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Indigenisation-An Old Testament Perspective

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Indigenisation is a process that is as old as human history and is very closely related to human culture and its development. It travels along with the native soil. Patterns of thought, philosophies, myth and ethos grow out of a cultic background which is inevitably bound up with the cultural or earthbound traditions. Neither civilisation nor religious philosophy nor secular ideology are completely or genuinely free from this influence.

Indigenisation is a process of conscious effort made by the adherents of a particular religion or philosophy in order to prevent their own faith from being disintegrated by the interference of elements not indigenous to their culture. 'Indigenisation' also refers to conscious endeavours of penetrating ideological movements in areas of advancement for the purpose of getting ideologies rooted and grounded in the soil itself. In simple terms, indigenisation is an endeavour to get ideologies incarnated in the native soil. This is very essential for the spontaneous expression of religious ideologies. Once a faith is rooted in the natural setting of a local culture, it takes an indigenous turn and this naturally helps its uninterrupted growth.

Old Testament Perspective

The culture and religion of the Old Testament have no homogeneity. The religious faith of the Old Testament has been tested through conflict and struggle especially in and through the diversified culture of ancient West Asia which spread through the Fertile Crescent. The confessional statement of a faithful Jew is significant in this context. "A wandering Aramean was my father ; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there few in number ; and thus he became a nation, great, mighty and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage—And the Lord brought us out of Egypt . . . and

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brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey?" (Dt. 26 : 5-9). The Hebrews were a semi-nomadic community, wandering from place to place from their settlements beyond the river Euphrates and Tigris (cf. Gen. 14 : 13). Abram was a Hebrew. The etymological meaning underlines the fact that Abram was one who came from beyond the River (cf. Gen. 11 : 31-12 : 9), and sojourned as far as Egypt (Gen. 12 : 10ff).

The faith of Abram, although solidly rooted in Yahweh, never arose from a purely personal or tribal background. The Patriarchal saga is our sole evidence for understanding their religion. Abram, alone among all his kith and kin, received enlightenment. He, as a *bodistava* realised the reality of God as one who was absolutely free from the powers of nature. During the middle of the second millennium B.C. Abram's enlightenment led to a new religious awakening in ancient West Asia. A nomadic sheikh, Abram the exalted father became the founder of a movement in which a great multitude of people believed in Abraham and in a dynamic reality, viz. Yahweh.

Modus Operandi

How did Abraham establish himself in a new cultural setting? We have very little evidence at our disposal for taking a definitive stand as to the mode of operation Abraham adopted in establishing his faith in the land which his descendants possessed after him.

(a) *Acceptance of local shrines* : Wherever Abraham went he made an altar, particularly on chosen sites traditionally acknowledged by the local religions as sacred sites : e.g., the oak of Moreh (an oak of instruction) (Gen. 12 : 6). The terebinth at Moreh had been a place of divine vision. In animistic religion divine presence was attributed to trees, mountains and rivers. Bethel (Gen. 12 : 8, 28 : 17) the Oaks of Mamre, (oak grove) (Gen. 13 : 18) and Salem (Gen. 14 : 18) were all sacred sites in Canaan. These places were acknowledged by Abraham as centres where he could worship Yahweh. As far as Abraham was concerned he had no hesitation in believing that Yahweh was the God who made himself available for him wherever he built altars. He believed in a God who transcended geographical, cultural and religious barriers. Finally it led to the transformation of the sanctuaries already used by Israelites into Yahweh sanctuaries so that Yahwehism gained a footing at ancient and venerable sites.¹

(b) *Adopting religious terminologies* : When Abraham encountered the religion of Melchizedek at Salem, he accepted the

¹ G. Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion*, London : SPCK, 1973, p. 99.

divine epithet "El Elyon Maker of Heaven and Earth" (Gen. 14 : 19, 22) and added it to Yahweh. Here we should not accuse Abraham of syncretism or henotheism. He was not acknowledging two gods, on the other hand he was declaring Yahweh as Most High, the creator of the heaven and earth. He made his theological horizon wider as a result of this confrontation with El of Canaan. Other epithets like El Olam, El Bethel, El Berith have been frequently and freely used to proclaim Yahweh's lordship over Canaan.² If the Canaanites have seen their gods as mere local tribal deities, Abraham has taken these terminologies to enhance the jurisdiction of Yahweh. The Canaanite understanding of El only contributed to enrich the Hebrew concept of Yahweh, the true El. For Abraham only one single god existed, that was Yahweh-Elohim.

The view expressed by Alt concerning the gods of our fathers is rather difficult to accept from the point of view of a pluralistic world of religions. A believer in monotheism, in such a background, may make use of the religious terminologies to establish the lordship of the one true God. That does not mean that he acknowledges the existence or reality of other gods. He uses the terms merely for theological convenience.

West Asian Heritage

The Old Testament through and through imbibes and reflects West Asian culture. It was in that matrix that the ideas of the Old Testament were shaped, the religious ethos developed and the myth grew into religious faith. And out of which a people came championing one of the most powerful religious faiths in the world which has contributed so much to the progress and transformation of human history.

