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LIBERATING DIALOGUE : AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

In a characteristically multi-religious society as India where liberation is the cry of the hour, few topics could be as pertinent as *liberating dialogue*. The fact that the two concerns-*liberation and dialogue* are linked together for reflection is itself significant, in as much as it points to certain clear convictions emerging at the global level, specially in Third World societies.

Not long ago, there persisted much skepticism about, and even negation of any positive role to religion in the project of liberation. One thought that the 'secular' was the surest path leading to liberation. With so much confusion and debate around the concept of the secular, there is a growing realization today that religions can play, in spite of their past scandalous history of oppression and enslavement, a much needed role of liberation. And this calls for a serious dialogue among the religions. Secondly, as societies all over the world are increasingly becoming multireligious, the religious traditions find themselves facing together also a world in bondage, towards the liberation of which they should bear common responsibility. Against these fresh convictions at the global level, it makes sense to reflect on what does in effect liberating dialogue mean in India.

I think we could fruitfully reflect on the issue of liberating dialogue in India against the backdrop of a three-fold development that has taken place in the past few years.

New Consciousness and Fresh Questions

Within the ambit of Indian Christianity, the explicit discourse about liberation is of relatively recent origin; so too, general and open discussion about dialogue. However, both of them have a wider background and pre-history which I do not intend to trace here. For our immediate purpose of discussion it is enough to hold in mind that in the 1970s these two powerful streams - the concern

for liberation and the necessity of dialogue-irrupted into the consciousness of the Indian Church, as perhaps never before. A very creative and refreshing period for the Indian Church, its life and commitment was thus ushered in.

The new consciousness, triggered off also new questions and challenges for theological reflection.¹ One such question was the nature of the relationship between liberation and dialogue. The socio-political concern and the dialogue concern seemed to move along parallel lines, with little interaction among them. We can speak even of a certain polarization between these two trends, which popularly came to be known as 'ashramite' and 'liberationist'. The conference on "Theologizing in India" held in Pune in 1979,² was a clear manifestation of this polarization. The ashramites in this discussion were thrown on the defensive. They were challenged by the liberationists about their concern for justice and social transformation.³ The liberationist, in the eyes of the ashramites, seemed to lack rootedness in the Indian tradition of interiority.

Social Base

To be able to understand at a deeper level these two streams, we need to pay attention also to the sociological base underlying their theological orientations. For, like in every realm of life, in theologizing too, inevitably, our social location determines our options and orientations. In fact, the issue of liberation reflects the concern of the socially lower strata of Christians, whereas that of dialogue the socially higher strata of the Christian community. This is not to say that those who espouse the cause of liberation are made up of lower class Christians, nor those who pursue dialogue belong to upper echelons among Christians. These are simply orien-

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1. Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations. The Journey of Indian Theology*, University of Madras, Madras 1993.
 2. The papers and proceedings of this conference were collected and edited by M. Amaladoss - Gispert-Sauch-T. K. John, *Theologizing In India Today*. Theological Publications in India, Bangalore 1981.
 3. It is in this context there appeared a few writings regarding the role of ashrams in social justice. For example, Vandana, *Social Justice and Ashrams*, Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore 1982.

tations which symbolize the already existing conflicts of interest within the Christian community. And this has a long history going back to the times of missionaries.

It may be recalled here that in most parts of India, conversion to Christianity was a mass phenomenon involving specially large groups of dalits and other lower castes. Their conversion, in fact, was a search for liberation. There was also an approach, represented by De Nobili, for example, which had as its target, the Brahmins and upper caste Hindus. It called for greater attention to the religious universe of the high castes.

In a way, there is a certain continuity of this historical past. For, the immediate experience base of the liberation orientation today is the *oppression* of the rural and urban poor (who generally belong to such groups as the *dalits* and tribals) through long-standing social, economic and political condition. On the other hand, the experience behind the dialogue orientation is the realization of the *alienness of Christianity* on the Indian soil, in terms of culture and religion. This orientation today seems to be represented by the upper strata within the Church, or by those who try to find a higher social location through the general phenomenon which M.N. Srinivas called as 'sanskratization'.⁴ All this seems to dovetail with the general picture in the country of a polarization between the lower and backward castes on the one hand and the middle and upper castes, on the other. Whereas for the former the crucial question is liberation, for the latter group, as symbolized in the politics of "Hindutva", it is a matter of vindicating the religious and cultural identity.

