

Findings of the Theological Consultation on Primal Vision and Hermeneutics in North-East India

Introduction

By hermeneutics we mean the art and science of interpretation, that is, of understanding reality and communicating that understanding—of the Bible, of other sacred texts—but also of reality as a whole, in order to find our way in it.

By Primal Vision we mean that basically religious perception of reality which seems in a measure common to all of humanity before people were shaped by the so-called great religions of the world, and which is the heritage also of the tribes of the hills and plains of North-East India. This heritage, sullied by human sin, always needs recovery and reappropriation.

The purpose of this Consultation was to see whether there was a specific approach which Christians in North-East India with a tribal heritage could make to their task of interpreting Scripture and in understanding and communicating the Word of God in history.

Christians of North-East India come from a hundred different tribes and sub-tribes inhabiting seven different states and administrative units of the Indian Union—Arunachal, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura. The Mishings and Kacharis of Assam, the Adis, the Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya, the Nagas of Nagaland, Manipur and Assam, the Mizos of Mizoram and scores of other tribes share among themselves many elements of culture and socio-economic organisation. Some tribes, as in Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland have become largely Christian, while among some others, such as the Meities, only a small percentage are Christians. All of them, however, share a common predicament, brought about largely by the advance of modern civil administration and governmental structure, as also to a certain extent by the adoption of modern ways of living, especially among the elite with modern education. The tribes have moved from a long period of undisturbed indigenous socio-cultural traditions, through a stage in which the consolidation of British colonial administration exposed them to totally new cultural, political and economic influence, into a period in which, following Indian Independence, there have been tensions created by large-scale influx of non-indigenous peoples and forces into their territory.

The pace of social change has left the tribal people—Christians as well as others—in a state of cultural uncertainty and insecurity of identity. Violence and disorder have spread in some areas at a frightening rate. There is also the fear of being swamped by an uncontrolled immigration of outsiders and thereby becoming a minority in their own homeland. There is apprehension of losing their cultural identity and cherished ways of life. For example, in Meghalaya, a hilly State where only 15 per cent of the land area is available for cultivation, the population grew by 70 per cent between 1951 and 1971, compared to 52 per cent for the whole of India, which is mainly due to immigration.

Nepalis and Bangladeshis have infiltrated in Manipur and other tribal areas and have taken over some of the best lands in Assam. The large inflow of these foreigners and uncontrolled immigration of people from other states pose also serious economic problems for the tribal people. Insensitive handling by the Indian Central and State administrations has shaken the confidence of the less than three million tribal people in the capacity of the government to solve their problems.

It is in this context that the Christians of North-East India have tried in this Consultation to raise some questions about their own self-understanding, as well as their understanding of the world and of the work of Christ in it.

Revelation and the Primal Vision

Within the context of the tribal traditions and cultures in the region of North-East India, the Consultation raised the question, "In what way did God's revelation come to our forefathers? What are the sources of the Tribal tradition of Primal Vision?"

The Consultation affirmed with the writer of Hebrews that "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:1-3).

The primal vision of the tribal peoples is similar to that of primal visions of the Hebrew and all other peoples. Most of the tribes have a concept of the Supreme Being who is the creator of the universe. According to some tribal traditions, human beings have been created by other lower gods and goddesses, some of whom represent the elements of nature. This could be reinterpreted today to mean that human life is integrated with the rest of the cosmos. These lower deities had to be pacified through sacrifices. The traditions of the tribes, their rituals and sacrificial rites, were passed on from one generation to another down the centuries.

Not all was well with the religious practices and social organisation of the tribal communities just as the human elements of sin and rebellion had distorted the revelation of God amongst the Hebrew peoples.

There are no written records of the earlier tribal history of their experience with God, but the oral traditions are very strong and capable of maintaining a faithful continuity amongst the tribal communities. The records of the Hebrew peoples affirm God's presence amongst all peoples and the human rebellion against God. Thus we

affirm God's revelation and presence amongst the tribal peoples also as he has been present amongst Israel and other nations of the world.

The revelation in Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel in North-East India have brought tribal peoples to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

The hermeneutic task comes as a fresh challenge to understand and communicate the reality of Christ, of the world and of ourselves, in the light of

- (a) the heritage of the people of Israel and the Christian community in the world;
- (b) the heritage of Primal Vision revalued and re-appropriated;
- (c) the socio-economic and cultural context in which we live, and our special interests created by that context.

The Consultation felt the need to integrate all these three in the task of interpreting the Gospel in our region.

Securing our Identity

Identity is certainly not fixed or static; it is continuously changing and developing. In our North-East Indian context we see the following four positive elements and two partly negative elements as directly relevant to the problem of securing our identity, which is threatened by the massive forces invading it.

(a) *Geographical roots*: Our life is intimately interwoven with the land—with these hills and plains. We have been sustained by this soil through immemorial ages. Our flesh is of this soil, and the flesh of our ancestors has now become part of it. We do not want to become a minority in our land or to be swamped by the inflow of people who do not share our culture and our tradition. Our identity is linked with the land which secures our freedom as a people.

