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Towards a renewal of theology in India through postmodernism

*M. M. Ross**

A (possible) dialogue between Indian theology and postmodernism here to be addressed will focus on what is proposed from the side of theology for a reconception of its subject matter, task and method(s). I feel that it will take time for the mutual engagement to bear fruit, perhaps for the benefit of both in case the debate becomes that 'public'. So at this point we have to be honest in admitting that theological thinking in India may not yet be able to make any adequate 'response' to postmodernism. The beginning years of the twenty-first century in India have in some way been influenced by postmodernism that it is no more possible to act as if we can develop a theological bastion against postmodernism. A theological critique of postmodernism should perhaps be made through postmodernism itself.

Christian theology in India has passed through several stages of understanding its task in relation to the context. Starting with the efforts of Robert de Nobili, who took the Hindu religious elements as relevant for doing theology, we have the trend that reached its more precise formulation in terms of the dogma-doctrine distinction.¹ According to this approach, the dogma is the unchangeable core given once for all and doctrine the translated form of that core in relation to the encountered culture. This perhaps reflects the Enlightenment ideal of the 'one grand narrative' which is the basis of all other narratives. Although the ideal of reason was antithetical to faith that cannot stand the test of reason, it provided the methodological tools to proclaim the one truth as applicable to all contexts or to show that the many truths can be brought under the umbrella of the one truth. In case the verity of this can be established, then we can all the more appreciate the significance of postmodernism as a possible way of resisting the Enlightenment-based approach. This kind of postmodernism can be of service to theology.

A second significant development in the conception of the theological task, which was in a way continuous with the earlier model, was that of bringing the Christian faith into much closer dialogue with the religio-cultural traditions of India and particularly with the consciousness of being Indian. Both the nationalist movement and renascent Hinduism gave the impetus for consciously developing Christian theology with Indian resources, including Indian forms of spirituality. Later with the dawn of Independence, the social and ethical dimensions were drawn into theological thinking vigorously with the suggestion of nation-building. There was a sense of unity and urgency about establishing our identity as a nation in a number of ways, and this was reflected in the theological enterprise. It became clear very soon that differences

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in social, religious and ethical principles and practices were so great, and so too economic disparities between communities, that they stood in the way of building up the nation in terms of a progressive civil code or social justice system. So although national ideals are not forgotten, there needs to be development at micro-levels for consensus-building to happen at higher levels. This is a thread that theology needs to pick up, and this essay suggests postmodernism as having something to offer.

The third Christian theological approach started with the awareness of structural factors of Indian society that were oppressive and exploitative of sections of society. The political and economic dominance of certain groups came to be recognized as symptoms of an infection that was damaging to every form of individual and social life. The concepts of 'liberation' and 'humanization' became the watchwords of theologians in India, but Kappen laments in 1986 that "no distinctive school of thought among Indian Christians that may be called theology of liberation" has emerged.² Perhaps the Indian reality eludes the possibility of a 'school' of liberationist thought emerging as Kappen would have wanted — along the lines of a 'foundational theology of liberation' as suggested by him in the same article. And certainly the labours of many cannot be discounted and should be appreciated for — maybe not so much their insights in respect of a general praxis methodology but — the way they have presented the theological demand for liberation through their rigorous social analyses of particular groups.

The present scenario in which we have to do theology calls for a recognition of the inadequacy of the idea of realization of liberation by a group on its own and through its own resources. Even the approach that certain economic considerations and justice concerns arising out of past exploitations being the source of privileged positioning of the oppressed group in policy-making has its own defects. Despite the importance of and need for seeing liberation in specific terms, there is the danger of the 'social' and the 'we' becoming exclusive. Even a specific liberation theology's acknowledgment of the Kingdom of God as an experience of fuller community which includes the whole creation may be nothing more than a utopia because there is no attempt to express it as a state in the present. I think this pushing of the 'fuller' and the 'all' to the future does injustice to some fundamental theological insights. In this essay I want to explore the possibilities that postmodernism can offer in this regard to Christian theology in India, particularly the way it can renew liberation theology.