Dialogue and Theology of Liberation

The question of the relationship between dialogue and liberation acquired sharper focus, yet through another development. The liberation theology emerging from Latin America broke new ground in the centuries old Christian theological tradition. It was indeed a breakthrough. In fact, for the first time in Christian history, it offered a method of theologizing with the poor and their liberation as the

4. Cf. M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Orient Longman, Delhi 1992 (reprint), pp. 1-45.

primary focus; or, more precisely, with the poor in their struggle for liberation as the subject of theological reflection. This theology, as is well-known, made ample use of Marxist and Neo-Marxist analysis of society. However, this type of analysis could not be valid in the same measure for all societies.

Experience of countries like India showed that in diagnosing the society and its structures, if we were to depend entirely on Marxist analytical tools, we would leave unexplained such important factors as sex, race and caste. It is impossible to analyze, for example, caste simply in terms of class or in terms of economic factors. Further, contemporary situation and past experience go to demonstrate that religion is such a social and political force that it cannot simply be discounted and written off.⁵

It was a very significant contribution from Asia, particularly India, to the developing theology of liberation to point out the crucial importance of religion and culture both in understanding society and in the process of liberation. This new climate called for attempts to relate more closely liberation and dialogue.

Humanization As a Rallying Point

Let me point out also a third general development, which can be referred to as theologico-humanistic. It assumes that the various religious traditions have today a role to play in the shaping of our society. Therefore, there is no question of religions having to fight one another to vindicate each one its own truth and its superiority over others. It is not realistic to think of any common doctrinal basis for the unity of all religions, not even a commonly agreed upon understanding of God. The most appropriate rallying point of religions would seem to be the common project of humanization. It is in this context that dialogue among religions and liberation are brought into play.

II

Inadequacy

The above developments have thrown in greater relief the necessity of a closer interplay of religion and liberation. However,

5. Cfr S. Lourdasamy, *Religion as Political Weapon*, Multi Book Agency, Calcutta 1990; ID., *Religion as Social Protest*, Multi Book Agency, Calcutta 1993.

it is doubtful that they can really come to grips with the contemporary Indian situation. There are several reasons for this. By way of example, let me give just two: As for liberation, what is envisaged in these developments, unfortunately, is not rooted in the dynamics of the Indian social and political history. No liberation can be effective and lasting, if it does not have a *social and historical anchorage* among a people and their struggles against dehumanization.⁶ This needs to be kept in mind in any effort at exploring the inter-relationship between liberation and dialogue. I mean to say that a Promethean liberal humanism in collaboration with religion can at the most stir the surface of the Indian society, and not really lead to its radical transformation. For this to happen, it is important to harken to the voice of a people's social history, specially the struggles they waged against dehumanization in the context of their life world.

Politically Insulated

Secondly, the developments I traced in the first part of this talk, do not seem to take sufficient account of the political role of religions in India. The conception of dialogue seems to move in a world insulated, as it were, from the political vicissitudes. When Christians talk about dialogue, there seems to lurk behind it an image of religion which is very much the legacy of Western Enlightenment tradition. And the question at the most limits to the inspirational or motivational role religion can play in the project of liberation.

At a deeper level, I think, there is here an unconscious application of the separation of the religious sphere from the secular, as it happened at a certain point of Western history. With this as the underlying frame of reference, one is at pains to reconcile these two spheres. What should not be forgotten is that religions are not simply a sum total of the ideals they professes. They have a sociological embodiment, and they are a great social and political force as well. Further, we are assisting at the increasing political role of religion on the one hand, and politicization of religion for ulterior ends, on the other. It is therefore not at an ideal level of

6. Cfr Felix Wilfred, "Indian Social Institutions and Movements of Protest," in *Indian Theological Studies*, vol. 30 (1993) 220-245.

a certain predetermined conception of liberation and an ideal understanding of dialogue that the discourse about their inter-relationship is to be posed, but right at the heart of the empirical reality of daily life.⁷

In short, if we do not want to broach the relationship between dialogue and liberation in terms of two pre-defined concepts, and end up in a vacuous intellectual exercise, then we have to address certain crucial issues impinging today on the life of our society. It is over against these concrete contextual experiences that the real picture of both liberation and dialogue in their interrelationship will come to relief. And that leads me to the next set of reflections.

