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Reflection on Theological Hermeneutics in the Indian Context

CHRISTOPHER DURAISINGH*

Perspective

The term "hermeneutics" has been generally used to describe the "technique" of interpretation of texts through the use of rules and principles for the extraction of "correct" meaning. However, in recent times the term has been used to identify not just the mechanics of interpretation but rather the more inclusive phenomenon of understanding of a text or tradition. In this paper also hermeneutics stands for the whole process in and through which we come to understand the subject matter of a text or tradition out of our context. Such a process involves far more than the methodical use of a know-how or rigorous application of clearly formulated rules and skills of text interpretation. No doubt, every hermeneutical process does involve some such use of interpretative rules as an essential step; but we can never equate nor confuse "conceptual mastery" of fragments of a text through analysis or exegesis of its various components with a more inclusive process in which the interpreter comes to "stand-under" a new world of meaning disclosed. It is a process through which the interpreter is addressed not simply by the meaning of words and sentences of the text but by the total subject matter that comes to expression in the text. It is a process of creative interaction and dialectical tension between the world or horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter through which a new world of meaning is brought into being. If this broader understanding of hermeneutics is accepted, then our enquiry in this paper is not about a specifically Indian technique for conceptual mastery or analysis of text; rather it is about the very phenomenon and process of understanding among Indian-Christians as well as the determinative context and conditions for such an understanding.

In our Indian religious heritage, particularly among the schools of Vedānta, the commentators seem not to be concerned simply to reconstruct what the text as text means at all times and for all places. The fundamental concern of the Hindu theologians such as Śaṅkara or Rāmānuja has been to discover the "inner meaning," the *tātparyā*, that comes to expression in and through the sense of words; the *padā-*

* Dr Duraisingh is Assistant Professor in Theology at the United Theological College, Bangalore.

artha.¹ While various rules developed by the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* are applied rigorously by all these thinkers, their goal is not to set forth the mere "sense of the text." It is rather to hear in the text its inner meaning, *ekārtha* or *mukhyārtha*, in and through the interpretation and analysis of words and texts. It is this holistic and dynamic subject matter that empowers and unifies various conflicting sections and sentences of the Vedic corpus. Whether it is Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja or any other commentator, his primary goal is to attain to the "heart of all *sāstras*" in and through the sense of the texts, for that alone is salvific. The aim of every interpreter is to "stand-under" the inner meaning of the Vedas. In such a process, exegesis is a necessary but an initial step. This is not, however, to claim that the ancient Indian seers were themselves conscious about what they did, nor that they had any conceptual apparatus either to identify or to articulate the process of understanding of the inner meaning of the text, the being of Brahman itself. It is here I recognize the significance of much of recent discussion on hermeneutics, particularly by persons like Hans-Georg Gadamer² and Paul Ricoeur.³ They provide for us the needed conceptual categories that help us become sensitive to what happens in the interpretative process among Indians, past or present.

It is also significant to observe the life of religious texts in India. Religious texts as they come to us in our context come with a life of their own. A text moves through history, through a rich traditioning process of a community of interpretation, acquiring new dimensions of meaning as it speaks to *bhaktas* in new contexts. The history and the role of *Bhagavadgītā* in the life and praxis of the Indian people and its meaningfulness in the history of the Indian freedom struggle illustrate very well the dynamic life of a religious text. It is particularly interesting to note the role of a text like the *Gītā* in the life and work of men like Tagore, Gandhi, Tilak and other national leaders.⁴ Therefore,

¹ See L. Renou, *The Destiny of the Vedas in India*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1965, pp. 24 ff. I have also examined such a hermeneutical process as seen in the writings of Rāmānuja in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Toward an Indian-Christian Theology: Rāmānuja's Significance," submitted to Harvard University in March, 1979.

² *Truth and Method*, New York: Seabury Press, 1975 and *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr. and ed. by David E. Linge, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

³ Among his many books available in English, see particularly *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976, and *Conflict of Interpretation*, Evanston: North Western University Press, 1974.

⁴ Two insightful studies along this line on the *Gītā* are: Gerald J. Larson, "The Bhagavadgita as Cross-cultural Process: Toward an Analysis of the Social Locations of a Religious Text," in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLIII (Dec. 1975), pp. 651-669 and Robert W. Stevenson, "Historical Change in Scriptural Interpretation: A Comparative Study of Classical and Contemporary Commentaries on the Bhagavadgita," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1975.

there is no text, particularly no religious text, that can be treated as a dead brute object, isolated from its history within the life of the community wherein it has its dynamic and life.

Therefore to reify a text and to give exclusive importance to it without its life within the traditioning process is to confuse the text with the dynamic and complex events out of which the text arises and within which the text has its life. To treat a text as all important in itself is to give it a centrality which it just does not possess. It is only when we locate the text within its historical process out of which the text arose and within which it has continued to be alive and the reality of which the text mediates that we can adequately come to know the subject matter which is referred to by the text, that is what it really stands for beyond the sense of words, phrases and sentences that constitute it.

What really matters, therefore, is a growing "surplus" of meaning, in Ricoeur's words, as the text moves forward in time and within the life of its community of interpretation. As Ricoeur puts it:

The text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author.

What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.⁵

This is so because

the sense of the text is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of discourse, but what points towards a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive references of the text. *Understanding has less than ever to do with the author and his situation.* It seeks to grasp the world-propositions opened us by the reference of the text. *To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference:* from what it says, to what it talks about. . . .

. . . . The text speaks of a possible world and of a possible way of orienting oneself within it. The dimensions of this world are properly opened up and disclosed by the text.⁶

Hermeneutics then is a process in which we are led by the text to a new world and a new way of orienting ourselves within it. In such a process, the text does not show simply what it means but also mediates a new mode of being. This was true for our Indian seers of the past. For they held that the "hearing" of *sruti* was salvific.