In the part to follow I will discuss briefly some of the key themes of postmodernism that will serve the above-mentioned purpose. Even specialists in the field of postmodernism admit the difficulty they have in defining postmodernism and connecting the important tenets as propounded in different disciplines and varying arenas and contexts. Postmodernism, as we shall see, has been embraced and defined by various eminent thinkers who have seen their special interests calling them to oppose modernism. Thus poststructuralism, postliberalism, deconstruction, social constructionism, feminism are all in one way or another postmodern in orientation. One important observation that speaks not so much for the consistency of postmodern thought but for the *specific* character of postmodern theory and practice should earn for postmodernism both credibility and a facilitator status. As the aim of this paper is to highlight the significant postmodern concepts that would help Christian theology discover itself anew in the present context, we will not enter into any detailed discussion of specific schools of thought and their consistency, except in passing and by pointing to some (logical) connections or mutual relationships between certain ideas. Only engaging some significant voices both for their specific critique of modernism and concrete philosophical and pragmatic

orientations will be undertaken here. The task will include presenting some aspects of postmodernism that will connect with the demands of a theology which is capable of addressing India's longing and bleeding.

I

The question that is frequently asked and debated in the Western context, namely whether postmodernity is a prevailing cultural and economic condition or whether it is a philosophy that is emerging with certain flexible features, could be taken as our starting point. This debate is relevant here for two reasons. First, I think, it brings up some of the key ideas of postmodernism. And second, it can give us an occasion to examine the forms of postmodernity as present in India, particularly whether it comes as an active invasion of the West or from within Indian developments. Or is there an exchange between India and the world in this regard. Certainly we have not experienced postmodernism's emergence in a cataclysmic manner as it did in France following the failure of the student riots of May 1968. In the French situation, postmodernism meant the voices of the margins persistently fighting the right-wing political powers. Postmodernism as resistance to the privileged classes received the support of the academia and the media. It may thus be seen as the voice of democracy.³ Since we have no single moment such as the one in France to ground our discussion historically, we have to start with some key concepts of postmodernism. And maybe in keeping with the postmodern spirit, we should see how our own life-orientations and practices reflect postmodernism or something akin to it.

Apart from the historic uprising in France with which postmodernism was specially connected, postmodernism emerged as a new form particularly in architecture, the arts, literature and philosophy. Later feminists and theologians also followed suit.

The most important concept that the prominent schools connected with postmodernism worked with was the nature of the human self.

i. The human self as constructed and relational

Postmodernism rejected the modernist conception of the human subject as an unmade, distinct and rational self and that he/she is a subject of experiences, actively ordering his/her experiences and working on material reality and other people as if the latter were objects. Postmodernism suggests that more of the play of the forces on the individual is in evidence rather than the other way round. While modernism saw the rational individual as only acting on the world and other humans, postmodernism recognized the affective and receptive character of the human subject. The subject is not to be seen as controlling the world as some given raw fact, but as experiencing himself and the world being born together at every critical point. In contrast to foundationalist metaphysics which offers the possibility of discovering reality, postmodernism sees everything as being created, constructed.

The conception of the human person in postmodernism, as Graham Ward points out, is free from the modernist notion of the self as an agent of a *cogito*. Now the self is seen more as a 'body' that is self-motivated, self-transcending and open to direction from the other, from outside. (1997:588) The suggestion here is that postmodernism challenges theology to develop along lines of non-absoluteness and differentiatedness as virtues in relation to God and the human.

Feminist postmodernists have a special interest in rejecting the idea of the individual subject as a fixed and autonomous self (man) who through reason is able to master nature, including woman, who is assumed to be set in opposition to him. The postmodern feminist, Susan Hekman, calls for “an epistemology that does not have man as its centre”. (1992:93) She suggests the abandoning of the Enlightenment idea of an all-knowing subject who controls through social organizations and through various discourses by resisting such discourses with the power of language which postmodernism has shown to be “fluid and multiple” and which is open to “revision and mutation”. (1992:189) We might want to ask the question: Is not Hekman labouring on a point which (non-feminist) postmodern discourse has already proposed, namely that of decentering the human subject? From a feminist perspective however, although inspired by the general idea of ‘no centre’ or ‘decentering’, it is important to proceed from one’s own experience and perspective to engage with the other (here, man) as a partner rather than a dictator.