III

Centralization and Peripheralization

The crisis which India is undergoing today can be characterized as a conflict between centralization and pluralism. On the one hand, there is a movement towards building up a strong nation-state, politically and economically powerful, and capable of competing with other nations in our world today. On the other hand is the stark reality of a country with different disprivileged groups and communities struggling to survive. We can think of the peripheralization of millions of *dalits*, tribals, ethnic minorities, workers in the unorganized sector, bonded labourers, child-labourers, women and so on.

In the post-Independence era, what we have been assisting is the progressive alienation of these groups as a result of their disillusionment with the increasingly centralizing political and economic orientation which pays rich dividends to a small elite, while leaving them in the shadow of oblivion, suffering and death. For these peoples and groups at the periphery of Indian society, the primary question is their human dignity, their *liberation* which they more and more clearly see as bound up with their *identity as a group*, as a people. In short, pluralism is very central to their concern. Thus, we are in the face of two polar interests.

Two Different Conceptualizations of Freedom

Now, it is crucially important to note that these two poles represent also two different conceptualizations of freedom, and con-

7. Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Sunset in the East. Asian Challenges and Christian Involvement*, University of Madras, Madras 1991.

sequently of liberation. Freedom in the case of centralizing orientation is a freedom understood as power to control; it is enlargement of the range of one's possibilities through domination. As a result, the life and destiny of millions are brought under the diktat of a small segment within the society whose freedom is realized and enhanced precisely by this control which they maintain. These are then the votaries within India of that tradition of freedom which underlies the project of modernity, and which is trying to universalize and globalize itself. More about it later in the talk.

On the other pole we have a totally different conception of freedom represented by the powerless, the small groups and communities—the dalits, the tribals and other marginalized sections and minority ethnic communities—who actually form the overwhelming majority of the population in India. It is a conception of freedom which is commensurate with their concerns and their legitimate aspirations. Freedom here is not control; it is something which enables a person or a group to enter into *relationships*. Freedom is achieved not through control *over* the other but in relationship *with* the other. It is not a freedom which moves away from the other to realize itself, but which realizes itself only with the other and never without the other.

Sustaining Pluralism

Therefore, freedom becomes genuine and real in a country, only when there is mutuality among the various communities, acceptance and recognition of equality in all spheres of life-economic, social, political and cultural. This calls for a humanizing decentralization, a committed pluralism as a mode of life. In short, the challenge of liberation in India today is basically the task of sustaining India (against growing centralizing trends) as a pluralistic society, something that has characterized its life and history.

From what has been said, we can perceive what liberating dialogue should mean in India. It is a liberation which is and ought to be in the direction of sustaining pluralism in the face of all tendencies of centralization. Liberating dialogue is a question of fostering inter-dependent communities, freed from every kind of enslaving domination. As we can see, interreligious dialogue is thus part of a larger project, namely that of nurturing relationships

among the communities in equality, justice and in the spirit of genuine pluralism. To that extent it can be truly a liberating dialogue.

Now, it is the failure to create the space of freedom understood as mutual and inter-dependent relationships among the various communities which give rise to religious communalism, diametrically opposed to liberation. For dialogue to be able to contribute to liberating pluralism, it should insert itself within the dynamics of present-day anti-liberation and anti-communitarian forces. In this regard we should differentiate, as T.K. Oomen rightly does, between different phenomena which all have unfortunately been grouped under the common label of communalism.⁸ He distinguishes seven different such phenomena.