The discussion thus far points to the fact of an inter-relation that exists between the text, its traditioning process and the community in which the text finds its life. As we saw above, a text has its dynamic existence primarily in the traditioning process of a community of interpretation, that is, its repeated encounters with the text in its history. These encounters of the community with the text constitute the tradition. Tradition, therefore, is understood here as a living social process in which repeated encounters of the text with the com-

⁵ *Interpretation Theory*, p. 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

community take place. Therefore, the text, tradition and the community together constitute a single given for the hermeneut. It is within the context of their interaction that an authentic understanding of the text is possible. No authentic and holistic understanding of a text is possible apart from the participation of the interpreter in the living social process wherein the text finds its life. Any attempt on the part of the interpreter to transpose himself outside the traditioning process in order to understand the text will lead to a subjective twisting of the meaning of the text. For, tradition is the bearer and endower of meaningfulness (*tātparya*) to the text. Without this historical context the text would remain almost alien.

This does not mean, however, that there is no room for any critical questioning of and creative encounter with one's tradition. On the contrary, tradition as a social process lives by its ever renewing and shifting horizon as the community encounters the text again and again in its different historical contexts. As Gadamer puts it,

The historical life of a tradition depends on constantly new assimilation and interpretation. An interpretation that was correct "in itself" would be a foolish ideal that failed to take account of the nature of the tradition. Every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs.⁷

This adaptation is necessary because of the nature of the hermeneutical situation of the interpreter where, as we saw above, the text, the traditioning process and the community are continually in interaction. The shifting of the hermeneutical context depends upon three distinct features in the experience of the interpreter and the community of interpretation to which he belongs:

(i) The *memory* or the remembered meaning of the text through earlier encounters with the text in the "inner history" of the interpreter and/or his community. The content of this memory, never to be fully or carefully measured but which belongs to the inner existence of the interpreter, constitutes the *pre-understanding* that the interpreter brings to the hermeneutical situation. With reference to the Church, the community of interpretation of the Christian texts, what John Knox says is very helpful at this point:

Just as my own memories of the past, my "internal history," make up no small part of the substance of my personal existence, so the concrete being of the Church, not only depends on a common remembering of the past, but, to a large degree, actually consists in the substance of these memories. Its "body" is in large part a body of remembrances. No wonder Scripture, tradition, . . . are significant to it! These are the symbols, and therefore the bearers, of its "inner history," of the concrete content of its memory. But they are important *only because* the memory is more important still.⁸

⁷ *Truth and Method*, p. 358.

⁸ *The Church and the Reality of Christ*, New York: Harper, 1962, p. 58.

Whatever we understand in the present is partly determined by the content of memory, that is, the content of our earlier acquaintance with the text and tradition that constitute our histories. Therefore, no Indian Christian hermeneutical situation can be described without spelling out in some measure the nature of the mnemonic content. For, it is the ground of our fore-understanding, pre-judgments and presuppositions.

(ii) But memory in itself is not active apart from the present *praxis* and praxiological interests and concerns of the community or the interpreter. The interaction of the text, tradition and interpreter/community of interpretation takes place in the context of the concrete involvements and active commitments of the interpreter in life in the present. Therefore "memory" itself is cognitively significant or understanding-constitutive only in relation to the concrete *praxis* of the interpreter(s). The specificity of the Indian-Christian hermeneutics would to a large extent then depend upon the Indian-Christian *praxis* in India today.

(iii) This leads me to the third component of the interaction between text, tradition and community. It is the *anticipatory awareness*, hope, of the interpreter(s). The specific form or content of the anticipation in understanding, the hope, of the interpreter in interaction with the content of his memory and present *praxis* determines partly the phenomenon of understanding. The dynamic character and the creative newness of the hermeneutical process have their basis in the components of memory, *praxis*, and hope that constitute the hermeneutical situation of the interpreter.⁹ Spelling out the implications of these for an Indian-Christian hermeneutics is an important task.

Because of the intricate relation between the text, traditioning process and community of interpretation, every hermeneutical enquiry must give careful attention to at least the following questions:

(i) The nature of the reciprocal relation between the interpreter and the community of interpretation;

(ii) The nature of the relation between the text *qua* text and the emergent possibilities of meaning;

(iii) If the text in itself is not capable of lifting out the emergent possibilities of meaningfulness to the hermeneut, the question regarding the agency through which the text becomes transparent, revelatory and meaningful must be raised. What is it within the Christian interpretative process that makes the text open up new possibilities for the community of faith? Can the Christian understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit be of significance here?

(iv) We must also be able to develop some mode of validating changing interpretations of the text in different moments of the tradi-

⁹ The works of Michael Polanyi are very helpful in understanding the role of memory and hope in any knowing process. See his *Personal Knowledge*, New York: Harper, 1964, and, with Henry Prosch, *Meaning*, Chicago University Press, 1975. A useful secondary work on Polanyi is Richard Gelwick's *The Way of Discovery*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

tioning process. Does continuity in interpretation of a text mean simply an unchanging sameness of meaning? If change is an essential component of a living social process such as the Church, what are the criteria for validating diverse interpretations?

(v) If memory, present praxis and the anticipatory awareness of the interpreter/community of interpretation are decisive co-determinants of the hermeneutical process, then the specificity of the hermeneutically significant memory, praxis and hope of the Indian-Christian(s) must be spelt out fairly clearly.

