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## **THEOLOGIES OF RELIGION AND THEOLOGIES OF LIBERATION : A SEARCH FOR RELATIONSHIP**

We meet at a time when momentous changes are taking place in the world. In western Europe, in spite of their attachment to national identities, people seek to come together as a European community. In eastern Europe, on the other hand, with the weakening of Marxist ideology, there is a disintegration of socialist states and the emergence of ethnic, linguistic and religious plurality.

Nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America, caught up in the clash of historical forces, are struggling to retain their freedom and bring about a measure of justice for their people. Our own country is struggling to build up the unity and integrity of the nation against separatist forces of language, region, caste and religion.

There are several concerns that touch the struggle for human well being in the global society. The theological quest for a just relationship between different religions in a pluralist society; the struggle of oppressed people everywhere for a life of freedom, self respect and human dignity; the ecological concern, which goes beyond trees, rivers and oceans, to the relationship between humanity, nature and God; a hunger for spirituality understood and experienced as rootedness of all life in the being of God through the Spirit; and the vision of a global society as a community of communities - all these and many others are part of the serious concerns in the world today. It is in this context that Christians have to rediscover the content and practice of their ministry as one of participating in the continuing mission of God through Christ and in the power of the Spirit.

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This is the text of the Convocation address delivered by Dr. S.J. Samartha at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Pontifical Athenaeum of Philosophy and Theology, Bangalore on January 20, 1992.

Among these many concerns the focus of this paper is on the *relation* between a theology of religions and a theology of liberation, the Christian quest for *theological* justice to neighbours of other faiths and the Christian participation in the struggle for *social* justice for the poor and oppressed. I wish to draw your attention to these two concerns not separately, but in *relation* to each other. The question before us is how to hold these two concerns together within the wholeness of God's mission and in the total ministry of the church in our pluralist society.

At the moment, perhaps particularly in India, there is a growing tension between the two within the consciousness of the church. Those who are working for a credible theology of religions often feel that social and political activists do not give sufficient attention to the spiritual dimensions in the social struggle. Those engaged in the struggle for justice in society are impatient with those engaged in dialogue, even hostile to them, on the ground that dialogue is irrelevant, even a hindrance, to the urgent task of liberating the poor from oppression. For different reasons, both groups face suspicion, resistance, even hostility, on the side of ecclesiastical authorities.

This tension between the two, which seems to be growing, often leads to debilitating conflict within the consciousness of the church that seriously weakens its mission in the pluralist society. Is it not possible, in some measure, to overcome this tension? Are there ways to relate the two within the wholeness of God's continuing mission in a manner that is theologically credible, spiritually satisfying and pastorally helpful to people in the congregations? My remarks here should be regarded as tentative and exploratory, an invitation to reflect further on this matter.

Let me draw your attention to two recent developments in contemporary history which have a direct bearing on our subject. The first is the decline of Marxist ideology and the distintegration of socialist states in eastern Europe. The second is the rise of religious fundamentalism and, in some cases, for example in India, the attempt to push it forward as a political ideology for the state. These two seemingly disparate forces not only influence each other but impinge directly on the life and witness of the church. They bring *theological* pressure on us to reconsider the present state

of affairs in theologies of religion and theologies of liberation. They both offer a challenge and an opportunity to the Christian academic and liturgical community. To avoid these challenges and opportunities may lead to the marginalisation of the Christian community in our pluralist society. This seems to be the time to open doors rather than to strengthen the fence that separates the church from the larger community.

One must be cautious in making observations about the developments in eastern Europe. We are too close to events, and, do not have a sufficiently critical distance to evaluate them. It would be too simplistic to regard them as a triumph of religion over atheism or democracy over socialism or market economy over command economy. Such overly simplified remarks do not do justice to highly complex historical developments. Marxism undoubtedly provided inspiration for oppressed people everywhere to fight against oppression, exploitation and injustice. Marxist criticism, at least the fear of communism, has influenced measures to improve conditions of workers even in Capitalist countries. Marxist criticism of religion, particularly its emphasis on the ideological assumptions of religions, and the oppressive character of many of its institutions, did indeed create a critical ferment within all religions. It may be unwise to write premature obituaries of Marxism. But it is an undeniable fact that within a little over 70 years of its establishment, the socialist state in the USSR, based on Marxist/Leninist ideology, has disintegrated.