While being in agreement with the necessity of discernment in this matter, I would rather see basically two types of communalism, in keeping with the reflections so far made. There is the aggressive religious *communalism of the powerful* for whom freedom means control. Here, the use of religions and religious symbols are geared towards the pragmatic end of gaining more power and better control. There is the *communalism of the powerless*; it is a communalism for survival. This communalism can in no way be equated or placed on par with the communalism for domination and centralization. Moreover, both these types of communalism – of the powerful and the powerless – should not be judged by the same standards. A dialogue aimed at liberation has to, then, deal differently with these two types of communalism, if it wants to realize the goal of creation of community and promotion of pluralism.

The Alliance and its Victims

A second closely related issue in which liberating dialogue assumes great importance is the role science and technology plays in the Indian society of today. Without entering into this larger issue in any detailed way, let me broach the question within the scope of this talk. As it is, science and technology have become powerful instruments in the hands of centralizing forces in the

8. Cfr T.K. Oomen, "Varieties of Communalism in India," in S. Arokiasamy (ed.), *Responding to Communalism. The Task of Religion and Theology*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand 1991, pp. 3-13.

Indian society and polity. The alliance with the technological modernity comes in handy for the forces of centralization which define freedom, as I noted earlier, in terms of control or expansion of the range of domination. Interestingly it is the same forces—the upper castes and classes—who are the ardent supporters of globalization. There is nothing strange about it. It dovetails with what they are doing within India.

On the other side are the victims of this grand alliance of the centralizing forces with modern science and technology. The misery and suffering for the marginalized groups and communities caused by this unholy union is beyond description. The destruction of the livelihood of millions of petty artisans, the ruin in the agricultural sector, the massive dislocation of peoples, the destruction of forests and alienation of lands of the tribals, and many more devastations are all the progeny of this union. The violence of every kind unleashed by this combine continues to create more and more victims among the weak and the powerless.

Liberating Ethic

The need for a liberating dialogue in India is dictated precisely by this situation. While the process of liberation needs to adopt multi-front approach with resources from every quarter, the religious traditions have a more specific task in this project: They are called upon to contribute to the practice of much needed humanizing and liberating ethic. Both the partners – the centralizing forces and modern science and technology woefully lack in ethical consideration. It is the total absence of all ethic and humaneness which is frightening about the wedlock of the centralizing forces with science and technology.

The centralizing forces which try to homogenize is inherently violent, as much as an ethically uninformed science and technology is murderous. Due to historical and philosophical reasons (into which I do not want to enter here), modern science and technology adopted in India was a child born ethically-handicapped. It is worthwhile to recall here that Zygmunt Bauman in his study on 'Modernity and the Holocaust'.⁹ He has challenged the attempts to mitigate

9. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Oxford 1989; cfr also the review of the book by Ravi Sundaram in *Economic and Political Weekly* vol. 27, no. 9, February 29, 1992, p. 459.

or explain away the Nazi killings of the Jews either by maintaining that it was the culmination of long standing Christian anti-semitism, or that it was the sudden outburst of brutality in an otherwise progressing human civility. The responsibility has to be laid squarely at the door of modern technological rationality which organizes and engineers everything, from material resources to human beings, while leaving out of its purview any ethical consideration or human compassion.

In the present Indian situation if the continuing holocaust of millions of innocents through the combination of fascist trends with ethically bankrupt modernity is to be arrested, it is imperative that the various religious traditions shed off their attitude of indifference or withdrawal from this whole human drama, and embark on committed response.

Centered on the Victims

This common ethical responsibility of religiously committed women and men should have a clear direction in the context. For us in India it is not a matter of evolving an ethical code which would serve as a *common basis* for all the religions, a kind of "worldethic". (After all no religion recommends murder or fornication!). Ours is a far more serious question than evolving a global ethic. What we require is an ethic with a clear orientation - an ethic centered on the 'victims of modernity' and centralization. Liberating the victims from the present thralldom calls for the combined moral force of all religious traditions in dialogue with each other on the present crisis.

