

Challenging Contexts : A Response

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I am thankful to Vebjorn L. Horsfjord for taking the trouble to read a few of the pages of two of my books and evaluate my thought. Whether he has correctly evaluated my thought or not is a matter of secondary importance. In fact on many points he has not. But that does not devalue my appreciation for his effort to study my thought. He has rightly pointed out the need for inter-contextual dialogue and here I am willing to pursue the same with him in terms of the following points :

1. The basic argument of the paper is that “the context in most cases is not wholly ‘given’, but to a certain degree a result of choices made by the theologising subject. For a theologian the context is not a ‘given’, but a matter of a series of choices and pre-suppositions”. I have never disputed the fact that understanding and interpretation (hermeneutics) takes place in relation to what we are and what our surroundings are. What I am, what my background is, what my community’s history is, what my nation’s history is, is my hermeneutical context and that determines what I understand and interpret. So the point is, my context is never given by anything or anybody external to me, my community, my nation rather it emerges from what I am, what my community is and what my nation is. In other words, the givenness is the givenness of my hermeneutical context, which will surely have its own choices and presuppositions. Context always means one’s hermeneutical context.
2. Hermeneutical contexts are diverse and numerous in India and consequently Indian Christian Theologies/Christologies also will be diverse and numerous, all authentic and supreme in their own realms. Advaita context is just one such hermeneutical context, giving rise to one of the Indian Theologies/Christologies. Advaita Theology/Christology will be authentic and supreme in its own realm as would be Dalit Theology in its own realm. No one in India thinks one is superior to the other. Both are equally relevant and important in their own respective hermeneutical contexts. Of course, while experiencing the Gospel of God in Jesus in terms of one hermeneutical context that experience can claim as correcting other experiences of God in Jesus in terms of other hermeneutical contexts. This does not mean claiming any absoluteness for one perspective, rejecting others. Rather it only shows that absoluteness for diverse perspectives can be claimed by diverse groups of people from diverse hermeneutical contexts. The Hindu concept of ‘*adhikārabhedāiṣṭadevatā*’ best explains this legitimacy to plurality in Indian Christian

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Theologies/Christologies. Wherever I have presented an Indian Christian Theology/Christology from within Advaita Vedānta as the supreme, I have done it only in this sense.

3. One of the basic contentions underlying all my theological thinking has been that there is no preformulated gospel. The Gospel is always in the process of formulation. Indian Christian Theology is always in the process of formulation. Indian understanding of Jesus is always in the process of formulation. There is always the emergence of the new in the understanding of the person and function of Jesus. There are no 'extra-contextual givens' in any Christian theology relating to biblical narratives, God's relationship to creation and the oneness of the church as claimed by Horsford. We cannot accept some timeless interpretation from somewhere and make it applicable to our context. Understanding and interpretation belong exclusively to us and to our context, and there is the possibility for the emergence of new meanings in the process of this. Knowledge of anything is an immediate existential knowledge formulated in the very knowing-process. In our knowing-process there exists nothing externally readymade that can be adapted, indigenised, incultured or contextualised. Adaptation, Indigenisation, Inculturation or Contextualisation of the gospel is an unreality; what really happens is the opposite i.e., gospelation of the hermeneutical context or experiencing the emerging gospel from within a hermeneutical context. Therefore the Western conceptions of Christianity cannot any more signify the self-identity of the Indian Christian, even if many of them became Christians through the work of Western missionaries. Hence we are entitled to make a very radical break with traditional church doctrines and with traditional Christian teachings on points that are often seen as essential to the Christian message. Indian Christians have all the freedom and authority to maintain a radical opposition to the dominant thought systems in which Christianity has developed in the West. This new Theology/Christology emerges in an Indian Christian community, in an Indian church and surely under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as Western theologians are not the exclusive custodians of the Holy Spirit.
4. Consequently theologians in India question two of the guidelines suggested by Horsford namely (a) the choices made by a radically contextual theologian must be guided by a pre-understanding of the Gospel and (b) the theology must be rooted in the church (by which what he means is the Western Church). It is our contention that an Indian theology has to emerge from an Indian Church in the making and not in terms of the particular denominations the theologians may represent. The vision of an emerging Indian church is the focus and not the theology of the denominations in which the theologians have grown up. This is not to deny the fact that Indian theologians may imbibe many an insight from the Bible as well as the diverse histories of Christian faith in terms of one's own hermeneutical context. But the point is, it is not our past church/es which guide/s us to our hermeneutical context; rather it is our hermeneutical context which guides us to the vision of a future Indian church, where there will be of course a diversity of theologies in dialogue with one another. 'One universal church' and 'one universal theology' are illusions of a Western imperialist arrogance which has to be countered by 'contextual faith-communities' manifesting diversity in theological thinking. Of course Indian theologies are open to dialogue with one another as well as with any school of Western theology, but adjusting its understanding as per the demand of a Western school of theology is possible

only to the extent of that Western school's adjusting understanding as per the demand of an Indian theology.

