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## DALIT THEOLOGY: VOICE OF THE OPPRESSED

### Prologue

Today, two of the most urgent questions that face any religion are the questions of the *many poor* and *many religions*.<sup>1</sup> The answers that the churches, Christian as well as non-christian, give to these challenges will determine their relevance. In this context, when religions of different view points dialogue together on the poor a fruitful and critical reflection, rooted in theo-praxis, will emerge. Such praxis and dialogue-based reflection<sup>2</sup> on dalit situation may be provisionally christened as dalit theology.

### Dalit Theology

*Dalits* are the *anawim*: the alienated, marginated, wretched of the earth; the voiceless, exploited non-persons, the under-dogs who have hardly any say in the making of decisions that affect their own life and destiny. They belong to lower classes as a property of the higher caste people and live in a culture of silence as apartheid mass. The 'great tradition' has been imposed on them willy-nilly as they are dominated. Their 'little traditions' are either ignored or 'used', rendering them defenseless. They are forced to live in habitual servile deference before the callous, arrogant and assertive wealthy. They exist as cogs on the wheel rather than as humans, in areas marked out for them, having no owning, no living, no learning. They are un-free, fettered by taboos and powerless all because of their accidental birth as shudras/untouchables.

DALIT THEOLOGY is a systematization of the critical reflection on ortho-praxis which the oppressed generate dialogically in the light

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1. Aloysius Pieris, S. J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York : Orbis Books, 1988), p. xi.
  2. Cf. Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, (London: SCM Press, 1978), p. xi.

of their faith. It is born out of a live experience of the suffering or marginalized and their shared efforts to abolish their existing unjust situation and to build *basileia*; a new society, more free and more human, come what may. Hence it is a theology of the riff-raff, the underside of history. Here the down-trodden become the historical *locus Dei*. God is encountered in the struggles for the rights of human beings through thick and thin (Is 1.11-17; Jer. 22.13-16; Hos 4.1-2, 6.4-6). The kernel and core of dalit theology is not *logos* but *praxis* that is liberative. The primary agents of this struggle are the dalits themselves and the others are only empathetic animators. This theology puts justice and establishment of God's reign at the centre of *Kerygma* in lieu of doctrinal orthodoxy and church-expansion.

In Christian situation, the baptism is understood here as commitment to dalits. The eucharist is the sharing with their struggles for liberation. It is also *the* pedagogy of the oppressed. Thanks to this re-understanding of sacraments, a counter-culture originates where the embedded sexism, androcentrism and paternalism are deleted from all positions of leadership and decision-making bodies. In such an interplay of faith-praxis-reflection from the 'underside', the institutional magisterial churches must die in order to rise gloriously as on-going God's kingdom beyond their own space-time limitations and consequent constraints.

### **Myth of Uniqueness**

Imperialism of religion has claimed uniqueness of dominant religion in the matter of its salvific function. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – Outside the Church no *salvation* – is the echo of such exclusive claim, though in the past, in its heydays. Now-a-days, theologians agree that every religion has its own soteriological nucleus. Divine grace acts beyond a particular religion's boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Only it has to be tapped in collaboration with the people of different vantage points through appropriate dialogue. Such a *praxis* will lead toward an *oikumene* of the people of God which can not be achieved through surface adaptations

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3. Cf. Han Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 122-23 and the documents of Vatican II.

and reconciliations at the top-brass levels. Such fruitful dialogues should be the *diakonia* (service) of all churches irrespective of religious affiliations. In this context, Christian churches in particular have to interpret afresh and radically the myth of the 'uniqueness of Christianity.'<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Vatican II and WCC, it is commonly held now that Christianity is one of the sister religions which has to live its charism of service (*dāsōha*) in building the Kingdom, not ecclesiastical but of God here-and-now.

Why should we imagine that God has only revealed in the Christian tradition?<sup>5</sup>

Do we have signs that lead us to affirm, for example, that God spoke in history only through Jesus of Nazareth and Old Testament prophets but not through Socrates or Indian seers like Buddha, Basava, Gandhi etc.? If God wishes to save *all* persons (1Tm 2.4), the hope for the Kingdom should also be found in all the religious traditions.

For Gandhiji, there could be no such thing as one true religion, all others being false.<sup>6</sup> Archbishop Romero<sup>7</sup> expressed the same idea but slightly differently, in very clear terms following the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes* (n.22 *et passim*):

The church believes that the action of the Spirit who brings Christ to life in human beings is greater than itself. Far beyond the confines of the church, Christ's redemption is powerfully at work...

