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## GROUNDWORK FOR AN INDIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Theology,<sup>1</sup> irrespective of the definition or description one may be inclined to follow, develops in concrete situations which in turn, form the context of theology.<sup>2</sup> Being 'contextual' is an essential ingredient for any theology to be relevant. Hence, it seems to me, that it is not the very possibility of an Indian Christian theology that can be called into question, but rather whether it responds to the context, whether such a response is adequate and relevant, will always be questioned, discussed and even controverted.

This article seeks to present a brief sketch and a sort of a critique of the historical development of Indian Christian theology, on the one hand, and to indicate certain problems arising from the religious traditions of India on the other, suggesting in the process certain essential elements for the growth of an Indian Christian theology. A serious effort is made to avoid those points that can be controversial.

### 1. A Brief Historical Survey

#### i. *The Pioneers*

Any Christian theology presupposes the existence of a Christian Church or at least a Christian community. The existence of a Church in India from the first century A.D. and its claim to apostolic origin cannot reasonably be doubted.<sup>3</sup> We have no written documents on the theology

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1. A discussion on the notion of theology is beyond the scope of this article. See, *Theologizing in India*, (ed.) M. Amaladoss and others, (T.P.I., Bangalore, 1981). For a short survey of the development of Indian Christian Theology, see, R.H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (CLS, Madras, 1975).
  2. See for example, M. Amaladoss, "Towards an Indian Theology: Some theological observations," in *Theologizing in India*, pp. 44-47.
  3. A. Mathias Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I *From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (Up to 1542)*, Published for Church History Association of India (T.P.I., Bangalore, 1984).

of this Church. Nevertheless, the life of the Church bears witness to a lived incarnational theology.<sup>4</sup>

Robert De Nobili (1577–1656) made the first serious attempt at socio-cultural integration in Madurai Mission in India.<sup>5</sup> It would have powerfully contributed to the development of an Indian Christian theology in the long run but for the misunderstandings and ecclesiastical oppositions.<sup>6</sup> Though some modern scholars, conditioned by modern outlooks, tend to regard De Nobili's approach negatively, the positive elements in his approach to Hinduism cannot be overlooked.<sup>7</sup>

The credit for initiating the first serious attempt to develop a genuine Indian Christian theology goes to Brahmabandhab Upādhyāya (1861–1907).<sup>8</sup> He attempted a conciliation of Thomism with Indian philosophical systems and a Christian interpretation of Hindu Scriptures.<sup>9</sup> He also began using Indian categories to express theological concepts.<sup>10</sup> If his efforts could not make any remarkable progress, it is only the Church herself to be blamed.<sup>11</sup>

At the hands of three European Missionaries Indian Christian theology gets a contemplative and monastic thrust. This movement began with the French Missionary, Abbe' Monchanin (1895–1957),<sup>12</sup> who found great inspiration in Brahmabandhab and calls him "a little of my Guru." Henry le Saux, known later as Abhishiktānanda (1910–1973), joined him.<sup>13</sup> Bede Griffiths (1906) was the third to follow the same

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4. Antony Mookenthottam, *Indian Theological Tendencies* (Peter Lang Bern, 1978), pp. 23–26.
  5. Roberto De Nobili, *Adaptation*, Ed. S. Rajamanickam (De Nobili Research Institute, Palayamkottai, 1971).
  6. Vincent Cronin, *A Pearl to India, The Life of Roberto De Nobili* (E.P. Dutton and Company, New York, 1959), pp. 210–220.
  7. As to an evaluation of the same, See Mookenthottam, *Theological Tendencies*, p. 28.
  8. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–43. See also, M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (SCM Press, London, 1969), pp. 99–110.
  9. Mookenthottam, *Theological Tendencies*, p. 36.
  10. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.
  11. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.
  12. Jules Monchanin, *Mystique De l'Inde, Mystire Chretien* (Ecrits et Inédits, présentés par Suzanne Siauve, Fayard, 1974), See p. 154.
  13. Abhishiktānanda, *Saccidānanda, A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (ISPCK, Delhi, 1974). This book is a good witness of his concern.

path.<sup>14</sup> They found in 'Mystical experience' a common platform for a dialogue with Hinduism.<sup>15</sup>

Though Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) and Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya found in Christ and Christianity the fulfilment of Hinduism, it was J.N. Farquhar (1861-1929) who gave systematic expression to it.<sup>16</sup> Now I may offer a simple sketch of some of the important theological tendencies rather than go by individual theologians as they are too many.

