

TOGETHER TOWARDS THE KINGDOM

An Emerging Asian Theology

The beginnings of Asian Christian theology, as reflection on the faith in an Asian context, could be traced back to Mateo Ricci in China and Roberto de Nobili in India in the 17th century. They distinguished between culture and religion and suggested that in Asia, while we seek to preach the Christian religion, we must respect the local cultures, their symbols and social practices. Looking back today we feel that they were not sufficiently critical of the feudal social orders and their discriminations and oppressions in Asian societies. But coming from a feudal Europe they did not consider them as being in variance with the Christian faith. They took great care to translate the Christian doctrine in the local languages as accurately as possible. Their attitude to other religions was negative.¹ It is interesting to note that in many ways these attitudes continue to mark Asian Churches even today. At the popular level such attitudes gave rise to groups of people who were socially and culturally Indian, but whose religious practice was Christian. The people developed a thriving popular religiosity that integrated in different ways, often on the margins of the official Church, its doctrines and practices, their cultures and religion.

In the latter part of the 19th century and the earlier part of the 20th we see a two-fold movement in India, which involves both Hindus and Christians. The Hindus see in Jesus a moral leader, a man who had realized in himself his oneness with the divine and God reaching out to us in human form as an *Avatar*. Many Hindus were attracted by Jesus and declared themselves his disciples without being tempted to join any of the Churches. They were even critical of them for having ‘occidentalized’, that is to say, imprisoned in an exclusive European institution, the oriental Jesus. Some artists and social activists were inspired by the suffering divine figure. A few who became Christian eventually distanced themselves from the Churches. On the other hand, some Christians presented Christianity as the fulfillment of the search and aspirations of Hinduism. Others tried to make Jesus meaningful in an Indian context by giving him Indian names like ‘Guru’. Towards the end of this period Christian ashrams were founded to present Jesus as a mediator of God-experience rather than a mere social activist or teacher of doctrine.² While there was a desire to present Jesus as the fulfillment of the Indian religious quest, there were attempts to do this in an Indian religious and cultural context.

A Moment of Transition

The middle of the 20th century is a period of transition. Politically and culturally many Asian countries become independent from foreign colonizers. There is a search for national and cultural identity. The Christians everywhere, except the Philippines, discover themselves as

¹ Anand Amaladass and Francis X. Clooney, *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise. Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili*. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000; Vincent Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West*. New York: Double Day, 1957.

² A mere list of names will be of no interest to a non-Indian reader. I have no space either for a more elaborate presentation of this period. The writings of the individual authors are also not easily accessible. So I refer the reader to a couple of historical presentations for more details. Cf. R.H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975.

small minorities, seeking to prove their national identity. The Second Vatican Council brings in a new two-fold awareness. On the one hand, the universal Church becomes aware of itself as a communion of local Churches. The creation of local liturgies start with the introduction of the local languages. National and Regional Bishops' Conferences are founded. A theology of the local Church starts taking shape. An International Mission Congress in Manila in 1979 declared that every local Church is responsible for mission in its territory and co-responsible with other local Churches for mission elsewhere. On the other hand, the Church affirms religious freedom and a certain autonomy of the secular. It becomes open to dialogue with other religions and with the secular world. Around the same time, the movement of liberation theology emerges in Latin America. It inspires various liberation theologies in Asia. But more importantly, it introduces a new method of theologizing from experience and context. This gives rise to contextual theologies.³

Contextual theologies are still not fully accepted in the Church. Therefore the first task of Asian theologies is to defend their right to exist and be recognized and respected. Official circles maintain that Catholic theology, like the Church, is universal. This affirmation is interpreted to mean that it is the same everywhere. It may be translated into various languages and adapted to different situations and cultures. We should therefore speak of Catholic theology in Asia rather than of Asian theology, just as we should think of the 'Church in Asia' rather than of Asian Churches. The possibility of a real pluralism of theologies is denied. On the other hand, European theologians sometimes treat Asian theologies – as also liberation theologies - as merely pastoral and not systematic. Contextual theologies arise out of an experiential context. Their reflection is helped by social and cultural as much as philosophical analysis. They dialogue more with the human and social sciences than with philosophies. In any case Asian traditions do not make a radical distinction between philosophy and theology, though Hindu and Buddhist theologians can be as rigorous in their reflection as their Christian counterparts in Europe. Symbol and narrative are seen to be as important as concepts. Symbols provoke thought and hermeneutical reflection can be as systematic as deductive logical argument.⁴ We can see in the following pages how systematic questions are raised and reflected on by Asian theologies.⁵ Contextual theologies also tend to be pluralistic.

