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## THEOLOGIZING IN INDIA

### An Exploratory Method

“ The Seers call that which is One in many ways ” (*Rv. I : 164, 46*).

Let me draw my inspiration for this exploratory approach to theologizing in India from the above-quoted basic insight of the Vedic Seer. Theology, as I understand it, is man's language (*logia*) about God. It is his expression of his experience of God in whom he believes and looks up to for some sort of ultimate meaning for his life. As language is meant for communicating one's inner experience, theology is primarily concerned with man's communication of his God-experience. Hence God as **God** is the primary subject-matter of its communication. So in this exploration I would like to confine my inquiry to that aspect of man's God-experience in India without immediately attempting at creating Indian parallels for the traditionally known branches of Christian “Systematic Theology”, such as Christology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology or whatever else is relevant to Indian context.

#### “ General Revelation ” as Source Material

As a science in the methodological and scientific sense of the word, theology too is a systematic discourse on the data of man's experience of God. A believing man's data of experiencing God is in the context of his “given faith” and, consequently, it may not be always possible to define precisely the terms of experience, though it may be possible to describe the same in a variety of ways using appropriate and in several cases approximate signs and symbols. Therefore theology has to deal with the symbol-stems of the people who express their experience for the information of others. Hence the language of “theology” as a science is a language of symbols which are products of a cultural heritage.

It is also a matter of common acceptance that God communicates or "reveals" Himself to a man or a people according to his or their mode of receptivity, and the mode of receptivity is conditioned by the cultural symbol-systems of his living milieu. Wherever man exists, he exists in the context of Nature's blessings or curses where from man draws his conventions of communicating is experience of the encounter with his environment (context). On the one hand, this contextualization of human existence, wherever it may be located on the face of this planet, is what is given to him as a gift by the author of the universe on the other hand, once he is given this man transforms this environment to suit his needs, and it functions as such to serve his meaningful existence. This rule of progress in transforming Nature's gifts ("revelations" of the One Reality) into a meaningful symbol-system is also the rule of human culture and civilization. It is in and through this transformed symbol-system that even God speaks to man on his pilgrimage to his final destiny. When man experiences this speaking of God in and around him he understands God as He is presented or revealed to him by means of the symbols and signs of "His Creation" (Rom 1, 20). This is what is known as the "General Revelation" of God.

Once man experiences God through Nature's symbols, he cannot express his experience except by means of the same symbols. That is why theology has to deal seriously with the symbol-systems of people who experience God. Their God-talk is symbolic and descriptive, mostly in naive anthropomorphic fashion. Nonetheless it is their theology. In fact we are actually confronting or encountering next door to us, the symbols of a theological system which form the fabric of the day-to-day life of our non-Christian brethren in our neighbourhood. Theologizing in India should not be an arm-chair reflection on some abstract dogma which we presume to be the only form of truth, but it must be a participational understanding of the religious symbols of our fellow-believers and fellow-citizens. Therefore, I would like to suggest that our primary source of theologizing in India is not our Scriptures or the teachings of our Fathers or the teachings of the *Magisterium* alone, to start with, as it often happened in the past. Such an approach more often than not ends up with formulating some form of *apologetics* in opposition to similar apologetics of the *ācharyās* of this country. Both sides have passed the stage of confrontation and apologetics. It is expected of us Christians as well as of our non-Christian neighbours to get involved in a certain sincere participation in the religious experience of our community where we live together. This approach in terms of participation, to be called

later in this paper “dialogical”, might be valid also for a creative theology as relevant to our heritage. Hence our primary source material for an Indian theology is the content and the symbols of the “General Revelation” of God in this human historical context. This “General Revelation” is partly enshrined in the “Revealed” Scriptures of our non-Christian brethren and partly in the living traditions of their religiosity. The latter constitutes the religious life-styles of the people of this country with their roots in the primordial revelations of the One Reality given to the Seers of ancient times. These revelations are transmitted to posterity by means of the symbol-system of ancient times which we have to interpret now as relevant to our times. This is the exploratory task of any theological enterprise in India.

