

# The Theological Task before the Church in India

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## I.

**I**T is certain that an article on this subject could more fittingly be written by an Indian theologian than a missionary. As the next best thing, what is said here has been submitted to Dr. A. J. Appasamy and other Indian friends, and while they are not committed to any of the views expressed in this article, their criticisms have considerably influenced it. Those who are in touch with Indian Church affairs will know that a book has recently been published in India called *Our Theological Task*, by the Rev. Marcus Ward. This book is strongly recommended to those who wish to think about the subject more carefully.

Mr. Ward's book took its present shape as a result of a conference of theologians convened by the National Christian Council at Poona in 1942. The Conference decided that a clear distinction between dogma and doctrine was essential to clarity of thought and expression, and we shall follow their distinction in this essay; Dogma was defined as "the absolute element in theology—the central core—the Word of God." Thus the fundamental assumption of the Christian dogma is that "God, the ground and source of all reality, has revealed Himself in an Act—in Jesus Christ our Lord—by which the world has been redeemed." Doctrine, on the other hand, is "the relative element—the expression, the interpretation and application" of dogma.<sup>1</sup> Having made this distinction, the Conference went on to define the task of Christian theology in India as follows:

- "(a) To appropriate dogma—that given, permanent living core, which must determine the characteristic shape of any expression or application which is to be recognisably Christian;
- "(b) To explicate doctrine—on the one hand for building up Christians and on the other for presenting the Gospel to others. Here we would stress our opinion that the 'Indianisation' of Christianity refers only to such changes in external forms and terms as will make the unchanging Gospel intelligible in India."<sup>2</sup>

This statement contains within it almost all that need be said. The theological task thus defined must be related to two main needs. The first is the instruction and building up in the Faith of the nearly eight million Christians of the country, most of whom have little education and live still in the medieval life of the villages. This task is urgent, because Western materialism is rapidly sweeping away old values and assumptions, even in the remotest parts, and the philosophy

<sup>1</sup> *Our Theological Task*, Marcus Ward, Madras, 1946, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

of Marxism is being taught by keen and devoted workers on an ever-increasing scale. When depressed-class Christians in a small village tell their pastor they no longer come to church because they have come to understand from the Communists that there is no God after all, it is time for the Church to look at the quality of the teaching she is giving and the keenness with which it is imparted. Again, in the new India a minority such as the Christians will be in a difficult position, especially if they are divided between two states of Hindustan and Pakistan. Temptations to join a majority community, for political reasons, will be made very strong. Only a devoted and instructed Church will be able to stand. We may add to this—only a *united* Church also. Church union is not only in the air; it will become a fact in September in South India, and it is in the discussion stage in North India and Ceylon. The conviction that our unity in the Spirit demands an outward unity presses upon the Church the necessity of distinguishing between dogma and doctrine, of discovering in denominational emphases the things which are precious and must be conserved, and those which are accidental and of no more than sentimental importance.

To instruct the Christians in the true faith is thus the first task of the theologians. This means that the expression of dogma in terms of doctrine must be in language and terms understood by the people—the one Gospel must have an Indian colouring.

The forms of worship which have been used hitherto in the Indian Church have become very dear to the people, but they are Western through and through, based on the traditions of the "sending" Churches and in most cases they have probably not carried their full meaning to the hearts of the worshippers. One of the great ways, perhaps the greatest, in which the Church plants the Christian dogma in the hearts and lives of its members is through its expression in Worship. The impressive power of worship, with its emotional and aesthetic content, is very great indeed. In the only case where the Christian Church has existed in India for many centuries, the Syrian Church of Malabar, we can see various ways in which the expression of worship became adapted to the life of the country, although the central core was unchanged, being expressed not in Sanskrit terms associated with Hindu theology, but in the Syriac of the early Church. The Indian Church is to find ways of liturgical expression which will take up the expression of Christian dogma into the adoration of God in such a way that it becomes a part of the very life of its people. This activity of worship, like the expression of dogma in doctrine, must find an Indian dress. Such a liturgy cannot be compiled by a group of experts; it must grow out of the life of the Church. It is true that in the first place an experimental liturgy will have to be compiled by people who have studied seriously liturgical science and who are striving to express in Indian terms the historic faith of the Church, but such a liturgy cannot be final. It must be revised from time to time until a service develops which is acceptable to the whole Church and which expresses truly the faith of its members. Prior to this task, the absolute which must be expressed,—the dogma,—must be clearly distinguished and accepted.