This leads us to a reflection upon the specificity of the hermeneutical context of the Indian-Christian. But prior to that let me restate the assumption in this paper that every hermeneutical moment in some sense is creative. The emergent meaningfulness of the text always transcends what either the text or the interpreter brings to the process of interpretation. This is what Paul Ricoeur calls the "surplus" of meaning. While the emergent understanding is shaped by the text and the interpreter, it is not determined once and for all by either. In this sense, understanding in the last analysis is neither arriving at the original meaning of the author or his original readers nor putting the meaning of the text under the subjective power of the interpreter. Neither the text nor the interpreter can be allowed to domesticate the emergence of the new horizon of meaning. Thus hermeneutics is a call to the Indian-Christian interpreter for participation in the creative event of bringing into being new worlds of meaning disclosed in the text as the interpreter struggles with it and is also addressed and altered by it.

Specificity of an Indian-Christian Hermeneutics

If hermeneutics is not simply the mechanics of text-interpretation but rather a process of understanding which is part of the "total human experience of the world," then, the specific historicity of the interpreter and the history of the text become essential for the hermeneutical task. The relation of the interpreter to life in all its felt-dimensions is crucial for any valid process of understanding. Hence the "life-world" of the hermeneut in the Indian-Christian context in all its varied aspects must first be specified.

The specificity of Indian-Christian hermeneutics lies in the peculiar nature of the life-world of the Indian-Christian community of interpretation. Insofar as our perceptions of our life-worlds (as opposed to mere environment) differ within India, our understandings of reality may also differ. Consequently their articulation, the form of theologies, may also differ. While there will invariably be some family resemblances between various Indian theologies, there will surely be pluriform theologies depending upon the plurality of our understanding of our historicity.

Any search for an Indian-Christian hermeneutics may have to be explored, at least around the following three foci:

1. The nature of the Indian-Christian *hermeneutical context*. This involves our search for our historicity and identity, our understanding of the religious and cultural horizon and the socio-economic situation. It also involves the givenness of the text within the complex reality of the tradition and community of the Indian-Christian.

2. The Indian-Christian *hermeneutical goal* and principle(s) involving the specificity of questions that arise out of our context.

3. The Indian-Christian *hermeneutical process*, involving some reflections on the phenomenon and process that we may observe in ourselves as we are caught up in our struggle to understand our texts and tradition.

I. The Indian-Christian Hermeneutical Context

We have already argued that every authentic moment of understanding is necessarily shaped by the historicity of the interpreter. A text becomes hermeneutically problematic only because the fact elements in the interpreter's historical context make earlier understandings or accommodation to the text strange or inadequate. What is it that constitutes the specific Indian-Christian hermeneutical context? The following is a brief description of our horizon out of which we understand anything that we understand.

(a) *Specificity in Terms of our Self-identity*

The first thing that may be said about the distinct features of the Indian-Christian hermeneutical situation is that the *inner-history* of the hermeneut and his community of interpretation include distinctly new elements compared with his or her counterpart in Europe or Latin America. These elements of his or her "inner-history" provide, therefore, a new critical self-awareness or identity. One way of expressing it is to say that we are Indian *hyphenated* Christians, hyphenated wholes, wherein both the terms "Indian" and "Judaeo-Christian" equally operate in our mental constructs.¹⁰ We are not simply Christians who happen to be also Indians by accident of birth, nor are we Indians who have somehow come to be Christians by choice or birth. We are Indian-Christians, doubly-determined by two traditions—Hindu and Judaeo-Christian, or the particular components of each according to our place and time. My own analysis of imaginative writings of several lay *bhaktas* (not discursive writings of academic theologians), lyrics of rural Christians and so on tend to confirm my affirmation that the mental modalities and religious structure of many Indian-Christians are *co-constituted* by the simultaneous operation of one or more strands of the pan-Indian religious heritage and one or more strands of the Judaeo-Christian heritage.

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of such a hyphenated existence of Indian-Christians, see my article, "Indian hyphenated Christians—Part I," in *Religion and Society*, XXVI (Dec. 1979), pp. 95-101.

Perhaps this was best expressed by Mark Sundar Rao, a lay *bhakta*:

The idea of the confluence of two streams of thought and faith, *sangam* of West and East, in the heart of the Indian Christian had then taken firm grasp of my thought and life. . . . Supposing some such thing has indeed happened in the religious consciousness. . . . what would be the consequences for an "Indian Christian theology"? . . . in the mental constituents of an Indian Christian, somehow both the living ideas of the West and of the East had converged, each side retaining its distinction and yet conjoined in a new configuration.¹¹

It is one possible way in which a hermeneut can identify the hermeneutical situation today. I am personally attracted by it. Once when I hear it, it kindles my dormant doubly-determined awareness to the fore. Dormancy surely is not a sign of absence. Are we not, the reflective members of the community of interpretation, charged with a responsibility to kindle in others that which is latent? Chakkarai sees our vocation as follows: it is a

bringing to the surface that which is still dormant in every Christian. . . . It is the task of many minds, specially of the awakened consciousness of the Indian-Christian genius.¹²

If strands of the pan-Indian religious heritage—be it Islam, tribal religion, popular village *bhakti* tradition or the Vedic traditions—are related to us in the way suggested above, then the shape of the question of the relation between the Christian Scripture and other Scriptures of the Indian tradition will also be raised differently. Scriptural texts belonging to those strands of Indian tradition that are in a *constitutive* relation to us will form a decisive part of our inner *history*. These scriptural heritages are (will be) also in an "effective historical relation" to us, that is effectively determining our hermeneutical context. Indian-Christianity with clearly marked boundaries is impossible, particularly at this stage of our traditioning process. Do not often "the boundaries, in time and space and conceptuality, that we erect around given systems, turn out to be postulates of doctrine rather than facts of history"?¹³ If the relation is what I have suggested, then the act of theologising is not what we often call indigenization, that is, indigenizing something that is alien and external to our context; the concept of indigenization must be carefully examined and exposed as a concept that seems to suggest that the Gospel is external and alien to us and that by our effort we can acclimatize or indigenize it. Instead, we must be able to speak of interiorizing the Gospel in such a way that the meaning of the Gospel, which transcends both what we and the text bring to the moment of encounter, emerges from within.

