

(Continued from Vol. 36/No, 2, 1994)

## Gospel and Culture: Some Indian Reflections

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**T**he expressions of the experiences of Subba Rao<sup>98</sup> in confronting Jesus have a unique place in Indian Christian theology not only because he was the founder-leader of a mass movement centered around Jesus but also because in them we are able to identify an authentic Hindu-Christian meeting point. The meaning of the life of Jesus for us is expressed in terms of Advaita Vedāntic convictions in the writings of Subba Rao. Subba Rao was no systematic theologian and what he did in his brief writings was to pour out his experience of Jesus in a fragmentary and poetic way. In this method of doing theology he had the presupposition that Christian religion with its various practices, especially baptism, has distorted the meaning and message of Jesus.<sup>99</sup> Hence in following his Gurudev Jesus, he claimed his foundations to be Jesus Christ alone; beyond doctrines and rituals.<sup>100</sup> Another presupposition which was very strong in Subba Rao was the Advaita Vedāntic conviction that in order to attain to the spiritual realm we have to sacrifice the material realm; forgetfulness of the fact that we are spirit and not body which is ajñāna has to be overcome by its opposite, namely jañāna.<sup>101</sup>

The death on the Cross of Jesus Christ is experienced, and expounded by Subba Rao, as dying to the body and ego, as well as the material world.<sup>102</sup> Jesus on the Cross sacrificed his body and ego and it is in this sense that his death becomes the expression of Love and Sacrifice. Jesus renounced or sacrificed everything in his life and showed us the way of life. Jesus accomplished on the Cross Love and Sacrifice in a fitting manner and his Sacrifice on the Cross is the way, the truth and the Life for us to follow today.<sup>103</sup> God out of His immense love sent the Lord Jesus for the practical teaching that Spirit has to conquer matter; the body has to be made from earthly desires so as to enable God the Spirit to live in it. According to Subba Rao, this is possible, for us humans today by going only the Lord's Way and by His grace.<sup>104</sup>

Subba Rao has not only interpreted the meaning of the life of Jesus from within the Advaita Vedāntic conviction, but his explanation of the Christian understanding of sin and salvation is

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also Advaitic in nature.<sup>105</sup> We are in reality Spirit, forgetfulness of this fact makes us the servant of the body and that is Full and the fallen state is sin. It is a Ajañana or ignorance which has misled us to think in terms of "I" and "Mine". The gist of jañana or realised knowledge is the teaching that "I-ness" binds us and jañana attained through the vision of Jesus makes us forget ourselves and thus removes ajñana.<sup>106</sup> For us who are in the sin of delusion, Jesus gave up the delusion and showed the Eternal Form in all forms. We have to go into the mind of Christ. We have to assume His nature; we have to conquer ourselves like Him and it is such effort which is true worship and prayer. But only the Divine Guru Jesus can help us to arrive at this realization which is salvation.<sup>107</sup>

Thus Subba Rao uses his particular way of understanding Advaita Vedāntic thought in the very construction of his experience of salvation in Christ, going beyond the traditional Christian doctrine of atonement; the only difference of his experience from that of the Neo-Vedāntic experience being in the fact that if for the Neo-Vedāntin the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are universal processes of spiritual life which are being continually accomplished in the souls of humans, for him they though verily so, are today accomplished in the souls of humans through the help of Jesus.<sup>108</sup> Consequently Advaita and Jesus meet each other uniquely in the vision of K. Subba Rao to make him and his movement a channel for authentic Hindu-Christian meeting point. Only improvement which perhaps may have to be made here is in the understanding of Sankara's Advaita. We should remember that the authentic writings of Sankara do not conceive either the existence of a dualism of matter and spirit or the existence of a monism of the spirit. Rather Sankara's thought stands for a non-dualism (advaita) of matter and spirit. Perhaps Subba Rao's thought may have to be remoulded from within the framework of this authentic Sankarite thought in which case the jañana of the self which we attain through self-sacrifice would be not so much the elimination of matter and body as the affirmation as the Self at each level and layer of them; as the affirmation or their essence as the Self.<sup>109</sup> The fact remains that the theology of Subba Rao is another Indian Christian example of an emerging gospel from within a hermeneutical context.

