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## New Scholars

# CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF PERSON AND HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE INDIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT A Systematic Study Based on the Modern Social Encyclicals

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This study is an attempt to reflect on the human dignity and to highlight the implications of social justice in the present multi-religious context of India. More than ever now a days there are many tragic violations of human dignity taking place in different realms, for instance, religious, political and economic sectors. At the very least, the basic sense of human kindness, belief in creationism and the responsibility of stewardship can definitely preserve and secure the human dignity and the concept of a human person. The Church as

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the visible sign of the Kingdom of God here on earth has to be highly visible and proactive in preserving these ideas and principles. Sadly, even today, the Indian Church bears a stigma of being foreign. Not just in India, the Church in many other Asian nations bears this. "The Church came to Asia largely in the wake of the colonial powers and the Church was planted in India, not merely in its western Latin form, but specifically in its Portuguese form, so that not only western forms of art, but even social customs and Portuguese names were imposed on Indian converts."<sup>1</sup> Knowingly, or unknowingly, the Church has kept up this imbalanced ethnocentric view and the insensitive approach to the highly established cultural and pluralistic diversity of Indian society. As a result, today's power-centred politics has politicized everything and wants to divide people sacrificing the constitutional values of secularism and democracy. India is a large country where people, from many cultures, having different languages, philosophical systems and very ancient religious systems are living together. All these trials and tribulations come before Indian Catholics today. They must be confronted in a new way. Thus, the purpose and objectives of this study are to define theologically and philosophically the nature and concept of the individual, to explicate and evaluate the most challenging issues of human person and human dignity in the present context of India, to delve into some practical objectives and initiatives and useful strategies of the Church to the challenges of human person and human dignity, enabling a more just society. I have structured my study under five headings.

### **1. Philosophical and Theological Concepts of the Human Person**

My study begins with a theological and philosophical analysis to orient the concept of the human person. The ancient philosophies and religions have understood the human person differently. However, when we understand the Bible and Christian tradition, we base the meaning of the human person on the creation and incarnation. "The God in man, the infinite identity, the multitudinous unity, who having made man in his own image, with the ego as the centre of working, seeks to express in him some image of the unity, omniscience, and omnipotence, which are the self-conception of the Divine."<sup>2</sup> "One becomes less a person, if he/she excludes God from his/her nature and activity in order to become a superman with total

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<sup>1</sup>Bede Griffiths, *Christ to India: Essays towards a Hindu Christian Dialogue*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966, 163.

<sup>2</sup>Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, 1940, 15.

autonomy and control over nature.”<sup>3</sup> After the reflection on the creation of human we are able to understand the human person through the prism of Jesus Christ as the Perfect Person in the ‘image and likeness’ of God the Father. The teachings of the church fathers and Christian tradition, upon which the Church has its strong foundation also provide similar understanding of the concept of the human person.

## **2. Dimensions and Thrusts of the Human Person**

The human person, known as rational, spiritual, material, social, etc., is a mystery. The creation story gives humankind a higher status among other creatures. The ‘incarnation’ revealed to the world how the Creator loves humankind and invites each person to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Justice, peace and love are the central values of the reign of God. We are not going to achieve justice and peace simply by preaching the gospel in traditional ways. Over time contexts have changed and in each iteration new theories and developments evolve. At this juncture, human beings forget and search for something without understanding themselves and their mission. The process of understanding oneself depends on how deeply we understand the concepts in the ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ of God of which we are created. By truly understanding these fundamental elements, one is blessed, leading to holiness and justice in particular personal redemption for the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the present society in general. To achieve this goal the Church as a replica of the Kingdom of God on earth has to become involved in more socially oriented programs.

Human beings are incarnational beings, social beings and above all they are spiritual beings existing in the society. The etymology, definition and various cultural, religious and social dimensions of the human person are seen through the kaleidoscope of human individuality, culture and society—the multiple colours of one’s dimensions and urges. Indeed, this view presents the individual ideally and one realizes how great the existence and presence of humanity is to the God’s order. The importance of human dignity and personhood adds to and increases the worthiness of humankind. The relational nature of human persons distinguishes them from other creatures. Both the vertical and horizontal relationship actually give nourishment and fulfilment to human persons.

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<sup>3</sup> Amal Raj Susai, *The Neo-Hindu Concept of Man*, New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1993, 244.