(b) *Common historical consciousness*: What binds us together as a particular tribe is our sharing a common history and tradition for a very long time. This history and tradition, to which we belong together, form part of our identity, and is the vehicle of our cultural values. We are not ready to merge our heritage with other heritages and thus lose our identity. We also think it is in the interest of the Indian nation as a whole to conserve and enrich these group identities without merging them in a common melting pot.

(c) *Our way of communicating among ourselves*: Our language is a central element in our identity, and to lose our languages would imperil our identity considerably. We need help to strengthen and develop our tribal languages and literature as part of our identity.

(d) *Our ways of dealing with reality*: Our folklore, art and culture, religious beliefs and practices, symbols and rituals, music and architecture are all part of our common identity, and we need to develop and recreate them in order to secure our identity.

As Christians we do not feel a conflict between our Christian identity and our tribal identity. In fact, we find that in Christ we can fully express our tribal identities in a creative way without falling back into some of the inhuman or anti-human practices of our past. The Christian faith does not suppress our cultural identity nor does it impose any kind of uniformity upon us. We can be Khasi Christians, Ao Naga Christians, or Tangkhul Naga Christians, just as there are Irish Christians, Scottish Christians, American Christians, Greek Christians and so on.

Today the drive to secure our identity is intensified, as everywhere also, by two partly negative factors.

(a) There is the external threat to group survival posed by confrontation with massive forces that tend to sweep away group identities into a "mainstream" that now intensifies our struggle for conserving and deepening our identity.

(b) The people's passionate search for identity can also be intensified by the desire for the group to benefit to the maximum extent from the fruit of the common economic productivity of the nation.

We want to affirm strongly our national identity as Indians. Within that framework, however, we want very definitely to conserve our own tribal identity. It is only when our tribal identity is reasonably secure within the nation that we can enter into fruitful dialogue with other religions in the mainstream like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and also begin to contribute freely and creatively to the emerging pattern of cultural diversity within unity in our nation.

The following questions were raised for further study:

I Primal Vision

1. Our own history and culture needs rediscovery and re-authentication, for the thread of tradition seems to have been broken by various factors over which we had no control. How do we go about doing this?

2. Some tribes like the Khasis claim to have experienced a void in their own spiritual heritage, to which the Gospel came as an answer. Was this gap in the nature of our Primal Vision itself, or caused by a failure of that vision? If the latter, what caused this failure already before the advent of the Gospel?

3. What, in our present understanding, are the values and attitudes that we need to recover from our own heritage of Primal Vision, over against the values of individualistic and acquisitive modern culture? What are needed in traditional values?

II Search for Identity

1. In re-appropriating our own heritage, we need criteria for judging what is of value in it, what should be rejected and what should be corrected. Where do we get these criteria? In the Bible itself there are many criteria, some of which, especially in the Old Testament, need to be rejected and others chosen. On what basis do we do this? Our understanding of the Bible itself is conditioned both by our own

heritage, and by what we picked up from the cultures of the Christians who brought the Gospel to us.

2. In the past each tribe has been fairly isolated from the others in North-East India. Today there is a common search for securing and developing our tribal identity. Can all the tribes cooperate with each other in doing this? What is the basis for such cooperation and what are the main obstacles? Can we do this without losing our distinct and separate tribal identities?

3. It is now generally recognized that it was the consolidation and expansion of civil administration, both in British colonial times and in independent India, that partially accounts for the present tensions and for the break up of our heritage. In the future also we cannot reasonably expect to be totally isolated from the rest of India either in economic activity, education, medical and industrial development or in civil administration. How do we protect ourselves from the continuing problems that this situation may create?

4. As we seek to protect our identity over against the cultures that seek to dominate us, it is inevitable that we appropriate and make proper use of modern science and technology based on it. This technology with its patterns of organisation and management has its own dynamic which may be in conflict with our cultural values. How do we handle this problem?

III Challenge to the Churches

1. Christianity has often been blamed for the break up of our cultural continuity, loss of cultural identity and our present tensions with the dominant communities in India. Is this justified? If not, what are the real factors?

2. As Christian churches we have not yet evolved a pattern of Christian life, worship and ministry which integrates all these concerns and appeals to our young people who are often drawn by other interests and attractions that the "mainstream" culture offers. What are the steps to put the churches on the path to evolving such patterns that will both ensure our identity and integrate our young people into that identity and into the Christian church?

3. Good hermeneutics demands that we take into account in interpreting the Scriptures, as well as in understanding socio-cultural, political-economic, and transcendent reality, the three factors of community, tradition and context. The factor which can put these three into creative interaction is the Holy Spirit. What are the steps towards creating a tribal hermeneutics and a Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit that takes all the three factors into account?

4. In several tribes, there are movements to regain their cultural identity by reacting both against Hinduism and against Christianity and recovering the Primal Vision itself, with necessary adjustments, as the religious basis for the tribe's cultural identity. What should be the Christian attitude towards such movements?

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