The Asian Context

The context in which Asian theologies have developed is a dialectical one in which the Gospel of Jesus encounters the realities of Asia. Evangelical dialogue is therefore the horizon of Asian theologies. The Asian context is characterized by the poor, the rich cultures and the great

³ Cf. Michael Amaladoss, "From Experience to Theology", *Vidyajyoti Journal of theological Reflection* 61 (1997) 372-385.

⁴ Cf. Francis D'Sa, "A Hermeneutic of Theological Language. The Relationship between Reality, Language, History and Faith." *Third Millennium* 3 (2000) 6-23.

⁵ For general surveys see Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations. The Journey of Indian Theology*. Madras: University of Madras, 1993. For the broader Asian context see R.S.Sugirtharaja (ed). *Frontiers in Asian Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994; Douglas J. Elwood (ed), *Asian Christian Theology. Emerging Trends*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980; John C. England, *Living Theology in Asia*. London: SCM, 1981. These general surveys can be complemented by Wing-Hung Lam, *Chinese Theology in Construction*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1983; Yasuo Furuya (ed. and translator), *A History of Japanese Theology*. Grand Rapids: W.B.Eerdmans, 1997.

religions of Asia. A look at this context is a necessary background for understanding the various Asian theological questions.

Many of the countries in Asia have masses of poor people. This is partly the result of past political and continuing economic colonialism, often supported by the local elite for their own benefit. Even in the developing countries the gap between the rich and the poor is increasing. The globalization based on the liberal market capitalism is only making the situation in the poor countries worse. As economic poverty often goes with political powerlessness, even in the so called democracies, and social marginalization the poor are oppressed. They become objects of anonymous forces. The poor however are increasingly aware of their situation and movements for autonomy and liberation are emerging everywhere. This gives rise to many liberation theologies.

Asia is a continent of a multiplicity of cultures. These are dominated by two highly developed millenarian cultures, namely the Chinese and the Indian. These have withstood the impact of the European cultures during the colonial period. They will survive the thrust of scientific and technological modernity while adapting to it. As a matter of fact there is a cultural revival across Asia as a means of discovering and affirming one's self-identity. Globalization of consumer goods and services will rather lead to the strengthening of these identities, as they learn to make use of the modern means of communication to express themselves and network with others. Such a quest for identity will successfully challenge in the long run any attempt to dominate and to impose uniformity by foreign and local hegemonic forces, even when they are backed by religious zeal.

Asia has been the cradle of all developed religions, including Christianity. Compare to West Asian religions like Christianity and Islam, East Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism had been tolerant and accommodative. But now all religions have become sources of conflict because of fundamentalism and the abuse of religion by political forces. Religious fundamentalism in Asia has been a reaction both to the secularizing agnosticism of modernity and to the materialistic atheism of Marxism. On the other hand, people, in an atmosphere of economic and political competition, find religion as an easy bond to unite them in their struggle. Christianity, after its birth in Asia, has grown up in Europe and has come back as a 'foreign' religion, largely dependent on foreign centres of theological and spiritual ideology, economic support and political control, but with pretensions of world hegemony as its right in the name of Christ. Its contemporary dialogical approach is looked at with suspicion, if not opposition.

It is in this context that Asian theologies have been developing. It is the work of small groups of committed Christians and theologians, often with the understanding, though tacit, support of the leaders. I shall outline in the following pages the new trends in theological reflection that have been emerging. There are no big schools and many well known publications. There are more articles than books. English remains a link language, but it necessarily distorts an authentic Asian theology. But the few writings in Asian languages are unfortunately limited to their particular contexts. I think that a thematic presentation will be more helpful to realize the emerging impact of Asian theologies than a presentation of authors, though the foot notes will refer to the leading authors. I shall also focus more on the Catholic scene, though Asian contextual theologies tend to be more ecumenical.

Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

It would not be an exaggeration to say that much of Asian contextual theologies are missiological. They are marked by the minority status of the Christians in most Asian countries and their attempts to witness to their Christian experience in a relevant and meaningful manner. But mission itself is understood in a new way. The Bishops of Asia meeting in a general assembly in Taipei in 1974 spoke of evangelization as a dialogue of the Gospel with the realities of Asia, namely the many poor people, the rich cultures and the great religions.⁶ This means, on the one hand, that proclamation itself is seen as dialogical. People who conceptually oppose proclamation to dialogue do not seem to understand that a proclamation that takes seriously the other to whom one is proclaiming can only be dialogical. Similarly, dialogue in which one seriously witnesses to his/her faith can only be proclamational. Proclamation is not an one-sided, unidirectional activity. The area of dialogue is broadened to include not only the other religions, but also the poor and the many cultures. The danger that such a broadening of dialogue may lead to a weakening of mission have led Asian theologians to sharpen the thrust of mission as prophecy.⁷ The mission of Jesus is a call to conversion in view of the Kingdom. It is necessary to be attentive to the needs of the poor. But mission will lead us to identify the causes – people and/or structures – that make people poor and challenge them to change. To seek to live and express one's Christian faith in one's culture is one's right, though this is hindered in various ways by the official circles in the Church today. It is when one challenges the limiting and sinful elements in culture, like the caste system in India or the oppression of women everywhere, to change in view of that Kingdom that one is evangelizing culture. Interreligious dialogue can help mutual knowledge and enrichment. But it is a dimension of evangelization only when it calls each religion to turn to God from various idolatries that may have been institutionalized in its name. One of the poles of such prophetic dialogue is the Gospel of Jesus. In the course of such dialogue people may feel called to become disciples of Jesus and to join the Christian community, inspired by the Spirit. But they are not entering a safe haven of salvation, but are making a commitment to join Jesus in his prophetic mission to the world. Such a view of mission can be understood adequately only in the context of the changing relationship of the Church to other religions.

Dialogue as Collaboration

One of the important characteristics of emerging Asian theologies is their positive approach to the other religions. The Second Vatican Council spoke of God as being the common origin and goal of all peoples. It defended the political freedom of people to follow any religion according to the dictates of their conscience. But its attitude to other religions was limited to seeing in them good and holy elements and the 'seeds of the Word'. The post-synodal document *Evangelii Nuntiandi* saw in them human efforts to reach out to God to which God's revelation in Jesus came as a response. But already at their first general assembly the Asian Bishops "accept

⁶ Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arévalo (eds), *For All the Peoples of Asia. Vol. 1.* Manila: Claretian, 1997, pp. 14-16. This volume and its companion volume Franz-Josef Eilers (ed), *For All the Peoples of Asia. Vol.2.* Manila: Claretian, 1997 are collections of the official statements of Asian Bishops over twenty-five years.

⁷ Michael Maladies, "Mission as Prophecy" in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (eds), *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), pp.64-72.

them (the other religions) as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation" and acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to himself through them."⁸ The Asian theologians speak of

The fruits of the Spirit perceived in the lives of the other religions' believers: a sense of the sacred, a commitment to the pursuit of fullness, a thirst for self-realization, a taste for prayer and commitment, a desire for renunciation, a struggle for justice, an urge to basic human goodness, an involvement in service, a total surrender to God, and an attachment to the transcendent in their symbols, rituals and life itself, though human weakness and sin are not absent.⁹

Such positive appreciation will be later endorsed by John Paul II when he invites the leaders of other religions to come together at Assisi in October 1986 to pray for peace in the world. Commentators pointed out that such an invitation supposed that the believers of other religions can pray to God and that their prayers were effective. This is a symbolic and practical way recognizing the legitimacy of other religions. Later in 1991, in his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, (28) John Paul II accepts that the Spirit of God is present and active in other religions. Since divine-human encounter is always salvific and since salvation is not offered by God piecemeal the Asian theologians conclude that other religions facilitate salvific divine-human encounter.

