INDIAN CHRISTIANS OF INDIGENEOUS ORIGINS AND THEIR SOLIDARITY WITH ORIGINAL GROUPS

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Introduction

The topic "Indian Christians of Indigenous Origins and Their Solidarity with Original Groups" is not without its difficulties. In the first place to recognize the identity of the undefined "original groups" is difficult. A further distraction is the implication that not all Indian Christians are of indigenous origins. An evaluation of Indian *Churches* of indigenous origins would have been more in my field of research. Indian Christians are, of course, persons. But, then, so are the Churches, that is, Churches consist of people. Churches, however, take on institutional expressions with varying shades of Indian indigeneity or foreignness. Nevertheless, an attempt is made to cope with the questions that are related to the theme under discussion.

1. Dalit perspectives

A recent historical investigation of the SPG mission to the Nadars and Paraiyas concludes that their conversion resulted in transformation and "a process of integration into the mainstream of Indian society"[1]. Upward mobility resulted from conversion by which, the Nadars in particular, discovered a new dignity and identity in Jesus Christ. By affirming the dignity of the oppressed, Christianity thus interacted with the indigenous culture at its roots[2]. Christianity assisted these former untouchable communities to cross

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[1] Samuel Jayakumar, "The Impact of SPG Missions on the Dalits of Tirunelveli 1830-1930", Ph.D. thesis, Open University, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 1998, p.2.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp.15,22.

the pollution line, thus shedding the outcaste stigma to obtain respectability and social transformation[3].

Jayakumar contends that Dalit Christian theologians for the most part do not represent the experience of India's poor and oppressed, but draw from outside sources which are mainly American, European and Marxian[4].   Contrary to common liberationist assumptions, converts did not lose their traditional identity.   Rather Christianity helped them to recover their local culture, which was further refined through interaction with the Gospel[5].

Both Paraiyas and Nadars (then known as Shanars) were considered untouchables, engaged in polluting occupations, consigned to menial labour and a slave status[6]. Through conversion the Nadars in particular gained new dignity and were no longer subservient[7].   Conversion as social protest was only one factor, another was a genuine spiritual quest. These conversion movements were genuine movements of the poor and oppressed, often in the face of severe persecution, and are correctly seen as "people movements" rather than mere counter-culture protests[8]. The oppressors learned they could no longer manipulate the outcastes 'who became conscious of their rights and privileges due to their conversion to Christ"[9].

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[3]   *Ibid.*, p.46.

[4]   *Ibid.*, p.54.

[5]   *Ibid.*, p.55.

[6]   *Ibid.*, p.78,84. Also see the study by S.Manickam, *Slavery in the Tamil Country: A Historical Overview*, Madras, CLS, 1982.

[7]   *Ibid.*, p.120.

[8]   *Ibid.*, p.155.

[9]   *Ibid.*, p.158.

2. Light From Ambedkar

It will be instructive to take a closer look at the phenomenon of untouchability. Ambedkar called it "an infliction and not a choice", a case of compulsory segregation, and declared, "if the Untouchables can be cured, untouchability will vanish"[10]. Jayakumar demonstrates that this can happen through conversion. Ambedkar held a different view, as we shall see. Untouchability in Ambedkar's evaluation was worse than slavery. "Untouchables can claim none of the advantages of an unfree social order and are left to bear all the disadvantages of a free social order"[11]. Theirs is a documented history of atrocities.

Who are the Untouchables? Ambedkar points out that they share the culture and follow the rites of the Hindu community in the midst of which they live, yet are assigned servile state from which they are not permitted to rise. "Theirs has been a fate of degradation and destitution in the past and for whom ... there seems to be no escape in the future"[12]. The source of degradation lies not within the Untouchables but within Hinduism, states Ambedkar, in that "untouchability is part of the Hindu law as contained in the Smritis"[13]. The conditions were imposed. Swami Theertha contends that those castes rules and notions of pollution were introduced in order to degrade and suppress the masses[14]. The modern caste system evolved from the ancient *Varna* system.

Because of the stigma of the untouchable designation, many have opted for other names such as Adi-Dravida; but according to Ambedkar a mere name-change is of no value, the only solution is in

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[10]   Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, "Writings and Speeches", Vol.5, *Unpublished Writings*, Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989, p.1,3.

[11]   *Ibid.*, p.18.

[12]   *Ibid.*, pp.138,133.

[13]   *Ibid.*, p.143.

[14]   Swami Dharma Theertha, *History of Hindu Imperialism*, Madras: Dalit Educational Literature Centre, 1992.

conversion[15]. Ambedkar's understanding of religion, and of conversion, implies a re-affirmation of original values found in the religious cultures of the oppressed. "Religion exists not for the saving of souls, but for the preservation of society and the welfare of the individual"[16].