A Theocratic system of Government

In Mesopotamia, Egypt and in Israel theocracy was accepted as the pattern of government. However, distinctive differences also were maintained among them. If Lugal was given divine veneration in Mesopotamia, the ruler was believed to be god-incarnate in Egypt, while in Israel the ruler was the adopted *son of God* (1 Chr. 28 : 6, 2 Sam. 7 : 14, Ps. 2 : 7). To the Israelites the ruler was after all human and he might fail in fulfilling theocratic goals by his government. He himself, therefore, stands before the judgement of God.

The Old Testament concept of theocracy was not an idea borrowed from neighbouring cultures, but a modified cultural expression governed by the distinctive theology of the Old Testament. The

² Cf. H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, London : SPCK, 1966, p. 19.

kingship ideology of ancient West Asia only contributed to work out the specifically Old Testament kingship ideology. Here we find a process of indigenisation in the field of political theology.

Religious Festivals and Institutions

Almost all festivals and religious institutions of Israel can be traced to the non-Hebraic religious presuppositions of the ancient West Asian background. The religious cultures of the region provided the basic structure for the religion of Israel. It was this pattern and structure that enabled Israel to be planted and rooted in the arid soil of Palestine, a small insignificant state amidst the powerful cultural pressures of mighty nations.

Passover: An annual nomadic festival of the shepherds in which rituals were performed to ward off evil powers or exterminators³ (Ex. 12 : 23). The Israelites adopted the festival to express their faith that the angel of destruction passed over them as a result of the ritual sprinkling of the blood on the door posts. The festival was intended to preserve life and fecundity.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread: *Maṣṣôt* was mainly an agricultural feast which marked the beginning of the barley harvest (cf. Dt. 16 : 9). This was the feast of unleavened bread, i.e., bread without anything from the harvest of the previous year in it.⁴ It represented a new beginning. Seven weeks later the Feast of Weeks was celebrated. Both together marked the beginning and end of harvest time. In Israelite tradition both *Pesah* and *Maṣṣôt* were fused into one common festival.⁵

Feast of Sukkôt: Ancient West Asians in Egypt and Canaan believed that at the turn of the year evil powers were active and would attack houses ; to cheat them and to escape from these attacks, the people would pass these days in temporary shelters.⁶ This explains the non-Hebrew background of the feast. However, when the Hebrews settled in the land, they took these feasts with modifications and put into them new religious content. In the Old Testament it pointed to the pilgrim life of the forefathers in the desert.

Sabbath: The feast of the Sabbath day occupies a very significant place in the religious observance of the Old Testament.⁷

³ R. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, London : Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961, p. 489.

⁴ De Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 490.

⁵ Cf. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, p. 186.

⁶ Cf. De Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 500.

⁷ De Vaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 475-83.

There is no dissent among scholars as to the non-Biblical origin of the Sabbath. However, opinions vary as to the exact place of its origin and religious pre-suppositions. The Sabbath was observed among the Babylonians, Canaanites and the Kenites apart from the Israelites. The Sabbath among these people was originally a taboo day. When this custom was accepted by the Israelites their theological perspective gave it a new emphasis.

Circumcision : As a socio-religious rite we may trace the origin of circumcision⁸ to Egypt from the third millennium B.C. According to Jeremiah 9 : 24-25, Egypt along with Juah, Edom, Ammon, Moab, the Arabs are referred to as being circumcised in the flesh but uncircumcised in the heart. Ezekiel 32 : 21-30 does not share this view. If we are to believe Herodotus, all the Phoenicians and Syrians of Palestine practised circumcision.

It was originally an initiation rite before marriage, (cf. Gen. 34, Ex. 4 : 24-26). Consequently, it also initiated a man into the common life of a clan. The relation to the in-laws is explained by the word *hatan* (which means in Arabic 'to circumcise' and is also the root of the Hebrew for 'bridegroom', 'son-in-law', and 'father-in-law'). Perhaps the Israelites had also stressed the same meaning at the beginning, nevertheless religious significance associated with the covenant-making ceremony was attributed later to the practice of circumcision.

New Moon : This is another nomadic observance of the ancient West Asians. People who were wandering through the desert made their journey in the night season. The heat was so unbearable that they disliked to move their tents and drive their cattle in the day time. When the new moon appeared on the western horizon they made the *Hallel* shout with excitement because the moon, their deity, appeared. It was the moon-god who gave the cool and pleasant light for their journey in the night.

The Arabs, the adherents to Islamic faith and the Jews revere the New Moon day, the first day of the lunar month (Isa. 1 : 13 ; Hos. 2 : 13). The Lunar calendar was adopted by the Semites for reckoning the days and the religious seasons. It is suggested that the word Yahweh probably may have originated from the *Hallel* shouts of the nomadic race. " *Ya-hu* - there he is ", exclaimed the bedouins on the New Moon day.⁹ The term may have existed in its several forms in the West Asian setting. The Aryan use of the sacred *Sabda aum* may quite possibly be a variant of the Semitic *Yaum* found among the ancient Babylonians. The Hebrews who moulded their culture and belief from the same matrix, shared

⁸ Cf. De Vaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 46ff.