There is however a difference of opinion about the role of the other religions in the salvific plan of God. Some would say that all salvation is related in some mysterious way to Christ and to the Church. They think that all the other religions are meant to find their fulfillment in Christ and Christianity. Asian theologians however feel that the majority of humanity are living and dying without any direct faith in Jesus and link with the Church. Though the mystery of God, Father, Word and Spirit, is active in every human being, this need not imply a necessary relationship with the visible, institutional Church. To posit a Church-mystery which will include all who are saved is not very helpful when we are talking about the Church and the other religions at a historical and human level. A mystery that is purely implicit does not explain anything, though it might satisfy some logical requirement of a statement which affirms: "There is no salvation outside the Church." Such an affirmation does not take seriously the possibility that the members of other religions who are saved receive God's saving grace through the symbols and rituals of their own religion. It is through these that they encounter God and such encounter is not fruitless.¹⁰

Such a positive appreciation of other religions also extend to the various structures in which they are expressed. God may be speaking to them through their scriptures. They may have a message also for us, especially when we are engaged in dialogue with them and read our and their scriptures together.¹¹ Similarly the Spirit may be present in their rituals and symbols

⁸ *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol I*, 14-15.

⁹ "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue" in John Gnanapiragasam and Felix Wilfred (eds), *Being Church in Asia*, Vol I. Manila: Claretian, 1994, p.13.

¹⁰ For a good general survey and history of the theology of religions in India see: Jose Kuttianimattathil, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*. Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti College, 1995.

¹¹ D.S. Amalorpavadass (ed), *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures*. Bangalore: NBCLC, 1974.

and, under certain conditions, we may be able to participate in them.¹² They may have developed special techniques of meditation like the Yoga and Zen that we too may find useful. To accept another religion as facilitating a divine-human relationship for the others does not mean that they are accessible to me in the same way. They are fully meaningful only in the context of that relationship. They can have some meaning for me only in the context of a dialogue with the others. Ultimately what we are positive about is not other religions and their institutions as such, but other people and their relationship with God which is expressed in the symbols and institutions of the other religions. In the process of such self-expression the limitations and sinfulness people also may be mixed up in it. This is true also of the institutions of the Church. A discernment therefore is needed. But what we are affirming is God's freedom of self-manifestation and the freedom of the people who respond to God.

No one who has any acquaintance with Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism can see Christianity as their fulfillment. One can perhaps see Christianity as the fulfillment of Judaism, though Jews will contest this. They were in the same line of historical development. Hinduism and Buddhism may be seen as related because they take their origin from the same religio-cultural context. But it is difficult to see Hinduism and Christianity related as preparation and fulfillment. It is more proper to see the religions as different. The difference is due both to the freedom of God who may manifest different aspects of Godself and to the freedom of human groups who respond in their own living and cultural context. Difference however does not exclude relationship. Since God is one and is the common origin and goal of all peoples, we can foresee a community among them which leads them to a convergence in the course of history. This is inspired by the Spirit of God and realized by the active dialogue of the humans. Such convergence itself may be eschatological. The Asian theologians suggest a new paradigm to comprehend this plan of God for the world.

According to the new paradigm, creation itself is a self-communication of God, who is reaching out to all peoples through the Word and the Spirit in varied ways, at various times, and through the different religions. This ongoing divine-human encounter is salvific. However, God's plan is not merely to save individual souls, but to gather together all things in heaven and on earth. God is working out this plan in history through various sages and prophets. Jesus, the Word incarnate, has a specific role in this history of salvation. But Jesus' mission is at the service of God's mission. It does not replace it. Taking a kenotic form, it collaborates with other divine self-manifestations in other religions as God's mission is moving towards its eschatological fulfillment. As disciples of Jesus we must witness to the Abba and his Kingdom of freedom, fellowship, justice and love.¹³

Interreligious dialogue is therefore not an option, but an integral dimension of our mission. The goal of our mission is the building up of the Kingdom of God and of the Church as its symbol and servant. Our own mission is at the service of God's mission through the Word and the Spirit and their various self-manifestations. It is here that the other religions find a place. Sometimes dialogue is still seen simply as a preparation for mission seen as proclamation leading

¹² Paul Puthanangady (ed), *Sharing Worship*. Bangalore: NBCLC, 1988.