ii. Nature of knowledge

Postmodernism rejects modernism’s superior role given to scientific knowledge above what can be called ‘knowledge’ in religion, morality and art. Richard Rorty for instance points out that science cannot claim that it is representing or ‘mirroring’ a reality ‘out there’. Whatever is said to be true and valid either theoretically or empirically is/are bound up with the ‘conceptual frameworks’ of a given community or culture, and it can be asserted that nothing other than such frameworks existed. (1979:275) Thus if the modernist science-based claim that what is observable is to be trusted is thrown into question by pointing to Aristotelian and Newtonian divergences, and particularly Rorty’s explanation that “Newton was better than Aristotle not because his words better corresponded to reality but simply because Newton made us better able to cope”, (1979:269) then internal conflict is manifest in science itself over a period of time. So this would mean that science cannot show its method as a paradigm of knowledge and go on to suggest that its method will judge the validity of knowledge in other spheres. Even less should science contemplate its ability to embrace and integrate truths from other arenas into an all-inclusive framework.

The suggestion by Rorty that cultural values shape the acceptance of certain scientific theories, particularly referring to Galileo’s version of the universe, emphasizes the need to check science’s self-validating attitude. Rorty speaks in a manner that upholds the different functions of the two approaches in their own realms, when he says:

[T]he crucial consideration is whether we know how to draw a line between science and theology, such that getting the heavens right is a “scientific” value, and preserving the church and the general cultural structure of Europe is an “unscientific value”. (1979:327-8)

The question we might want to put before the above approach is whether the delineation of science and culture should stop with a suggested cultural ‘imperialism’ – scientific truth being authenticated through cultural development and ethos – or whether mutual influence between the two are witnessed and advocated. It might therefore be observed that the oppression religion, ethics and art experienced under liberal thought are now removed through postmodern theory.

The confidence in what postmodernism has achieved in this way makes Baudrillard lament that many people fail to understand this concept that, “we have now moved into an epoch...where

truth is entirely a product of consensus values, and where 'science' itself is just the name we attach to certain modes of explanation. (Norris 1990: 169).

Coming from a poststructuralist angle, Foucault's suggestion that all knowledge is related to power is noteworthy. His attempt, like that of other postmodernists, was to throw into question the claims of objectivity and neutrality in scientific knowledge. He sees the subject's performance in three levels: knowledge, power and ethical action. (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983:237) These levels are free from any hierarchy. Rather they are to be seen in relation to each other. He points out a basic connection between knowledge and power. Knowledge is a technique of power, and on its part knowledge needs a system of communication, which is the exercise of power. (Davis 1994:163). Foucault contributed to postmodernism by showing how power played a role in everyday practices of people and how it influenced the systematization of knowledge. He pointed out that one implication of seeing everyone active in determining power relations should call into question history as facts presented from the rulers' point of view. Rather underlayers of suppressed and unconscious knowledge should be recognized as crucial for the history of a particular group because they are responsible for that society to achieve its identity. (Appignanesi 1995:83)

iii. Theory of Meaning

Postmodernism rejects the approach of the distinction between essence and appearance, depth and surface, the inside and the outside in hermeneutics. Meaning cannot be reached in any concrete way because there is no reality other than the words, images and signs used to refer. That is, there is no referent. There can be no real other than the signifiers. Any suggestion of a realm of the unrepresentable and the unknowable is futile, and it cannot claim to be real. We only have the plane of immanence. Connor points out that in postmodernism the old distinction between knowing and experience is overcome with the suggestion that meaning is found every moment with no discernible pattern in its movement. (1989:4)

For Derrida meaning is consistently deferred in favour of a chain of signifiers. There is no immediate presence of the addresser, and a direct communication beyond a web of signs. In other words, everything is a text; there is no being or event before or beyond the text. The consequence of this understanding for theology is that it questions God as the speaker and God's ability to speak directly (revelation) to the creatures. Such theology is abandoned to remain consistent with the postmodern rejection of dualisms of spirit/body, speech/writing and presence/representation that engender the privileging of the first over the second. (Ward 1992:264-6) While such an enterprise does give theology real scope to work with written texts and experiences too as texts, it can be charged for falling short of the ability to affirm any value as valid and to champion the cause of the oppressed.