Every religious experience presupposes a certain intuition or insight which is a sparkle of the revealing Reality. And no faith can be maintained without some glimpse of the Reality of the Absolute as related to the believer with regard to his meaning in life, especially when it is a question of the ultimate concern of man. The revealing nature of the One Reality either directly according to His own chosen ways to the interior of each man or through some mediator such as a prophet or a sage is commonplace knowledge both in the Vedic tradition of Revelation and in the Biblical Revelation. To quote some representative passages here we may take first the Upanishadic attestation to this effect :

*Kathopanishad* has this beautiful passage :

This *Atman* (Supreme Self) is not to be obtained by instruction nor by intellect nor by much hearing. *He is to be obtained only by the one whom He chooses; to such a one that Atman reveals Himself (Kath. Up. 2 : 23).*

The implication is that their scriptures contain such revelations granted by God himself according to his benevolence and goodwill; and thus “from time immemorial His plans and designs were known to men” (Eph. 1 : 8-10; Rom. 1 : 20-21; Heb. 1 : 1). The Gospel of Matthew has something to the same effect :

No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and *those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him* (11 : 27).

Since every human experience of God is a participation in some form of the “General Revelation” which God in his own will choose to

grant to various peoples according to the receptivity of their symbol-systems, it can form part of the integral Christian experience of God, if one may choose to call it so. This argument is based on the logic of the relationship of everything that is properly called human to Christ's humanity; as the dictum goes, "nothing human is alien to Christ", and for the same reason one may argue that nothing human is alien to Christians as well, if the horizon of the Christian vision could be sufficiently extensive.

### To build on the "natum" and the "datum"

It seems to me that our basic attitude to be truly Christian in outlook on the "revelatory character" of our religious heritage, must be an attitude of respect for what is already "born with" (*natum*) and "given to" (*datum*) our human situation here in this country's cultural heritage. Having stated the basic attitude which may be also the foundational principle of theologizing in India, let me now draw the line of demarcation I may make between the old ways of theologizing and the possible new alternatives: we are not going to take first as a starting point any one of our Trinitarian formulae or Christological problems or, for that matter, any of our accepted doctrines of the Christian creed to be interpreted intelligibly to our Hindu or Muslim brethren. This attempt would only end up, as it happened in several cases in the past, in a sort of "translation work" which sometimes requires only a trilingual or bilingual dictionary and a working knowledge of Latin or Greek, Sanskrit or Hindi, English or Kannada, Tamil or Malayalam. This type of translation work aimed at rendering one of our scholastic systems to or through its counterparts in India is not to be considered theologizing in the Indian context. Theological enterprise implies cultural living with the heritage and participation in its religiosity. It demands a radical incarnational process which implies a *kenosis* and a *diakonia* on our part rather than a superiority complex for domineering, and destroying the gifts of God to mankind.

In this connection I recollect what Paul Tillich said as the two most important things necessary for any valid theology : (i) *interpretation of the authentic message of the Gospel* (Revelation), and (ii) *speaking to the concrete situation of man*.<sup>1</sup> "Situation," he says, refers

1. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, The University of Chicago, 1951, Vol. 1, pp. 3-4.

to “ the scientific, artistic, economic, social, political and ethical forms in which an individual or groups express their interpretation of existence.

Taking into account these two norms of a valid theologizing process we may discover our own subject-matter and the method of discourse. The subject-matter is the authentic message of the “ General and particular Revelations ” both of the Judeo-Christian tradition and of the Hindu traditions which we find embodied in the *Sruti* (the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*). The method of discourse or interpretation is *experiential* or phenomenological in a broader sense. This is a positive and scientific approach to the understanding of the *given data* of our acquired situation, wherein we reflect over our “ *natum et datum* ” of our faith. Theology here may take a new attempt to redefine or re-discover some of our hidden dimensions or recessus of our so-called “ *Depositum fidei* ” which due to the passage of time might have lost its “splendour” as it was not frequently on the grind-stone of human experience.