¹³ Thomas Malipurathu and L. Stanislaus (eds), *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium*. Mumbai: St. Paul's, 2000, p. 203.

to the implantation of the Church. On the contrary dialogue is part of the life of the Church in Asia. In the words of Asian theologians:

In the developing, multi-religious societies of Asia, struggling towards liberation and wholeness, all religions are called to provide a common and complementary moral and religious foundation for this struggle, and be forces for growth and communion rather than sources of alienation and conflict. They can do this only through dialogue and collaboration.¹⁴

Unfortunately in Asia today religions are everywhere in conflict. The forces of religious fundamentalism and the political use of religion are leading to violent confrontations. Even before we start dialoguing we have to engage in conflict resolution. But this is not a theological problem.

Any acknowledgement of other religions as legitimate in God's plan of salvation inevitably questions the absolute and exclusive claims of the Church. The implications of this for ecclesiology have not really been worked out yet. And yet, the vision of the Church as the symbol and servant of the Kingdom of God is not new. It is another way of saying that the Church is a sacrament. While sacraments are means of grace, they have no claims to exclusivity. They are no magical symbols either. They are effective only in so far as they signs of the presence and action of the Spirit of God. We have unfortunately tended to absolutize and isolate the symbols in the past, also denying the possibility of other symbols. The struggle of Jesus and the Church for the Kingdom of God is not primarily against other religions, but against Satan and Mammon, as the structural and personal powers of evil. It is when the Church was identified simply with the Kingdom of God that other religions came to be identified as the 'kingdom of Satan'. Our experience of other believers helps us to get out of this mindset.

The Church then cannot set itself as a criterion to judge all the other religions. Jesus is the Truth incarnate. The Church is called and sent by Jesus. But it does not possess Jesus. It is a pilgrim. It is slowly deepening its own experience of God. It is also affected by the human limitations and frailties of its members. In the process of dialogue then we will have to depend on the 'fruits of the Spirit' of which Paul speaks to the Galatians. (Cf. Gal 5:22-23). We can also think of the principle of non-contradiction, though this will have to be carefully applied. A spirit of connaturality can also play a role. This can take the form of *sensus fidelium*, taking the 'fideles' in a wider sense that includes also the other believers. In interreligious dialogue then we can not only teach; we can also learn from the others and be enriched. Terms like 'ultimate' and 'final' with regard to revelation must be understood eschatologically. The fullness of Christ of which Paul speaks to the Ephesians and Colossians is still in the eschatological future. (Eph 1:10; Col 1:19-20. Cf. also 1 Cor 15:28)

Some people may feel called to experience God in more than one religious tradition. They claim to be Hindu-Christians or Christian-Buddhists.¹⁵ I would like to evoke here only the example of Henri Le Saux. He was a Christian monk who was loyal to the psalms and the

¹⁴ Theses on Interreligious Dialogue, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵ See Dennis Gira and Jacques Scheur (eds), *Vivre de plusieurs religions. Promesse ou illusion?* Paris: L'Atelier, 2000.

Eucharist till the day of his death. At the same time he felt attracted by the Hindu experience of *advaita* or non-duality. He claims to have experienced it. He was in great tension for many years because he was not able to reconcile the two experiences. I think that he overcame this tension in the last months before his death by simply accepting them as two different experiences of the divine.¹⁶ Others like Raimon Panikkar do not seem to feel this tension at all seeing the different religions as complementary.¹⁷ Ultimately it is a matter of personal integration and various ways of achieving this remains possible.

Jesus, the Saviour

While Asian theologians may seem to relativize the Church, they do not relativize Jesus as Saviour. They seek to understand the mystery of Jesus in the context of the presence and action of God in other religions.¹⁸ A few might suggest that there are many saviours. Others may say that there is only one saviour, but known under different names in the different religious traditions. Both answers are inadequate. It depends partly on how the process of salvation itself is understood.

The traditional approach to how Jesus saves has been *a priori*. There are three major theories. Some say that when the Word becomes incarnate in Jesus, it unites itself with humanity in such a way that the whole of humanity participates in the saving paschal mystery of Christ. Others suggest that Jesus by his passion and death has made satisfaction for all the sins of all human beings. Still others think that humanity that sinned through the disobedience of the first Adam is now in solidarity with the second Adam (Jesus) in his total obedience to the Father. So all are radically redeemed though this redemption passes to people in various ways. On the part of those who are saved at least implicit faith in the saving mystery of Jesus is needed.