An important finding of our research has been that the interpretations of the relation between gospel and culture provided by both the general Protestant tradition<sup>110</sup> (including the Orthodox)<sup>111</sup> as well as the Roman Catholic tradition<sup>112</sup> fall short of the vision envisaged above regarding the emergence of the new in the interrelation between the gospel and the Indian hermeneutical context. The cases of some individual theologians like Christopher

Duraisingh, A.P. Nirmal, P. Chenchiah, H.A. Krishna Pillai, Aloysius Pieris, and Raimundo Panikkar are an exception to this evaluation. For example Christopher Duraisingh has demonstrated<sup>113</sup> that terms like localization, acculturation, indigenization or contextualization imply the following misconceptions: the gospel is external and alien to us; revising the language of the unchanging Gospel is what is needed; there is a dichotomy between message and context; and we can judge our religious traditions from inside and those of others from outside. But we should note that Indian Christian consciousness is co-constituted by the Judaeo-Christian tradition and elements of our pan-Indian heritage through their continuous confluence; we are Indian *hyphenated* Christians. According to A.P. Nirmal<sup>114</sup> "indigenization" is a contradiction in terms because it is an artificial attempt to make indigenous that which is not indigenous. It implies that Christian theology which is foreign has to be translated in India. Theologically it is also branding God the Creator as a foreigner to our country and culture. What we need is to interpret the indigenous God in our indigenous history in its religious, cultural, philosophical and socio-political aspects in order to arrive at an indigenous theology, for which "Christian tradition" which conceives God in Jesus as loving and just, may give the hermeneutical principles. A prominent aspect of our indigenous history is the sufferings of the Dalits and servitude is the character of the God of the Dalits represented by Jesus. What is needed today is organismic relationship with ecosystems resulting in dialogical paradigm of theologising where different religious traditions will mutually enrich as well as correct each other.

P. Chenchiah demonstrated<sup>115</sup> the possibility of the new emerging in the meanings of the gospel. According to him the gospel of salvation from sin by forgiveness of sins, atonement and reconciliation which M. Kraemer took as absolute need not exhaust human understanding of Jesus; today we have to realise Jesus as the head of anew cosmic order to which we are incorporated through the power of the Holy Spirit. We have to understand the meaning and significance of the Raw Fact of Jesus Christ anew going beyond the doctrines and dogmas of the Church. The living forces of Hinduism and other religions provide a positive key to the still inaccessible riches of Jesus. Without deserting one's own religion, culture and country one can accept Jesus. The thought of H.A. Krishna Pillai<sup>116</sup> was creative in bringing out new meanings on the function of Jesus going beyond the atonement theories. His thoughts, during his conversion experience (1857-59) show that in understanding the work of Christ he was unable to find meaning in the idea of expiation and juridical justification; rather he expressed the function of Jesus as releasing

precious life for humanity and making people his devotees. Jesus was understood as the most decisive paradigm case of radical recentring of life in the true self.

Among the Roman Catholics Aloysius Pieris has pointed out<sup>117</sup> that if we pull oriental techniques of introspection out of the stereological ethos of Eastern religions, we will be committing "theological vandalism". "Oriental spirituality" should not be conceived as a *political escape*, rather it has to be allowed to burst forth as a *prophetic movement*. Separation of religion from culture and philosophy does not make sense in Asian society. So in Christian triumphalism if inculturation means the insertion of 'the Christian religion minus European culture' into an 'Asian culture minus non-Christian religion' that is an impossibility. In Asia what is needed, is not just *inculturation* but "*enreligionization*" of the Church. Raimundo Panikar also has shown<sup>118</sup> that cultural incursions have religious consequences. For example when Christians use the living symbol Om, they are joining the Hindu tradition in seeing It as the recapitulation of the universe. Also a point has been made by the Indian Theological Association<sup>119</sup> that the need today is for inculturation and not interculturation, interculturation being the mutual fecundation and symbiosis that happen in the encounter between two religions/cultures.