The theology of fulfilment soon became the theology of mutual fulfilment which in turn became the theology of cross-fertilization.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, an attempt to integrate advaitic experience into Christianity emerged side by side.<sup>18</sup> An integration of bhakti, jñāna and karma mārgas with a certain preponderance of jñāna mārga reaching its culmination in a theandric reality was another approach which was attempted.<sup>19</sup> Quite in keeping with these tendencies was the approach from *Anubhava* that was suggested.<sup>20</sup>

As these developments were going on and the need for a theology of religion was being deeply felt, the Latin American theology of liberation began to make its impact on Indian theology.<sup>21</sup> As a consequence, the tide of Indian theological thinking began to turn to that direction.

To complete this short sketch, the services rendered by two institutions ought to be mentioned. If the NBCLC Bangalore made a consistent

14. Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, (Collins, London, 1976). This work expresses the same concern.

15. The works of these three missionaries mentioned in no. 12, 13, 14 and other volumes from the same authors may be consulted. For dialogue, See, Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point, Within the Cave of the Heart*, (ISPCK, 1976).

16. John Nicol Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*, (Calcutta, 1913).

17. Raymundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and World Religions*, (CLS, Madras, 1970), pp. 1-7.

18. Cf. Abhishiktananda, *Saccidānanda*.

19. Cf. Panikkar, *The Trinity*.

20. T.M. Manickam, *Anubhava as Pramāna of an Indian Christology in Jeevadhāra*, I, 1971, pp. 228-244; See also, *Unique and Universal, Fundamental Problems of an Indian Theology*, Ed. J.B. Chethimattam, (Dharmaram College, Bangalore, 1972), pp. 167-217.

21. See, *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Ed. NBCLC, 1981; *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation*, Ed. Paul Puthanangady, (ITA and NBCLC, 1986).

effort to synthesise and integrate various theological outlooks particularly during the tenure of Fr. Amalorpavadass as its director and later continued by his successor,<sup>22</sup> the Centre for the Study of World Religions, at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore has been at pains to promote dialogue between religions and develop a theology of Religions.<sup>23</sup>

Significant contributions to the development of an Indian theology has been made by Protestant theologians as well. The christological approach of Vengal Chakkarai (1880-1958)<sup>24</sup> and Pandipeddi Chenchiah<sup>25</sup> (1886-1959) was given a distinctively social orientation by Devanandan<sup>26</sup> (1902-1959). It was further developed by M.M. Thomas<sup>27</sup> (1916) into a Christocentric theology seeking to participate in the historical struggle for humanization.<sup>28</sup>

This short outline of the development of Indian Christian theology shows not only its possibility but its actual existence, however limited it may be. Perhaps a few observations would not be out of place before concluding this historical survey.

## ii. *A Few Limitations*

1. There have been several efforts and various approaches to create an Indian Christian theology, but to develop a theology or theologies with definitive options and consistent theologizing in the same line have been lacking. It was more a hit and run affair or a successive planting rather than watering, caring and developing what has been planted. This accounts for a succession of theological approaches without definitive gains.

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22. Besides what is mentioned in No. 21, See *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures*, Ed. D.S. Amalorpavadass, (NBCLC, 1974) and similar NBCLC publications.
  23. The centre organizes regular courses and dialogues. *The Journal of Dharma* and Dharmaram Publications are making significant contributions.
  24. Mookenthottam. *Theological Tendencies*, pp. 125-127.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-131.
  26. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-139.
  27. M.M. Thomas has written several books. There is a progression of thought too. See, M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ (op. cit.)*; *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ*, (CISRS, Bangalore, 1976). etc.
  28. T.M. Philip, *The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology, An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas*, CLS, Madras, 1986.

2. Imported theologies held and continue to hold greater appeal. They draw the attention of theologians leaving not much room for original thinking.

3. The inability of Indian Christian theology to gain popular appeal and involvement is yet a point of concern.

4. Religious experience which has such a hold on the Indian mind has still to take deep roots in the Christian.

5. Often Western thought is expressed in Indian terms rather than Indian thoughts in Indian categories.

These are some of the problems which has seriously come in the way of giving a concrete shape to an Indian Christian theology. In addition, there are basic Indian philosophical outlooks and problems which continue to be real challenges to such an effort.

iii. *Some Basic Problems*

Right from the beginning of Indian thought Sages were concerned with the origin of the many from the One (RV.10.90; 129. etc.) and the degree of reality to be assigned to the many.<sup>29</sup> How can one harmonize the unity, calmness and peace experienced in deep sleep with the dynamism and change taking place in the realm of phenomenal reality?<sup>30</sup> How to conciliate the transcendence of the Absolute One with the impermanence, change and decay of daily experience?