It is not easy to preach this doctrine to the members of other religions without downgrading their own religious experience that is not related to Jesus. It represents a high Christology that looks on Jesus simply as God.

Salvation, as I have suggested earlier, is a cosmic project that embraces the whole of human history. It is the gathering up of all things. God carries on this project through the Word and the Spirit. It is God who saves every one, but in history, historically. The Word becomes human in Jesus in the course of carrying God's plan to its fulfillment. He visibilizes the ongoing saving action of God. He becomes its symbol and servant – a sacrament – in his paschal mystery. All are called to share in this mystery though the actual sharing may take place in various ways in various religions. At the same time Jesus launches a social movement in history which collaborates with God's own mission in the world.

When we say that Jesus Christ is the only saviour, we tend to look at the divine in Jesus. But in history, the man Jesus and the Church, which is a community of his disciples, play a

¹⁶ Henri Le Saux, *La montée au fond du coeur*. Paris: O.E.I.L., 1986.

¹⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978; *The Cosmotheandric Experience. Emerging Religious Consciousness*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993.

¹⁸ Cf. Errol D'Lima and Max Gonsalves (eds), *What does Jesus Christ Mean?* Bangalore: The Indian Theological Association, 1999; Michael Amaladoss, "Jésus Christ, le seul Sauveur, et la mission", *Spiritus* 41 (2000) 148-157.

special role which does not exclude the other religions. Jesus has gone before us, showing us an example of self-giving love even unto death. Even people who do not know Jesus can participate in his mystery by doing what he did. (cf. Mt 25) This involves a radical secularization of life in which all religions, their doctrines and rituals become relative. What is important is to love God in the other, ready to give one's own life. Such egolessness leads to peace, love and fellowship. Spiritual masters like Anthony D'Mello have explored this in their teaching.¹⁹ Many Christians have also fruitfully practiced Asian methods of concentration like Yoga and Zen.

Today we cannot think of history without Jesus and the Church. But their role is one of solidarity, symbol and service, not monopoly. The human Jesus has chosen a kenotic (self-emptying) way of service, rather than domination. Asians do not feel comfortable with traditional images like 'Jesus the King' which may have urged missionaries to conquer Asia for Christ. They would prefer to witness to Jesus as the liberator of the poor and the oppressed, Jesus as the Wise Man, as the eschatological Prophet, as a Servant.²⁰

Asian Liberation Theologies

Asian liberation theologies owe their inspiration to Latin American Liberation theologies. Three of them have been developed rather systematically: the *Minjung* theology of Korea, the theology of Struggle of the Philippines and Dalit theology in India. These theologies arise out of the struggle and reflection of the economically and politically marginalized and oppressed peoples. They have however specific Asian accents.

The *Minjung* theology of Korea has been very ecumenical. It opens out to recognize the whole history of their people, even in the pre-Christian era, as a salvation history and look at their struggles as movements for liberation in which God has been active. They have explored the liberative potential of some of the shamanistic rituals and mask dances of popular culture and religiosity. Their criticism focuses on the utopias of both the Capitalists and the Communists. Their vision of liberation is eschatological rather than historical.²¹

The theology of struggle in the Philippines has tried to keep its distance from the Communist movements. It is noted for its expression in popular religious culture like the narrative of the passion of Jesus, liturgies, dances and music. The Basic Christian Communities may have played a role. It has animated two non-violent revolutions in which the country's Presidents have been driven out of office. But it has also realized its limitations: political liberation and the restoration of formal democracy does not really bring economic equality nor real political power to the people.²²

¹⁹ Anthony D'Mello, *The Song of the Bird*. Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash,

²⁰ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Asian Faces of Jesus*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993; Peter Phan, "Jesus Christ with an Asian Face", *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 399-430; Michael Amaladoss, "The Asian Face of the Good News", *Mission Today* 2 (2000) 166-172.

²¹ Commission on theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia (ed), *Minjung Theology: People as Subjects of History*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983.

²² S. Eleazer Fernandes, *Towards a Theology of Struggle*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994.