### Process And Condition

Dalit theology is operative through the process of conscientization for the organization of the voiceless. Conscientization is a process

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4. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987).
  5. Juan Luis Segundo, S. J., *The Liberation of Theology*, Trans. John Drury, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 37-8; Cf. *etiam* James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Philadelphia: Lippercott, 1970), p. 77.
  6. *Harijan* (March 6, 1937). M. K. Gandhi, *Christian Mission*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1941), p. 170.
  7. Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless*, Maryknoll; New York: Orbis, 1985), p. 105

of transformation of naive *reflexive* consciousness of the grass-roots into *reflective* awareness and of educating the masses for assuming responsibilities to serve with the oppressive *status quo*. It makes the powerless and the under-privileged conscious of their rights, privileges as well as duties.<sup>8</sup>

If conscientization is the process of dalit theology, inculturation is the *sine qua non* condition for its praxis. Inculturation cannot be a major difficulty at least for Christianity since it has an 'ostrich's stomach' that can swallow anything and transform it, as history has demonstrated all through.

In India, the organized communities (*Ekklesia*) characterized by defensive attitudes as regards orthodoxy of faith cannot be the tools for conscientizing and organizing the silent masses. Instead, base human communities, constituted of men and women of good will belonging to various religions, must be founded for the radical transformation of the unjust social structures and the in-built mechanisms of oppression. They should be characterized by Gorbachevian *glasnost* which deletes the *caesura* that exists between various churches of diverse religious traditions. Here orthodoxy is a non-issue and has no relevance as finite knowledge of man is ever growing and no human institution has absolute certitude within it. The base communities enlighten people as regard their oppressive history and inspire them to change it for the better.

God is ultimately a Mystery, *quod homo sciat si Deum nescire*.<sup>9</sup> He/She cannot be contained in capsules made by human cerebral fabrications. He/She has to be experienced viscerally, particularly in 'the poor', 'the voiceless' and the 'non-persons' through the struggles for their liberation from those who hold exclusively the levers of socio-economic and political powers.

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8. Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

9. Thomas Aquinas, *De Pot* 7,5,14; Cf. 1 Tm 6. 16; Cf. *etiam* the well-known sapiential expression of St. Augustine : *Deus intlmior intimo meo, superior summo meo*. Jesus expressed this *Mysterium Tremendum* as 'Father in heaven', meaning *Deus est semper major*.

### Voice of the Oppressed

Theology, which is the voice of the oppressed rooted in their faith-experience, is not purely academic knowledge of God but experiential one obtained through critical reflection on their liberative praxis. Hence there is no scope here for 'escape mechanisms' of academic theology.<sup>10</sup> Thus dalit theology revolves around the oppression-liberation axis.<sup>11</sup> It pulls down all the walls of religious and confessional affiliations of various theological hues and shades and considers the profane and the divine, the religious and the secular to be only the two sides of the same coin and thereby integrates at a higher space different peoples as one people of God. Such an at-one-ment/ecumenism of freedom<sup>12</sup> will be readily welcomed by one and all and it will be extended beyond the boundary of Christianity.

Dalit theology is not a *fuga mundi*: an escapism from the harsh realities of this world but an engagement with life and struggle for humanization of human society, which is composed of 'wolves' and 'sheep,' with a radical openness for the future, a characteristic and definitive feature of existence according to Bible.<sup>13</sup> It does not rely much upon temple-centred ritualistic liturgy but a worship *in spirit and truth* (Jn 4.21-23). It is a liturgy of witnessing (*Marthuria*) Jesus the crucified in the midst of human struggles for the liberation of the underdogs. In short, theopraxis roots dalit theology. After all, the first Christian liturgy on Calvary did not take place in the temple of Jerusalem but outside it. When the religious authority murdered Jesus – the visible face of the invisible God, on the Cross, in connivance with the political power, he became the most powerful witness to his Father. It was outside the temple Jesus gave witness to his name: Emmanuel, which means, God-with-us (Mt 1.23). Here one may recall the dictum: *Ubi Christus ibi ecclesia* (Where Christ is, there is the Church) but *vice versa* need not be necessarily true.

10. J. L. Segundo, *Ibid.*, p. 170.

11. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, Trans. and ed. Sister Caridad India and John Eagleson, (SCM Press Ltd., 1977 (3rd impr.) / 1974), p. 48.

