context, it emphasizes the unique Dalit experience of suffering and pain in the specific context of caste discrimination, in addition to poverty and deprivation. Situating Dalits in context is their attempt for liberation.<sup>43</sup> Amaladoss is of the strong view that every theology is contextual and theology becomes more Indian by the kind of topics that are proposed to it by Indian reality. As such, Dalits, poor, and women are India's contexts today. Theology must be done from their viewpoint.<sup>44</sup> However, he cautions that a liberation theology should never emerge into a new tool of oppression. To this end, he explains that the contextual theology must prioritize a society of equals. "The aim of the transformation based on the good news of Jesus is not merely to liberate the poor and to help them to seize political power so that they can now dominate the rich, but to create a society of equals—a community of mutual love, service and sharing."<sup>45</sup> Contextual theologies are more focused on the liberative agenda of the gospel based on Jesus as redeemer.

### 2.4. Decolonization

A decolonial vision of theologizing is advanced by another noted Indian theologian Felix Wilfred. For him theology is about finding its presence and voice in the context in which it is rooted. Hence,

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Amaladoss, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31, 1 (2007) 24.

<sup>43</sup> See Joseph Tharamangalam, "Whose Swadeshi? Contending Nationalisms among Indian Christians," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 32, 2 (2004) 232-46.

<sup>44</sup> See Amaladoss, *Quest for God: Doing Theology in India*, 56-57.

<sup>45</sup> Amaladoss, *Quest for God: Doing Theology in India*, 70.

rootedness in a context is also about purging the context of division, bias and discrimination. To this extent, he holds that “A theology sensitive to the issue of inequality and exclusion in our world today has the liberating task of de-sacralizing the “golden calf” of the free market. Theology will try constantly to weave the question of God into the burning issue of inequality and exclusions afflicting humanity. It will continue to provide a vision that will be based on the ultimate unity and communion of the mystery of the human, the divine, and of the universe.”<sup>46</sup> Further, Defining postcolonial theology, Wilfred stresses that

Postcolonial theology is one which would challenge the usurping of the privilege of framing theological questions for all and then invite responses. Contextual and postcolonial theologies will frame the questions themselves through their episteme and language and deal with the theological question in context.<sup>47</sup>

Explicating that even inculturation and interreligious dialogue will fade in time and fall out of significance, he proposes that Asian theology should move towards religious cosmopolitanism which will centralize the *other* as the reference point as against the religions and their tenets centralized by interreligious dialogue. In essence, he lends out a vision of Indian/Asian theology without any trace of colonialism, so that for such a contextual theology, inequalities and exclusion become the focal point of theologizing.<sup>48</sup>

Having explored some common concerns of Indian theology, I now move on to indicate the points of interface for both African and Indian theologies while simultaneously throwing light on their journey beyond.

### **3. The Points of Interface for African and Indian Theologies and the Way Forward**

A comparative and critical analysis demonstrates that African and Indian theologies have much in common and therefore stand to correct and shape each other towards attaining a holistic growth in their respective theologizing. Dominic Irudayaraj, in his book review on *The Way, the Truth, and the Life: A Confluence of Asia, Europe, and Africa in Jesus of Nazareth*, registers an interesting account of what Adolfo Nicolas, a former superior general of the Society of Jesus is

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<sup>46</sup>Felix Wilfred, *Theology for an Inclusive World*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2019, XXIII.

<sup>47</sup> Felix Wilfred, “Asian Christianities and Theologies through the Lens of Postcolonialism,” *Concilium* 1 (2018) 19.

<sup>48</sup> See Wilfred, “Asian Christianities and Theologies through the Lens of Postcolonialism,” 355-377.

credited to have said on Asia, Europe, and Africa and their respective affirmations. “Whereas the Asian accent is on *the way* and the European emphasis is on *the truth*, the African affirmation is on *the life*.”<sup>49</sup> Again Amaladoss has explicitly shown the commonality and the distinctions between African and Indian theologizing. As regards inculturation, decolonialism and contextualization, these two traditions share very much only exhibiting their natural affinity towards each other. Amaladoss believes that African religions can help Indian Christianity with their holistic perspective on life and community. Secondly, India lacks an efficient tool for cultural analysis and African experience could be of immense help in this endeavour. Moving ahead, the African Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa and its underlying theology transformed its understanding towards asymmetrical equations of life, expressing themselves as structures of sin. India suffers too with its unequal social structure of caste system. Here Amaladoss is convinced that South African reflection would certainly enrich Indian tradition. Finally, African attempt to evolve an African Christology having Jesus as “Great Ancestor” will be of great avail to Indian paradigm of “Cosmic Christ.”<sup>50</sup>