What is becoming clear is that academicians are beginning to see religion not from the side of clerics or texts, but from the side of the common person's way of making sense of religion. James Beckford affirms that

putatively post-modern forms of religion would embrace diversity of discourse and the abandonment of unitary meaning systems; cross-references between, and pastiches of, different religious traditions; collapse of the boundary between high and popular forms of religion; and an accent on playfulness or cynicism. (1992:20)

The method of deconstruction as suggested by Derrida is also a postmodern approach which analyzes texts to find exceptions to the general rule in contrast to the positivist exegesis of finding the main theme and harmonizing the rest of the text with that theme. This would mean that a deconstruction or interpretation is hardly likely to yield any absolute point, which represents one side of a legitimized dichotomy. Even such dichotomies will need to be deconstructed. The approach is that nothing is to be accepted and nothing is to be rejected. In fact obscurity is to be preferred and even celebrated. Derrida's suggestion in connection with the text is that the basic meaning is one that an individual brings to the text. This can apply even to representing social reality, that there is no particular history that can give meaning to a group for instance, rather it has to be seen in terms of "playfulness".⁴

The postmodern interest in novelty, multiplicity and fluidity are all possible due to the one important philosophical denial of a transcendental signified, the borders for the play of significations being infinitely widened, as Derrida claims. (1978:280)

iv. Beyond Metanarratives

J-F. Lyotard's approach is there are no metanarratives which can be used to make sense of everything. Nor should there be a self-legitimization as science does, posing as some 'first order' narrative as opposed to popular narratives. The task of legitimization itself should be seen as redundant, for popular accounts and significations should freely play their role in holding culture together and enriching culture. (See Davies 1994:155) Lyotard sees experience and knowledge too diverse to be put into a scientific form. So he argues against such a metanarrative, and claims that each discourse has its own set of rules guiding them. What was once the indulgence of a few who fulfilled the academic demand for realism in art through individual genius and elite craftsmanship has now been surpassed by the 'mass' instruments of industrial photography and the cinema. In the place of a "Grand Theory" (totalizing explanations in history, science and culture) which can represent all knowledge and explain everything, localizing and contingent theories are being suggested. Another important postmodern contribution is that of highlighting the 'little traditions'.

The emergence of contextual theories as a result of the collapse of the core-periphery approach is a welcome sign. However, the point must be raised about the *possibility* and *scope* of theorizing about common concerns in the different contexts.

The aim of metanarratives is to affirm a certain completeness and a whole picture. It is the desire for mastery, including intellectual mastery. But on the one hand this is not something that can happen across realms and disciplines given the richness and diversity, and the plurality and depth of reality as a whole. So a fragmentation takes place when specialization catches up. Crook and others see modernity's attempt at differentiation of cultural spheres leading to a proliferation of divisions and in the process making distinctions between cultural spheres redundant. (1992:36,69) Representation of the social has multiplied in the present time that it takes away any idea of the real as possible. The eroding of the certainty and stable cultural forms that the modernist-capitalist system provided has led to the easy coming together of the high and the low.

On the other hand, mastery can also lead to violence. The emphasis on a realist way of knowing coupled with developing a metanarrative can lead to making ourselves and others fit into what is believed to be the 'real out there'. Hence Albert Borgmann's labelling of a realist metaphysics as "aggressive realism". (1992:27)

v. Beyond Liberation

The modernist approach looked forward to a stage where conflicts will be overcome either in the way Hegel proposed it or in the leftist, reality-changing way of Marx. Postmodernism is seen to reject any universalistic political projects, including emancipatory ones, which are considered as acceptable in *general* and *human* terms. Postmodernism is of course sensitive to and open towards particular struggles against particular oppressions. Rorty points out that a community determines its course of action and future not by adopting a definite standpoint to reach a goal but through negotiated standpoints and through trial and error. (1991:16-7) No universal course of action for humanization can be followed when there is no basis for formulating a universal theory of justice.

Frederick Jameson, a Marxist originally, sees postmodernism in the light of the new development of capitalism. His suggestion is that postmodernism is 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'. This capitalism so named as 'late' has invaded the most resistant of social and cultural systems and conquered them. The fairly independent economies and socio-political systems of the Third World have now been captured by late capitalism, through a process of commodification. According to Jameson postmodernism celebrates this commodification instead of resisting it as modernism used to do.

The key themes of postmodernism thus far seen will now be discussed in the light of theological concerns in the Indian situation with a view to identifying Christian theology's theological methods and viable role in theory and practice in the Indian situation(s).

II

The best form of interaction of two systems leading to best results happens when what is unique in each and what is critical to each are allowed to emerge as each system speaks for itself. Identifying common grounds between two frameworks is usually held to be the workable model. Of course it can be a good starter, but the danger is that of reaching a minimalist consensus, leaving the real meat untasted!