Those who make special study of these developments draw attention to some lessons to be noted in this connection. One is the fact that the most radical changes were brought about in an almost *non-violent* way. It may be too early to affirm this and one may have to modify this statement. But contrasted with the tremendous amount of bloodshed and violence that accompanied the French revolution and the first Russian revolution (1917) the second revolution was far less violent. Rajni Kothari remarks, "Never before had so much change been brought about almost wholly non-violently and that too in a society that had never accepted the creed of non-violence".<sup>1</sup>

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1. "Soviet Developments in Wider Perspective" in *Mainstream Annual*, Oct. 26, 1991, New Delhi, p. 71.

The second lesson is the rejection of the ideological *exclusivism* of Marxism. For many decades it was claimed that Marxism was the *only* way to explain the economic process, interpret history, analyse society, and even more important, to change society and move it towards the goal of a classless society. "Praxis" was a hallowed word among intellectuals and those who did not use it were given an inferior intellectual consciousness. This "onlyness" of Marxist ideology now stands exposed and rejected.

The third lesson is the recovery of *religion* and the emergence of *plurality*, ethnic, linguistic and religious, in what was formerly the USSR. Let it be clear that this is not an attempt to celebrate the seeming triumph of religion. A good deal of Marxist criticism of religion will remain valid. However, the question must be asked whether the failure of the left in general, and of Marxism in particular, to provide a credible alternative to religion so ruthlessly suppressed in the USSR for over seven decades, has contributed to this recovery of religion. Bhabani Sengupta asks "Why is the modern mind turning to religion? Why does the rationality of science and technology fail to give satisfaction to human mind? Why did communism fail to build a creative atheism in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries that could really replace the quest for God through religion? Why does the Church return triumphantly to Gorbachev's Russia?"<sup>2</sup> Any quick answer to these questions would be premature. But they raise fundamental questions both for theologies of religion and theologies of liberation:

What is significant in this new situation is not just the recovery of Christianity but the visible emergence of *religious plurality*. It is not just Orthodox Christianity, but also Islam, Buddhism and Judaism that have returned to what was formerly the USSR. A contemporary Russian poet, Andrei Voznesensky, points out that of the three victims of the August coup (1991) one was a Jew, and that during their public funeral, a crowd of about 100,000 people listened to the Kaddish, the Hebrew prayer of mourning, for the Jewish martyr.<sup>3</sup> The Christian tendency to recognise *only*

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2. Bhabani Sengupta, "Little about God, All about Power", Review article on *Religion, State and Politics in India* (Ed), Mohin Shakir, Ajanta Publications, New Delhi, 1989, in *The Book Review* Vol. XIV No. 3, May-June 1990, p. 8.
  3. *Time International*, January 6, 1992, p. 40.

the emergence of Christianity and totally ignore the emergence of *other* religions not only underestimates their enduring power to survive ruthless suppression but also leads to a distorted theology of religions.

The effect of these developments on religions cannot be ignored. Will the weakening of Marxism now lead to a strengthening of religious fundamentalism? Religious fundamentalism is an attempt to recover and hold fast to the essentials of faith at a time of confusion and uncertainty. At such times the emphasis on "Hindutva" or "Islamicity" or the "Christological substance" of Christian faith is legitimate. But what minorities in India are worried about today is not the emphasis on "Hindutva" as such but its projection as a political ideology for the state in India. A theocratic state would be intolerable in a multi-religious society. It is in this context that the recognition of a plurality of religions becomes significant because it would resist the imposition of any one particular religious ideology on a pluralist society. Therefore, it looks as if there is a greater urgency now to re-examine all exclusive claims, ideological or religious, and look for a more credible theology of religions.

The weakening of Marxism and the emergence of religious plurality also raise questions to theologies of liberation. During the past few decades theology of liberation has made significant contributions to the life and work of the church in society. It has given voice to the voiceless. It has transformed the feeble murmurings of the oppressed into a roar of rebellion against the oppressors. Also, by drawing attention to the context where people encounter God on the side of the poor, it has shaped new ways of doing theology, and has put issues of justice firmly on the theological agenda of the church. The enduring contributions of liberation theology to the reshaping of the character, method and direction of theology cannot be ignored.