There is the possibility of mutual creative enrichment between gospel and particular cultures. In some cases, a mutual critique between particular aspects of cultures and specific understanding of the gospel may be in order. Specific understandings of the gospel as well as particular aspects of cultures can both be ambiguous when conceived in isolation. Mutual correction and reformulation are the needs in India today and we are all for this cause.

(b) *The limitations imposed on creativity*

Other thinkers, both those who are Roman Catholics and who are not, though may be saying some radical in the construction of theology, are really not for the hermeneutical context deciding the content of Indian Christian thought. For Kaj Baago<sup>120</sup> indigenization meant leaving Western Christianity and moving into another religion, another culture, taking only Christ with oneself. Thus Christ here seems to be preformulated. Paul Gregorios has pointed out that Indians resent Indigenisation in the sense of making an aspect of the local culture as a garment for Christian faith; if they can understand Western medicine, science and technology, they can understand the Church's faith also. For him the Church's faith is preformulated.<sup>121</sup> For M.M Thomas<sup>122</sup> again, understanding of Jesus

Christ as the principle of discrimination and coherence is preformulated. According to him if syncretism denotes any interpenetration between religions and between cultures, the Christian goal would be a Christ-centered syncretism. Christ-centered syncretism means Christians are open to interpretation at cultural and religious levels with Jesus Christ as the principle of discrimination and coherence. But the basic question is on the very understanding of Jesus Christ, and this question is not answered by Thomas. A Christ-centred humanism according to Thomas is the ideal open secularism for India; also needed is new non-communal forms of fellowship in Christ. All that is very good provided the problems of a preformulated Christ is solved.

S.J. Samartha<sup>123</sup> again, has called for revision not in the *substance* but in the *formulations* of the Christian faith inherited from a previous era and a different culture. According to him there is a relational distinctiveness of different faiths including Christianity. But we have shown that in the Indian formulations, the hermeneutical context can contribute to the very substance of Christian faith; the division between substance and formulations is an artificial one which in reality does not exist. True, Samartha has provided some positive points like the following: Theological oppression of the South by the North which goes side by side with economic oppression has to stop. Acceptance of the Supreme Reality as a Mystery as well as of a theocentric Christology helps in establishing new relationships with neighbours of other faiths. Advaita helps us to hold together theological diversities. We should affirm the Lordship and Saviourhood of Jesus Christ, but reject the "onlyness" of Christian parochialism. The theory of multiple *avatars* seems to be theologically the most accommodating attitude in a pluralistic setting. But in the matter of a construction of the very content of Christian faith, the contribution of Indian religions are not yet acknowledged by Samartha.

Mention has to be made here that among the Protestant Christians in the second half of 19th century there were attempts in Calcutta, Tinnevely and Madras to create united indigenous churches<sup>124</sup> and these attempts influenced the thinking of Indian Christians with respect to their attitude to Indian culture and religion resulting in efforts to develop Indian Christian theology. *The Bengal Christian Association, the Calcutta Christo Samaj, The Hindu Church of the Lord Jesus, and The National Church of Madras* represented these attempts. But most of the early theological attempts were not going beyond the scope of Incultivism which is in line with the present attempts of Inculturation or Indigenization. Krishna Mohun Banerjea's attempt<sup>125</sup> to present Jesus Christ as the *True Prajapati*

was for example a pioneering one thirty eight years before J.N. Farquhar as it was he who first proposed the "Fulfillment Theory" in 1875. He showed striking parallels between the Old Testament and the Vedas and concluded that Christianity was the logical conclusion of Vedic Hinduism. A.S Appasamy Pillai<sup>126</sup> is remembered as perhaps the first Indian Christian who made use of Indian Yoga technique—both Saiva Siddhantic and Advaita Vedāntic Yoga—in Christian meditation and prayer. In the later part of his life i.e., from the beginning of this century he went through a rediscovery of Hinduism to gain new insights for Christian faith. According to him Hiranyagarbha of Rg Veda prefigures Christ in the conceptions of logos and atonement and this again, only points to the approach of Inclusivism.

The Roman Catholic Church<sup>127</sup> sees the relation between the gospel and culture in terms of inculturation which is in line with the approach of Inclusivism. The term "inculturation" is preferred to the terms "adaptation" or "indigenization". The interpretation given is : "adaptation" signifies external changes; "indigenization" though signifies both external and internal changes, is past oriented and so cannot express dynamic changing aspect of culture, whereas inculturation, it is claimed signifies both external and internal changes as well as a deep sense of belonging to the culture with its past, present and future dynamism.