Further, unless we believe that religious traditions are simply ways to a *post mortem mukti* or in search of the pie up in the sky, we have to acknowledge that they have much to tell about the way life and its various departments are organized. And they do tell us about it precisely because every religion offers a certain wholeness of vision to human life and a comprehensive meaning often embodied in its myths, rituals etc. Oriented by their nature towards wholeness, they contain resources also to envision and project alternatives and utopias. At this moment when lives of millions are maimed through a widespread culture of violence, it is of utmost importance

that people belonging to various religious traditions reactivate the utopia-projecting resources of religion, so that alternative paradigms to the present aggressive and dehumanizing ones can be evolved. These paradigms will be suffused with transforming ethic that will have the protection of the weak, the powerless and the victims of modernity as the focal point. And that says a lot about the necessity of a liberating dialogue among the religions.

V

Critique by the Victims

There is yet another important issue we need to at least briefly address. It is the *critique of religions by the victims*, which holds out promise for a liberating dialogue. Let me explain. There are very few in India who would abjure religion because Feuerbach and Marx have explained it as alienation, or Freud has very plausibly shown how religion originates from psychological factors. But there are millions of *dalits* and oppressed who would reject (and in fact have rejected) the religion of their experience because their history and social experience have demonstrated that it has been one of the chief sources of their enslavement. They have the most incisive critique of religion and in this they solidly stand in the tradition of one of the most significant, but neglected currents of thought - Indian *nastika* tradition. Atheism may not be a proper category to render *nastika*. Perhaps more accurately, in terms of its spirit, *nastika* may be characterized as a movement of anti-religious establishment and its ideology.

We cannot today meaningfully enter into a discourse about or praxis of liberating dialogue without taking into serious account of the ideological critique of Indian religious traditions, specially of Hinduism, on the part of the marginalized, specially the *dalits*. Any liberating dialogue has to come to terms with the experience of religion (which is not the same as religious experience) by the *dalits*. This is because of the legitimizing role played by traditional Hinduism and its hierarchical anthropology forming the basis of social inequality. It should be added here that, as regards Christianity, a similar experience of religion is being undergone today by many *dalits*, and the practice of discrimination within Christianity has come under heavy censure on their part.

It is well-known that in modern times there has taken place a re-interpretation of Hinduism geared to struggle for Independence, as exemplified in the case of Gandhi and Tilak. In more recent times, there has been efforts, as for example by Swami Agnivesh, to channel the Hindu resources towards social engagement and transformation.¹⁰ There has been even a call for developing a Hindu theology of liberation. Such initiatives for liberation are in themselves open to dialogue with peoples or other faiths. Therefore liberating dialogue can furnish a point of convergence for peoples of various religious traditions.

Reversal Hermeneutics

However the liberating dialogue from the perspective of the victims differs from such efforts. It has quite a different tone and a sharper focus. Here it is not a question of a general hermeneutics or re-interpretation which any religious tradition requires if it does not want to slip into fundamentalism. Rather what is attempted by the victims is so to say a reversal hermeneutics. It is something like the reversal parables of Jesus. It is a radical ideological critique of religious sources by re-evaluating persons, events and symbols in such a way that the mighty are pulled down from the thrones and the lowly are elevated (cfr Lk. 1:52). Liberating dialogue is possible only *among the victims* in the various religious traditions of India – Hindu, Islamic, Christian etc. – who dare such a radical critique of their religion and their religious sources. Among these (and those who are deeply in solidarity with them), there can be a true liberating dialogue because their experience and concerns converge and their hopes meet.

Conclusion :

Admittedly religions have a great liberative potential. But this potential is not a matter of culling out elements from its sources for a theoretical construct *about* dialogue and liberation. The liberative potential of a religious tradition is released only within the dynamics of a contextual political praxis. It is at this level that dialogue among the religious traditions within a particular context can also become liberating.

10. Swami Agnivesh, 'Vedic Socialism', in *Seminar* 339, November 1987, pp. 18-22.

In the present context of India, liberating dialogue means three things: First it is the sustaining of the Indian society in genuine pluralism against the forces of centralization. Secondly, liberating dialogue is the mutual interrelationship of religions oriented towards the creation of an ethic that would safeguard the weak and the powerless. Thirdly, it is the meeting of the victims who exercise radical critique of their religious traditions and are united in the same hope of an alternative order of society. The victims themselves are the active subjects of liberating dialogue. This and nothing short of this deserves to be named as liberating dialogue.