

REVIEW ARTICLE

Mary and Human Liberation

by Fr. Tissa Balasuriya,

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My interest in the personality and power of Mary was first aroused by the reading about the Black Madonna in Poland. She came to represent power and protest. Till that time I had understood Mary in a passive, subservient way. That is how she is usually portrayed in sculpture, painting and poetry. It was just about that time I read Fr. Tissa Balasuriya's book, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979) particularly about the liberation of Women. He mentioned in that context the role of Mary (p. 56). Now I am delighted to read his recent writing about liberation in terms of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It has certainly stimulated my thinking and challenged my teaching ministry.

This is a systematic and sustained presentation of traditional Marian doctrines and a critical and creative reflections on them. It is a genuine effort to critically evaluate and appropriate Marian theology from within the tradition. Nothing about it can be considered insincere and hypocritical. On the contrary, this is an attempt to demonstrate his profound love and respect for Mariology without being superstitious or ritualistic about it. Such a presentation makes Mary a definitive model or a paradigm for liberation and justice for all people everywhere—Roman Catholics and Protestants, Men and Women, rich and poor. He has done this through eight chapters tracing the history and theology of the doctrines as it has developed in the Roman Catholic tradition.

In the first chapter Fr. Balasuriya has shown how this theology has been appreciated in the Roman Catholic Church—in her devotion, prayers, songs and liturgy. Marian apparitions and shrines have made Mary an object of superstition and idolatry. As a result the kind of theology that has evolved over the centuries is individualistic, asocial (non-relational) and even other-worldly. This the bane of this theology. He has made clear his objective—not to dilute, Marian devotion but to make it meaningful and fulfilling for all. But the traditional, Marian devotion has made Mary of the capitalist, patriarchal, colonialist, First world of Christendom (p. 15). Obviously he is very unhappy about it being a Sinhala belonging to the Third World which has been oppressed, exploited and denied justice. In traditional Roman Catholic theology, Mary is considered as the second Eve, freed from Original Sin and therefore her own conception is Immaculate—Holy. As the mother of Jesus, she is considered as the Mother of God (theotokos), co-redeemer, the mother of the Church and of all graces. Out of this train of thinking the various doctrines have developed—Mary, the Mother of God in 432 A.D. at the Council of Ephesus; Virginity of Mary was asserted by Pope Martin I in 649 A.D.; Immaculate Conception was declared in 1854 by Pope Pius IX and her Assumption into Heaven in 1950 by Pope Pius XII. Some of it may be Biblical in origin but most of the Marian theology is the creation of the Roman Catholic Church. It is for this reason Fr. Balasuriya

reminds us of the need to rethink and redefine Marian theology and spirituality. He is not alone in this appeal. Pope Paul VI made a fervent appeal in 1974. He mentioned about Mary as woman of strength rather than a timidly submissive woman (p. 44). Pope John Paul II has emphasized the spirituality of Mary's commitment to justice and the liberation of the weak on the basis of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–56). Even Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger upheld Mary as the image of freedom and liberation. Thus the author rightly writes,

Fortunately modern theology, specially liberation theology sees in the *Magnificat* a spiritual support for the struggles of the poor and the oppressed for freedom and justice. This places Mary on the side of the needy, the weak and the exploited. It has been a great inspiration to the Christian movements for social transformation throughout the world (p. 52–53).

In chapter Four the author shows how Mary presented in the New Testament tradition. It clearly indicates Mary in flesh and blood, loving and caring Jesus and all these around her. Mary would have participated fully in the training and development of Jesus and his message. There was mutuality, authenticity and sincerity about each other as shown in some of the encounters. She followed Jesus in his public life and encouraged him in various ways. So the author asserts,

One of the consequences of the development of Mariology in a 'descending' way i.e. postulating divine maternity, immaculate conception, and virginity, Assumption, is that Mary is not thought of as a human mother of a human son who lived in very ordinary human circumstances, and faced situations similar to those faced by millions of mothers and children even today. This is the damage done by the traditional interpretation of Mariology that makes her mere of a heavenly being (conversing with Angels) than a pedestrian woman of the people (p. 69).

The author clearly delineates Mary's strength of character, her conviction and her perseverance. Mary is the one who offered the life of Jesus as a sacrifice. As the mother her sacrifice is exemplary. She is the one who was the closest associate of one of the greatest spiritual leaders of humanity (p. 79). Thus "a more wholistic approach is required in regard to both God and Mary" (p. 95).

In Chapter Five the author writes about Mary's contributions to the society in general and to the liberation of Women in particular. Such a contribution is possible if she is liberated from Latin captivity and ecclesiastical bondages—from dogmatic assertions and doctrinal definitions. The author writes about the positive recognition Mary has received in the writings of scholars like Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemar, Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth A. Johnson, Lenardo Boff, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Mary Daly and Phyllis Trible. Indeed Mary has to be liberated from patriarchy, hierarchy and denomination (pp. 107 and 121). Then it would be possible to make her a model for political, social and economic liberation.

In Chapter Six Fr. Tissa Balasuriya examines the fundamental presuppositions of Christian theology. He believes that Christian theology for a long period of time has been nurtured and shaped by the ideology of the West. This has resulted in a theology that is basically anti-non-white (pro-white), anti-poor

(pro-rich), anti-people (pro-elite) and above all anti-women (pro-male). For this reason he quotes approvingly Reinhold Niebuhr's assertion,

All human knowledge (including theological) is tainted with an 'ideological' taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge (Taken from his *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, p. 194).