¹¹ *Religion and Society*, XIV (Sept. 1967), p. 6.

¹² *Harvest Field*, May 1972, p. 171.

¹³ W. C. Smith, "Interpreting Religious Interrelations," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 6 (1976-77), p. 516.

addressing us, transforming us and bringing into being something wholly new.

(b) *Specificity of Indian Hermeneutics in our Cultural and Religious Context*

How far have we taken our analysis of various aspects of the cultural, and religious consciousness in India as essential? Do they constitute our hermeneutical context? Several people have pointed out that the religious awareness of Christians in India as a minority group must be taken seriously. The massive heritage of the tribal religious awareness, their cultural richness, the heritage of Jains, Islam and other minority religious communities have not been taken as elements of our hermeneutical context; for many of our theological forefathers it is the Vedantic tradition in India that has been the "highest and the noblest" that they could offer to Christ. Many of us cannot describe the hermeneutical context without the religious and cultural aspects of the upsurge of popular *bhakti* cults all over India.

Nor can we limit the specificity of the cultural aspects of our hermeneutical contexts only to what is identifiably religious. India's complex cultural ethos is much more than that. The secular, Marxist and other ideologies will also have to be taken seriously by some of us.

(c) *Specificity of our Hermeneutical Context in the Light of the Socio-economic Structures and Abject Poverty of Millions*

No description of our hermeneutical context can leave out the stark reality of an unjust socio-economic structure within which millions are denied dignity, freedom and wholeness. A group of Indian-Christian theologians, including the present writer, in their search for articulating the hermeneutical context in India has stated:

We recognize the crucial character of our time and realize that what is at stake is the very life of our people, even the physical life of the masses, not to speak of the quality of their life or their participation in culture or space for their creativity. The situation is complex.

Among the most shocking features of our country is the *poverty* of the masses, often amounting to destitution and misery, side by side with enormous wealth and luxurious affluence enjoyed by a few who form a thin layer at the summit of our social hierarchy. . . .

The economic situation has structural links with the *political* set up. . . .

Caste is a mighty, divisive and oppressive institution, deeply entrenched in the very flesh of the people and infecting all the limbs and movements of the nation.

What is required is a basic cultural struggle in which the economic will be a key component. . . .

Such in outline is our present reality...¹⁴

What is important to note is that if these aspects form the historical determinants of our hermeneutical situation, that is, out of which we understand whatever we understand at all, then we shall "re-read" the texts only in and out of this context. We cannot afford simply to accept some timeless interpretation from somewhere and then pretend to make it "applicable" in the Indian context. No, our understanding of God, humanity and the universe will certainly be shaped through and through by this hermeneutical context. To deny this is to deny our historicity and the historicity of God's ways with humans. Theologically, it is a denial of the central Christian affirmation of incarnation itself. This is so because, as Bonino, a leading Latin American hermeneut states, there is no apprehension of truth "outside or beyond the concrete historical events in which men are involved as agents."¹⁵

Our praxiological involvement in our context alone can open up our horizon before us and enable us to hear what God would have us hear in and through the text that we seek to understand. The complex reality of our hermeneutical horizon demands that we take these triple dimensions of our reality together. No one dimension can be isolated from the other. It is such a relating of these three dimensions meaningfully and describing of our context both for our praxis and interpretation that is important; but since we find it so difficult, we seldom attempt to do it.

2. Indian-Christian Hermeneutical Principles and Goals

The beginning of any process of understanding is dependent upon one's apprehension of one's hermeneutical context. To be sure, the resultant understanding in the end is not solely determined by the initial and corrigible schema or pre-understanding with which one starts. But it is one's fore-structure of one's hermeneutical attempt obtained through an analysis of one's historicity that makes the text hermeneutically problematic and significant, that is, that throws open before one an anticipatory awareness of what to hope for as a goal.

Let me illustrate this through some Latin American theologians. Their acute awareness of oppression and their consequent praxiological involvement in liberation struggles makes "liberation" the *goal* of their hermeneutics: Gustavo Gutierrez speaks of their fore-expectation as the "transforming historical praxis which comes from below." When this is the goal, Hugo Assmann sharpens it further and describes the hermeneutical principle as "the epistemological privilege of the poor." Others have called it, "the hermeneutical claim of the poor" and "the hermeneutical disadvantage of the rich."

¹⁴ "Theological Priorities of India Today," prepared by the Indian preparatory group for the Conference of Third World Theologians sponsored by EATWOT in *Voices from the Third World*, IV:1 (June 1981), pp. 4-10.

¹⁵ *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Context*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, p. 88.

I am citing these merely as examples to show how in the hermeneutical process, one's understanding of one's historicity leads to new hermeneutical goals and principles. Through a detailed study of Latin American hermeneutical efforts, one can also demonstrate the role of the interplay between memory, praxis and the anticipatory consciousness of a hermeneut and his or her community within the hermeneutical process. But this is beyond the scope of this paper.