The National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Center (NBCLC) at Bangalore played an important role in inculturation in the post-Vatican II period. Various attempts were made in India for liturgical inculturation.<sup>128</sup> An Indian Anaphora was prepared and this was approved by the CBCI in 1972; but later the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship disallowed the use of this anaphora. In 1991 a revised text of this anaphora approved by the CCBI—Latin, has been sent to Rome for approval. Bishops of the Latin Rite are encouraging inculturation; in the North Indian region inculturation is taken seriously. But there is a view among some thinkers in India that the inculturation taking place in some Christian Ashrams is nothing but impostures as what is involved is slavish imitation of Brahminical Traditions in rituals, diet, techniques of prayers etc.<sup>129</sup> When we consider the inculturation process in the Third World countries, it should be noted that the EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of third World Theologians) Conferences<sup>130</sup> influenced Latin American perspective to realise the need to include religion and culture in the work of social analysis. The African Church is for the inculturation of the Gospel and Africanization of the Church.

In the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church inculturation is Christianisation of the local culture. The claim is that cultures are

regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel. Theologically<sup>131</sup> inculturation supposes participation in the paschal mystery; religion and cultures should be made to pass through Christ's death and resurrection. The doctrines of Creation Incarnation/ Redemption and the Church are the theological bases of inculturation. All creation is by the Word of God. God found the creation to be good. The seeds of the Word are in all creatures. These are the meanings of the doctrine of creation. The Incarnation of Christ was inculturation. The theology of redemption i.e., incarnation, death and resurrection points to the path of inculturation. The Church continues the mission of Christ through incarnation in a local situation; she interprets the mysteries of the kingdom through the local cultural forms. It is claimed<sup>132</sup> that a genuine process of inculturation facilitates a synthesis of faith and culture; faith purifies culture and culture helps faith to diffuse socially through art, poetry, philosophy etc. Inculturation has to be effected in all the realms of the life of the church such as liturgy, spirituality, theology, ministries, institutions etc. So many elements of truth can be found outside the Church and they have a dynamism towards Catholic unity, which is accomplished through inculturation. Culture and religion always interact and influence each other and as a result inculturation includes religious traditions, as part of the total reality.

According to the document *Redemptoris Missio* (1990)<sup>133</sup> inculturation is not mere external adaptation but intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures. Inculturation has to be guided by the twin principles of 'compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the universal Church'. The document clearly states that inculturation must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith. It is the view of the document that culture, being a human creation marked by sin, needs to be corrected by the gospel. The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991)<sup>134</sup> points out that the Christian message supports many values found and lived in various cultures but at the same time may put to question some culturally accepted values. Through inculturation the Christian message becomes not only intelligible to the local people but it also becomes conceived as responding to their deepest aspirations. The document reiterates the conviction of the II<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council that there are positive values in other religious traditions which have to find their fulfillment in Christ. The Church should prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among people of other faiths, as well as the values in their society and culture. (NA 2)

According to the document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, the concepts dialogue and proclamation though not interchangeable are intimately interrelated, Dialogue makes Jesus Christ better known and proclaiming Him is to be carried out in the spirit of dialogue. Though it is said that through dialogue Christian faith can gain new dimensions, in the overall analysis all the Roman Catholic documents are only for the fulfillment of the cultures through the gospel from the hermeneutical contexts.