12. Sebastian Kappen, *Liberation Theology and Marxism*, (Ahmednagar: Asha Kendra, 1986), p. 67.

13. Rudolph Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity In the Contemporary Setting*, Trans. R. H. Fuller. (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 180 ff.

### Orthopraxis as Liturgy

The theology of the marginalized replaces the *liturgy of the altar* by the liturgy of life i.e. orthopraxis, involvement in secular liberative action, based on the pedagogy of the oppressed, a continuum of faith-praxis-reflection. The celebration of Jesus' murder brought about by his liberative life-style cannot be uprooted from its *Sitz im Leben*, the human secular lives and struggles for existence, justice and dignity except for distorting it.

Secular action, if done through egolessness, itself is the authentic liturgy, vertically acceptable to the Divine and horizontally capable of waking up the sleeping uncritical masses to the reality of their situation. Such a REAL liturgy can not be replaced by the SYMBOLIC or sacramental liturgy of the altar except as a stage-play. Gutiérrez<sup>14</sup> has rightly observed that participation in the cultic eucharist appears to many, for want of necessary base in the community, an exercise in make-believe. Such an esoteric ceremony turns out to be only a priestcraft for maintaining *status quo*.

Sacraments which claim to have *a-historical* sacred efficacy do not seem to exhibit any *historical* sensitivity by raising awareness of reality, which is of injustice and oppression, in solving problems of the people or in taking most important decisions as regards strategies to bring about structural changes.<sup>15</sup> Mostly it is the human search for individual security that brings people to Mass and Sacraments. Hence they have ceased to transmit christianity from the past generation to the present one, characterized by critical reflection.<sup>16</sup>

Men and women of our age are convinced that salvific mechanisms proposed by Churches are not the exclusive means since God acts also outside his specific historical manifestations as well as the sacramental and ecclesiastical systems.<sup>17</sup> Sobrino<sup>18</sup> is more specific when he observes.

14. *Op. cit.*, p. 137.

15. J. L. Segundo, *Op. cit.*, pp. 40-43.

16. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

17. M. Amaladoss, S. J., "The Pluralism of Religions and the significance of Christ," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, LIII: 8 (Delhi : Aug. 1989), p. 408.

18. *Spirituality of Liberation : Toward Political Holiness*, Trans., Robert R. Barr, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 156.

Salvation comes to us through all women and men who have truth more than lies, who are more eager to give than to receive and whose love is that supreme love that gives life rather than keeping for oneself.

Here, the priesthood of the commoners (*hoi polloi*) obtains its usurped function as well as position and the ministerial priesthood of the clerics is made subordinate to the former and is understood not ritualistically but functionally as animating leadership. Thus the old clericalism, of the petrified, feudal, autocratic churches which do not believe in *sensus fidelium*, is allowed to die out a natural and hopefully peaceful death.

The anti-temple and anti-cultic type of worship (Jn 4.19-26) is based not so much on external offerings but truly on the practice of prophetic values such as truth, justice, love and freedom,<sup>19</sup> which demand constant spiritual sacrifice of the self-oblation in one's day-to-day struggles of life. Without this pro-existential breaking and pouring out of one's life for the hungry,<sup>20</sup> the liturgy at the altar is only anti-eucharistic, anti-ecclesial and therefore sinful (cf. 1 Co 11. 21, 27) *Coram Deo et proximo*.

Gutiérrez<sup>21</sup> opines that

Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationship among men, the breach of friendship with God and with other men, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture... Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation.

The liturgy of life is living the life of self-sacrifice biased in favour of the poor and the oppressed, since to be religious person is primarily

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19. William Madtha, "Pope John XXIII and Socialization," *Social Action*, 14.2 (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, April 1964).
  20. R. J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979) and Louis M. Bermejo, S. J., *Body Broken and Blood Shed*, (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1986).
  21. *Op. cit.*, p. 175.

to be in solidarity with the under-privileged. The priesthood without the victimhood only leads to clericalism. Hence the liturgy of life recognizes the priesthood only of those faithful who assent to be grass-root witnesses to Jesus' victimhood and thus become effective animators of an integrated liberation of oppressed peoples.

As the prophets of the old (Is. 1. 10-17, 58. 6-7, 9-11; Jer 7. 21-23, 45 ff; Ho 6. 4-6 ff; Am 5. 21-24), dalit theology too devalues empty liturgy that is purely ritualistic repetition,<sup>22</sup> and blurs the existing sharp separation between the roles of the priest and the layman which in reality is a hinderance to the liberative action of building a just society.