5. Horsfjord has failed to present my interpretation of Jesus correctly because he has yet to study my book *An Indian Jesus from Śaṅkara's Thought* (Calcutta : Punthi Pustak, 1997) where a Jesology is presented in elaborate details. My life and thought has been always Jesus-centred and therefore to interpret my thought on Jesus as pointing away from himself to God would not be correct. The whole struggle of my life in the last twenty five years has been to experience and interpret who Jesus is. Had Jesus been not important for me I would not have involved in such a wholehearted struggle. What I have shown is, the significance of Jesus lies in his denial of any significance for himself through complete self-sacrifice and Advaita Vedānta provides a theological basis for this self-sacrifice of Jesus and thus explains his meaning for us: It is Being Himself/Herself who is perceived in a form other than His/Her own namely Jesus and hence we should not make any assumption of anything other than Being at any time or place. For those who know the real character of the rope and clay, the name and idea of serpent and jar cease and in the same manner for those who know the real character of Being, the name and idea of Jesus cease. We have to sacrifice ourselves as Jesus did to discover our reality as Being. My interpretation of Jesus as the extrinsic denominator (*Upādhi*), name and form (*nāmarūppa*), and effect (*kārya*) of Brahman affirms this relation of total dependence on the part of Jesus upon Brahman. The function of Jesus I have further interpreted as to manifest the all-pervasive, illuminative and unifying power of the Supreme Ātman, as to manifest that the Supreme Brahman as Pure Consciousness is the Witness and Ātman of all and as to manifest the eternally present human liberation. Such an interpretation paves the way to understand the work of Jesus in a novel way, different from what the Atonement theories have tried to present and thus new meanings are shown as emerging regarding the person and work of Christ through Advaita Vedānta.
6. Horsfjord again has not understood my interpretation of Advaita as he is yet to study my book *The Relevance of Relation in Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedanta* (Delhi : Kant Publications, 1996). I have clarified in detail that Śaṅkara's thought presents an ideal, integral, God-World-Human relationship. Without minimising the significance of human life on earth, of the world in which we live, of history, Advaita points to the meaning and purpose of these in relation to the Ultimate Reality. According to it creation which includes humans is the effect, name and form and extrinsic denominator of Brahman-Ātman. The Ātman pervades, illumines and unifies the whole world, the whole of history and the entire human personality. This pervasion, illumination and unification is the true knowledge and liberation, and not the dissociation of the Ātman from the senses and the elements. Ātman is always the innermost reality of the senses and the elements of humans and the material world. Also, to say that individuals (*jīvas*) are partly Brahman and partly *māyā* (illusion) would be a distorted picturing of Advaita. Jīva is never Brahman, rather jīva's innermost reality is Brahman. Also, neither the material body-senses-mind-intellect-ego nor the material world is an illusion in Advaita, rather illusion lies only in our projection of these as Absolute, if at all we do that. There is integral relation between humans and Nature in terms of the five elements. Unity is on the basis of *tādātmya* or non-reciprocal dependence relation between jīvas and Brahman. In Advaita on the one hand there is

total dependence of human person and the rest of creation upon Brahman-Ātman and on the other there is total grace from the part of Brahman-Ātman upon humans and the whole of creation. The reality of humans and the world is totally derived from the Supreme Ātman. In Advaita, relation between Brahman-Ātman and creation which includes jīvas is total, and it is this relation which gives meaning to human life and fulfilment to creation and therefore Advaita is not just for a small intellectual elite group as has been misunderstood, but for all. The need of the hour is a correct interpretation of Advaita and its contemporary relevance, namely the relevance of relation, for the purpose of present-day celebration of human life on earth. Sanskrit language, like Advaita is the glory of Indian religion and culture, it being the mother of many mother tongues and the symbol of Indian civilization. To be in touch with Sanskrit is to be in touch with our roots.