But new questions have thrust themselves into the contemporary context. All liberation theologies, including Dalit theology in India, have depended on the Marxist analysis of society and its interpretation of the historical process. That is, the ideological basis of liberation theology has been admittedly Marxist. Now,

with the weakening of Marxism and the recovery of religions in what were formerly socialist countries, will it not be necessary for liberation theologians to reexamine the ideological basis of their theology?

Liberation theologians in other countries have recognised the persistence of religions in Asia. In India, Dalit theologians have drawn attention to the "liberative resources" in selected religious movements such as *Bhakti*, tribal, and village religions. In view of the new developments will it not be necessary for liberating theologians to recognise not just "the liberative resources" within some religions, that is, the *instrumental* use of religions for the purpose of justice, but also the *theological validity* of the religious dimension in human life? Has not the time come to overcome the tension between theologies of religion and theologies of liberation, between *Dalit* theology and what is described as "*Brahmanical*" theology, and to recover the coherence and integrity of *Christian* theology in the wholeness of God's revealing and redeeming work in Christ, and in the diversified gifts of the Spirit to the church in the world?

One way to do this may be by emphasising that God is both Creator and Redeemer, both holy and righteous, that Jesus Christ is both Lord and Saviour, and that the Spirit is both Creator Spirit and Liberator Spirit. While this may appear to focus more on theology than justice this need not be so because, as liberation theologians have pointed out, the knowledge of God generated by human experience has to be constantly tested in the living context of God's encounter with people, particularly the poor and oppressed in society. Therefore, if the context of new developments in contemporary history is taken seriously, both theologies of religion and theologies of liberation have to critically reexamine their positions, overcome the tensions between them, and seek new ways of understanding God's dealings with people of other faiths and the poor and the oppressed of all faiths in society. The relationship between them has to be so stated that Creation and Redemption, theology and ethics, the Lordship of Christ and the Saviourhood of Christ, the being of God and the doing of God, are not seen in isolation but as related to each other by the Spirit within the diversified unity of Trinitarian life. It is not ideas about God alone or the deeds of God alone, but the living God who holds together

those who reflect theologically on God's concern for all creation and those who work for justice for the poor and oppressed in society.

Although the question of justice is now largely secularised its roots are in the religious soil. God, the Creator of all, is both holy and righteous. One must be careful not to quote isolated texts without taking into account established hermeneutical principles. But the whole Bible, and the history and tradition of the church, emphasise this relationship. The prophet Isaiah says, "But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness" (Isaiah 5:16). This means that the just acts of God on behalf of the oppressed are rooted in his character as the Holy God. It is this combination of holiness and righteousness in the character of the Creator God that might serve as an entry point to relate theologies of religion and theologies of liberation.

In recent years a great deal has been written about christology in the context of religious pluralism. This has become a controversial subject. This is to be expected because no theme that is important for the faith of the church in the world can afford to be non-controversial. In the light of new developments to which reference was made earlier, particularly because of the emergence of religious pluralism, and the persistence of other religions and cultures in history, this question may now have to be pursued with greater vigour.

There is a double tension here. One is the tension between the particularity of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the universality of the love and justice of the Creator God towards all creation. This is where the question of the "uniqueness" of Christ in the context of claims by neighbours of other faiths becomes controversial. The other is the tension between the Lordship of Christ and the Saviourhood of Christ, that is, the Godward side of the incarnate Lord as the revealer of God and his humanward side as the Saviour and liberator of the oppressed. Paul Knitter has suggested that by focussing on "soteriology" rather than "christology", that is, by concentrating on the question of liberation and human well-being rather than on questions about the "uniqueness" of Christ, a consensus

or common point between many engaged in this double task may be reached. Time and space have to be given to work this out to test it in the life of the Community.

But perhaps another way to overcome these tensions and to recover the wholeness of Christian theology may be by recognising the priority of God as the Creator, by becoming more sensitive to the working of the Spirit in nature, history and human hearts, and by placing christological reflections within the larger context of God's continuing creative and redeeming activity.