It is high time that as Indian-Christians we ask ourselves the question, what are the specific goals and principles for our hermeneutical task in India. Here we cannot be neutral and allegedly objective; we cannot play safe. Claims for value-free perceptions of meaning of a text irrespective of the specificity of the context are a myth and a delusion. Our careful analysis of the content of our Indian-Christian memory, an inner-history constituted by diverse religious and secular heritages, our active praxis for the liberation of the masses of our country and our collective sharing in the hopes and aspirations of our people must enable us to identify certain specific hermeneutical goals. Granted that our context is pluralistic, our definitions of our hermeneutical goals may also be plural; however, we must define and clarify to ourselves the goals of our understanding of our texts and traditions as carefully as possible.

In the 1950s and 1960s when Paul Devanandan understood his hermeneutical context as the renaissance Hinduism in India, he defined the hermeneutical clue to understand the text and tradition as discerning and witnessing to the "inner working of the Holy Spirit in the Hindu renaissance." Or again M.M. Thomas is led in these days to identify the hermeneutical clue or principle as the "spiritual penetration in the revolt of the poor and oppressed" out of his involvement. It has become for him a significant interpretative key to Christian faith and witness in India in recent days.¹⁶

In the 1980s what can be the specific Indian-Christian hermeneutical goals and principles? Indian-Christian praxis for the transformation of religious and cultural values on the one hand and for the overthrow of the oppressive socio-economic and cultural structures on the other hand would provide us the matrix for our discernment of our hermeneutical goal(s) and principle(s). It is important to remember that, unless our theorizing about the hermeneutical goals arises out of our corporate existential and praxiological involvement, it will remain irrelevant. Our longing for, experience of and participation in the creative, judging and recreating presence of the Spirit in all dimensions of Indian life may provide us the possibility of defining more comprehensive and concrete goals and principles today. We may arrive at one dominant clue that most of us could share or we may have to be satisfied with a plurality of goals in our plural context. But clarifying such hermeneutical clue(s) and goal(s) to ourselves is a top priority in our theological agenda in India today.

¹⁶ See his most recent work, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1981.

But I am convinced that such a task can arise only out of our commitment to a process of liberation and to the wholeness of Indian people and society. Committed involvement to mobilize possible cultural, social and religious resources for social change can alone provide us the necessary total awareness of our hermeneutical context for the understanding of God, humans, the world and their inter-relationships. Perception of hermeneutical clues and goals can take place only within the locus of our social praxis.

Much of the hermeneutical writing that we have in India today represents an understanding of our horizon primarily in terms of religious pluralism. It is our awareness of the predominantly religious character of our ethos that has been determinative of our understanding of texts and tradition. Even though such attempts are only partial and do not take the socio-economic struggles and cultural revolutions as constitutive elements of our hermeneutical situation, they can and do illustrate the actual process of Indian-Christian hermeneutics. Therefore, in the next section, as I attempt to make some observations on the actual process of an Indian-Christian hermeneutics, I limit the hermeneutical context to that of religious pluralism. The context that is presupposed is that in which the hermeneut is aware that his horizon of understanding is constituted by two religious traditions, the Judaeo-Christian and the Hindu, coalescing, as it were, in his or her awareness. The hermeneut is aware that he can understand the text only out of this religious context wherein he inherits two traditions and they, in their coalescence in his mental constructs, constitute his hermeneutical context.

3. Some Observations on the Process of an Indian-Christian Hermeneutics

I will first attempt to illustrate how a particular theological motif, namely *mukti* (liberation), may be understood within a hermeneutical context of two religious traditions meeting in the experience of the hermeneut. Then the illustrative presentation will be followed by a more formal and theoretical reflection upon the hermeneutical process itself.

The hermeneut starts with the fact that there are differences in the ways of understanding the motif of liberation or salvation in the two traditions that he inherits. The Judaeo-Christian tradition, at least in its Protestant version that has been dominant in Indian-Christian thought, describes salvation primarily in terms of an act of "reconciliation" of humans with God.¹⁷ Since humans have turned away from the intended state of relation to God through wilful disobedience and transgression and thereby have become enemies of God, it is only through an act of propitiation and payment of the penalty on behalf of humans by Christ, the mediator, that restoration of relationship is

¹⁷ No doubt the Indian-Christian may be familiar with several other theories of salvation and atonement. For the sake of illustrating my point, I am confining myself to this one image.

possible. Such a juridical imagery has been the dominant one that many Indian-Christians, particularly Protestants, have inherited. But this image or set of images that arises out of a form of political and juridical structure of thought and experience is unfamiliar and strange to the Indian mind. P. Chenchiah expresses this restlessness very well :

The juridical concept of Christianity is an attempt to reduce Jesus to the ideology of Judaism or the political ideology of the State of Rome; in other words, to interpret Jesus in terms of sacrifice and propitiation or law, offence and punishment. . . . The cross may be soul-shattering. Yet, as we accompany Jesus we never get "the Kalighat"¹⁸ feeling. No Indian gets that feeling. . . . An attempt to express the meaning of Jesus in terms of these (images). . . . is not even true to the Indian experience. . . . I want to emphasize that we can never get to the heart of Christianity by the way of juridical theology.¹⁹

Herein is a clear expression of strangeness with the image through which the very work of Christ for our salvation is presented to the Indian theologian. This sort of restlessness that arises out of strange images, particularly that of juridical structures of thought, is evident also in H.A. Krishna Pillai, one of the most imaginative Indian-Christian poets of the nineteenth century. As a convert from Hinduism, he inherited the rich religious heritages of both the religious traditions. It is out of a hermeneutical horizon constituted doubly by both the Judaeo-Christian and Hindu traditions that he attempted to understand his faith. In his autobiographical reminiscences, he speaks of the problems of understanding. The most problematic motif in the pietistic German Lutheran theology to which he was exposed in those days was the idea of expiation and juridical justification. He expresses it as follows:

While I clearly understood doctrines such as the Saviour's sacred incarnation, I was greatly perplexed and bewildered, not comprehending how his act of expiation imparts salvation to men.²⁰

Commenting on his perplexity even when he had help from a fellow convert who introduced Krishna Pillai to a literature that graphically described salvation through images of juridical transaction, D. Hudson says, "It does not appear that this juridical mode of thought was convincing to Krishna Pillai, and it may actually have been an obstacle to

¹⁸ Kalighat: a place where blood-sacrifices are offered to propitiate the goddess Kali.

