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Theological reflection is the search for the meaning of the present in the light of God's unchanging Word. That which distinguishes a particular type of theology is its method, themes and emphasis. It is in this sense that evangelicals in Asia can engage in theological reflection. The product of such an enterprise is a theology that must be biblically oriented and responsive to the issues and challenges posed by each situation in Asia. As a pilgrim and prophetic community, God's people in Asia must continually pursue the hermeneutical task of relating God's Word to the total context, discerning where the Spirit is leading and being alert to the burning issues of the day.

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Towards an Evangelical Theology in India

by Sunand Sumithra & Bruce Nicholls

INTRODUCTION

A clear grasp of and a genuine commitment to evangelical theology which seeks without reservation to be faithful to the Bible as the Word of God is our first priority in attempting to develop "an evangelical theology in the context of India and Hindu cultures". A second priority is a sympathetic understanding of Hindu cultures and of the historical moment in contemporary India. Thirdly, we take the Church as the people of God seriously in our theological task. Therefore we want to reflect carefully on the strength and weaknesses of earlier and current attempts at formulating theologies and evaluate them both from the normative standard of Scripture and the response of the churches as they have sought to implement such a theology in the fulfilling of the church's mission in the world.

We affirm that good theology faithful to the Scripture and relevant to a particular cultural situation cannot be done from a distance. The task of formulating theology must be done in the context of worship and a right relationship to God on one hand and in the context of a commitment as Christ's disciples in his mission in that particular situation. God himself did not consider solving the problems of the human predicament from a distance. He became incarnate, identified with us, lived as a servant, was crucified on a cross and rose again from the dead for our salvation. In the spirit of worship and personal involvement as God's fellow-workers we take seriously and sympathetically the effort of other theologians in India to bring the Good News to those without the knowledge of Christ. We bring their insights and achievements along with our own to the foot of Christ and the judgement of his inscripturated Word. Therefore, in this paper we seek to describe some of the vital cultural issues which we in India face and analyze our own part in them. We then reflect on the questions that these issues ask of biblical theology. We then seek to evaluate some of the methods and answers that Indian theologians have given in this dialogue between context and text. Finally, we want to suggest some

guidelines faithful to Scripture which will help us in developing an evangelical theology relevant to Hindu cultures.

SOME VITAL QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Sensitivity to the Realm of the Spirit

In contrast to the materialistic world view and secular ideologies that **p. 173** are engulfing the world the Hindu approach is still predominantly spiritual. For Hindus reality belongs to the realm of the spirit. A spirit-conscious Hindu is ready to renounce his earthly life and relationships and sacrifice all worldly ambitions in the search for spiritual realization. The appeal of sadhus and sanyasis (the wandering gurus and ascetics) continues as a great ideal. This is why Hindus are attracted towards the person of Jesus as the great ascetic, the great guru, the yogi. His cross is interpreted as a supreme act of self-sacrifice.

This spiritual sensitivity is a challenge to much of our theological thinking and values as they have developed not only in the west but also in India. Those elements of spirituality which are affirmed in biblical revelation need to be preserved by Indian Christian theologians. They are not only an antidote to the materialistic and secular ideologies of our time but challenge us to theologize in spirit and in truth. The Christian caught in a spirit of consumerism becomes a major stumbling block to Hindus coming to Christ. They say yes to Jesus but no to the Christian church. Where the spirit of self-sacrifice and willing acceptance of suffering is seen in the life-style of the Christian community they become bridges to the Hindu mind and heart. However, this search for spirituality can become a stumbling block unless the biblical understanding is made abundantly clear in word and deed. Mahatma Gandhi wept at the sight of the cross, for to him it was a supreme principle of self-sacrifice. Many young Hindu men today wear a cross for similar reasons.

QUESTIONS RAISED BY INDIAN PATRIOTISM

In 1947 when India became freed from British colonial power, India became one nation as never before in all her ancient history and she became *independent* as never before in modern colonial history. Though the early Christian patriots, like Kali Charan Banerjee and K. T. Paul wisely avoided forming communal Christian political parties as the Hindus and Muslims have done, this has sometimes being interpreted by our Hindu neighbours to mean a lack of patriotism. This has led to the saying that every new Christian is a loss to the nation as a citizen. This is confirmed in cases when new converts who formerly were active in public life now withdraw and devote themselves primarily to spiritual ministries. At the same time Christians have a good record of being mediators in situations of bloody Hindu-Muslim riots and their efforts to preserve national unity have often been recognized. With conversion to Jesus Christ as Saviour **P. 174** and Lord, nationalism ceases to be our god. We do not cease to be Indian citizens. As was true of the early Church we will seek to be loyal to our rulers and motivated by love and compassion for the welfare and progress of our poor and especially the down-trodden.