7. To say that my theological writings are limited to Christology again only shows that Horsfjord has to read some more of my books. For example, *The Role of Pramāṇas in Hindu-Christian Epistemology* (Calcutta : Punthi Pustak, 1991). In this work I have indicated an Indian Christian epistemology in terms of the Indian philosophical schools, especially Advaita Vedānta. I have indentified the important meanings of all the six *pramāṇas* (sources of valid knowledge) of Indian Philosophy namely perception, inference, scripture, comparison, postulation and non-cognition in order to discover these *pramāṇas* as sources of valid knowledge in Indian Christian theology so that an authentic Indian Christian theological method as well as an understanding of Indian Christian sources of authority may be clarified for the benefit of all the Indian theological constructions. If scripture (*śabda*) can be classified under revelation, the other five *pramāṇas* come under reason and there is an integral relationship between reason and revelation in Indian epistemology and consequently in Indian Christian thought. Perception (*pratyakṣa*) proclaims the integral relation between humans, nature and the Innermost Reality Ātman and makes theology rooted in day-to-day experience. Inference (*anumāna*) challenges us to identify the invariable concomitances (*vyāptis*) in Christian theological issues in terms of the present day Indian context. A word (*śabda*) signifies the universal class character (*jāti* or *ākṛti*) over against the particular (*vyakti*) and so we are enabled to cross over from the particular Bible to the universal Bible, avoiding dogmatism. On perceiving Jesus to be like the person pointed out by the Old Testament and the Upaniṣads, we come to know that the Old Testament and the Upaniṣads definitely point to Jesus through comparison (*upamāna*). By means of postulation (*arthāpatti*) we can arrive at theological statements that explain seemingly inexplicable phenomena in Christian Theology and Non-cognition (*anupalabdhi*) recommends an apophatic Indian Christian theology.
8. In another work *A Convergence of Advaita Vedānta and Eastern Christian Thought* (Delhi : ISPCK, 2000) I have indicated how Advaita Vedānta can dynamically enrich Eastern Christian Thought in its further developments. For example the insight that Brahman/Ātman pervades, illumines and unifies all the levels and layers of human personality as well as the whole of creation enables Eastern Christian Theology to arrive at new insights regarding the energies of God through which God is knowable and through which deification is actualised. The *neti neti* theology of Advaita, the experience of Brahman/Ātman as the subject and knower of all and every thing and who cannot be

known, enables Eastern Christian Theology to develop its apophatic theology. The Orthodox conception of deification is enriched through Advaitic insights. Deification is in terms of the implantation (*mayah*) of the Ātman in the five human sheaths. The luminous Ātman (*ātmajyotiḥ*) imparts His/Her lustre to the intellect and all other organs and thus deification is effected. Brahman/Ātman unifies everything and every one in His/Her homogeneity (*ekarasata*) and the result is again deification. Brahman/Ātman as Pure Consciousness and Witness pervades, illumines and unifies the whole human person by means of His/Her reflection in it. The awareness that Brahman/Ātman Himself/Herself is reflected at all the levels of our personality gives new vigour to the interpretation of human person as created in the image of God, taught by Eastern Christian theology. The divine willing, the ideas of created things, the *logoi*, the words, are in the energies of God and not in His/Her essence. The Advaita Vedāntic view that before creation this universe pre-existed in Brahman as potential seed (*bījaśaktiḥ*) and undifferentiated name and form (*avyākṛtanāmarūpa*) clarifies this understanding of creation in the energies of God.

9. Also, I have tried to clarify a particular approach in theology of religions entitled Pluralistic Inclusivism (cf. *Theology of Religions. Birmingham Papers and Other Essays*, Calcutta : Moumita, 1998) which is important as the basis for all my theological thinking. It is an approach which is totally open to receiving insights from other religious experiences and theologies. What is suggested is, to go beyond a comparative approach to an inter-relational approach as religious traditions are not static finished products, rather dynamic inter-related experiences of growth. Pluralistic Inclusivism stands for dialogical theologies that encourage the relational convergence of religions, conceiving on the one hand the diverse religious resources of the world as the common property of humanity and on the other a possible growth in the richness of each of the religious experience through mutual inter-relation. Pluralistic Inclusivism is an attempt to make Christian faith pluralistically inclusive i.e., the content of the revelation of God in Jesus is to become truly pluralistic by other faiths contributing to it as per the requirement of different places and times and it is through such pluralistic understanding of the gospel that its true inclusivism is to shine forth. Here pluralism transforms itself to focus on its centre which is God as God in the universally conceived Jesus and inclusivism transforms itself to bear witness to the fulfilment of the Christian understanding of Christ in and through theological contributions from people of other faiths. The basic affirmation here is that there is a possibility of the fulfilment of the theological and spiritual contents of one's own faith in and through the contributions of other living faiths.