¹⁹ "The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World," in *Rethinking Christianity in India*, G. V. Job et. al., 2nd ed., Madras: Hogarth Press, 1939, pp. 164, 165.

²⁰ Translated and cited by D. D. Hudson, "Hindu and Christian Theological Parallels in the Conversion of H. A. Krishna Pillai, 1857-1859," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 40 (June 1972), p. 196.

his understanding."²¹ In contrast, it is interesting to take note of the first verse that Krishna Pillai wrote immediately after his conversion. It has no reference to a process of justification through the juridical transaction due to the death of Christ. Instead, it speaks of God *releasing* his precious life and making him his devotee:

O Sea of Grace, O Sun that dispels the works of Darkness,
O God who has released precious life for this your slave,
On this occasion when you make a devotee of me, I offer my
heart only to you, the form of Dharma. God opened my
heart.. and I opened my mouth to praise him.²²

As Hudson rightly suggests, "This, his first poetic composition as a Christian, could have been uttered by a Vaisnava."²³ However, he continued to grapple with the doctrine and to attempt to understand it.²⁴

The point of all this for our immediate discussion is that, however strange and repugnant the juridical interpretation of the act and experience of reconciliation may be for the Indian-Christian, insofar as it is partly through these images that his Judaeo-Christian heritage has mediated the reality of God's relation to him and his community, he can neither set these images aside as irrelevant, nor claim total unfamiliarity with them.

Now on the other side, the dominant Hindu understanding of liberation has been in terms of a self-realization, of self-knowledge that ultimately one's self is Brahman itself and all else has only such a relative reality that in the event of the liberating self-knowledge, one is released from the binding effects of the contingent and phenomenal world of *samsāra*. For an Indian-Christian who understands God primarily as the one who addresses him as "thou" and is addressed by him, an understanding of salvation purely in terms of self-realization is strange and unfamiliar. Yet it is the tradition out of which he partly understands himself; and hence he cannot set this notion aside as utterly meaningless. Since there is no going beyond his historically-given doubly-determined conceptual framework, he discovers that no *mono-polar* categories—that is, *no categories that arise only out of the tradition*—can adequately make sense of the reality he is trying to understand. Therefore, a crisis of images becomes an inevitable experience for him. As a consequence, he actively seeks for a unity of meaning or what we described earlier as a "fore-expectation of

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

²⁴ Of course, in the case of Krishna Pillai, the missionary tradition that brought the gospel to the Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu in the late nineteenth century presented the work of Christ only in juridical images. There was no possibility, therefore, for these converts to know that within the Christian tradition itself, there are several other possible models for understanding Christ's work.

harmony" through which a new understanding of liberation is obtained. It will be a more comprehensive understanding in which both the affirmations of the independent traditions are transcended in a newer unity of meaning.

As the quest for a comprehensive understanding goads the hermeneut forward, it is likely that he will arrive at an understanding of salvation as the self-knowledge that the Divine Self is his true Self and therefore what is involved is a process of *recentering* one's separative ego (*ahamkāra*) in its one and only proper Centre, God. In this sense salvation is both a *discovery* of one's true self (*ahampathartha*) as well as a *restoration* of an alienated and estranged relation of oneself from God, one's true Centre. Here a comprehensive standpoint is reached where the motifs both of restored relation and of progressive self-knowledge have their place. As the theologian attempts to spell this out further, newer metaphors may emerge.

For the theologian who is directly influenced by the thought of Rāmānuja, such as H. A. Krishna Pillai, the Self and its body, that is, body as the field (*deśa*) or the focus of expression of the Self, will form a central metaphor. Salvation is, then, a recentering of one's relationship to God in such a way that the self becomes increasingly aware that it is a field or focal point in and through which the glory (*vibhūti*) and love of its true Self, the divine Self, are adequately expressed in such a way that, in turn, the human self finds its fulfilment. The relation of this liberated self to other selves is also altered.

That the foundational concerns of the motif of liberation in both the traditions function within the emergent understanding must be remembered. For, if the recentering of oneself in the divine Self as its true Self is not understood in terms of reconciled *relational* categories, that of love and communion, for example, the notion of self-knowledge may be reduced to one of monistic identity. Likewise, if the restored relation is not affirmed as one's relation to one's only true Self, and hence a recentering there is a danger of relapsing into dualistic and juridical images that are dominant only in one tradition.

Within such a theology, the role of Christ is not of one that mediates the propitiatory requirements to satisfy a righteous God. Rather, the mediatory potency of Christ is that of a potency of the most decisive paradigm case, classic instance, and unique manifestation in the plane of history of such a radical recentering and self-knowledge. Jesus' acknowledgement of the divine Self as his true Self was so complete and his recentering so maximal that in and through his life, death and continuing presence in the faith of the believing community a potency for the self-realization of the believer as centred in God, his only true self, is released. If in faith an Indian-Christian affirms that in Jesus there was maximal recentering of his self in the divine Self and a complete self-knowledge that his true self was nothing but the divine self, then it is possible for that theologian to affirm also that the reality of God itself was fully present in Christ. This implies that Christ is not only the decisive *pattern* for all our recentering and self-knowledge, but that

he is also, in some sense, the decisive mode of the *presence* of the "Self of all" in the plane of time and space. He is God's *vibhāva*, the one in whom God's splendour and being comes to be seen, comes to be present. But this is not naively to identify the Supreme Self of all and Christ. Rather, it is to affirm with the Judaeo-Christian Paul that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (II Corinthians 5:19). One can also say with the author of the letter to the Colossians, "...in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him" (Colossians 2:9-10). Therefore, our love and loyalty to the reality of Christ does in itself, in some sense, become our act of recentering ourselves in the divine Self. This is so, because Christ is both the decisive *pattern* for our recentering of ourselves in God and the *power* of the fullness of the presence of the divine Self in history.