THE QUESTION OF INDIVIDUALISM IN SOCIETY

The basic unit of most Indian cultures is the extended family. Important decisions such as marriage and education are decided within the circle of the family or the local community. Decision-making is rarely a private act. The extended family of several generations gives

a sense of identity and belongingness both to children and to the elderly and is in accord with the biblical understanding of family. Paul Sudhakar, a well-known Christian evangelist in India, testifies that he was converted through reading in Matthew's Gospel the genealogies of Jesus Christ back through David to Abraham. This impressed on him the importance of Jesus Christ. Understanding this pattern of society became an important factor in developing a theology of conversion and of disciple-making. On the other hand, the denial of the rights of the individual, particularly of women, reinforced by ideas of *karma* and *Sansara* can lead to intolerable suffering and fatalism. It is the Gospel which focuses on the worth of the individual in the sight of God. The shepherd spares no effort to find the one lost sheep in a hundred.

THE QUESTION OF CASTEISM AND COMMUNALISM

We feel that casteism is the great curse of our nation next only to idolatry. We are painfully aware that legislation fails to alleviate caste distinctions and the intolerable burden of dowry which is only one of its consequences. We confess that as Christians we have failed in the struggle against the stranglehold of casteism which functions inside the Church as well as outside of it. In our caste-conscious churches there is a lack of inter-caste marriage. Caste discrimination affects church elections and the training for the ministry. However, we thankfully acknowledge that in some areas this is fast changing.

Communalism which is often seen as a necessity of survival is also a major cause of national disintegration. The Christian community had not always succeeded in its fight against communalism. It has made the Church hesitant to welcome converts from other communities, and unwilling to share the benefits accrued by the Christian community from the foreign missionary movement or from their own resources. The recent Harijan conversions not to Christianity but to [p. 175](#) Buddhism and to Islam have opened the eyes of the Hindu leaders to the evils of the caste system and stand as an indictment against casteism in the Christian community.

In order to defend Christian conversion against charges of proselytism it must be shown that becoming a disciple of Christ is not the same as changing one's allegiance from one religious community to another. While recognising that motivation for Christian conversion is never purely spiritual, every effort must be made to ensure that it is primarily so. Christian discipleship is the change of allegiance from all forms of idolatry to commitment to Jesus Christ as Saviour, apart from material and communal benefits.

QUESTIONS OF POVERTY AND OPPRESSION

The all-pervading social issues in India today are abject poverty and religious, social, economic and political oppressions. It is estimated that 60% of the population live below the poverty line and the number increases year by year. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening. In Bombay, which is our richest commercial city, it is estimated the 40% of the population live in approximately 1,600 slum colonies. Dehumanization, the loss of human dignity, hopelessness and despair, fatalism and hate are to be seen to be believed. One of the major causes of this widespread suffering is unemployment. But we agree with the economist E. F. Shumaker that India's economic problems are ultimately moral problems. Poverty and oppression stem from human greed, bribery and corruption among politicians, merchants, social workers, police and even the courts. We confess with shame that the Church has been largely silent. But we also believe that the only hope for India is in a renewed and growing Church, insofar as it is the sign and agent of the Kingdom of God, God's reign on earth.

Where the Church is true to its nature and calling, it becomes the conscience of the community, restraining evil and bringing hope to the poor and oppressed. Its ministry is a moral force rebuking evil rather than a political agent conscientizing people towards revolution. The human heart is individually and collectively sinful. To the Church is given the Good News that Christ can change human nature and the moral behaviour of families and communities. The fact that poverty and oppression are increasing in our contemporary society makes it immoral for the Church to keep silent or to withdraw from its social responsibility. p. 176

THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS RAISED BY CULTURAL ISSUES

As evangelicals we believe it is legitimate to begin our theological process by studying our own society, listening to the questions that our cultures raise and then going to the Bible for guidelines and answers. In this dialogical process we quickly discover that the Bible has its own agenda and that it not only gives guidance in the issues which our cultures raise but it also raises its own set of questions. The Bible as the revealed Word of God has an inherent balance between the divine and the human as expressed in the two great commandments “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “love your neighbour as yourself”. ([Matthew 22:37, 39](#)). Because of the limitations of our humanity, theologians have the tendency to focus primarily on either our vertical relationship to God or our horizontal relationship to our fellow man. When we hold to one and neglect the other we distort the Gospel. This is the history of theology both in the West and in the Third World. It is true of both evangelicals and liberals.