In this section we will identify briefly some ways in which postmodernism can contribute to methodological issues in theology. Following that we will consider whether postmodernism can contribute to contextual theologies like liberation theology.

i. Postmodernism and Theological Method

The question of method is about criteria that can validate how certain facts and concepts are to be interpreted in a given system. So obviously reflective protocol requires all discussion to start at that level, while adequately attending to existential realities which have contributed to the given formulation. Postmodernism calls for an approach where all willing participants can come together and to play their games. In the new global situation which offers awareness, inter-connections and inter-mingling, different worlds are encountered by the individual. And he/she need not look to one's social order for approval, but freely engage in dealing with what might look as opposites. (Beckford 1992:11-23). Whereas existentialism throws the individual into the world without any resources, postmodernism affirms meaninglessness as meaning. Meaninglessness is not absence of meaning, but meaning which lends itself to *many interpretations*. From a theological perspective, Felix Wilfred is aware of theology's "partial" and "provisional" character (1998:128) and is determined by the character of the "many fronts"

(1998:130) with which theology assumes a dialogical posture. However, Wilfred does not manage to keep this openness all along, where a certain experiential and praxis concern leads him to state dogmatically that option for the poor is a "definite option" as it is from God Godself. I am not saying that experiences of the poor cannot come into framing criteria for theological method. But unless being poor itself is seen in a number of ways in addition to the economic factor, theology will cease to be a creative and envisioning enterprise. It would become nothing more than developing arguments for a programme of liberation.

A second aspect of theological method that can be taken from postmodernism is the positive appraisal of *difference*. Here difference is not attributed to various influences, conditionings, and prejudgments but is seen as the authentic mode of desire, creativity and being-with-the-other. Postmodernism first expressed this method in its critical response to the Western liberal tradition based on sameness in otherness, unity in diversity. In respect of the degree of such affirmation of difference, postmodernism goes full-scale to the extent of celebrating difference. It suggests the multiplying of particulars. In contrast to this approach, liberation theology sees difference as a product of structural social conditioning. This would mean that the division is something to be overcome. Liberation theology views difference in terms of collectivity. This perhaps is the primary approach to difference. The secondary one can be positive in that difference is connected with participation of the many with their distinct needs and perspectives. One further distinction is that for postmodernism, difference is almost an end, that is, one moves towards a unique self-realization. In the case of liberation theology difference is related to the background or the social positioning which is the starting point for analysis. Can liberation theology find a way of going beyond a people group and renew itself with microscopic and macroscopic viewpoints and analyses.

A third methodological stand of postmodernism lies in its *refusal to* accept any formal *authority* as the basis of its formulation or which serves as the test of its approach. Formal religion expects conformity of the individual to the given beliefs and practices. It promises identity in social terms and security and peace. Charles Davies suggests that the new religious identity people are seeking is not determined by one tradition but by the resources of many, and ends with a striking postmodern note with regard to the individual and a judgment on the hegemonic character of institutional religion:

Personal autonomy is not a rebellion, but the gift of the Spirit. Conformity is not a virtue, but a lack of confidence in the Spirit that makes us free. A communication open to all as free persons and undistorted by domination is the descent of the Spirit of love. (1994:152)

I would stand for the shift of seeing religion as it is being expressed by the individual. The problem in this of course is that the individual becomes the sole creator of his/her form of religion. This would raise the question of finding channels to bring people together to face common issues in a concerted manner. It will further raise the question of what 'community is' and 'what role it would play' in the life of the individual, without the individual being seen as conforming to something formal which community dictates.

The earlier point being about authority and personal autonomy, the implications of that for any helpful relationship between the individual and the community should concern us now as a fourth point. Let us recall the postmodern belief that knowledge is not derived from an objective referent. This premise might suggest knowledge can become a victim of subjectivity. Now if we link this premise with another important postmodern premise, namely 'the other',

then we can expect the other to represent his/her community in providing an occasion for encounter so that pure subjectivity as the source of knowledge could be avoided. How certain views and concepts take shape in a community can become subject matter for reflection. Perhaps what John Reader says in connection with leaders of oppressed groups taking caution not to express their views so strongly that the voices of the people of such groups go unheard is to the point. Both the difference and sameness between the leaders and the people should find a place in a common frame:

There are both sameness and radical alterity, both symmetry and asymmetry, identity and difference in our relationships with others. The task is to do justice to and respect this 'both/and' structure. (1994:91)⁵

A final point is one which in fact is both an affirmation of the value of postmodernism to give some theoretical undergirding to the sense of *history* that people possess and a critique of tendencies in postmodernism in relation to history. In the West it is increasingly the case of a disappearance of a sense of history, people being unable to retain their own past both in terms of personal values and social institutions. Constant changes in the political, economic and legal scenarios undermine or obliterate past traditions and social formations. The prominent role of the media today, after the postmodern style of endless image-production, engages the audiences ceaselessly, providing no opportunity for them to think of their past heritage. Of course in the Indian context the picture is different in that people have their traditional festivals, and cultural, social and family occasions which help them maintain connection or continuity with the past. However it is to be pointed out that this connection is eroding due to urbanization, nuclear family patterns and influence of leisure activities of the information and technological age. Also how far people take seriously their past heritage by thinking about it, adapting it to the present in a meaningful way, and promoting it is not evident. Unless this latter is taking place, there is less hope for the past to be part of a creative ferment in the present time.

Postmodernism's way of keeping the individual engaged in the present is not in itself a bad thing. If only culture and the past can continue to be attractive and provide defining signs, then they will continue to have a role in the present. So in principle postmodernism is not opposed to the past. It does not accept the past in a way the past is supposed to have its own objectively valid integrity. Postmodernism could perhaps do better if it could create space for the self-affirmation of groups such as Islamic ones⁶ such that within Islam itself there can be the reaching out from within, thereby overcoming the fear that they would be conquered from without. Postmodernism therefore in principle can support the advancement of plurality within a tradition but all the time affirming that there is no real justification for holding the homogeneity of a tradition as more important than interaction with others.

We shall now consider some ways by which postmodernism can be part of the process of the development of contextual theologies in India.

ii. Postmodernism and Contextual Theologies in India

Postmodernism is sometimes suggested as a condition that has come to India, specially among the upper classes.⁷ It is not quite convincing to see postmodernity simply as consumerism which in some way describes the lifestyle of the elite.⁸ Varughese John fails to appreciate an important aspect of postmodernism namely that of the overcoming of the distinction between elites and the masses. From what we have seen above as having happened and still happening in the western context is that of a mutual engagement of postmodernism and postmodernity. In

the Indian context let us be open to various forms of postmodernism either as present or as slowly taking its place in discourses and in the social, political and economic spheres.

Arul Raja sees postmodernism as possessing a homegrown character, pointing out that dalits are naturally given to deconstructing metanarratives including the Bible. Because of their attachment to material reality (land, sweat, food materials in the process of production, carcass, etc.) it is claimed that their mode of perception is not logical reasoning aiming at determinacy and a system. "The dalit way of understanding reality innately acknowledges its sense of fluidity, particularity, indeterminacy, partiality and contextuality." (1999:44) As Raja's concern in the article is about Dalits and the Bible, he does not bother to show how the indeterminacy and contextuality of the dalits are akin to that professed by postmodernism. For later in the article he refers to a postmodern source and suggests that the dalit as an interpreter (and transformer) does not stand between the addresser (biblical authors) and the text (Bible), but rather between the text (Bible) and the addressee (dalits). (1999:49) He is certainly right in presenting the case of rejection of objective and universal meaning of a text by both dalits and postmodernists. But when he says that the dalit interpreter's task is that of standing between the text and *his community* (particularity), he differs from the postmodern belief which is about the fluidity of experience and perception of reality. Whereas for dalits it is important to maintain the binary of the oppressor and the oppressed for analyzing and dealing with the structures that oppress, for the postmodern the binary way of perception has to be transcended.

Postmodernism can offer Dalit theology greater impetus to engage in a variety of self-definitions such that stereotyping of their condition by the dominant powers could be stalled. Often Dalit and tribal groups and their plight is very broadly defined in national terms, and the way the groups can function on their own is undermined at the local level. So the power is concentrated on the leaders of these communities. The dalit individuals themselves are not involved. In one way, since caste permeates the whole of Indian society, the wider forums are needed to address the situation and to work out transformation models. But responsibilities at the local level, particularly by individuals, is equally to be encouraged, for that is where the concrete changes as locally relevant could be conceived and worked towards. The more concrete a model is, the more the power it has to draw its own members together as well as to challenge and influence the powers that be.

