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**“The Changing Face of Global Catholicism:  
Implications for Theology and Theological Education.”**

## **1. PROFILE OF INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION**

### ***1. Beginning....***

The birth of *Indian Theological Association* was an organic crystallization of diverse movements and initiatives at various points of time and place when the thinkers and leaders struggled to root the Gospel in the Indian cultural milieu and religious texture. To name its multiple sources: “Theology Centre”(1950 – 1980), "All-Kerala Student League"(1952), "All-Kerala Teachers Guild"(1954), "Theology Course for Laity"(1961), *Jeevadhara*"(1971), "Jeevadhara Theological Society"(1974). It was founded in 1976 by a band of committed theologians who wanted the Gospel vibe with the Indian struggles and dreams. Moreover, the ITA mothered, in its turn, other centres and movements like “Model Village”(1990) and “Socio- Religious Research Centre”(2001), etc. Visit: [www.itanet.in](http://www.itanet.in)

### ***Vision***

A creative and an inclusive theological engagement with the whole of reality for the *Reign of God* to build up the Church of India is the vision of the ITA. It implies that Indian Christian theology addresses to all people and their liberative struggles, all cultures, all religious traditions and the whole world. That is to say the ITA is not an exclusive and ethnocentric fellowship but a partnership of pilgrims in a dialogical pursuit in a multi religious and cultural context in which a triple dialogue with the poor, the cultures and religions is inviolably sustained; thus its sole vocation and mission is to dedicate to “building bridges of love and hope and peace” for all peoples on the ‘Earth’.

### ***Methodology***

Partnership and solidarity have been the key principles which have undergirded and guided the ITA over the past years. It has always been its endeavour to sustain and keep alive an inclusive and creative platform on which scholars, thinkers and activists can engage discourses on human life in the perspective of Biblical Revelation. It is not an exclusive club but a network in which pioneers, poets, prophets, thinkers, social activists, leaders of diverse layers, pursuits, and traditions are active participants in the discourses and deliberations so that the *Word-World Dialogue* is exercised credibly and contextually in a challenging perspective.

If we surf through the discourses and deliberations in the past, a four-fold dialogue has been steering its journey: namely,

1. Dialogue of Religions
2. Solidarity with the Poor
3. Reconciliation between religions and secular ideologies.

#### 4. Dialogue with the Civil Society.

Moreover, the whole exercise of the ITA is figured out and lived out on the spectrum of a Communion of triple *Sui Juris* Churches. The Church of India is of three ritual trajectories namely, Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara. A dialogue of these three *sui juris* Churches is verily the ecclesial presupposition and challenge to build up an Indian Church.

#### 2. THEOLOGIAN AND THEIR CONTEXTS

The major chunk of the ITA members are professors of Theological centres, Seminaries and Christian Departments at the Secular Universities. The strength of the association is one hundred and fifty plus, and the ten percent of the Association are women theologians and activists. A good number of the members are activist theologians who are engaged in peoples' movements and liberative activities. However fully active members will be about 50.

#### 3. THE GENERAL PROFILE OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS

By and large our theological centres are seminaries and athenaeums. The general profile of our theological schools is ecclesial and papal. However today there is a number of inter-faith centres which are silently becoming the vital sites of contextual theology in the sense that theological and liturgical experiments are boldly entertained especially in the context of inter-faith dialogues and grass-root activities there.

Moreover it is the new development and trend in India that Departments of Christian studies are erected in secular universities. Govt. of India is now becoming more inclusive towards starting such departments for all the religions. It seems to be a policy matter and is a strategic initiative of the Government of India in the present context of increasing conflicts among the religions. It is hoped that an academic acquaintance with other religions at the university level will help the young minds to develop a greater tolerance and appreciation towards other religions of their brothers and sisters. At present we have eight Christian Departments/Chairs. New ones are in offing.

1. Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras
2. Department of Christianity, Mysore University
3. Chair in Christianity, Calicut University
4. Chair in Asian Christianity, Pondicherry University
5. Chair in Christianity, Madurai Kamaraj University
6. Chair in Christianity, Manonmaniam University, Tirunelveli (just started)
7. Chair in Christianity, Mangalore University
8. Chair in Christianity Patiala, Punjab University

It is a great achievement in a Hindu nation where there exists staunch opposition from the Hindu fundamentalist groups toward this inclusive approach of the present coalition government.

#### 4. STUDENTS AND THEOLOGICAL FORMATION

First and foremost I would like to state with delight that our numerous seminaries are brimming with vibrant seminarians. We do have plenty of true vocations. That is the inner strength as well as the promise of Indian Church. Now Indian Church has become a cradle of missionaries who travel to the "ends of the earth".