In the context of our search to develop an evangelical theology in the context of Hindu cultures we limit ourselves to reflection on three theological questions which the Scripture asks the cultural context.

PERSON VERSUS PRINCIPLE IN CHRISTOLOGY

“Is Jesus Christ God incarnate, or a prophet or a deluded mystic or a cosmic ideal?” is a question countless people have asked in every culture. Hindus have always been fascinated with the figure of Christ. Is he a person or is he a principle? For Keshab Chandra Sen, one of the early leaders of the Brahmo Samaj, Jesus Christ was a “divine humanity.” In his lecture “India asks: Who is Christ?” (1979) Sen portrays Christ as “the prince of idealists.” He exhorted his hearers to “be Christ”. His aim was “to make every man Christ.” Mahatma Gandhi, whose admiration for Christ is well-known, said he did not care if there lived a man called Jesus or not. The sermon on the mount would still be valid for him. For Vivekananda, Christ was the greatest teacher of the world for he both taught and practised Godrealization which is the universal gospel of mankind. He is pure soul and his suffering a *prasad* offered to God. It is clear for both orthodox and reforming Hindus that Jesus the man is but a symbol for a cosmic ideal, a symbol for the divine principle of self-sacrifice. Hindus do not deny that Jesus is a historical person, but they deny the significance P. 177 of such historicity for the principle of Christhood. Only the ideal is real, all else is *maya* or illusion.

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, on behalf of them all replied, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God,” ([Matthew 16:16](#)). Christian orthodoxy affirms Peter’s confession that Jesus Christ is none other than God incarnate in history.

THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN CONTEXTUALIZATION AND SYNCRETISM

Hinduism challenges the Christian claim to uniqueness by using analogies drawn from human observation to show that all religions are equally true and all ultimately lead their devotees to God and to bliss. All appearances of diversity are only relative manifestations of the Universal. In the thought of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the late philosopher President of India, the mystical experience is the universal religious experience.

The biblical response to this challenge is a call to faithfulness to God's self-revelation in scripture and to relevance in the diversity of our cultural contexts. The attempts of Indian theologians to take the Gospel out of its Hebrew cultural framework and pour it into the cup of one or more Hindu religious philosophies and lifestyle is fraught with dangers unless the relationship between content and form, text and context, is itself controlled by the parameters of biblical revelation. This two-way dialogue between the Bible and the cultural context must be contained in a one-way movement of communicating the Word of God to man. Symbolically, it may be spiral rather than linear, but at heart its message is always eschatological. Too often Indian theologians have made the Hindu religious cultural framework primary and the biblical content secondary. The boundary between true contextualization and false syncretism depends on exercising the prophetic rebuke of the Christian faith, judging what is contrary to revelation, purifying and transforming what reflects God's work as creator and bringing to all men what is new in salvation history.

RELATING NEW LIFE IN CHRIST TO JUSTICE IN SOCIETY

The enormity of human suffering and social injustice in India challenges the Christian to face the issue of the relationship of proclamation and evangelism to social service and justice. To proclaim a Gospel of a loving God without compassion and love for one's neighbour and vice-versa is a truncated gospel that falsifies God's **P. 178** Good News. The Bible recognizes that mission is reconciling men both to God and to one another. If we close our eyes to the suffering of the poor and the oppressed they will block their ears to our Gospel of salvation in Christ. Biblical salvation is for life now as well as for life after death. Evangelical theology must show the relationship between the two.

EVANGELICAL REFLECTIONS ON SOME INDIAN THEOLOGIAN

In this section we confine ourselves to some broadly representative theologians who have pioneered new frontiers in Indian theology.