Our point of departure implies yet another thing. Just as any neat definition of God or any compact system of the Euro-American Universities remains like an alien jacket over a similar system of the Indian Vedantic or other theological schools, so also each Indian system of thought, however, well defined it be, with its own logical coherence, remains alien to another system or to another sect in our pluralistic religious tradition. So respecting this concrete situation of our religious pluralism and the multiplicity of the philosophical categories they embody in their symbol-system, I am not inclined to suggest that we may choose one or the other system of the philosophical schools of India to back up our theologizing process. If we do that it will destroy the *authenticity* of the message of Revelation, General or particular. On the other hand, if we take each concrete local situation of religiosity seriously into account in our theological enterprise it will do justice to the actuality of the “ Reality ” presented here in our religious milieu. Hence the suggestion is not one Indian Theology but many Indian theologies. To continue in the same vein, I feel like adding that any theology authentic on its claims of expounding the experiential dimensions of the One Reality is also Christian, as I have already stated earlier nothing human is unchristian, and we have not explored all the human dimensions of our Culture and for the same reason we have not yet exhausted our search for “ the Christian dimension ” of any human situation of our heritage: religious, social or whatever. As Christ embodies in his humanity potentially and

prospectively anything that is positively human, a Christian-theologizing enterprise is an ongoing process towards the finality of human concreteness and historical situations. So the commonly used phrase namely, an "Indian Christian Theology" would be a tautology or a redundancy. An "Indian theology" would be worth its name once we take the actualities of the Reality in our concrete religious culture as the foundation of our theologizing process. This is what is meant by building on the "*natum et datum*" of our "General Revelation."

### **A Model of a Dialogical Theology**

It seems to me that the time has come for us to plan for a dialogical theology based on the foundations of both Christian and Hindu Revelations. This has to be the scope of the future of theologizing in India. The main reason is, there are valid theological syntheses possible between the varieties of Christian religious experience and the varieties of Hindu religious experience. Moreover, a proselytizing or an apologetic motive seems to be quite out of place in the present-day independent, secular and self-reliant India. Our theology, in whatever form it shapes itself, should not be an alienating force for the Christians as against the Hindu or Muslim brethren; rather it must serve as a unifying force. This cannot be achieved except by means of an attitude of fellowship in religious experience which we have to create honestly and sincerely with the sole purpose of witnessing to the true Christian sense of brotherhood among a people who accept obedience to One Reality under some name of their choice for reasons of their cultural and sociological exigencies.

A dialogical theology may very well start discussing with, as I have already pointed out in the earlier part, the religious experience of the people of the locality where the Christian community lives in association with men of other faiths. Of course, it is understood that the faith of one community is different from that of another in most of the details of the doctrines they believe. But the emphasis of the dialogical model of theologizing is not the details of the doctrines but the very fundamental experience of the One Reality as the "Father of all people who makes his sun shine on both the bad and the good people and his rain fall on honest and dishonest men alike" (Mt 5: 45). Hence the right motive for a dialogical Indian theology is our common concern for enriching fellowship with one another in a pluralistic religious community which accepts One God in different forms and "speaks about Him in different names." None of these names could adequately

describe the One nameless and formless Reality. The exigency for a common language of God (theology) arises also out of the inability of all groups of a pluralistic community to express univocally what they all perhaps experience mostly as one and the same aspect of the One Reality. For example, the benevolence, goodness, justice, kindness, mercy, and all other worthy dimensions of the One Real might be experienced at the same existential level and predicament by all the members of the religiously pluralistic community, yet the symbol-systems which articulate these aspects of the God-experience of the various groups makes their expressions different, one from another; and in some instances the expressions may even look or sound like contradictories in actual forms like the water which softens the clay but hardens the cement, though the fluidity of the water permeates both lumps in the same way. The difference lies in the nature of the material which receives and not in the nature of water itself. Articulations of the experience of God vary from people to people; hence the variety of theology due to the variety of symbols used by various groups of people having various cultural differentiations. However, a dialogical theology which incorporates into its system of symbols elements from congenial sources would in course of time refine and purify the original sources themselves, working out what is called a certain mutual "transformation" and "mutual fecundation" by a process of cross-fertilization of the cultural opposites. This might be one of the important achievements of a dialogical theology which would work out in its own way a harmonious synthesis of the "good elements" of all the belief-systems of the pluralistic society; we may call this process a theological cross-fertilization of faiths. In a religiously pluralistic and secular country like India, a viable theological approach might be a co-existential one. This co-existential approach will also promote tolerance on the part of all concerned and will tone down the arrogance of the "absolutists". India's spirit of tolerance in the matter of religious co-existence is proverbial from time immemorial and unparalleled in history. Christianity will have to come to terms with this great ideal of mutual tolerance.