### **Dalit Spirituality of Involvement**

The theology of dalits demands that spirituality of persons come of age consists not in so much in doing religious things like reciting beads, attending church services and participating in devotional practices but in *doing the duties* of their secular calling, through theocentric consciousness, in a self-less involvement in socio-political life. Even priests and religious seek to participate directly in political life since they do not cease to be citizens of their country. In exercising their natural civic and political rights, they come to friction with tradition-bound bishops. In spite of such tragic and oppressive situation, enlightened and committed priests renew their fidelity to their Lord, Jesus the crucified, by casting their lot to work *with* and *for* the rejected and the apartheid, instead of keeping themselves apart solely for the service of the altar. Given this sad situation of friction a re-evaluation of catholic priesthood and parish-centred church, institutionalized by the Council of Trent, is urgently called for. Unfortunately many bishops are ill-prepared to read signs of the times and help dialogically in search of more relevant expressions of priestliness and religiousness needed in changing the processes that prostitute religion and even God in order to get economic and political profits.

To start with, at least the more progressive bishops should give lead in defending the human and civil rights of their clergy for direct

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22. John Desrochers, *Christ the Liberator*, (Bangalore : The Centre for Social Action, 1977), p. 179.



political ministry and in restoring the priestly functions of the laity at grassroot levels since the profane is only the surface-dimension of the Divine.

Commitment to the oppressed and their struggles for liberation is necessary both for the laity as well as church-men-and-women in order to build up a renewed society of persons. This commitment to the dalits, a crucified people of our own times, is in accordance with the example of Jesus, viz., his active defense of the powerless and his denunciation and *exposé* of the powerful. Such a heroic example of the Master places the churches and the church men squarely within the politics, though not in the pejorative sense of the word, in order to incarnate their scripture-reflection in the process of transformation of historical injustices into human relationships of genuine justice.

Archbishop Romero, one of the political saints of our times, was an outstanding example in the episcopal ministry of a church incarnate in the struggles of restructuring (*Perestroika*) society. Romero does not mince the words when he says:

Religion held with deep conviction leads to political involvement and tends to create conflicts...where there is a crying need for social justice.<sup>23</sup>

A church, less concerned with the administration of the sacraments and with worship at the altar than with promoting the vast poor majority who are deliberately ignored and silenced as well as deprived of all resources: cultural, social, economic and political is irrelevant for men and women of transitive consciousness as they do not rely upon sacraments and church-mechanisms for their security as in the past.

The existing dichotomy between faith and life does not lead towards our personal integration or wholeness. Such a split is one of the most serious errors of our age (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43), about which we cannot afford to be neutral or indifferent any more. Rather it has to be effectively overcome if one desires integration at the micro and macro levels of one's existence. The *dvaitic* thought is also foreign to Biblical *weltanschauung*. Hence St. Paul does not hesitate to speak

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23. Jon Sobrino, *Op. cit.* (1988), p. 81.

of a 'spiritual body' (1 Cor 15.44) and of a 'carnal mind' (Col 2.18). In the Bible carnal is understood as egocentric consciousness in opposition to the theo-centric one.<sup>24</sup> Contemporary mentality too in this regard is one with that of the Bible.

### **The Crucified: Jesus and Dalits**

Dalit theology is the theology of the Cross. Contemplation on the crucified Jesus puts steel into the backbone of the crucified but conscientized dalits. Whenever temples are built to mammona on the graves of the poor, Cross can lead the non-persons toward a commitment of their own peoplehood by orienting them to the experiential knowledge of a liberating God, if a proper pedagogy of encountering God is employed.

Jesus' victimhood as well as priesthood on the Cross was a peak experience of the consequence of his option for the poor, his liturgy of life. Jesus encountered his Father here most authentically. Those who would like to be disciples of Jesus by their option for the poor must learn to encounter their God in their commitments to the dalits (Is 66. 1-2) and not so much in material temples (Jn 4. 21-23) built of stone and gold.<sup>25</sup> They are not needed (Jer (3.16) since *believers* themselves are temples of God (1 Cor 3. 16-17, 6. 19).

Who are such believers? In the final analysis only the Lord "knows his own" (2 Tm 2.19). God's presence can neither be localized nor restricted to particular churches since they do not contain God but only point Him beyond themselves. God-experience<sup>26</sup> extends to all the peoples of the earth (Is 41. 1-7, 45. 20-25, 51. 4; Am 9. 7; Jonah):

Since God has become man, humanity, every man, history, is the living temple of God. The "pro-fane," that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists.<sup>27</sup>

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24. John A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1952).

25. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1946), pp. 8-9.

26. William Madtha, "Authentic Mysticism: A Critique," in *The Journal of the Karnataka University: Social Sciences*, XX-XXI (Dharwad: 1984-85).

27. G. Gutiérrez, *Op. cit.*, p. 194.

In dalits, the wretched of the earth, we experience Christ who is hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, homeless, and imprisoned (Mt 25. 31-46). Jesus Christ is not only God's human face but also leader of the de-classed ones of contemporary history. He is one of them: son of a carpenter (Mk 13. 55) having no house of his own (Mt 8. 20; Lk 2. 7) or even a piece of land to be buried (Mt 27. 60), hunted down by the rich and powerful (Mt 2. 13), calumniated (Lk 23. 1-8), arrested (Mk 15. 16), tortured (Mt 27. 26) and murdered (Lk 23. 39) by those intent on maintaining the *status quo*, thanks to the priestly connivance and political opportunism (Mt 27. 11-23). Hence our encounter of Christ in the poor/dalits is decisive and fundamental.

### Being Poor for the Poor

Women and men of current age are not persons who believe in doctrinaire orthodoxy of their churches and obey unquestioningly the self-appointed ecclesiastical authorities. They obey God rather than men (Ac 5. 29). Primarily they are persons immersed in the real history of men. They move out of the safety of all ecclesiastical structures and theological formulations which are very much under the thumb of the hierarchy which imposes on laity a kind of authority from which there is no appeal.<sup>28</sup> They are aware that fraternal communion (*Koinonia*), with those to whom God is partial, viz., the dalits, leads in depth to filial communion with the Father. Hence the *mission* of all churches and religions today should be basically a struggle *with* and *for* the poor.<sup>29</sup>

Archbishop Romero expressed his defense and love to the poor in admirable pastoral terms which reveal a specific mind-set:

Nothing is more important to the church than . . . the human person, above all, the poor and oppressed person, who, besides being human, is also divine.<sup>30</sup>

No one can be *for* the poor unless one holds firm to the principle of voluntary renunciation (*aparigraha*) in a Gandhian style. A living experience of poverty and of the people's struggle with poverty is required in order *to be poor for the poor*. We should be really touched by their

28. J.L. Segundo, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

29. Cf. J. Desrochers, *op. cit.*, p. 38, 40 & f.n. 14.

30. J. Sobrino, (1988), p. 112.

suffering, feel their anguish and experience the filth of the slums and thus understand experientially the plight of the poor since man is essentially a being-for and being-with others. To fail in this is to fit the proverb to a tee: "You heard the rooster crow, but you don't know where."<sup>31</sup>

God's reign can not be achieved by possessing power and prestige but only through *kenosis* (self-emptying) for the sake of the suffering. When the powerless church became established respectful and powerful, christianity waned under the smoke screens of legitimation and mystification. The wealth-accumulating obese clerics dominated the cult-centred waxing *churchianity* at the expense of *christianity*. In order to remedy this situation, a lay-man by name Ignatius of Loyola gathered a group of University friends and summoned them to follow Jesus in his poverty and thus provided them an ideological 'space' where they could liberate themselves *ab intra* as well as *ab extra* from the bureaucratically top-heavy organizational structures. They and, through Spiritual Exercises, many others were liberated not so much for themselves but for human-others (Jn 10. 18; 1 Cor 9. 19), in order to bring about the transition from what *is* to what *ought to be*, at individual and ecclesial levels.

*Voluntary* poverty, which is basically sharing of what we have and what we are with the needy, is a basic need for those who commit themselves to the removal of *forced* poverty. Mahatma Gandhi is a powerful paradigm for voluntary poverty thanks to his self-sacrificing simplicity of life. He dispossessed in order to liberate the oppressors from their *greed* and the oppressed from their *need* and thus transform them as active subjects of their own future and destiny.

Forced poverty has no right to exist. Bible, if re-read truly, gives a clarion call to be committed both personally and collectively to the building of a new society *Basileia* characterized by sharing (Lk 3. 11, 16. 19-31). When bread is broken and shared particularly with the hungry it becomes and makes us body of Christ.<sup>32</sup> Similarly if our wealth is distributed (Lk 18. 23) in such a way that there be no needy person (Ac 2. 42-47,

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31. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Liberation Theology (From Confrontation to Dialogue)*, Trans. Robert R. Barr, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 11.