According to Ambedkar, "there is no racial difference between the Hindus and the Untouchables"[17]. Ambedkar confesses that "the origin of Untouchability lies buried in a dead past which no one knows"[18]. Nevertheless, he finds sufficient evidence to construct a valid hypothesis based on facts, inferences and circumstantial evidence. Regarding the origins of the notion of defilement, Ambedkar finds the idea of pollution common among all ancient people. In this the Hindus were no different from others. The contrast appears with the assignment of *hereditary* untouchability to certain communities, whereas in other primitive societies it was a temporary condition[19]. Consequently the Untouchable's impurity is permanent.

From primitive nomadic tribals, the so-called Untouchable evolved into a territorial community living in settlements outside the village because they were of a different kinship from the settled village community[20]. The primitive society consisted of two categories, the settled tribes who founded village, and survivors from defeated tribes who sought patronage as protectors of the village

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[15]   Ambedkar, *op.cit.*, p.240.

[16]   *Ibid.*, p.421.

[17]   Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, "Writings and Speeches", Vol.7, Reprint of *Who were the Shudras? How they came to be in the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society. The Untouchables. Who were they and why them became Untouchables?*, Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, p.242.

[18]   *Ibid.*, p.244.

[19]   *Ibid.*, p.259,266.

[20]   *Ibid.*, p.273.

community and who lived outside the village as *aliens*. "The Untouchables were originally only Broken men. It is because they were Broken men that they lived outside the village"[21]. Ambedkar thus rejects theories of racial superiority and occupational origins. If so, the ancestors of today's Untouchables (Dalits) were not Untouchables. The precise date is not known when untouchability was imposed. "There was no Untouchability in the time of Manu", but it began sometimes between 200 CE and 600 CE, probably about 400 CE, in the struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism[22].

3. Conversion

It may be argued that conversion of Dalits represents a return to an earlier status. This, we have seen, is the contention of Jayakumar. According to Ambedkar, Christianity, which for centuries has provided a shelter for the Untouchables, has come to stay in India, despite Gandhi's opposition, which was intended to prevent conversion of the Untouchables[23]. Ambedkar's complaint was that converts to Christianity in India had failed to root out caste feelings. Converts continued their pre-Christian religious observances primarily because the missionaries preached purely "spiritual" message unrelated to the realities of everyday existence[24]. An inadequate theology of conversion failed to grapple with problems of the social context. Instead of substituting the new faith for the old, converts merely added the new message onto their old religion[25]. Incentive and dynamic for renewal and change therefore were diluted and lost.

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[21]   *Ibid.*, p.277.

[22]   *Ibid.*, p.373,379.

[23]   Ambedkar: "Writings and Speeches" Vol.5, p.450.

[24]   *Ibid.*, p.454,471.

[25]   *Ibid.*, p.472.

4. A Tribal Perspective

The question is whether Ambedkar's analysis holds true. In a recent article George Oommen re-reads Dalit and tribal conversion movements in relation to pre-existing beliefs[26]. In a setting of social change, exploitation by European planters, Tamil traders, a new cash economy, cholera and fever, the Malayarayans of Kerala determined to embrace Christianity. "Their system of belief, land, sickness and cure were under threat. Their movement to Christianity was a move towards sources of power"[27]. Theirs were not the questions of outsiders, but were framed according to their pre-existing worldview: questions regarding·land, ancestors, spirits and gods, old and new. "Pre-existing religious ideas played a role in Malayarayan conversion to Christianity. Christianity seems to have offered a package to deal with crises of the mid-nineteenth century ... Malayarayans appear to have appropriated new ways to deal with their changing worldview"[28]. Their conversion was an affirmation of personhood and the validity of the cultural identity of the Malayarayan people.

5. Identity

The Christian Gospel is characterized by otherness. Cultural affirmation and recovery of dignity is one side of the coin. Ambedkar complained that Hinduism is never a missionary religion because of its insular exclusiveness, which forever excludes the Untouchables. In contrast, a Biblical understanding of humanity is to cross over to embrace the outsider, not to exclude but to enfold, to be "enriched by otherness"[29]. Categories of oppression and liberation are inadequate, state the Volfs, to address the Eastern European

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[26]   George Oommen, "Re-reading Tribal Conversion Movements: The Case of the Malayarayans of Kerala, 1848-1900", *Religion & Society*, June 1997, pp.66-82.

[27]   *Ibid.*, p.79.