However the question of the relationship between theological education and priestly formation is always a contested issue. The vital link between these two is oft not boldly and positively recognized and strengthened or even appreciated in many of our seminaries.

First of all there is a real want of interest in theology among the seminarians. Now, the trend and tenor in the priestly formation, as I see it, is sadly more cultic and ritualistic than theological or prophetic. The students may not be blamed for such a situation. It is more of theological atmospherics prevailing in the theological colleges and athenaeums. The present papal and Eurocentric compulsions in the theological and liturgical discourses and stances is the prevailing cause of the given situation. The idea of 'new evangelization' or 'liturgical renewal' etc., subtly embody a theological Puritanism and absolutism which is not appreciated especially in the Asian pluralistic context. Here comes the crucial question of theological freedom.

#### **5. THEOLOGICAL FREEDOM AND ECCLESIAL CONSTRAINS**

It seems that a fear psychosis envelops the Church and it looks that the Church is afraid of the increasing importance of religious pluralism and multicultural ethos of the present globalized world. The Church is becoming more and more inward looking and ethnocentric so that it mistakenly thinks to contain the challenge of dialogue of religions. The worldwide scams and scandals may be another contributing factor in this regard. In the market of religions the Church is showing withdrawing tendencies and becoming defensive while other religions are forging ahead with confidence. We find millions flock around Hindu Gurus worldwide. Our Hindu centers of the Shri Shri Ravi Shankar, Mata Amartanandamayi are deluged with devotees from the West.

The Church is taking on this challenge through a strategy of protectionism relying on stringent dogmatism and theological aloofness and naive normativity. This may be a weak strategy in the present age of media, informatics and multi-culturalism. The world is different now from the Medieval period. People have become autonomous and they have multiple options in the pluralistic cultural ethos.

Here the whole question is that of leadership. In today's world of media and communication, leadership is credibility. Christian credibility abides in the Christian God's strategy of being vulnerable. He/she participated in the vulnerability and brokenness of this world. Being vulnerable is the mystery of Christian renunciation which is not a state of being isolated and insulated through dogmatism and directives but deeper and radical incarnational involvement. Truth explodes in vulnerability. Truth cannot be possessed; on the contrary the truth should possess us. In today's world one of the ways to be vulnerable is to engage in the dialogue of religions with a proactive and open attitude of submitting to the ways of the Spirit which is active in all cultures and religious pursuits to unveil the face of the ubiquitous Risen One both within and without.

Even though we speak of the importance of interfaith dialogues we do not know the art of doing dialogue and the skill of listening in an inclusive theological receptivity and openness. We are still under the spell of mistaken understanding of Jesus' unicity or uniqueness. Or rather we are obsessive and possessive towards the uniqueness of Jesus as if it is a private property.

Often the uniqueness is falsely understood as exclusivity and interpreted in universal concepts. But uniqueness is to be understood in terms of ubiquity. It is more 'catholic' which

etymologically means ubiquitousness, not universality. Uniqueness of Jesus is wholistic inclusivity. Unicity is to be explored in the ubiquitous presence of the Jesus the risen One who is unbound and unfettered because the Father reveals him increasingly 'outside the flesh and blood' of the Church. In Jesus' unicity, "Holly is Wholly," if we borrow Barthian articulation. The Hindus and even Muslims think that the risen Christ now belongs to the whole humanity and is not a private patrimony of the Church.

Jesus' uniqueness abides in his new status of being the 'Lord of life' as St. Peter puts it in his second sermon. In the uniqueness of Jesus, Life is God, and God is life - abundance of life. What we find is a shift from Anthropocentrism to Bio-centrism when he was portrayed as the Lord of life. What I am arguing is that Christian theology has to be worked out in a more inclusive, open, processive scenario of existence which is ever creative and innovative. Asian/Indian theological genius engages in this versatile and vibrant God's presence in the Existence, the whole cosmos. Here lies the vital source of a new translation of Christian faith more in terms of ecology and earth, a positive drift from historical to bio-centric.

Theological freedom of this genre is not oft appreciated in the seminaries and the professors are drilled and grilled if they begin to tread on uncharted path. A competent and credible theology can be constructed only when we make the way while walking. It is in this context that the theological centres (not seminaries) in the name of diverse missions, like interfaith harmony, Dialogue of religions, Inter cultural dialogue, social justice, human rights, women empowerment, Spirituality etc. become new innovative spaces and platforms to experiment and explore new idioms, paths and praxes of Christian Gospel. I would say that these theological centres are the potent breeding grounds of new theologies and theological ventures and adventures. Since these centres do not come strictly under the scan of Orthodoxy they take the theological freedom to explore and experiment new concepts and paths.