Transcendence itself is conceived as something impersonal:

Personality is a limitation, and yet only a personal God can be worshipped. Personality implies the distinction of self and non-self and hence inapplicable to the Being who includes and embraces all that is. The personal God is a symbol, though the highest symbol of the true living God. The formless is given a form, the impersonal is made personal.<sup>31</sup>

29. Antony Mookenthottam, *Towards a Theology in the Indian Context*, ATC, 1980, pp. 59-68.

30. Uddāḷaka Aruṇi tries to give an answer to this problem. See *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 6. 8. 1-7.

31. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1962), p. 97.

Actually the question here is not transcendence itself but whether transcendence can be expressed only in impersonal terminologies. This leads to the problem of the personal and the impersonal in Indian Thought.

Since one of the leading school of Indian philosophy lays enormous stress on the Impersonal dimension of reality<sup>32</sup> and christians on the personal, this problem needs a deeper study. We may refer to it again later.

While paying attention to these and similar problems, there are essential elements which are to be included in 'theologizing in the Indian context.'

## 2. Essential Dimensions in Theologizing

Certain essential dimensions are to be incorporated into any Indian Christian theologizing. Here a few suggestions are given in this regard.

### i. *Role of Culture*

Any theology, to be relevant to the context, cannot ignore culture. The vastness of the subcontinent and cultural differences offer a veritable challenge to theologizing. Nor can this vast problem be tackled here. We can only mention some of the important aspects here.

It is difficult to determine precisely which are the essential cultural values common to the whole of India.<sup>33</sup> Yet there are commonly accepted values such as the quest for the Absolute, a sense of honesty and integrity, a certain openness to and concern for the various dimensions of truth and reality, hospitality, humaneness and so forth.<sup>34</sup> It is a fact that some of these values are being corroded by materialism. Yet any theologizing in India has to concern itself with these values and preserve them.

At the same time, no theologian can ignore the almost imperceptible cultural evolution (or rather revolution) taking place everywhere in the

32. *Advaita* gives enormous importance to the impersonal aspect of the Absolute which is only a dimension of the Absolute. The Absolutization of this one dimension is as much a limitation of the Absolute as the absolutization of any other.

33. This arises from the multiplicity of philosophies, religions, races, castes, languages etc.

34. A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That was India*, (Fontana, Collins, 1977), pp. 8-9.

world under the great impact of the mass-media. As a result of the increasingly easy facilities of communication, a world culture or mondial culture is evolving. In this context, the spirit of synthesis and integration, the very characteristic of Indian culture, have a significant role to play.

The essential background of Indian culture is found in the sacred texts of the Indian religious traditions. Sufficient attention is to be paid to them.

ii. *The Scriptures of Religions*

The Scriptures of all the religious traditions offer much greater possibilities of a broader interpretation than any system of philosophy or theology based on them. A reinterpretation is possible and welcome.<sup>35</sup>

Here a simple example may be presented. The neuter pronoun *Tad* in *Tad Ekam* of the *Nāsadiya Sūkta* (RV. 10.129) refers more to the transcendence rather than the impersonal nature of *Tad Ekam*.<sup>36</sup> In fact it is not a question of personal or impersonal nature. It means only that *Tad Ekam* is beyond sex, hence transcendent. Similarly little attention is paid to *antī avātam svadhya Tad Ekam* which presents *Tad Ekam* as living, full of life and energy.

If this possibility of a broader reinterpretation can be accepted, then a common theology of religions is not too far.

iii. *A Theology of Religions*

An essential aspect of an Indian Christian theology is a theology of religions. Living in the midst of the sea of humanity which follows a variety of religious traditions, it is necessary to develop a theology of religions. In fact, Indian theologians have been aware of this dimension. Raymundo Panikkar has done significant service in developing such a theology. However, while Panikkar's highly intellectual ontic approach has its own relevance, there is a crying need for a more existentialist approach to meet the growing challenges of fanaticism and communalism.

Panikkar's theology of religion has paid attention to another important problem – Christ in relationship to the religious traditions of mankind.