Here we should remember that during the 18th and 19th centuries, the Protestant Christian missionary attitude to other religions and cultures also was marked by a spirit of certainty about the superiority of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the doctrines held by Christians. The World Missionary Conference of 1910 at Edinburgh, of course, did not favour an 'iconoclastic attitude' to other faiths. The Second Missionary Conference at Jerusalem in 1928 considered other religious cultures as allies to fight against communism and secularism. The Third World Missionary Conferences at Tambaram in 1938 unfortunately emphasized the discontinuity between the Gospel and the religions, and the missionary theologian Hendrik Kraemer was largely responsible for such a perspective.<sup>135</sup> According to Kraemer<sup>136</sup> the Christian revelation as the record of God's self-disclosing revelation in Jesus Christ is absolutely *sui generis*. The relation of Christian Revelation towards the whole range of religious experience and striving, is not that of continuity, but discontinuity. It is not Christian belief which is absolute but its source and object namely God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Revelation should not be muddled up with intuition. Kraemer was for incarnation and adaptation in the sense of translation, and not in the sense to assimilate revelation to other religious ideas. He opposed syncretism as the illegitimate mingling of different religious elements. It was such a standpoint which creative Indian theologians like P. Chenchiah had to refute.

In the post-Tambaram period many theologians openly departed from the traditional exclusive approach to other religions and this paved the way for dialogue initiated by the World Council of Churches since its Fourth Assembly at Uppsala in 1968. Dialogue is in community and it gives opportunity for authentic witness. At both the Nairobi (1975) and Vancouver (1983) assemblies of the WCC dialogue became a controversial point and at the end of a four-year study programme the Baar Statement in 1990 concluded that dialogue can provide us a fuller understanding and experience of our faith.<sup>137</sup> The relation between gospel and culture was an important issue for controversy in the Canberra Assembly in 1991.<sup>138</sup> The Orthodox and Evangelical delegates pleaded for more theological

clarity in identifying the relation between gospel and culture. The Official Report of the Assembly stated that it is important on the one hand to respect the national and ethnic identities and on the other to preserve the unity of the Church. A coherent ecumenical theology must be faithful to the apostolic faith on the one hand and appreciative of local cultures through which the gospel is expressed and lived, on the other. Thus though the report has said that the influence between gospel and culture is mutual, the main thrust of the Report is to preserve the apostolic faith and the unity of the Church at the expense of the emerging gospel from the local hermeneutical contexts. Here the approach of the World Council of Churches is not different in essence from that of the Roman Catholic Church.

Thus the official standpoint of the Churches, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox as well as the views of many of the theologians are not encouraging the natural manifestation of the gospel from within the local hermeneutical context. Hence the gospelation of the context is the only way out in this crisis. This is happening through the work of some creative theologians. One aspect of the gospel of Indian culture will be the gospel emerging from the Indian hermeneutical context. Indian hermeneutical context contributes to the very content of the gospel revealed in Jesus and such a gospel further ratifies aspect of the gospel of Indian culture namely the fact that the composite culture of India is the outcome of a creative harmonious interreligious interaction.

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128. Cf. Paul Puthenangady, "Liturgical Inculturation in India" *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXIII, No. 135, May 1993, pp. 193–207.
  129. Cf. George M. Soares Prabhu, "From Alienation to Inculturation : Some Reflections on doing theology today in India" in *Bread and Breath: Essays in Honour of Samuel Rayan S.J.*, ed. by T.K. John, Anand: Gujrat Sahitya Prakash, 1991, pp. 55–99.
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  131. Cf. Paul Puthanangady, "Theological bases of Inculturation of spirituality" *op. cit.*, pp. 103–104; D.S. Amalorpavadass, *Gospel and Culture op. cit.*, pp. 18–22; Julian Saldanha, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–41; Joseph Prasad Pinto, *op. cit.*, p. 26–33.
  132. Joseph Prasad Pinto, *op. cit.*, p. 22; D.S. Amalorpavadass, "Inculturation is not Hinduisation but Christianisation" *op. cit.*, p. 112–113.
  133. Cf. *Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Missio of the Supreme Pontiff, John, Paul II on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*, Rome, 7th December 1990.
  134. Cf. Congregation for the Evangelization of people and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Rome, 19th May 1991.
  135. Cf. J.R. Chandran, "Christianity and World Religions—The Ecumenical Discussion", *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol.30, Nos. 3 and 4, July–Dec, 1981, pp. 186–203.
  136. Cf. H. Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938; *Religion and the Christian Faith*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1961; *World Cultures and World Religions: The Coming Dialogue*, London: Lutterwoth Press, 1960; *The Comunication of the Christian Faith*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956; *Why Christianity of all Religions?* London: Lutterwoth Press, 1962.
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