[28]   *Ibid.*, p.82.

[29]   Judith M. Gundry-Volf and Miroslav Volf, *A Spacious Heart: Essays on Identity and Belonging*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997, p.43.

Balkan conflict. So also the issues of "original peoples" in India. In a sense Christians are called to be aliens and exiles at all time: *in* the world yet not *of* it. "Christians are not simply aliens in their own culture; they are aliens who are at home in every culture because they are open to every culture"[30]. Theologically the Gospel interacts with every culture and every people, particularly at the point of conversion with its multiple dimensions. Christianity affirms cultures while judging them. Here is a new identity and a belonging, which is universal as well as local. Interaction takes diverse forms and directions as is evidenced by a multiplicity of indigenous movements in India. The subject is vast and includes numerous Hindu reform movements in Bengal as well as other new religions some of which were inspired by the Christian encounter in the past. A radical social leader once remarked to me that "behind every movement for liberation of the oppressed in India is some Christian instigator!" Julian Saldanha writes about "unbaptized Yesu bhaktas", that is to say, persons committed to God's reign though not counted as Christians[31]. The list becomes enormous if one includes the numerous "Messianic" movements with little or no apparent Christian relationships, says Stephen Fuchs[32]. Several examples are from Bihar. It seems significant that in cases of movements among the Mundas, leaders such as Birsa did have either direct or indirect contacts with the Christian message through Catholic or Lutheran missionaries. Not all movements had traceable Christian antecedents as parallels. The Khewar Movement among the Santals aimed at a return to an original culture and religion in which a dormant memory of a Supreme God was evoked[33].

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30   *Ibid.*, p.44.

31   Julian Saldanha, "Unbaptized Disciples of Christ?" *Third Millenium*, July-September 1998, pp.20-27.

32   Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions*, Bombay: Asian Publishing House, 1965.

33   *Ibid.*, p.53. It appears that the leader was either a Christian or had studied in a Christian school.

Religion and social change may simultaneously take more than one direction. The classic *Village Christians and Hindu Culture* by Luke and Carman is a study of the interaction of Andhra Christians of the Medak Diocese with their roots. The investigation revealed that Christian and traditional beliefs and practices exist side by side with considerable intermingling of concepts and rituals. "The adaptations spontaneously conceived by village Christians are not so much the indigenizing of Western Christian forms as the Christianizing ... of traditional ceremonies used in village festivals or in family rituals at various stages of the life cycle"[34]. The investigators found what they considered a disturbing lack of systematic Christian teaching, which resulted in continuation of practices incompatible with Christian belief, e.g. idolatry and the worship of village deities and demons along with Jesus. Nevertheless the Christian ideology was appropriated in terms of the everyday life of the people, e.g. its ability to free them from caste oppression[35].

Another example is from Kerala. In his study of people movements in Kerala, Gladstone describes the longing of the Pulayas for social emancipation and progress which was resisted by militant Hindus who attempted to stop accessions to Christianity[36]. The record shows, however, that Neo-Hindu leaders came to recognize Jesus' example of love and sacrifice, which resulted in concern for the poorer sections of society. The Christian message penetrated into society outside the Church among people not professing Christianity[37].

Later on, the shock of threatened Izhava conversion to

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[34]   P.Y. Luke and John B. Carman, *Village Christians and Hindu Culture: Rural Churches in South India*, New York: Friendship Press, 1968, p.188.

[35]   *Ibid.*, p.173.

[36]   L.W. Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity and Peoples Movements in Kerala 1850-1936*, Trivandrum: Seminary Publications, 1984, p.302.

[37]   *Ibid.*, pp.305,307.

Christianity provoked Hindu response and reaction in the form of Hindu missions by Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, the Kerala Hindu Mission and others. The Christian movement had instigated the liberalization of Hinduism[38]. "Thus Neo-Hinduism movements in Kerala were not a mere re-interpretation of Hinduism in the light of Western culture and Christianity, but also included a re-interpretation of their faith against the background of their own philosophy of religion"[39].

6. Revitalization

A number of tribal communities in India have been absorbed by a process of Hinduization by which their original identity and culture are lost. The result was disastrous in the case of some who were branded as criminal tribes. Often an erstwhile tribe was assimilated at the bottom of the social structure as degraded outcaste untouchables for the simple reason that they were "poor, landless and dependent on others for their livelihood"[40]. Sanskritization does not necessarily bring higher social status. Lynch suggests that Sanskritization is not effective unless linked with other forces such as politicization[41].