The second task confronting theologians in India is that of expressing the Faith so that it can be understood by non-Christians. The proportion of Christians to the population as a whole falls every year, in spite of conversions, and we have to face the fact that the great majority of people in India do not understand what our theology is trying to say. It is true that the intelligentsia respect Christ and that many of them have a great respect for the persons of Christians who taught them in their early days in Christian Colleges. But the faith of their teachers remains to them an enigma. It was something which produced admirable and saintly men, but which was quite foreign in its expression. Christians do not speak the same language as other people. In most areas even the language of the vernacular Bible is not clear to the non-Christians. The dogma of the Faith has to be expressed in such terms that India will be confronted with the living Christ and to make its decision. The supreme need, then, in relation to the two-fold task of instructing the Christian and evangelising the non-Christians is for competent Indian theologians to distinguish clearly and to build firmly and squarely on dogma, but express it in terms of their own heritage.

## II.

It cannot be said that there is yet any distinctive Indian Christian theology and we are still waiting for that commentary on St. John's Gospel which Bishop Westcott said many years ago could be written only by an Indian. The younger theologians in India have all been trained in Western ways of thought and expression and in the majority of cases their Indian heritage and environment does not seem appreciably to have affected their theology. There is, however, a group of senior men in the South which produced the book *Rethinking Christianity in India* and which is largely responsible for the weekly periodical *The Guardian* of Madras. Most of these men are converts or the children of converts and they combine a real devotion to Christ with an impatience of anything which seems to them to exalt things Western at the expense of their own Indian heritage. It is not fair to generalise about the thought of this group, but on the whole they may be said to interpret Christianity along the lines of Bhakti marga, the way of faith-love, centring in the Teacher who is also the Divine Lord. This group of thinkers would accept Christian dogma, but they would question whether the West has expressed adequately in terms of doctrine all that God has revealed to us. They would claim that Hindu thought gives a clue to fresh understanding of the Christian revelation, and they would question the Western emphasis on the crucified Christ and urge that more emphasis should be given to the resurrection, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of the new creation. This group is not convinced that the Catholic conception of Church order is integral to the Gospel, but would consider this as a rationalisation of an accident in history and would find their basic conception of the Church in the group of *chelas* following their *guru* (disciples following their teacher). To them it is the personal relationship between the Lord and the disciple which constitutes the essence of Church membership. This group and those who think with them in

India would seem to many Westerners to discount the "once-for-all" element in history when they claim for present experience of God a place in the given element of dogma. The experience of God which comes now through contemplation and the mystical experience is to them of primary importance, and they would point to the experience of a man like the late Diwan Bahadur A.S. Appasamy Pillai<sup>1</sup> to show that the employment of Indian devotional methods such as yoga can lead to more and more immediate experience of God. I have outlined the position of this group at some length, because it is the only purely Indian expression of theological thought which I know. A study of their views and of the difficulties which they feel in Western doctrine helps one to see some important aspects at least of the theological task before the Indian Church.

There are a few others, notably Dr. A. J. Appasamy, who do not belong to this group but who have been working on the interpretation of Christianity to India. Dr. Appasamy's thought has been expounded in a number of books. He would teach for example that Hindu thought in its emphasis on God as *Sacchidananda*, that is, God as truth, pure thought and joy includes elements which are in line with the Christian revelation but have never been expounded by western theologians."<sup>2</sup>

Our attitude to revelation determines our agreement or otherwise with this group. It is a question at once obvious and urgent for all Christians living in a place where another faith is dominant. It is a problem almost as old as Christianity itself whether God reveals or has revealed Himself in any way apart from His people Israel and His Son Jesus Christ. It is perhaps easier to answer this question if one has not had first-hand contact with the real ideas and thought of people of other faiths. When a Christian finds Arjuna greeting Krishna as the gracious self-revelation of God with the words :