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35. Mookenthottam, *Towards*, pp. 2-3; 180-183.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

iv. *Christ and Christ Jesus*

A very crucial challenge to the development of an Indian Christian theology is Christology. The problem is not so much with the transcendental dimension of Christ in a theology of religions as with Christ Jesus of Nazareth. Only a few observations may be made as it is too vast a topic to be dealt with here.

1. It is possible to have a theology of religions with only the transcendental Christ, that is, a Christ beyond time and history.
2. It is impossible to have an Indian Christian theology without Christ Jesus of Nazareth, the very corner stone of Christianity.
3. Risking Christ Jesus of Nazareth for the sake of the transcendental Christ of a theology of religions seems to be the main problem faced by the Christological approach of Raymundo Panikkar.<sup>37</sup> The evaluations of Anto Karokaran<sup>38</sup> and M.M. Thomas<sup>39</sup> emphasise this point.
4. The advaitic synthesis suggested by Vekathanam to conciliate various polarities in Christology deserves attention in this context.<sup>40</sup>
5. A study of the opposition between the personal and the impersonal, as pointed out earlier, and a conciliation of both may reduce the tension between divinity, Christ and Christ Jesus. The problem of the historical Jesus will have to be taken up specially.

While this type of a christology is more concerned with the uniqueness and universality of Christ, attention has also to be paid to the liberative dimension – Christ as the liberator.

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37. Raymundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1968).
  38. Anto Karokaran, *Evangelization and Diakonia*, (Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 1978), pp. 209–210.
  39. M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake, towards an ecumenical theology of pluralism*, (WCC Publications, Geneva, 1987), pp. 106–108.
  40. Mathew Vekathanam, *Christology in the Indian Anthropological Context, An Evaluative Encounter with K. Rahner and W. Panenberg*, (Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 1986), p. 530ff.



v. *A Liberation Theology*

As a whole, Indian liberation theology is of latin-American inspiration. The efforts of Kappen<sup>41</sup> and Desrocher<sup>42</sup> are exceptions to this as they seem to be based on lived experience. On the other hand, a liberation theology in India is still only in the beginning stage. It appears to be more a theological style or fashion than a concern based on lived experience.

A concern for liberation has to be an essential dimension of an Indian Christian theology as the socio-political situation in the country makes it imperative.

It is not difficult to find Sruti and Smṛti basis for a theology of liberation.<sup>43</sup> An Indian Christian theology of liberation has, first of all, to identify areas of liberation such as poverty, economic inequalities, corruption, religious superstitions, communalism, fanaticism and so forth. Priority of liberative involvement in these problems is to be determined and followed by actual involvement in the democratic set up of our country. From the involvement in such a process of liberation an Indian theology of liberation can develop.

While social experience form the basis of a theology of liberation, *Anubhava* (experience in all its dimensions) must be the basis for an Indian Christian theology.

vi. *Anubhava*

*Anubhava* (from *anu* + *bhū* = *anubhavati*) etymologically implies an apprehension, fruition, an embracing, a coming into a new state of being, the realization of a new state of being. In this sense, it has a deeper meaning than the ordinary English word 'experience.' *Anubhava* may be differently understood.<sup>44</sup>

The starting point of religious as well as rational reflection in India is *anubhava*. The categoric affirmation of *Nāsadiya Sūkta* that

41. Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1977).

42. John Desrochers, *Christ the Liberator*, (The Centre of Social Action, Bangalore), 1984.

43. See *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation*, p. 24ff.

44. The fact that there are differences in the understanding of *Anubhava* among the various systems is not to be ignored.

wise seers, searching within their hearts discovered the bond of being in Not-Being (RV. 10. 129. 4) and Yājñavalkya's argument, "But when all has become one's very (eva) self, then with what should one smell whom?" (BU. 2. 4. 14)<sup>45</sup> indicate that theologizing and philosophizing is based on experience and rational arguments should only illustrate such an experience.

As a consequence, an Indian Christian theology has to be based on experience, *anubhava*, understood in a holistic sense, religious social and so forth.

### 3. Conclusion

An Indian Christian theology has definitely come into existence. Various approaches and starting points for the same have been set forth and developed. Sometimes there is a tendency to follow hit and run approaches. Theologians and groups working consistently with definitive options and orientations will contribute further to the development of an Indian Christian theology relevant to the context.

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45. *Hindu Scriptures*, (Tr) & Ed., R.C. Zaehner, (Dent, London), p. 47.