As a way of helping out the African reality, Amaladoss also comments on the challenges African Christian theology is encountering and how Indian perspectives can offer to rescue it. As Africa reveals keen interest in dialoguing with African traditional religions, it must also develop an ecumenical theology to dialogue with various religions in the context. Secondly, Africa can involve in interreligious dialogue with the effectively present religion of Islam. It stands to gain from Indian interreligious perspectives and approaches. Thirdly, Africa should be wary of the consequences of new-found developments that might in course of time affect their quality of life.<sup>51</sup> That Africa is a promoter of life, in welcoming life, in the family, and in communitarian living, has been well-captured in *Ecclesia in Africa* thus:

In African culture and tradition the role of the family is everywhere held to be fundamental. Open to this sense of the family, of love and respect for life, the African loves children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of

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<sup>49</sup>Dominic S. Irudayaraj, “A Book Review on ‘The Way, the Truth, and the Life: A Confluence of Asia, Europe and Africa in Jesus of Nazareth,’” *Theological Studies* 79, 2 (2018) 443–44.

<sup>50</sup>See Amaladoss, “Cross-Inculturization of Indian and African Christianity,” 165–66.

<sup>51</sup>See Amaladoss, “Cross-Inculturization of Indian and African Christianity,” 166–167.

God. "The sons and daughters of Africa love life. It is precisely this love for life that leads them to give such great importance to the veneration of their ancestors. They believe intuitively that the dead continue to live and remain in communion with them..." (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 43).

Another essential feature of commonality is the sacramental value attached to the ordinariness of life in both Africa and India. Such external ordinariness, when approached from the point of view of faith, puts on a religious meaning in which people find their faith symbolized. One of the beautiful examples that I find interesting in the narrative of Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator is African way of doing Christology especially by finding in Christ their "Ancestor." Orobator renders the unanimous conclusion of Nyamiti and Bujo as, "Jesus Christ is the unique ancestor who completes and perfects all there is in the African conception of Ancestor."<sup>52</sup>

I am very much encouraged by this application because it extends the sacramental value to all that people of a region hold and cherish as essential expressions of their faith. Refuting all superficial affirmations of inculturation, Orobator believes inculturation is skin-deep.

Inculturation is not only about song and dance; as an ongoing quest for mutuality and comprehension between faith and culture, it touches and transforms the core of the symbols, gestures, words, actions, rituals, theology, government, and so on that make up Christian faith and African culture. In brief, the ultimate goal of inculturation emerges as an appropriate understanding and practice of Christianity.<sup>53</sup>

I perceive that Orobator orients his readers to discover meaning practically in all that the people do in the name of their Christian faith. As such, sacramentality in ordinariness becomes the bridge between human and the divine. Hence, I come to understand that 'faith-meeting-culture' is kept alive and vibrant through these transforming practices especially when people attach and find in them sacramental value based on what they believe.

In my own culture, there are many practices attributed with the sacramental value. In essence, I find my life/our life interwoven with sacramental reality. As the final attempt, ahead of concluding remarks, I wish to detail some ordinary practices which Catholics perform in their everyday life but with sacramental meaning ascribed to them.

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<sup>52</sup>Agbonkhianmeghe E Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, New York: Orbis Books, 2008, 77.

<sup>53</sup>Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 130.

#### 4. Life Interwoven with Sacramentality

I believe faith blooms out richer and nobler when it is implanted and rooted in cultural expressions. The so-called 'secular' expressions, which otherwise have no 'religious' import or value or outlook, when tinged with elements of faith, assume sacramentality for ordinary people with fervent faith. Some examples from my life as a catholic villager in Tamilnadu, India, would indicate how cultural expressions of faith could be more meaningful and impactful.

Our ancestors literally 'christened' our village after St Michael, the Archangel: It is today Michaelpalayam: meaning Camp or Stronghold of St Michael.