### **3. Ecclesial Concerns for the Human Person in the Social Doctrines of the Church**

The social sensitivity of the Catholic Church is explained in the social doctrines of the Church. Social doctrines of the Church encourage people with its discourse on human dignity and the contribution in developing the human capabilities.<sup>4</sup> The voice of the Church is the consolation and hope of the people. This voice is heard through the Church's timely interventions in the problems of people. The presentation of the summary of the social encyclicals proffers a renewed impression to understand that the Church is also for the poor. Emphasis on the encyclicals of this century, especially the recent social encyclicals shows that the Church has been focusing on the cry of the people of God and giving the necessary instructions to her children. The foundational sources of papal encyclicals back up these concepts.

### **4. Challenges Posed to the Human Person in the Indian Social Sector**

An analytical reflection on the context of India open our minds and then we can see that there are various challenges within religious, cultural and social realms. The Indian Catholic Church takes pride in saying that Christianity sowed its seed in the very first century. Among the global Church the number of Christians and the statistical reports elucidate this same historical fact. In spite of the fact that Christianity came to India during the first decades of its very birth, it is still considered to be a foreign religion in many parts of India and the Catholics are looked upon with a certain amount of suspicion.<sup>5</sup> And at the same time the complicated complexity of Indian society exists more and more visibly today in society and there is a myriad of problems due to multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual reasons. Besides, the sudden integration into modernity, the unexpected impact of globalization, social insensitivity of the political leadership, and the politically imbalanced and unstable governments create these systematic pressures. These are explored in detail with a vision to invite and invoke the Church to involve itself more in difficult realities of human condition. Here I not only present the problems of today's society but also express the need for a special thrust.

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Citta del Vaticano: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2004, 105-129.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. T. Pothacamury, *The Church in Independent India*, Bombay: Examiner Press, 1996, 13.

## 5. Regaining Human Identity of the Person for a Just Society

The effort made here is to envision some approaches and possibilities to counter the challenges posed to the human dignity and to the concept of the human person. And, it suggests the need and significance of a practical theology. A “practical theology entails experiences and aspirations of those who suffer and experience suffering in their day today existence. It should be grounded in the past, relies on the present and moves ahead believing in the redemptive power of the future.”<sup>6</sup> Having examined the concepts and challenges, here I try to articulate the responsibilities as Christians, family, society, nation and the world. “Socialization expresses the natural tendency for human beings to associate with one another for the sake of attaining objectives that exceed individual capacities. It develops the qualities of the person, especially the sense of initiative and responsibility and helps guarantee his rights.”<sup>7</sup> It entrusts the responsibility of achieving the Kingdom values to the human persons, especially as Christians. At the same time, I would emphasise a revived mission of injecting justice and holy grace into day-to-day life. As Benedict XVI said, “In a globalized society like the one being formed today, theologians often are challenged by public opinion to; above all, promote dialogue among religions and cultures [and] to contribute to the development of an ethics that has peace, justice and the defense of the natural environment as its natural coordinates.”<sup>8</sup> The social involvement does not mean solely an involvement of spiritual and religious leaders alone, but of all Christians. Here the model is Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

True knowledge about the human person provides one with the serenity and docility to know the situation of our people, the poverty, and social and political disparities of the society and the disabilities of people. This will take us to a situation of identifying ourselves with the contribution of Jesus in the Gospel to His society. Thus, radical Christian life will become a process to nurture a culture of viewing the world with optimism where the Christian minority will

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<sup>6</sup>John Mohan Razu, “Practical Theology for the Marginalized: Pastoral Care as a Point of Reference,” *Indian Journal of Christian Studies* 3, 1 (2013) 54.

<sup>7</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994, 1882.

<sup>8</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Participants of the Plenary Session of the International Theological Commission (Rome, 5 December 2008), as quoted by Robert Mickens, “Pope Tells Theologians to Focus on the Truth of Faith,” *The Tablet*, 13 December 2008, 31.

show the world that they are the followers of Christ. The mystery of salvation worked out by Christ is not a mere satisfaction for injustice committed and reparation of the damage caused by sin; but it is a new order of the world established in the person of Jesus Christ. This optimism assumed from the Gospel values invites us to have a dynamism that will incur in us a personal encounter with Jesus and an expression and an experience of this encounter in the given socio-cultural realm that leads to a personal conversion. It is this dynamism that is the drive for the change urged in us of the need to be sensitive to the social injustices existing in India.