Dalit theology acknowledges its living links to other liberation movements that have their origin in other religions and even in political groups. It has a strong Christological focus, recognizing in Jesus a dalit who was marginalized and rejected by his own people, dying outside the gate. We note a progressive deepening of this Christological perspective. First of all Jesus is seen as a fellow sufferer - God who shares our sufferings. Then there is a realization that Jesus helps us to move from being passive sufferers to becoming active agents who assume suffering as a sign and means of their struggle. Finally, there is a move to discover the redemptive aspects of such suffering which may reach out also to the oppressor.²³

Asian theologians have discovered the inter-religious dimension of liberation theology. The 20th century has given rise to liberation theologies in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Some of these, like the socio-political liberation movement of Mahatma Gandhi rooted in the Gospel and the *Bhagavad Gita*, are older than Latin American Liberation theologies. People of different religions therefore can struggle together for liberation. Interreligious dialogue can be economically and socio-politically liberative. Such a dialogue of action should even be the context for deeper forms of dialogue at the religious level.²⁴

Aloysius Pieris of Sri Lanka has even discovered a deeper link between liberation and the Asian religions. Asian peoples are deeply religious and any liberation movement in Asia should take their religiosity seriously. There is an intimate link between religiosity and poverty in Asia. While we have to struggle against imposed and oppressive poverty, voluntary poverty is a value recognized by all Asian religions, including Christianity. We can say that a spirit of poverty – egolessness and freedom from attachment to material things – is a necessary condition to get rid of imposed poverty. Thus ‘religious poverty’ becomes a necessary instrument to overthrow ‘economic poverty’. Pieris says further that while all Asian religions (including Christianity) stress the need to *be* poor, Christianity alone stresses the need to opt *for* the poor and to struggle with them. The Biblical God makes a special covenant with the poor. This particular distinction between Christianity and other religions may not be true with regard to the actual liberation struggles in which the members of other religions too are involved.²⁵

Beyond Inculturation

The Second Vatican Council recognized the universal Church as a communion of local Churches. This communion was sustained by a principle of collegiality at all levels. Unity in the faith and a pluralism in its expressions was encouraged. The Church was encouraged to become African, Indian, Chinese, etc. It was suggested that just as the Word of God incarnated itself in the Jewish culture of Palestine, it must today incarnate itself in the different cultures that it encounters. This is called the process of inculturation.

Asian theologians are today suspicious of this image of incarnation. It is a beautiful theological principle. But it does not offer a true picture of what actually happens when the Gospel encounters a culture. The missionary proclaiming the Gospel tries to translate it to the

²³ James Massey (ed), *Indigenous Peoples: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1994.

²⁴ Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom. Liberation Theologies from Asia*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997.

²⁵ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988; *God's Reign for God's Poor*. Kelaniya: Tulana, 1998.

best of his/her ability in the local language and culture. The people who listen to the Good News respond to it in terms of their own language and culture and express this response in their way of life, ritual and celebration, in their spiritual and theological reflection. It is in this self-expression of a local community of people that a local Church, in which the Word of God is newly rooted, emerges. The people are the agents of this process and they need a certain autonomy to do this. But authoritative interpretations of inculturation see it as a process from above and their model is one of translation and adaptation of a pre-existent Gospel, not a creative response to it by the people. This process is evidently controlled by the central authority.²⁶

The Gospel is a self-manifestation of God in history, particularly in Jesus. In every age and circumstance we have to go back to the sources to discover anew the Gospel. It has to be appropriately re-interpreted to the changing circumstances. The cultures in which the Gospel was first expressed has a certain priority. But they are normative to succeeding generations. One does not have to become a Semite in order to become Christian. Paul solved this problem with regard to the admission of the Gentiles into the Church. But today, not only the Semitic, but also the Greek and Roman cultures in which the Gospel found expression in the early centuries of the Church are sought to be projected as normative. To put it in a simple way: we are no longer expected to pray in Latin. We can pray in Chinese or Hindi. But we have no right to write our own prayers in our own languages in the context of our own contemporary cultures and situations. We can only use the prayers translated from the original Latin. Asian theologians do not find these principles that emphasize uniformity and centralization acceptable. But Asian Bishops are not able to assert their autonomy.