*Chiluvaithinnai*, a raised platform open on all four sides but with a roof above, is another faith expression of the people. Built around the settlements, these structures are meant for rest and recreation of the community. At times, people are gathered there to talk about their community involvement and development. Its locale amid settlements and households acted as a binding force for people to 'behave' well at least when they were in front of the *Chiluvaithinnai*. It is also meant to act as a temporary shelter for the homeless and passersby. There are three such ones in the village, each dedicated to St Michael the Archangel, the patron saint of the village, St Ignatius, in remembrance of the Jesuit missionaries who baptized us, and St Antony, the popular saint of the locality respectively.

No matter he/she is an employee of Google earning multiple K's in Silicon Valley, the community custom requires that on the day of marriage, followed by matrimonial Eucharist at the church, the couple will walk in procession to *Chiluvaithinnai* dedicated to St Michael the Archangel. The couples exchange garlands in St. Michael's presence (exchanging garlands is an expression of matrimonial consent in our region), light candles, pray for sometime, and then proceed to celebrate the day in the marriage hall.

Following the famous tradition that St Thomas who travelled to India was martyred on a little mount in Chennai, capital city of Tamilnadu (St Thomas is the patron saint of Madras-Mylapore Archdiocese), my village has a hillock dedicated to Saint Thomas where Eucharist is celebrated every month and feast and community meals once a year in May. Since St Thomas is known to be a healer (my mother always tells me my skin tags were healed by St Thomas as I offered salt and broomstick on the day of his feast when I was a child), people have a special devotion to him.

My parish organizes three grand feasts every year in all of which the car bearing the saint will go into every street to bless the people. On New Year's Day, it is Child Jesus; for Easter, it is the risen Christ; on September 29, it is St Michael the Archangel, our patron. My father always prides himself to talk of the strategic location of our house because at any of these three occasions, the car bearing the saint will have to pass through our house twice.

There are many other practices with sacramental value attached: Prayers and ceremonies that surround birth and death, planting of cross on grave instead of tombstones or headstones, planting a cross in vegetations, blessing of seeds by priest before agriculture, every day rosary and night prayers, school reopening and closure with mass, mass and confessions for school students every month, dedicating a rooster or calf for saints, burial of dead animals with dollars of saints, people named after saints, tonsuring of child one year after birth at shrines or churches, wearing dollars of saints, meeting the parish priest on new year's day to get his blessings, walking on barefoot *Padayatra* (*Pada* = foot + *Yatra* = journey) to Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health, Vailankanni located 172 miles away, Celebration of All Souls' Day, all our 10 substations having their chapels to house the people of the locality, tomb of Jesus and kiosk of Mother Mary at either sides of bus stops, etc.

I am aware that I have just illustrated some of the sacramental practices that I am fond of as a typical Catholic villager. One can witness diverse sacramental practices in each and every culture across the length and breadth of India, certainly alluding to the absorption of faith in their respective cultural forms. Hence, while I have tried to represent some of them from my culture, I do not claim to have exhausted them all. As far as I am concerned, if this is how faith can enliven a person's life through countless cultural practices, then I call it 'in-culturated.' As Orobator holds, a person's faith journey is governed by these, making the person's journey of faith more authentic. It is a life interwoven with sacramentality.

### **Concluding Remarks: Lessons from 'In-Culturated' Practices**

As a priest when I look back at those meaning-making traditional practices, I cannot overlook the element of faith that runs deep in me. It is this sacramentality that has nurtured in us vocation to religious life that till date my village has about 35 priests and 45 nuns serving in India and abroad (excluding those in formation) and is known to be an epicentre and 'rich soil' for vocation. It is famously said of my

village: 'There is no youth in the village; they are either in seminaries or convents.' I cannot posit myself away from this sacramental tradition, as if my vocation was totally independent and disconnected. In my opinion, if this is not sacramentality, what else could they point to? These sacramental practices remind me that inculturation is not just the work of theological speculation but is drawn from the very life of the faithful in the local culture. Here the subject of inculturation is people themselves who bring out their cultural richness to meaningfully assert the relevance of their faith.

Orobator's book is filled with elements of sacramentality from African culture applied to Christian faith. Likewise, Indian theology effectively dialogues with the culture, when it allows forms of expressions that can have their cultural face. The two ends, faith and culture, are meaningfully bridged by practices that are founded on faith but expressed through culture. As these 'cultural expressions' are helpful interlocutors, genuine efforts must be made to nurture them both in African and Indian realities.