#### **6. KEY THEMES, PRIORITIES OF THE THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE**

The following seem to be the various shifts happening subtly in different branches of Indian theology. I just try to figure out them. I do not dare to explicitate them now owing to the constraints of time and space.

1. Normative to Narrative Theology (Asian Mission Congress)
2. Incultural to Inter-Cultural
3. Papal to Public Theology
4. Exclusive to Inclusive Spirituality
5. Faith to Inter-Faith
6. Anthropocentric to Bio-Centric theology
7. Ecclesial to Academic Theology
8. Christic Unicity (uniqueness) to Jesus' Ubiquity
9. Being a Missionary to Being Missional
10. Context to texture

These shifts silently speak of new frames and horizons which vibrate with the changing face of global Catholicism which has become pluralistic, contextual, narrative and processive in the globalized world. They call for new methodologies and new initiatives for theological education. What is implicit in these paradigm shifts is that the theological education is to be increasingly missional and interactive with the new global issues of human rights violation,

religious violence, justice issues, ecological concerns, gender justice, migration, media, neo-liberalism, human traffic, new spiritual movements, people movements etc. Formerly they were local. Now they have become global, or rather glocal.

In Asia theological academics in itself will not be fascinating because religious experience is fundamentally existential and core personal. If theology becomes a vital agency of social and spiritual transformation there is every opportunity to revive the interest in theology. Pure academic theology, though it can be justified in itself, is losing its relevance and appeal since it does not vibrate with the real issues. What is needed is a democratization and socialization of theology at the peoples' level. That is to say theology itself has to become missional and a transformative agency.

To phrase differently, theology must become an agency to transform religious truths into a culture-thing. The late pope Paul VI in his renowned *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) rightly stated that the fatal flaw happened in Catholicism is the split between the Gospel and culture (#20). To elaborate, human beings are fundamentally cultural being in the present discourses. It implies that we humans are a potential and promise and we have to construct the meaning of life by engaging in the vulnerabilities and vagaries of life in a proactive and passionate stint. Ours is not an *idem*(given) identity but *ipse* (processive) identity. Our life is a narrative, ever evolving event which tells and retells new stories and sings new songs each day when the Son (sun) resurrects (rises) in the interior and exterior horizons.

Theology has to play a vital role in constructing the logos of life by interrogating, critiquing and integrating various incidents in one's journey of life and the occurrences of the world. I would dare to say that the critical function of theology is to be sought in transforming our Gospel into a culture thing. If this is accomplished the Gospel becomes a natural and spontaneous happening in one's story of life. As our great religious poet, Kabir would say, religion is a spontaneity. It is not something borrowed or imposed from outside. It is a natural 'happening' in one's engagement with life – self-inquiry. Our faith becomes spontaneous only when it becomes cultural – a prevailing and pervading presence in our priorities and policies, options and values, life styles and relations. At this point religion becomes a celebration. The function of theology is to help us to become the celebrants of life, life in abundance as in the case of Jesus.

For Jesus life was a celebration; it was an hour of glory for Jesus even while he was crucified. The cross became the 'plus', the transcendence of existence, and womb of new life. He indulged in life - life in its plenitude and infinitude. His teachings and his whole life is thoroughly life affirmative. For Jesus "God was Life" and "Life was God". He was a theological or rather a religious 'epicurean' profoundly interested in life in its totality and collective unity. He had proactively been affirmative to life and to its myriad manifestations. 'The function of theology is fundamentally to transform the 'tomb into womb', 'cross into plus' by empowering us for deeper and comprehensive involvement in life.. The theology will find its steer and gear in the ever changing and unpredictable scenario of the present history if it becomes life affirmative and empowering agency to help us participate in the river of Life.

## CONCLUSION

One of the most fascinating phenomenon happening in the globalized and media savvy world is that contexts are becoming scenarios in the present culture of dialogues and

partnership leading to new fecundations and mutations. No more boundaries exist in the diffusive and globalized cyber world. Texts are evolving into interactive textures in the secular spaces. The sacrosanctity and immutability of texts, whether be it religious, or ideological, are interrogated, deconstructed and reconstructed in the public debates; they are democratized and socialized at people's level. Today, there exist no more absolute or autonomous exclusive centres. There are only power points in the network of reality without circumference, and everyone needs everyone. Thus the present ethos is gearing us irretrievably into a culture of partnership, and dialogue has become the path, substance, style and passion both in the secular spaces and religious sites. The above mentioned theological shifts embody and empower a synergic tenor of the present epoch and make theological education relevant, credible, competitive and appealing.

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