"Thou art the Father of the world—of all that move and all that do not move. Thou art the object of its worship and its greatest Teacher. There is no one equal to Thee. How then could there be in the three worlds one greater than Thee, O Thou of incomparable power? Therefore I bow down and prostrate myself before Thee, adorable Lord, and seek Thy grace. Bear with me as a father with a son, as a friend with a friend, and as a lover with his beloved,"<sup>3</sup>

he is moved to ask, as college students frequently are, whether this also is not a true revelation of the one God. The problem of revelation will become more acute as intelligent high-caste theists are converted. It may not be a general difficulty at present, because the vast majority of India's Christians are from the poorer sections of the community who have found new freedom and hope of uplift within the Christian Church and who want nothing in their new religion, words or architecture, music or ritual, to remind them of the depressed state under the

<sup>1</sup> The story of his life is given in *Fifty Years' Pilgrimage of a Convert*, C. L. S. Madras.

<sup>2</sup> See end of article for books by Dr. Appasamy.

<sup>3</sup> *Bhagavadgitha* XI. 42, 43.

old religion from which they are beginning to rise. If there are resemblances in the cults of other faiths to aspects of Christian worship, the majority of Indian Christians would probably be inclined to express the view that even the devil can disguise himself as an angel of light. Almost all would stress the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel and be suspicious of attempts to view these other religions as school-masters to lead India to Christ. Yet this attitude which wants "Gothic" Church architecture and Western tunes, will almost certainly change as India grows into a self-conscious nation, and then questionings will arise about the relative values of the Githa and the Old Testament and all the other problems which stem from the fundamental one of revelation.

When St. Paul and others in the early Church expressed dogma and formulated doctrine, they gave some words in common use a new content, *e.g.*, the words St. Paul used to explain the meaning of our redemption. Occasionally they had to invent new words like *agape*, to express ideas or experiences which were previously unknown in the world. The younger Churches have always had difficulty in deciding the principles which should govern the use of words to express the Christian verities. There is, for example, continuous debate as to the suitability of various words in Tamil to express the Christian conception of God. It sometimes happens that a word was employed in an early translation of the Bible which is now thought unsuitable but which has for Christians acquired a distinctive content. Attempts to change this for a word whose association and meaning is more fitting are looked upon by conservative village Christians with horror, as akin to heresy. One has sometimes felt a wave of feeling run through a prayer meeting when someone has used a word in addressing God which, while intrinsically more suitable, has not been in common use among Christians and is therefore felt at once to be heathen and not judged on its real merits. There are some biblical ideas which are new to the thought of India, *e.g.*, there is probably no one Indian word which adequately expresses what the New Testament means by *ecclesia*, and many feel that a distinctly Christian vocabulary is needed which is based on the Bible words themselves and which could be incorporated into all the vernaculars. In this connection it is instructive to know what was done by the Syrian Church of Malabar, a Church which claims apostolic foundation and which in any event was established by the beginning of the fourth century. It adopted from the Hindu society in which it soon found a recognised place many honorific words which could be used in addressing God, but for those ideas which it did not find already expressed by Malayalam words it used the terms employed in its liturgical language, Syriac. There is thus in present-day Malayalam a large number of words which are pure Syriac. Many Christian words are combinations of Sanskrit and Syriac, *e.g.*, "Holy Spirit" is *Parisudharuha* = *parisudha*—most holy (Sanskrit), *ruha*—spirit (Syriac).

Recent scholarship is adding a great deal to our knowledge of the real meaning of the terms used in the New Testament through its investigation of the common language of the time and the Septuagint. Although the results of this study are generally available in the West,

they have not yet been brought into the thought of the Indian Church. But they must be taken fully into account as this business of forming a more adequate Christian vocabulary is proceeded with. One part of the theological task of the Indian Church, therefore, is to raise up scholars who are familiar with the biblical languages and the results of modern philological research, and who at the same time know their own vernaculars and Sanskrit really well.