⁹ Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion*, p. 76.

the very faith of the people among whom they sojourned. However, in course of time they developed their own identity through a process of tension and conflict, and what we call today the faith of Israel slowly evolved as a particular, distinctive phenomenon.

The Socio-Religious Impact of the Settlement

When the community that wandered in the desert entered the land of Palestine, they saw it as a land flowing with milk and honey. The settlement had its socio-religious impact on the life of the people.

The people in the land believed in a brood of gods, over fifty in number. Each village had its gods and goddesses, believed to possess powers for the fecundity of the land. Every hill had its high places. The trees, the streams, and the stones were believed to have special powers.

The Israelites gradually began to understand and accommodate the underlying religious ideas of the occupied territory. They slowly began to open themselves to the cultural and religious influence of the new land. This is what we call indigenisation, i.e., by understanding the cultural expression of a people, trying to absorb and assimilate what is good in it in order to make one's way of life akin to the culture of the people among whom one has settled. We have already seen how the Patriarchs tried to find their way into the cultural heritage of Canaan.

At a second stage which began with the settlement, a new type of indigenisation began. Let us examine some aspects of it.

Pilgrims to Settlers

In the pilgrim state of the nomads the gods also travelled along with them in the sacred chest (Ark of God). When the Patriarchs moved from place to place, they built altars at the traditional sacred sites. However, during the time of the monarchy, King David expressed a desire to have a permanent house for the Lord. This was intended to be a royal chapel as was the practice of the great Sultans of ancient West Asia. The kings wanted to settle their gods along with them (1 Kings 8 : 13). Experts were brought down from Byblos for the construction of a temple *par excellence* on the model of the famous Phoenician temple. Solomon took seven years to build the temple, while he took thirteen years to finish the royal palace (1 Kings 9 : 10, 7 : 1).

Both people and their god settled in the land, and thus developed a theology of the God of Jerusalem. A god who was with the people in their desert experience, day and night, had now become

a god who enjoyed his abode a 'Great House' *Hekal*, like the royal palace. It was this political ideology that had entrenched a dynamic god within the four walls of a man-made house. The prophets and the Deuteronomic editor protested against this view, however even today people would like to see God imprisoned in the temple. The nomadic god was indigenised and thus Canaanised that he might be the deity of the land.

Zion became the mount Saphon, the mountain of the North, where El, the god of the land dwelt at the confluence of the rivers. (Ps. 48 : 2, 46 : 4; Ezek. 47 : 1-12). Now Yahweh, El Elyon, dwells in His holy temple. The glory of God is in the temple and the source of life, the living water flows from before Him from the temple. Jerusalem became the centre of the world and the whole world turned their attention to Jerusalem, to the house of the God of Israel (Isa. 2 : 2-3). The word of the Lord shall go forth from Zion. Nations will proclaim "God is with you only, and there is no other, no god besides him" (Isa. 45:14).

Summing up we may say that the Old Testament perspective on indigenisation leads to certain conclusions.

- (1) Indigenisation is closely related to the cultural expression of peoples' faith and practice.
- (2) Indigenisation in the Old Testament has a long history which begins from the second Millenium B.C. in the Mesopotamian region and passes through the cultural heritage of the Fertile Crescent, and finally settles down confronting the cultural heritage of the buffer state Palestine.
- (3) The progress of indigenisation is seen in the faith of Israel, particularly ;
 - (a) in their faith associated with local shrines and their duties,
 - (b) in the socio-economic life of the nomadic community,
 - (c) in the religious rituals and festivals of the people,
 - (d) in the religious life style of the people, particularly of the nomadic and the settled agricultural life style,
 - (e) in the theological formulations of the people.
- (4) The purpose of indigenisation is three-fold :
 - (a) to make one's own faith rooted and grounded in a new cultural situation,

- (b) to establish and strengthen one's own faith against opposition from the new situation and thus prevent it from disintegration,
- (c) it arises from an apologetic and missionary situation. It thus becomes a means of communicating one's faith to a new people in a new cultural setting.
- (5) Indigenisation implies the pilgrim character of the Biblical faith. The prophets always warned the people of the dangers of indigenisation. Absorption and assimilation may lead to syncretism and self-annihilation of one's faith.
- (6) Indigenisation points to the incarnational and missionary character of the Biblical faith.
- (7) Therefore indigenisation is a process that one should view and handle with care. It has a dialectic of tension which results from a process of attachment and detachment, assimilation and dissimulation, involvement and withdrawal. Indigenisation is a means and therefore one should not absolutise it as an irrevocable 'end' in one's encounter with a new cultural situation. However, one may make use of the process for the sake of translating one's faith and making it relevant to new situations.