For this very reason he wholeheartedly endorses "a hermeneutics of suspicion" (p. 135) particularly with regard to the traditional doctrine of the Church about Mary. In our interpretation it is imperative that we distinguish between what is historical or what is mythical or imaginative about the understanding of Mary. To overcome the ambiguities, complexities and contradictions in the Bible and Church tradition, Father Balasuriya develops two criteria to evaluate the value and validity of any theology including Christian:-

1. Any element in a theology that insults, degrades, dehumanizes and discriminates against any section of humanity of any time or place cannot be from God in Jesus.
2. (Positively) everything that is truly humanizing and ennobling in any religion or ideology is also ultimately from the divine source (pp. 142-143).

Such a criteria will help us to purify and deepen our faith and focus sharply on the core message or the central teaching of the faith in God communicated by Jesus. From this point of view he does not reject myths as they are essential aspects of all religions but develops the following criteria so that we can discern what is authentic or in authentic about myths:-

- i) if the consequences of a myth are opposed to the human fulfillment of one group.
- ii) if the myth lacks internal coherence.
- iii) if it negates 'the emerging consciousness of humanity.'
- iv) willing to question myths of religions if they contradict in the midst of the plurality of religions.
- v) The ability of a myth or traditional mental construct to respond meaningfully to the new human consciousness regarding sexuality, feminism, ecology, nature, genetic engineering, astro-physics and overall human personality development.
- vi) If a myth or its interpretation tends to deflect the attention of the believers of a religion from the more important issues and obligations of the core values of the religion, it can be harmful to them and others by a neglect of duties and a diversion of attention to less important or less relevant issues (pp. 150-151).

On the basis of the above criteria Father Tissa Balasuriya is very critical of the Theology of Original Sin, of Christology and more specifically Mariology as developed traditionally in the Churches. With regard to the Original, Sin he states.

A. In its Sources

- i) is not directly from the Bible
- ii) is not taught by Jesus
- iii) or by St. Paul as such.

B. Lacks internal coherence, and is not compatible with the goodness of God.

C. In its Consequence

- i) discriminates against females
- ii) discrimination against persons of other religions or no religion.
- iii) it led to a wrong accent in the understanding of mission of the disciples of Jesus and of the Church (pp. 158–159).

He elaborates these points in the subsequent pages (159–178), emphasising the fact that the Christian mission over the centuries have become preoccupied or obsessed with conversion to the Church, doctrines, and not Kingdom-centred, human-centred and Jesus-God-centred. This is the bane or the curse of the traditional Christian Church. In the light of the above the author looks at the doctrine or the dogma of the *Immaculate Conception of Mary* very critically, quoting from Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, St. Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus and then opposing the belief of Mary's holiness at the expense of the rest of humanity (p. 182). He then quotes from the Feminist theologians like Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether who hold Mary, the mother of Jesus, in very high esteem without subscribing to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. They emphasised her humanity, her ordinary motherhood which is dynamic and participatory in character. There is no convincing evidence in the Bible either for Immaculate Conception or for Mary's virginity. Therefore there is no reason to magnify, absolutise or exaggerate these teachings of the tradition of the Church. We should not be dogmatic about these. *But* rejection of these teachings about Mary does not rob her of her greatness or holiness. She becomes universal and universalisable. She cannot remain the monopoly of the Roman Catholics, she becomes the symbol or a paradigm for Feminist theology or even of Liberation Theology. She is no more to be affirmed as an obedient, docile, faithful virgin mother resulting in Marian spirituality that is passive and individualistic. Thus Tissa Balasuriya retrieves Mary from the encrustations of doctrines and dogmas with the help of Feminist theologians like Mary Daly and Rosemary Ruether. He quotes approvingly from Ruether,

Mariology becomes a liberating symbol for women only when it is seen as a radical symbol of a new humanity freed from hierarchical power relations; and not when 'femininity' is seen as the underside of masculine domination (p. 205–206).

From this perspective the author rediscovers the social dimension of Mariology. In the hands of Balasuriya, Marian Theology becomes liberating and life-giving.

Coming from a Roman catholic scholar, I found the book most challenging and relevant, modernising Mary and giving her universal worth and meaning. It is an honest and rational effort to liberate Mary from historical-traditional burden and bondages. I commend and recommend this book as a compulsory reading for all those who want to understand Christian theology as liberating and justice-oriented.

Finally I may mention that John Macquarrie basically endorses and strengthens the theology of Tissa Balasuriya in his recent book, *Mary for all Christians* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992). Like Balasuriya John Macquarrie critically examines the Marian doctrines like the Immaculate Conception, Glorious Assumption and Mary as Corredemptrix and comes to the conclusion that modern Mary combines two value systems, one theological-religious and the other secular Enlightenment—Faith and Love on the one hand and Liberty,

Equality and Fraternity on the other (pp. 121–127). One is writing from the First World, Anglo-Saxon, white and rich nation context and Balasuriya from the Third World, non-white and poor nation perspective. One is a Protestant (Anglo-Catholic) and the other is a Roman Catholic. *But* both the scholars, both the theologians, come to the same conclusion—Mariology must be separated from Christology or Christology must be liberated from the traditional-historical understanding of Mary in terms of Immaculate Conception, Virginity, Assumption and such other doctrines that have deviated or even vitiated the core message or the central teaching of Jesus—worshipping the one God who is loving and demands justice and liberation. Mary must represent or express solidarity with all motherhood or womanhood which will give us a better understanding of a suffering, vulnerable, and crucified God.

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading the book from page to page (and not cover to cover!) and learnt from it enormously. Let there be more such theologians who can be liberated from ecclesiastical authority or pressures and reveal to us the authentic Word of God if not God herself/himself.

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