Christianization appears a better alternative. This is the proposition of Augustine Kanjamala who supports his thesis from the experience of Northern Orissa[42]. Jayakumar's study of the transformation of the Nadars leads to similar conclusions, as we have seen.

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[38] *Ibid.*, p.408.

[39] *Ibid.*, p.419.

[40] Stephen Fuchs, *At the Bottom of Indian Society: The Harijan and other Low Castes*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981, p.53.

[41] Owen M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability*, Delhi: National Publishing House, 1974.

[42] Augustine Kanjamala, *Religion and Modernization of India*, Indore: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, 1981.

These "people movements" might also be seen as *revitalization movements*[43]. The latter is a useful concept developed by social anthropologists to describe the passage of a society from a state of stress to a new steady stage through a mazeway of reformulation. The question is whether the formula can be applied to contemporary Dalit struggles in India. Revitalization requires continuity as well as change, the interaction of a new force with remnants from the past. The inhibiting factor is the ambiguous heritage of Dalit peoples in India. A "pauper-serf-vassal-slave" heritage is not a culture of pride. It is not surprising that a Dalit group in search of a better pedigree not infrequently creates a new mythology of origins. It is best not to be too dogmatic about any theory of origins in India, as Stephen Fuchs has remarked.

For people with an uncertain past, a Biblical theology of human origins and redemption provides the possibility of a new beginning – one world, one race, one Gospel – an egalitarian understanding of all humanity created in the image of God, a body of people redeemed by Christ through faith now in process of re-creation as the People of God for worship of God and service of humankind. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"[44]. This theology confers a new status, a high and upward calling, a realignment: "Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy"[45]. This dynamic, in process of realization, not yet perfected, escaped the deduction of Ambekar as well as of many social scientists (and some theologians). Given the fact of human frailty it is not surprising that the process sometimes stops short, is incomplete, unfinished. Failures notwithstanding, this does not negate the reality.

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[43]   The term is from Anthony F.C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements", *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956), 264-281.

[44]   I Peter 2:9 (RSV).

[45]   I Peter 2:10 (RSV).

To return once more to the question of revitalization movements, George Oommen's case study of Malayarayan conversion describes a process from a disturbed state into a new steady state as a Christian community. The new identity appropriated a worldview providing answers to pressing questions while maintaining continuity with the past. The Malayarayans took the move to seek Christian instruction and affiliation themselves. It is an example of revitalization.

The study of Indigenous Christian Movements, Churches of Indigenous Origins, Independent Indian Churches, provides numerous similar cases, some of which might be considered revitalization movements. Tippet observed that many of the African Independent Churches are in fact revitalization movements[46]. Not all conversion movements qualify. A revitalization movement involves the members of the community themselves – not outside advocates – in an effort to create new structures leading ultimately to a renewed Church, group or society. Revitalization is not the same as revival. Revitalization is a renewal of a structure[47]. The revitalization concept is enriched by Barnett's *recombination* theory[48], which is applied by Tippett to the understanding of conversion and renewal movements. Studies of New Religious Movements provide interesting instances of revitalization, recombination, and other examples of innovation and change[49].

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[46] Alan Tippet, *Introduction to Missiology*, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1987, p.140.

[47] *Ibid.*, p.180.

[48] Homer Barnett, *Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953.

[49] See essays by Lamin Sanneh, "New and Old Africa's Religious Heritage", pp.63-82; Janet Hodgson on classification of African movements, pp.83-94; Rosalind I.J. Hackett, "Enigma Variations: The New Religious Movements in Nigeria Today" pp.131-142; and Wlibert R. Shenk, "The Contribution of the Study of New Religious Movements to Missiology" pp.179-205 in *Exploring New Religious Movements*, eds. A.F. Walls and Wilbert R. Shenk, Elkhart, USA: Mssion Focus, 1990.

Among Independent Indian Churches of Indigenous Origins some at least are to be seen as revitalization movements. Others represent revival and renewal movements, still others comprise break-away operations and apparent personality cults, some are the outgrowth of persistent communication of the Christian message on new ground. The solidarity of Indian Christians with Original Groups is not to be questioned. All are of indigenous origins. As Hollenweger states, Churches of Indigenous Origins "represent a return of Christianity to its roots"[50].

7. Indigenous Peoples

Who are the indigenous people? Nirmal Minz refers to the tribes as indigenous people of India[51]. From a tribal perspective Minz discusses the implications of tribal alienation from the land. "The unbridled process of industrialization of India is endangering the very existence of the tribes"[52]. Global ecological problems are very much tied up with the exploitation of the tribes. "Saving the indigenous people is to save the planet earth from destruction"[53].