### **A Pilgrimage and a Realization**

Theologizing in India by means of a dialogical method is a common pilgrimage in which Christians together with their non-Christian brethren ought to take part, sharing their common human concerns and working together for resolving the socio-religious and communal tensions as well as planning for a better life rooted in the faith of One Reality

(God), a faith which has to be blossomed on the other shore of our life. To liberate ourselves from all forms of oppression, suppression, ignorance, bondage and alienation, as well as to make us capable of realizing the values of human dignity and the enlightenment of our lives in the light of the One who enlightens everybody that comes into this world, a theological understanding of the abiding presence of the One Lord of the Universe becomes a necessary ingredient in our building up of this changing society. The passing nature of things, persons and places always creates tensions and problems of insecurity among us, in the sphere of religious belief as in any other sphere of life. While a God-believing society still finds some reason for consolidation and harmonious living, an atheistic society feels terrible frustration, finds no ulterior motive for the freedom of human person. In the case of materialistic societies which do not care for God's abiding presence, power and providence, the rupture of all conventional relations is inevitable; their stupefying consumerism drive men either to tragic ends of mass suicides or to an indulgence in superficial and passing fads of life-styles. There seem to be no common goals to guide such societies, no common morality, no reason for keeping promises and loyalties, no transforming force that links people together in a spiritual sensitivity of purpose and meaning. Thanks to the spiritual sensitivity of the mass of the Indian people, life still has for us a common purpose and meaning based on our faith in the Lord of the Universe who is working out a common destiny for all believers. This has its theological expression in the beautiful hymns of the *Upanishads*, especially in the *Īśāvāsya Upanishad* :

This whole universe, all that lives and moves on earth, is enveloped by the Lord.

Therefore find joy in abandoning the transient.

Do not hanker for another Man's lot (*Īś Up.* 1.)

We have in this inspired verse of the "Vedic Revelation" an authentic message of the "General Revelation" consisting of a salutary faith content and a code of morality, which guides us on for a common pilgrimage across the face of this transient world. Sharing in such insights is not un-Christian or profane. Rather it is enriching our own understanding of the true value of things in our day-to-day life, their transient nature and that One Reality which envelops all of us whom we all address by different names and conceive in different forms. Participation in the religiosity of our non-Christian brethren therefore becomes a *sine qua non* for our comprehensive grasp of what Revelation itself is. Hence theologizing in any religious pluralistic



context is an inter-religious and inter-faith enterprise. It is a shared search, and a mutual give and take process, a pilgrimage along the untrodden paths towards the "Holy of Holies," that One Real whose "Holy Ghat" is reached by many ways. Hence theologizing in the Indian context is itself a *religious experience* of a dialogical nature and not simply an epistemological game which only some scholastic experts can play with the rules they themselves have formulated without consulting the common man who is actually engaged in a religious pilgrimage. As a religious experience shared in common with the men of other faiths and cultures, theologizing might be primarily aimed at exploring the unknown realms of the Common Goal, the One Reality; and as a dialogical pilgrimage in search of a more meaningful articulation of our experience of God, theologizing might take the form of a spiritual pursuit, and not simply the career of an academician who may be indifferent to the concrete human problems of the people in their actual situations.

Besides being a dialogical pilgrimage in the quest of the Real, theologizing in the Indian spiritual tradition must also be a way of "Realization". "Realization" implies "Reality + I + zation", if we want to make it more linguistically related to what we are trying to say. By means of theologizing, the Reality gets transformed into the "I" of the theologizer and the latter becomes part of the former and *vice versa*, because of the identical process of action in which the real is encountered.

This is so because theologizing, if it should be meaningful in our spiritual and mystical religious context, must include also contemplation of the Mystery of the One Real who envelops everything, who is both concealing and revealing to the actualities of human life. Detachment in faith will also detach the theologian from the Reality itself. Thus theologizing becomes a prayerful reflection on a lived faith with a view to making life itself more worth living with a meaningful reference to the Ultimate Reality—call Him God, Father, Brahman, Atman, Allah or whatever; the One whom the Seers call by different names.