32. Louis M. Bermejo, S.J., *Op. cit.*, and William Madtha, "Gastro-semiotics of the Eucharist" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 54.4 (Delhi, April 1990), pp. 195-200.

4. 34-35) it ceases to be mammon. Such theopraxis will enable the communities of renewed persons to take the reins of their own destiny.

Poverty is an equivocal term. Negatively speaking, it does not mean being wretched. Positively, it is an attitude of openness to God through a commitment of solidarity with the oppressed (*lōkasangraha*) and protest against the oppressors. For, to be *with* the oppressed is to be *against* the oppressors. Such a positive poverty is a *conditio sine qua non* to political holiness.

Poverty, therefore, is the state of someone who has only the needs and not the 'greeds'. To *be poor for* the poor is authentic dalit spirituality. No one can serve two masters: *Abba* and *mammona* (Mt 6. 24; Lk 16. 13).

Hence servant-leaders of communities should adopt simple life-style by avoiding special dress, greetings, titles and seats of honour (Mt 23. 1-11), since all are equal in New Order (Mt 23.8, 18.15, 22). Jesus has condemned clergy as a separate social class in his condemnation of the limitations and blind-spots of scribes and pharisees of his days.

In Christian parlance, the poor by birth are proxies of Christ (Mt 25. 31-46). The Good Shepherd claims to be in solidarity with the whole of dalit misery,<sup>33</sup> in such a way that there is neither substitution nor symbolization but only identification between Christ and dalits (Mt 25. 31-46) which is technically known as *Grand Moi* (Great I). If we opt to be poor for their service we become disciples of Jesus of history (Mt 19.21), since Jesus himself had taken decision to side with them (Mt 9.12; Mk 2.17; Lk 5.31, 19.10). Hence voluntary poverty has to be embraced to remedy the situation of forced poverty and not directly for the love of God as such.

Our actions toward human-another are *at the same time* actions toward God. Our encounter with God occurs in our encounter with men, especially the socially disfigured persons: the dalits (Is 53.2-3). What is done to the least is done for the Lord himself as the needy neighbour is God-in-disguise (*Daridra Nārāyaṇa*).

33. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, Trans. S.H. Hooke, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1954), p. 143.

### Protest for Honesty

There is a spontaneously emerging protest regarding religions and their churches since the clerics and Religious have become counter-signs to voluntary poverty. These dishonest church-men guarantee a historical, other-worldly happiness in heaven to the house-holders (*grhastas*), while they themselves pamper, here-and-now, with this-worldly blessings denied to the masses. The luxuries of *belt-loosening*, otiose religious leaders unsurprisingly turn the *belt-tightening* honest masses and more particularly the youth, who are abreast of the times and conversant with the tools of social analysis provided by Marxism.

In such a situation, the authority of Churches that have lost touch with reality is simply ignored. Along with the crisis of authority, there is also the crisis of credibility of the churches because of the gap between the clerical culture of exploiters and the grass-root culture of the exploited. Unless the priests and Religious identify themselves with the exploited dalits, the adult world will not trust in the competence of the Churches in evangelizing the poor which is according to Pope Paul VI<sup>34</sup> is the *raison d'être* of the whole Christian life and the life of Christians.

The authenticity of the salvific core and *doxa* of religions depend largely on the witnessing to the voluntary poverty both individually and ecclesially. Jesus invites his disciples-in-political-action not only to be disinterested in their service (Mt 10.8) but above all to live a life of sharing (Mt 5.42; Lk 6.34, 10.7-8) without relying on wealth (Mt 10.9-10). Such fleshing out of voluntary poverty is a vociferous condemnation of any form of power control exercised through money. Leonardo Boff observes that the Church has too often forgotten this message and transformed Jesus' concept of 'sacred service' into that of 'sacred power'<sup>35</sup> very often with self-expansion motive even at the cost of blackmailing the have-nots with 'assistentialism' or through babying them with 'maternalism'.

So, the churches should reflect the culture of dalits through a readiness to give *to* and receive *from* the people.<sup>36</sup> The formation of the

34. *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, No. 15.

35. J. Desrochers, *Op. cit.*, p. 190.

36. J. Sobrino (1988), p. 60.

church-ministers<sup>37</sup> should be centered round the ethos of the poor, especially the landless labourers, the small peasants and the dalits.<sup>38</sup> Priests must not make a living out of religion like parasites but earn their livelihood through honest employment. They should conscientize the rank and file about the tutelage of alienating religions which tend to support the *status quo*<sup>39</sup> and the need of building up a qualitatively different society in which man will be free from all servitude and be the artisan of his own destiny.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, when the whole *ecclesia* is geared to evangelization, which is the primary duty of any church, we can evoke in the members of that church a desire to de-centre from self and to seek ever deeper evangelical roots for a social commitment to the human-other, particularly, the exploited and the outcast, no matter what religion, sex, and caste she belongs to. Such a praxis can inspire members of a particular church to enter into true dialogues with other sister-churches and faiths in order to share mutually the experiences in the service and commitment to the poorest and the most insignificant people.