Theology, however, needs more than words for its full expression ; it must employ metaphors and illustrations. Up till now Christian theology has been expressed almost wholly in Western terms. A familiar example of this is the doctrine of the Atonement, where we see St. Paul using expressions derived from the background of Jewish Sacrifices, from the everyday practice of slave manumission or from the contemporary law courts. Anselm tries to interpret the Gospel to his contemporary world in the terms of kingship and the social system he knew. The classical (ransom) theory comes from a similar thought-background. Grotius explains the doctrine from the standpoint of international law and so on. The time has surely come when doctrine concerning the dogmas of the Faith must wear an Indian dress and speak a language which is at once relevant and intelligible to the people of this land.

## II.

The same point may be made about the philosophy which has to be assumed in theology. There is no real need to employ the categories of Kant or the thought of Descartes in India. In Indian philosophy many answers have been given to the great problems and it may yet be that the raw material for a Christian philosophy can be drawn as well from them as from the west. Mr. P. Chenchiah (of the ' Re-Thinking Christianity ' group) claims that the categories of Sankara's are better than Aristotle's or Plato's for the expression of Christian philosophy. Others would differ and say Ramanuja could provide a key to interpretation like that which was in Alexandria found in the logos philosophy. An illustration may make the point clear. Salvation, for Ramanuja, is attained by worshipping God in his five manifestations,<sup>1</sup> which are real and not illusory. By such worship, according to one's spiritual capacity, a union with God is attained in which individual consciousness is not lost. It is not claimed that Ramanuja preaches the Christian Gospel ; many points in his teaching are not acceptable ; but some would say that here is a schoolmaster to lead India to Christ, and use of his technical terms, explaining the changes or additions given to their meaning by their new Christian content, is perfectly justifiable. In this task of finding a philosophy which is Indian and not altogether inadequate to express the categories of Christianity, the Indian Christian philosophers may find unexpected allies already to hand. A Christian who studies the work of Sir S. Radhakrishna and other Neo-Hindu philosophers must often feel that what they are offering is a re-presentation of Hindu philosophy in the light of the Christian Gospel. " While Hinduism believes in the divine indwelling and declares that there is no escaping from the divine

<sup>1</sup> See note 1 at end of article.

presence, it does not say that everything is God as we find it. Piccadilly is not God, though even Piccadilly cannot be unless it is allowed by divine activity. There are divine potentialities in even the worst of men, the everlasting arms of God underneath the worst sinners. No one is really beyond hope. Every sinner has a future even as every saint has had a past."<sup>1</sup> In a passage such as this, which has been taken at random from a chapter on Hindu Dharma, a Christian can hardly avoid hearing the echoes of the Gospel. Many other passages could be quoted in which they would be even clearer. It often seems that it has been the impact of the Christian Gospel on these philosophers which has driven them to reinterpret the Hindu system, as a means of defence. We have to turn their attack upon the Gospel into a support, for we must point to the fact that the high idealism they proclaim can be translated into life only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Nothing has yet been said in this article which assumes the Muslim background for Christians which is possessed by the half-million Christians of the Punjab. It seems clear that for them, the expression of dogma in liturgy and theology may be somewhat different from that developed by Christians with a Hindu background. Dogma of course must be the same for both, but their use of metaphor and symbol will differ. Some years ago a certain Indian Baptist minister borrowed an Anglican chapel in the Punjab for an "indigenous" service. Lights were burning in the sanctuary, flowers were offered and various other ceremonies used which were Indian, but Hindu, in their origin. The service was intended only for students, but the report of it soon went out and tremendous feeling was caused among the Punjab Christians. For them such forms were more alien than the ceremonies of the English Prayer Book. The thought forms of those with a Muslim background are also different from those held by people who have been Hindus.

### III.

The theological task before the Church in India may be summarised as follows. It is to distinguish dogma from doctrine and in the light of this distinction to find some new light on the question of revelation with special reference to Islam and Hinduism—and to these especially in their *sufi* and *bhakti* (i.e., mystic) forms respectively. Then the Church has to formulate doctrine in terms which will be intelligible both to the Christian and to the non-Christian. For this task a careful re-examination of theological language and metaphor is as necessary as is the attempt to agree on an Indian Christian philosophy. Theologians must keep in constant personal touch with the two constituencies for whom they work. They cannot be content with any academic isolation. They must be conscious of their membership of the Indian Church and must be living in the life of the Church. At the same time they must be evangelists, trying to carry the Gospel of Redemption to their non-Christian neighbours. Only so can these tasks be tackled seriously. There are probably two places immediately obvious as the centres of such attempts.