There is no wonder then that Asian Churches are seen as 'foreign' by the other people. This cultural foreignness is further strengthened by economic and political dependence. A 'foreign' Gospel loses its prophetic relevance. The Church is not the local community, but an institutional mechanism, centered round the priest, that keeps producing Slavonic grace through the sacraments. Fortunately, the central control extends only to the official circles. On the sidelines, the people have created a flourishing popular religiosity around Mary and the Saints. Popular religious festivals relate their faith to their local needs. The spiritual elite interact with and practice Asian techniques of prayer like Yoga and Zen.²⁷ Activists are inspired by the Gospel to engage in liberative struggles. Theologians continue to reflect on actual questions posed by their living context. They have ignored official warnings that seek to restrain them. But then we have the problems of uneasily coexisting parallel Churches. Popular disaffection with the Church which we see in Europe today may not be long in coming to Asia too.

Evangelizing Culture

From the time of Ricci and de Nobili, a facile distinction between religion and culture has made the Church focus on the doctrine, law and rituals of religions, adapting easily to existing cultures and political structures, often uncritically. The Church had no problems with feudal social structures, colonial exploitation and oppression and discriminative and oppressive socio-cultural structures like the caste system, the discrimination against women, the destruction of nature, etc. Today we are becoming aware that when the Gospel encounters a culture it must

²⁶ Michael Amaladoss, *Beyond Inculturation*. Delhi: Vidyajyoti/ISPCK, 1998.

²⁷ William Johnston, "Arise, My Love...". *Mysticism for a New Era*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000.

also challenge that culture to conversion in the light of the values of the Kingdom. Bringing about cultural change however is a very difficult process and we need to collaborate with other believers and all people of good will, taking various people's movements seriously. In this effort the Church's pretension to hold on to a moral high ground, ignoring its own history, is not always helpful. Secularizing movements are more anti-Church and anti-clerical than anti-God.²⁸

Asian theologians have not spent much time on developing a credible theology of the local Church. I think that this is a serious lack. Such a theology would focus on the rights and responsibilities of the people in the Church as the primary agents of its mission. Collegiality will have to be rediscovered at all levels. Authority, not as power, but as service has to be seen not merely as a spiritual principle, but as an organizational one. We will have to explore the role of the Spirit in the Church and in the world and move away from an overly Christo-centric, hierarchical structure. The Church will become a movement of people that is in constant dialogue with other people's movements, religious and non-religious.

Conclusion.

Asia (South, South-East and East) is a rich and diverse continent. Thanks to be Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference it has been acquiring a common theological voice, symbolized by its Office of Theological Concerns. This office has a group of Bishops and theologians that meet regularly and publish statements on various theological questions. But this emerging commonality does hide a rich diversity of cultures and situations. Here we have an example of communion in pluralism in an experiential way. The fact that this is achieved thanks to a 'foreign' language like English is significant. It is symbolic of Asian openness to the Churches elsewhere, in Africa, America and Europe, to which Asia is ready to relate in communion.

The individuality of Asian theologies will continue to grow because of two reasons. Thanks to Buddhism and the Yoga on the one hand, and the Chinese vision of harmony and the Indian ideal of wholeness on the other, the Asian approach to theological reflection is different from that of Europe based on the rational and dichotomous (between God and the world, the human and nature and the spirit and body) Greco-Roman culture. Asian religions also are less institutional. I think that it is time to acknowledge and respect difference. Truth should not be confused with its expressions and no one formulation need be considered normative. The Second Vatican Council accepted the 'hierarchy of truths'. Today we can accept that 'truth as experienced and expressed can be plural'. Truth, as a relationship between communicators, can be pluralistic. That is why such an affirmation is not relativistic. An easy irenicism that searches for common denominators or affirms sameness must give place to a healthy pluralism which can be mutually challenging and enriching.

Secondly, the experiential encounter with other religions challenges the whole theological structure founded on the exclusive claims of Christianity. This is of immediate relevance to us in Asia. But it is not uninteresting to Europe where Christianity is already a minority religion, in practice. The internal differentiations between nominal Christians there may be more radical than the interreligious differences in Asia, especially when it concerns life and

²⁸ Sebastian Kappen, *Tradition, Modernity, Counter-Culture. An Asian Perspective*. Bangalore, Visthar, 1994.

praxis. The solution is not to impose a self-defensive uniformity, but to celebrate difference and pluralism as enriching, particularly when all are collaborating in building human community. The pluralism which we celebrate is the result of the interplay between the freedom of God and the freedom of the humans. This makes dialogue at all levels a way of life.

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