Arvind Nirmal's picture of the dalit response to Hindu casteism by mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956 under the leadership of Ambedkar is a picture of options before dalits, but at the same time in their exercise of choice things changed not only for them but also outside them. Nirmal points out that the dalits were pessimistic about a reformation within Hinduism, and chose an alternative path, embracing Buddhism. In so doing they demonstrated at once a *protest* against Hindu religious fundamentalism and *challenge* to classical Buddhism. (1993:94-6) The way Nirmal looks at the significance of the conversion is the demand for what is "right", which he goes on to identify as a secular ideal at the end of the same article as "Dharma" itself, not simply a brand of Dharma, namely hindu dharma, or christian dharma or buddha dharma. What are 'fundamentals' for him are not the original *shabdic* testimonies, authorities as mediated through the priestly class, but truths as they are identified as righteousness contemporaneously.

In respect of theology's response to economic forces, one particular trend that is to be addressed is consumerism. Zygmunt Bauman points out that we are more consumers than

producers. As consumers reality has both possibilities for reconstruction in a creative manner on the one hand and being too vulnerable to manipulation on the other. And he points out that as a consumer the individual acts with a desire for pleasure, and freedom in this case is nothing more than choosing between what satisfies more and what satisfies less. Rationality too serves the interests of the first over against the second.(1992:49-50) If postmodernism is to remain true to its profession that it upholds relationality, then it must give an adequate answer to counter the non-relational trends that consumerism brings in.

To what extent is postmodernism relational then in order for it to be of service in this connection? We pursue the answer by asking, "Does doing away with the atomistic individualistic framework of the Enlightenment automatically mean that postmodernism is relational?" Its assumption that the human subject is relational is to be commended, but it does not show how that relation is carried out for mutual fulfillment. Postmodernism sees different individuals and different groups working with their respective interests. While it would be dogmatic and limiting to suggest that some interests are alone mutually relevant and must thus be pursued, it would still be helpful to identify tentative agenda of commonly agreed interests and work on analyzing them and discussing them through many and different methods. If some such mutual project is not tenable according to postmodern thought then it is hard to justify that it has gone beyond modernist individualism.

The relational concern should also give scope for a resistance mode. The path to resistance should not necessarily mean that one group is set in opposition to another, but rather the members of the 'oppressed' group involve in debate, art and demonstration to draw attention to oppressive elements, using resistance as a means. The resistance has to be creative and bear the marks proactivity, a form of action that does not imitate but rather finds models developed perceptively.

The task before Christian theology in India today is to attend to problems identified in all spheres, work towards attaining interactive relationships with people of various cultures and religions by being able to discover not so much the inner meaning or message of one's own traditions but one's active role in the present dynamics of the world process.

NOTES

- 1 At a Theological Conference convened in Poona by the National Christian Council in 1942, this formulation was agreed upon. See Ward's discussion of this (1946:3); and also (1946:18-9) where he states: "the guiding principle of the theological task is the recognition that the essential content of the Christian faith is the same for all times, places, circumstances; that this central core, this absolute element, this divine, given Word, which we have called the dogma, must first be surrendered to, and appropriated by, all who join in the sacred work of building a theology for the Indian Church."
- 2 From his article (1993:24), which had earlier appeared in P. Pathanangady, ed. (1986). *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation*. Bangalore: Indian Theological Association and National Biblical and Catechetical and Liturgical Centre.
- 3 See Graham Ward's brief recall of the significance of the event (1996:198-200).
- 4 See Best and Kellner (1991:229)
- 5 John Reader acknowledges Bernstein's work in this connection. (1991:70)
Reactions to the postmodern from a religious angle was sounded quite early by Daniel Bell, criticizing the postmodernist trend as promoting irrationality and undermining of authority and calling for a return to religious values. (1976:51)
- 6 Gellner (1992:27)
- 7 This is stated by Varughese John in a brief article.(2000:70) What he particularly refers to is the consumeristic culture, which he sees as common to the Western and Indian scenes. He fails to discuss postmodernism in terms of a philosophical and cultural framework, and only points out an economic phenomenon, which actually is secondary if not marginal for postmodernism.

- 8 Surely the extent of the increase in goods and varieties can make the human feel that he/she is one among the many replaceable entities.

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