A. J. APPASAMY (1891–1957)

Bishop Appasamy is well-known for his attempt to interpret John's Gospel in terms of *bhakti marga*, or the way of devotion and surrender to God. His early writings *Christianity as Bhakti Marga* (1928) and *What is Moksha?* (1931) largely reflected his liberal theological education in the west, while his later writings and ministry as a Bishop of the Church of South India reflect the heart of an evangelical pastor. The ground of his earlier work was that just as the New Testament in its Hebrew cultural form assimilated Greek culture, so the Bible can assimilate the best of Hindu culture. Appasamy maintains that God was preparing to reveal Himself to India through the long spiritual heritage of India. Thus, he seeks to show how John's Gospel corrects the abuses of *Bhakti*. He makes frequent use of Ramanuja's use of the analogy of body and soul to show that the universe

is the body of God. Body is that which is totally dependent and subordinate to soul. Using this analogy, Appasamy seeks to show that the logos is God filling all and again that Christ's relationship to the father is one of dependence and subordination. The sacraments are the body of Christ and so likewise is the Church. His attempt to interpret biblical salvation in terms of release from *karma* is equally limiting and unsatisfactory. *Bhakti* has no real place for grace and the forgiveness of sin, while *karma* rejects the possibility of substitutionary atonement. Thus Appasamy's emphasis on the immanence of God without a corresponding emphasis on the transcendence of God in revelation leads to reductionism. The context shapes the content of the text itself.

Appasamy acknowledges his indebtedness to Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889–1929), the faith mystic of Indian Christian spirituality. His unusual spiritual power, his obedience to the call of Christ, his joy in suffering and his christocentric faith were an inspiration to p. 179 Appasamy, as they have been to countless other Christians. While aspects of his trance experiences and visions of the spiritual world and his sadhu lifestyle may be questioned, his devotion to Christ, his desire to submit to the authority of Scripture, kept him on a more even keel. He used parables and symbols to express his faith but not as its ground. However, because of the limitations of his hermeneutical method, his understanding of biblical doctrine may be questioned.

BRAHMABANDHAH UPADHYAYA (1861–1907 AND RAYMOND PANIKKAR 1918–).

These well-known representatives of Catholic scholarship were attracted to the task of reconciling Thomistic theology with the Vedantic monism of Hinduism. Brahmabandhah (a friend of Brahman) sought to find the meeting point of pure Christianity and pure Hinduism in the Trinity as Saccidananda (Being, Consciousness and Bliss). However, such natural theology has little Good News for those bound by sin and guilt or suffering from poverty and oppression. Raymond Panikkar in his famous book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, (1964) looks for the same synthesis but in a modern existential framework. History as subjected to the symbolic and the grammatical-historical exegesis of Scripture is subject to the principle of analogy. The cosmic Christ is the fulfilment of the Hindu mystical search for reality. His dialogue with Hinduism is on Hinduism's terms.

P. CHENCHIAH (1886–1959)

Chenchiah as a leader of the "Rethinking Christianity Group" known for its radicality is undoubtedly one of the most original thinkers in contextualizing the Gospel message in the Indian context. He sought to synthesize the biblical message with insights gained from the gnosticism of Aurobindo and with the emergent evolution of naturalistic science. His starting point is what he calls "the raw fact of Christ", whose humanity is permanent and who is a bridge between God and man. Christ is the beginning of a new order of creation and salvation or union with Christ is "reproducing Christ" or "becoming Christ." This somewhat mystical experience is achieved by the yoga of the Spirit. Thus, according to Chenchiah we are saved not by the act of Christ, but by the FACT of Christ, not by the Cross but by the Incarnation. In the process of evolution Christ brings a new creation order for man. Chenchiah had little sympathy with the P. 180 organized Church believing that it usurped the kingdom of God. He writes that on the day of Pentecost, the Church gained three thousand souls but the kingdom of God lost them. While Chenchiah's theology is creative and responsive to many Hindu concepts, its biblical rootlessness leaves it powerless to bring India to Christ.

M. M. THOMAS

Perhaps the most important Indian theologian is M. M. Thomas. The approach of M. M. (as he is affectionately known) is we believe an excellent example of the ideologization of the gospel. Having come out of the struggle for independence and nation building he tailored his theology to be relevant to these struggles. However, M. M.'s uniqueness lies in the fact that he was also involved in the struggle to evolve a relevant theology of mission both at national and international levels. In broad terms his approach may be summarized in four steps:

- (i) His starting point is *man's quest*. He analyzes what man is searching for and discovers that the primary search is for human dignity, freedom, creativity and meaning in history.
- (ii) he then asks: what is *Christ's offer* to these quests? He responds that Christ is offering exactly those things for which man is searching. Christ is the new man, the new humanity. Humanization is the most relevant point of entry for dialogue between Christianity and other religions.
- (iii) then what is the *mission of the Church*? It is to participate along with Christ in the liberation movements of our time, so that man may receive what he is searching for. The confession of participation is the essence of the mission of the Church.
- (iv) finally what is the *goal of humanity*? It is the humanity of mankind leading ultimately to a just world society. This utopian world society is at best the preparation for the coming kingdom of God, for the kingdom of men is necessary raw material for the kingdom of God.