Tribals are not the only indigenous people of India. These also include the Dalits as well as others. The greatest response to the Christian message in India has come from these two categories. History shows that it was the tribes more than the castes who responded to the Gospel. Christianity bought a new dimension into the life of the tribes, which is seen in the Believing community.

The fruit of the Gospel can be seen as a new lease of life for the tribes of India. They are now a people with their own language: written down, taught and used, particularly in the preaching, teaching

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50   Walter J. Hollenweger, "The Theological Challenge of Indigenous Churches", pp.163-167 in Walls and Shenk, *Exploring New Religious Movements*, p.163.

51   Nirmal Minz, *Rise Up My people and Claim the Promise: The Gospel Among the Tribes of India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997, pp.xiii, 4-7.

52   *Ibid.*, p.13.

53   *Ibid.*, p.7.

and worship in churches. Now they have a written scripture in their own tongues. The tribes of India could never have dreamed of this status, being given to their language and their particular community under the Hindu-Indian tradition. Their languages and tribal identities had been disparagingly demeaned and underestimated in the past. So much so that in the process of being absorbed in the caste frame of Indian society, they were losing both their language and their identity as a tribe[54].

Tribes, which were formerly enemies to each other, now face each other as brothers and sisters in Christ while retaining their distinctive names, language and culture. Tribal Christians stand in solidarity with indigenous groups in preserving traditions, values and cultures. In North Eastern states where a majority of tribes have become Christian, the Church has been an effective force for integration, enforcing traditional values as well as filling voids. At the same time there are critical concerns such as the need to cope with economic disparity and the search for an authentic tribal lifestyle.

The other indigenous (original) category consists of the Dalit groups. Here the situation is somewhat different. What Stephen Fuchs says concerning the Doms of North India may apply as well to others, namely, that "enforced social contact with high-caste Hindus has reduced them to the state of servility and untouchability"[55]. In the face of this enormity the mission of the Church cannot be less than to strive for a recovery of full human dignity and the removal of social injustices. "The Gospel - divine truth – must not be separated from human values and social ideology. A christo-centric humanism is part of the Gospel and has a witnessing dimension of its own"[56]. A

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[54] *Ibid.*, p.44.

[55] Fuchs, *At the Bottom of Indian Society*, p.40.

[56] A.G. Honig, "Asia: The Search for Identity as a Source of Renewal", in *Missiology, an Ecumenical Introduction*, ed. F.J Verstraelen, A. Camps, L.A. Hoedemaker, M.R. Spindler, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, p.316.

vast missional task remains for the Christian community to fulfill its objectives towards these castaways.

8.   A Thomas Christian Perspective

In this paper nothing has been said about the most ancient of indigenous Christian communities of India, the St.Thomas Christians. Their contribution to the development of India, as well as to the welfare of their own community, is well known. Erudite scholars have carefully investigated the question concerning origins of the earliest Christian community in India[57], and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Christians in independent India willingly chose to forgo a separate electorate and special concessions, e.g., reservations. By so doing, as Isaac Padinjarekutt has argued in a recent article, Christians made a unique contribution to the rights of all minorities in India. Christians, who had played a minor role in creating independent India, made a major contribution for minority rights and religious freedom in the Indian Constitution. By demanding the Constitutional right to propagate their faith, they made a lasting contribution to India as a secular democracy on behalf of all religious communities in India[58].

Indian Christians of various ethnic origins, including those of the ancient St. Thomas tradition, continue to interact with their roots at fundamental level.

Conclusion

Each indigenous Christian community within the larger family of Christians bears witness to the reality of the Gospel's preserving and renewing work within the fabric of India. What the Orthodox

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[57]   See A.M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol.I, *From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century*, Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1989, pp.1-115.

[58]   Isaac Padinjarekutt, "Christianity in Independent India", *Jnanadeepa*, I.1 (1998), p.88.

priest Oleksa stated in another context seem true in general: "Where tribal peoples embraced Christianity, they underscored and reaffirmed the cosmic dimension of Gospel", which includes a reaffirmation of their love for their homelands[59].

Tribals, Dalits and other Indian Christians are of indigenous origins and continue to interact with their social and spiritual roots. The Churches of indigenous origins indicate a grass-roots interaction with Christian sources manifesting constructive liberative potential. As M.M. Thomas stated, "the striving of the people of India for a new society is due in part to the transformation of traditional spirituality under the influence of the Gospel"[60].

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[59] Michael Oleksa, "All Things New: An Orthodox Theological Reflection on Interfaith Dialogue" in *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. S. Mark Heim, Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998, p.124.

[60] Cf. Mundadan, *op.cit.*, p.307.