In more familiar terms, the work of Christ, in and through his life, death and risen presence, is not the only occasion for God to forgive and restore self-centred humans to him once and for all; rather it is the supreme illustration of the ever-relating and ever-restoring love of God as well as the decisive releasing of God's potency for further recentering of humans in their true Self. In this sense, as Bishop Appasamy puts it, Jesus, the "supreme power of God's love which forgives and redeems, exerts its irresistible influence."²⁵ Hence, it is the entire life of Jesus that mediates the potency of God's love and presence, not simply his death.

We can observe analogous processes of theological understanding of the doctrine of salvation or liberation in Chenchiah and Krishna Pillai as well. The strand of the Indian heritage that actively determined Chenchiah's mnemonic content is the evolutionary metaphysics of Sri Aurobindo. In terms of those coalescing traditions, he articulates his understanding of salvation as follows:

Redemption is effected, not by death but by the larger life. . . .

Salvation is not just sinlessness but lifefulness.²⁶

This is so, because what happened at the cross and resurrection "is no happy ending which a sense of justice has invented for a tragedy or woe,"²⁷ but rather a bringing into being of a new creation. "In Jesus, creation mounts a step higher. . . . Jesus is the origin of the species of the sons of God."²⁸ Therefore Christianity, for Chenchiah, cannot be "primarily a doctrine of salvation (in the juridical sense) but the announcement of the advent of a new creative order in Jesus."²⁹ Jesus is the pattern and spearhead of this new order.

In this struggle with the juridical images and his Vaisnava tradition, Krishna Pillai arrives at an understanding of the work of Christ, in

²⁵ *Christianity as Bhakti Marga*, London: Macmillan, 1927, pp. 112-113.

²⁶ Quoted in R. H. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Madras: CLS, 1975 (2nd ed.), p. 153.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

the early days of his conversion, as the work of a great soul who through his good works earns such great merit (*punyam*) that it is efficacious for all those who trust him and relate themselves to him as their source of merit. Hudson points out that this notion of Christ's merit is not to be confused with similar notions in parts of Protestant thought:

I would suggest that this particular formulation... of the power of Christ's merit resonates of the Indian religious milieu where merit and its power has played an important role for centuries. In Indian thought, all acts bear fruit, and good acts bear merit...³⁰

Hudson also suggests that there may be evidence that in the Vaisnava tradition, Rāmānuja might have been looked upon as one who has stored merits, by his meritorious life and *bhakti*, which his subsequent disciples can draw upon for their liberation.³¹

The above presentation of the understanding of salvation is intended primarily to illustrate the process of Indian-Christian understanding of a doctrine in the context of two coalescing traditions... Hence exhaustive studies of the motif has not been our concern. I shall now attempt to reflect more theoretically upon the process of Indian-Christian theological hermeneutics in terms of the rather sketchy illustrations indicated above.

(i) The first thing to be noted is that the question of liberation is not merely a theoretical one. Nor is it that the Indian-Christian first attempts to know what the "right" and universal understanding of liberation is and then applies it. Rather it is a quest that involves the concrete involvement and action of both the hermeneut and his faith community. The question as well as the truth of liberation lies not outside and beyond the concrete relations and historical events in which we are involved. It is in the praxiological context of our involvement in liberating, integrating and transforming our relations with ourselves, the world of things and persons and with their ultimate source of being, that our hermeneutical quest arises and proceeds.

(ii) Secondly, in Indian-Christian hermeneutics there seem to be three significant factors that every hermeneut must take account of. It is in the creative interaction of these three factors, that the hermeneutical process comes to be. First, there are the two different traditions, with their history and distinct structure. They encounter the hermeneut primarily by their chief modes of being, namely the linguistic expressions such as the sacred texts and their historical interpretations. Therefore, a certain amount of intensive study and knowledge (*vedana*) of the content and history of the respective traditions is crucial. There is no way of avoiding such a careful study. However, it is only a preliminary task and in itself it does not constitute theology. Secondly, there is the already acquired relation of the theologian to these two traditions. Much of this anterior relation and accommodation to the

³⁰ Hudson, "Theological Parallels," p. 204.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

two traditions may be only in the private and corporate memory of the community. We have described it as the *mnemonic* given. It is because of this earlier accommodation to the *coalescing* traditions that the theologian is able to perceive the situation as hermeneutically problematic, that is, as something that needs to be interpreted. Thirdly, there is what Gadamer calls the "effective historical relation" to the traditions.³² It is a relation to the traditions in which the interpreter is historically constituted by the very traditions that he now seeks to interpret and therefore *he is a part* of the historical process in which they are coalescing together. The hermeneutical process begins and is maintained by the interaction of these three factors. If only the first factor, namely, the distinct history and structures of the two traditions is emphasised, there is the danger of treating the traditions as objects for our conceptual mastery alone; if the second element, that is, the theologian's anterior relation to the traditions, is given exclusive emphasis, then there is the danger of reducing hermeneutical experience to a mere re-experiencing of the past response or accommodation; the theological task may be reduced to a mere subjective projection of the theologian, if only the third element is emphasised at the expense of the other two. In this sense, it is at the juncture of an active inter-play of all the three factors that an adequate hermeneutical task of a two-fold tradition may be begun and continued.