Honesty demands that our preferential option for solidarity with and concern for the dalits should enable us to become more indigenous in our world-views as well as life-styles. We should assimilate our faith, without losing its cutting edge, through our own local popular culture and become more integrated, authentic and native.

Another area of protest is our 'big' institutions. Can our schools, colleges, hospitals, technological institutions run with 'big donations' and/or foreign aid, which serve mainly the elite more than the poor, really be witnesses to God who is biased in favour of the poor?

### Cultural Revolution

Dalit theology generates a revolution where all are equals as persons.

37. Subhash Anand, "Training Priests for Human Liberation", in *Human Liberation in the Indian Context*, (Pune: The Students' Council, Jnanadeepa Vidyapeetha, 1983), p. 224-36.

38. Mervyn Carapiet, "Poverty as an Inculturation Factor" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, XLV: 3 (Delhi: March, 1981), pp. 117-23.

39. G. Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

40. Cf. *Id.*, Ch. 2.

This radical socialism<sup>41</sup> humanizes human beings and leads them to the realization of the dictum: *Homo vivens, gloria Dei*. It uproots the human tendency of 'having more' (consumerism) by fostering the tendency of 'being more' (mysticism). It transforms authority as service (Mt 20. 28; Mk 10,45; Lk 22,27) ignoring status in society (Mt 18.1-5; 20. 20-28; Mk 2.33-37, 10.35-45; Lk 9.46-48, 22.24,27).

This cultural revolution is shaped authentically by the dalits themselves in an on-going fashion through their political commitment. The coming closer of such revolutionized people brings forth base human communities which downplay or even replace the institutional churches dominated by the leisure-class clergy offering only symbolic rituals in an irrelevant manner on appointed days, at fixed times in grandiose places of worship.

Gandhian political spirituality which organizes masses to change the oppressive social structures might serve as a paradigm to the members of base human communities in their task of bringing about cultural revolution speedily.

Gandhi collapsed verticality of man with his horizontality:

For me the road to salvation lies through the incessant toil in the service of my country and there through of humanity.<sup>42</sup>

The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with Him. This can be done by the service of all.<sup>43</sup>

I am endeavouring to see God through service of humanity.<sup>44</sup>

The service of the distressed, the crippled and the helpless among the living beings constitutes worshiping of God.<sup>45</sup>

Gandhi renounced rituals, offerings, pilgrimages, temple-worship and other religious observances as means for God-encountering. Instead, he experienced God through effective political praxis for the liberation of suppressed classes and preached the same royal road (*Rāja mārga*)

41. Rosemary Ruether. *Liberation Theology*, (New York: Pauline Press, 1972), 149-50.

42. R.K. Prabhu (ed.), *Truth in God*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1955), p. 5.

43. Harijan, Aug. 29, 1939.

44. R.K. Prabhu, *ibid*.

45. C.W., vol. 36, p. 296.



to others. Hence Gandhiji is *the* paradigm for political holiness which corrects the error of bygone priestly-spirituality which separated religious domain from the secular/political one. Here a word of *caveat* may be necessary. Gandhi's diplomacy of pleasing one and all (the exploiters and the exploited, the oppressors and the oppressed, the rich and the poor), as well as his defense of certain traditions like Indian *varna* system may not dovetail with dalit theology which aims at a radical change of *status quo*.

### Good News To The Poor

Dalit theology announces good news to the poor by cutting at the root the two-tiered spirituality which reserves special zones for the priests and Religious that are forbidden to the laity since, as explained above, there is no dividing line between the secular and the spiritual sphere. Hence we can not separate salvific work from liberative work based on justice and human concern.<sup>46</sup> It paves the way towards the total transformation of a people of the poor into ONE people of God (*Oikoumene*).