Some Biblical scholars now talk about "the reclamation of creation."<sup>4</sup> They point out that the canonical priority of *Genesis* over *Exodus* indicates the ontological priority of creation over redemption, that is, the liberation of the people of Israel is to be interpreted in the light of creation, and not the other way around. Frethem writes, "Redemption, for all its decisiveness, does not cancel out the becoming character of creation, a becoming in which God continues to be active as the creator of the world... The objective of God's work in redemption is to free people to be what they were created to be".<sup>5</sup> This is also the sequence of God's creative activity in all life. Human beings in all places and at all times experience God's creative activity in the sequence of conception, birth and growth in maturity. One cannot speak of "new humanity" without first accepting the priority of created humanity.

According to Biblical scholars, the law given at Sinai also can be interpreted in the light of creation. The law was not a new reality but "a fuller particularisation of how the liberated community should now take on its creational responsibilities in the context of new times and new places. Sinai is simply a regiving of the Law implicitly or explicitly commanded in creation. Sinai reiterates for those redeemed the demands of creation".<sup>6</sup>

There is a further point to be noted here recognising that God is the Creator of all nations. This is the parallel between the ri-

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4. Terrence E. Frethem, "The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus" in *Interpretation* Vol. XLV No. 4, Oct. 1991, pp. 354 ff.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 363.



tual acts and social laws of Israel and those among surrounding peoples and cultures to which many Biblical scholars have drawn attention. They point out that few of these laws are in fact uniquely Israelite. What is unique however, is the particular configuration of material and its being related in specific ways to Yahweh. The significant point here has a bearing on the theology of religions, namely, that the existence of so much parallel material in the religious, social and cultural life of other people, is testimony to God's work as Creator among them.

Recent developments in the understanding of the source and work of the Spirit, particularly the general agreement on the "filioque" clause, also open new ways to relate creation and liberation. At the beginning of his ministry the very first words Jesus utters in his sermon at the synagogue at Nazareth was, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Lk.4:18). It is the Spirit, who sent Jesus "to set at liberty those who are oppressed". This means that the liberation of the poor and the oppressed is part of the work of the Spirit in the world. But it is the same Spirit who was active in the conception of Jesus, in his baptism, temptation, and in the signs manifesting the power of the Kingdom of God. At Pentecost the Spirit brought together people from different nations and languages into the *Koinonia/communio* of the church. And as *antaryamin*, the indwelling of God, the Spirit nourishes the inner life and roots Christian life in the being of God through Christ.

But it should not be forgotten that the Spirit "who proceeds from the Father", and who works so manifestly in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and who grants diversified gifts to the church, does not cease to be *the Spirit of God*. The Spirit of God was "moving over the face of the waters" and "spoke through the prophets." The Spirit indeed continues to be the Creator Spirit. The marks of the Spirit, working whether in nature or history or in the hearts of individuals, are clearly indicated: freedom, spontaneity, boundlessness, the power to bring about new relationships, and so, to create new communities cutting across borders that separate people from one another. The Spirit is described in the Bible as "wind" and as "fire". These images give the impressions that the Spirit does indeed continue to be a "wandering Spirit", still brooding over all creation and helping

to bring to birth new insights, new relationships and new communities. Also, the diversified gifts of the Spirit to the church (1 Cor. 12:4-11) whether for proclamation of the word or for service to the poor are held together in the unity of the Spirit.

It is sometimes suggested that in view of the controversies generated by the debate about christocentrism and theocentrism, a pneumato-centric theology might offer more possibilities not only to shape a more credible and less controversial theology of religions but also to overcome the tensions between those who work for justice in society and those who seek new relationships with neighbours of other faiths. This is indeed a possibility to be tested in living contexts. Time and space have to be given to the Spirit to work in the hearts and minds of people. However, the work of the Spirit should not be seen as separate from the Father and the Son, but as being within the diversified unity of Trinitarian life. The Spirit both distinguishes and relates the Father and the Son. For Christians, the Trinity symbolises and points to the ultimate Mystery of God, the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of all creation. The human desire to solve divine enigmas is at the root of most of our problems. It is unlikely that human beings can resolve all the problems and tensions we face in this area. We may have to live with most of them for sometime to come. But we need to be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit into areas that may be unfamiliar to most of us at the moment.

Although this paper has emphasised the need for the church to respond to significant developments in contemporary history, it must be recognised that the gospel includes, but is more than social reform, and that the church in the world will be judged more by its faithfulness to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ than by its relevance to changing historical developments.