(iii) Thirdly, in H. A. Krishna Pillai's struggle for understanding there comes a transformation from a simple relation to the mere "sense of the text" to a self-involving relation to the subject matter that comes to expression in and through the text. It is at this point, we suggest, that there comes to be a "fore-expectation" of meaning and harmony in the text and tradition.

It is when the Indian-Christian theologian's simple relation to both the Hindu and Judaeo-Christian traditions (such as academic curiosity) is turned into a self-involving relation (in which the theologian comes to understand that he and his community are constituted by both the traditions), that there comes an expectation for newer and more comprehensive meaning.

There is a special problem for the Indian-Christian theologian. That is, the Indian-Christian is acutely aware that he is in an "intermediate place between strangeness and familiarity."³³ But this experience of being between strangeness and familiarity has two dimensions. First, it is an experience of being addressed by the traditions as the other, as someone at a distance from the tradition; hence the strangeness. At the same time there is the awareness of being a part of or even a moment in the historical process of tradition itself, and hence a familiarity. This "intermediate place" and the consequent conflict is shared by the Indian-Christian with anyone also who attempts to interpret his tradition, such as Rāmānuja or Aurobindo. But the second dimension is uniquely that of an Indian-Christian.

³² H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 267.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

On the one hand, as a Christian, the Hindu tradition is strange and yet, since he belongs to it, it is familiar to him; on the other hand, as an Indian, he experiences the Judaeo-Christian tradition as strange and yet insofar as he belongs to it, there is a familiarity with it.

This experience of familiarity as well as strangeness leads the theologian to an active "fore-expectation of harmony" and "an immanent unity of meaning." We have suggested that in both Chenchia's and H. A. Krishna Pillai's writings one can speak of such a familiarity and distancing and hence a seeking for unity of meaning and completion. This accords very well with a general hermeneutical principle that Gadamer enunciates:

When we read a text (or understand a tradition whose mode of being is linguistic) we always follow this... presupposition of completion, and only when it proves inadequate... we seek to discover in what way it can be remedied.³⁴

This quest for a *samanvayat* (harmonization) is consequent upon the experience of both strangeness and familiarity with the two traditions that the Indian-Christian belongs to and that he seeks to understand.

(iv) Our fore-expectation of harmony and completion between conflicting aspects of our dual tradition leads us to a search for what we may call "a common connotation" or a comprehensive standpoint. As the elements in both the traditions that constitute our mental constructs stand in dialectical tension and creative concretion, and as the memory, present praxiological concerns and our anticipatory awareness interact, horizons of meaning fuse. Certain elements that appeared to be in stark *contradiction* now become elements of *contrast* bringing out the complex nature of the reality understood. In other words, hitherto apparently contradictory elements now appear as polar correlates that enrich the whole. This is the stage at which the Indian-Christian can come to an authentic understanding of his world out of both the traditions that constitute his mnemonic content. Such an event of understanding will involve "the attainment of a higher universality that overcomes not only our particularity, but also the particularity of the other."³⁵ It is neither a naive and superficial assimilation of elements of the two traditions of our heritage, nor simply a bringing out of what is best or essential in the past into the present in an artificial manner. Rather, it is an ontological event in which a larger horizon for the interpreter and the community of interpretation comes to be. It is here that what the text or tradition potentially is, is mediated in the present and brings into being a new comprehension and consequently a new expression. The "closed" text of the past here engenders an "open word-event" that brings into being a new life-world, new orientation and new possibilities. As Ricoeur puts it, it gives to the interpreter "a new capacity for knowing himself.... The reader rather is enlarged in his capacity of self-projection by

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

³⁵ *Truth and Method*, p. 272.

receiving a new mode of being from the text itself."³⁶ It is here that we come to stand-under distinctly and immediately the meaningfulness, the very *ātman* of the texts and traditions that address us in the midst of our memory, praxis and hope, activating our imagination to grasp the world around us in terms of new metaphors, and fresh images.

(v) The second level task of theology, namely articulation, begins at this stage. It will be an articulation that arises out of the theologian's depth-awareness of himself and the Indian reality. The language that expresses the new horizon of meaning, in the words of the Indian Preparatory Statement for the Delhi EATWOT conference, "will be a concrete language, a historical and committed idiom... The new language will no longer reduce human beings and their world to mere objects and commodities.... The new language will be an ever growing reality, assimilating every search for freedom and fellowship but refusing to absolutize any one sign or set of symbols...."³⁷ A theology reached through such a creative hermeneutical process will be a sign of authentic *growth* in human consciousness about the realities of God, the world and the human. But as Panikkar states,

Growth means continuity and development, but it also means transformation and revolution. Growth does not exclude mutation; on the contrary, there are moments even in the biological realm when only a real mutation can account for further life... we do not know... the ways growth may possibly grow further. The future is not just a repetition of the past.... Growth does not exclude rupture and internal or external revolution.... Growth does not deny a process of death and resurrection; quite the contrary. If growth is to be genuine and not merely cancer, it implies a negative as well as a positive: metabolism, death as well as new life....

Who are we to stifle the growing seed, to choke humble and personal buds, to quench the smoking wick?³⁸

³⁶ *Interpretation Theory*, p. 9+.

³⁷ *Voices from the Third World*, IV:1 (June 1981), p. 14.

³⁸ *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, New York: Paulist Press, 1978, p. 72.