M. M.'s "living theology" is always situational "born out the meeting of the living church and its world". Such a theology is always in the direction of synthesis. And so starting with the analysis of the human situation for which a vision of the world society is set as the ultimate goal, M. M. uses Christ and the Church as a means in a programme of action to achieve this goal. This is clearly an ideologization. p. 181

SOME GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

From this discussion of text and context it becomes clear that the starting point of our theology must be the biblical doctrine of God as Creator. The Hindu denial of creation, of history and the portrayal of the earthly life as *maya* or illusion is one of the root causes for a lack of social ethics. Even Hindu leaders such as Dr. Radhakrishnan have felt the need to reinterpret *maya* to give history reality and validity. This worldly life is not an illusion but a second reality in order to receive *monksha* or salvation. The biblical doctrine of creation is the best antidote to *maya*. The world, mankind and history have reality and moral purpose because they are the creation or outworking of a holy creator God. Men and women are of the utmost importance because they are created in the image of God for fellowship with God. The fact of the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the clearest evidence that history is the arena of God's actions. Promise and fulfillment in the coming of Christ is the strongest evidence that history has divine meaning. The Word became flesh and we beheld his glory full of grace and truth. The God of the Bible is, as Martin Luther repeatedly emphasized, the God of action, a God of history.

This has already led us to our second major concern of God as Saviour. He is the Creator-Saviour God, for salvation is all of grace from first to last. The failure to recognize

the work of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Creator and Redeemer lies at the root of much of our theological failure. The fact of the universal fall of mankind from righteousness into seeking to claim equality with God, in rebelling against his law, brings us under the just wrath of God. It points to the need of a covenant-making God to restore man not only to his original image but to the new fullness in Christ to which the resurrection points. This eschatological hope of the coming reign of God, of the perfection of his body the Church, and the ultimate new earth and new heaven wherein dwells righteousness, is the Good News which God offers to all.

One way of developing this God-centred and God controlled theology is to think of it as Word of God theology, not in the circumscribed limits that Barth gave to that term but, in the fullness of Scripture in which the Word of God is revealed through written propositional truths, in the living Word of Jesus Christ, God's final Word to mankind and in his acts in history preparing and creating a new people of God unto his praise and glory.

It is therefore the Word of God that maintains the harmony of [p. 182](#) proclamation, of life style, of action and reflection. It is a theology of reconciliation and liberation now and in the world to come.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, revelation is a process of interiorization while in Islam it is flat impersonal propositionalism. In Christianity, revelation is verbal and prophetic, historical and eschatological. It is supremely personal because Jesus Christ is the living personal Word of God.

In the dialogue between the Christian faith and other faiths the distinction between God's general and universal revelation as Creator and Law-giver and his special and saving revelation as Redeemer is both valid and necessary in discussing religious truth and the uniqueness of salvation in Jesus Christ. The loss of this distinction in revelation opens the door to universalism.

The theology of the Word of God is one of judgment and fulfillment. Christ through the cross brought judgment on all forms of idolatry and sin and in his resurrection points to fulfillment and the new creation. The hope of the resurrection is indeed good news to those who despair of the body and are imprisoned in endless rebirths. The early Church was excited by the good news of the resurrection and it is equally exciting for today's hearers. But to talk of the resurrection without the cross is to reduce the gospel to the determinism of Allah who destines men and women to heaven or to hell. Apart from the cross we cannot understand the meaning of grace. It is found in other religions but apart from the cross it can never be more than an aid to the keeping of the law. A theology of the Word of God is a theology of grace and forgiveness, faith and hope, love and compassion.

Such a theology is not the possession of a few individuals but is manifest in the Church, wherever it is truly the sign of the kingdom of Christ and a model before the watching world. The Church as the body of Christ is his agent in the world as salt and light, as the conscience of society restraining evil. It is the place where the Word of God is actualized, where culture is judged and transformed, ever looking forward to the perfect culture when Christ returns to usher in the kingdom. Only a mission-theology flowing from the Church as God's people will be adequate to meet the spiritual and social need of India and of the whole world. Our theology must be a confessing theology of the Word of God. [p. 183](#)