<sup>1</sup> *The Hindu View of Life*, Sir S. Radhakrishna : London, 1941, p. 71.

For the first part of the task—the study and expression of theology in relation to the needs of the Indian Church—the writer believes that the united theological colleges which the National Christian Council hopes to see established for every language area, are appropriate workshops. This article is written from the first of such colleges to be established.<sup>1</sup> It serves nearly half a million Christians belonging to Eastern (Mar Thoma Syrian), German Reformed (Basle Mission), English Congregationalist (London Missionary Society) and Anglican Church (C.M.S.) traditions. Most of the work is done together, but there is provision for any one tradition to have separate classes in addition for its own students, if required. Each co-operating body (from September, three of the traditions will be incorporated as three dioceses of the Church of South India, which the Mar Thoma Church is not at present joining) sends a member of staff. The staff works as a fellowship and the aim is to run the college on as simple lines as possible and in close touch with the local Church. In colleges such as these the basis of study is the Holy Scriptures which contain the dogma. In such a place, where different traditions of interpretation meet, an intelligible doctrine must be worked out and propagated through teaching and literature.

A characteristic feature of the Hindu religion for many centuries has been the Ashram. In recent years, Christian Ashrams have been established, usually taking the form of a group of people living in community and dedicated to some form of social and religious service in the villages around. This adaptation is, however, more akin to religious communities of Europe in their early days than to the Indian Ashram, which consists essentially of a group of disciples living round a teacher in order to share his spirit and be taught by him. There is at present one such rishi (teacher) living in South India to whom many convinced Christians have gone and who has strengthened their faith. The writer knows of one European who was brought to an awareness of Christ, of whom before he had been sceptical, after living for a time in the presence of this man. If God calls out Christian rishis or great souls (mahatma) of this type, they will be a most potent force for the evangelisation of caste India and round them will certainly gather communities of disciples. In any event it seems that the second task of presenting the Gospel in intelligible terms to non-Christian India will have to be done partly through Ashrams or through communities of utterly committed disciples.

In the last analysis we can see that the two tasks are one, for it is as the Christian Church comes to certainty of the faith that is in her and is able to give a reason for that faith that she will become conscious of her unity. As she becomes one, the world will be challenged to belief. As the Churches set in the towns and villages of India become communities of love, witnessing boldly by their words and consistently by their lives, the attention of the non-Christians will be caught. The witness of the changed community living in One Lord, one Faith and One Spirit will be a converting factor of almost irresistible power, and the second task, of presenting the Gospel in intelligible terms will be

<sup>1</sup> See note 2.

accomplished. For how should we have known the Word had He not become incarnate ?

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NOTE 1.—The five manifestations of God, according to Ramaneya.

1. Moorthi—images—the lowest and most imperfect manifestation.
2. Partial embodiment—embodiment of God in a living being, such as Rama.
3. Full embodiment—Lord Krishna.
4. God known as Chinmaya—*i.e.*, the subtle all pervading spirit.
5. The Antheriyamin—*i.e.*, the indwelling God. The worshipper recognises that God is dwelling within him, guiding and controlling him.

NOTE 2.—I do not know whether the Editor will think it is fair for me to say that some readers might be able to take a share in this theological task if they could help build the united theological colleges which are now being planned. The Kerala United Theological Seminary, Cannanmoolay, Trivandrum, for example, serving the Malayalam area, is the one referred to in this article. It has been running for five years, but needs buildings and equipment. £11,300 will build the college and endow it with an income to meet its annual running expenses (apart from students' and staff stipends). We have at present no idea where this money will come from, although our need is urgent.

NOTE 3.—Books by Dr. A. J. Appasamy are entitled CHRISTIANITY AS BHAKTI MARGA ; WHAT IS MOKSHA ? ; CHRIST IN THE INDIAN CHURCH ; and THE GOSPEL AND INDIA'S HERITAGE.

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