Good news of the powerless is *bad news* to the powerful. The priests and Religious neither practiced voluntary poverty effectively nor renounced power and prestige efficaciously. Yet they claimed to be elitist spiritual group and did not believe in the spiritual capacities and the priesthood of all believers. These religious leaders were neither proposed by the faithful to be their leaders nor retrieved their authority over the commoners from their spirituality but manipulated it through their own pragmatic administrative mechanism. Such comfortably established religious leaders need to be first enlightened and then liberated. It is possible only through their own critical reflection, collaboration of the bishops and the awakening of the slumbering laity.

The Bible is Good News to the poor since it, on the whole, not only justifies but demands partiality in favour of the oppressed.<sup>47</sup> Only if the Biblical text is read in every day words and reflected critically in the *context* of the suffering, taking side of the exploited masses, it becomes Good News to the poor. Such a biased reading helps us to return to the

46. J. Neuner, S.J., "The Priest's Role in the Quest for a New Society," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, XLVI (Delhi: Jan-Dec., 1982), p. 28.

47. J.L. Segundo, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

roots of our faith and to go back to our source. After all the Bible is the record of the religious experience of 'non-people' constantly struggling to become a 'people'.<sup>48</sup>

The genuine dedicated love for the dalits is the hallmark of authentic Christian faith (Jm 2.20; 1 Jn 3.17-18). It is the *mission* of the churches as well as mark of the disciples of Jesus 'who went about doing good (Ac 10.38) especially by serving on priority basis the wretched of the earth (Mt 8.17; Lk 7.18-23) and by challenging the oppressive social structures both in religious and secular domains.

### Epilogue

Dalit theology, which is relevant to our land and times, is not a sterile God-talk: a mere jugglery with words, but a dialogic critical reflection upon theopraxis amidst the struggles for the liberation of dalits. Such a theology has liturgy of life as its base. This liturgy does not consist in external offerings through the mediation of cultic priests as such but more authentically it is self-oblation of women and men who become the victims *with* and *for* the proletariat in their secular struggles, irrespective of church affiliations, for building up more humane society.

When persons renounce their selfishness and seek to change the world, they open themselves horizontally to fellow beings and vertically to God, the depth-dimension of all reality, in a simultaneous manner. Such bi-dimensional openness is the acid test and touchstone of the authenticity of religiosity and spirituality worth the name. Struggling for human rights is *in actu* serving God himself.<sup>49</sup> Communion with God is lived in one's social and secular existence given our human situation.<sup>50</sup> Such salvation/liberation is essentially intra-historical, transforming and guiding history to its *parousia*. It embraces not only *all* men and the *whole* man but the totality of creation (Eco-spirituality).

The spirituality of such transformed people consists in engaging themselves pro-existentially with cosmotheandric consciousness which itself is

48. A. Pieris, S.J., "A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches" in *Liberation in Asia: Theological Perspectives*, S. Arokiasamy, S.J. and G. Gispert Sauch, S.J. (eds.), (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987), p. 36.

49. J. Desrochers, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

50. *Idem.*, p. 82, 226.

salvific/liberative.<sup>51</sup> In fact, cosmotheandric consciousness and pro-existential life-style are the warp and woof of the same fabric of liberative, humanized existence.

In sum, *doing* politically takes the place of pure academic God-talk (1 Jn 3. 17-18; Jm 2. 15-16). Doing politically means to be in the struggles of the poor-majority. This involvement is not for power, but for freedom. Catholic priests and bishops are, in practice, involved actively in politics through the embacies of Vatican State. The political involvement of Pope John Paul II in the politics of Poland is well-known.<sup>52</sup>

Dalit theology reflects on the real as it occurs and always in relation to liberative praxis. In its orthopraxis, the *needs* of all will replace the '*greeds*' of a few. Cooperation will replace competition and love will replace aggression. Freedom will be realized in self-sacrifice. Consumerism will yield to sharing (Lk 3. 11-14). The identification with disprivileged (Heb 2. 17) will foster union with the *Plenum/Pūrṇam* as in the case of Jesus<sup>53</sup> who loved 'the unlovable' to the extent of sacrificing his own young life (Jn 3. 16, 15. 13) as a consequence of his faith. Such Ortho-praxis calls for a death of all institutional churches by transcending their specific cults and creeds and arising as Reign of God here on earth for all times to come.

To capsualize, dalit theology is a praxis of shaping history for the welfare of all (*lōkaksēme*), particularly in favour of the oppressed, the dalits.

51. G. Gutiérrez, *Op. Cit.*, Ch. 9.

52. *Vide*, *Human Liberation in the Indian Context*, p. 239.

53. Cf. J. Neuner, *Jesus Christ* (Mimeo). (Pune, Jnana Deepa, 1977).