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of the Gospel of Christ in the Light  
of the Many Asian Spiritualities

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# The Inclusiveness and Exclusiveness of the Gospel of Christ in the Light of the Many Asian Spiritualities

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## **Preamble: Diversity and Plurality - Presupposed Asian Context**

Diversity and pluralism in terms of spirituality, race, religion, culture, language, world-view and tradition are characteristic of most Asian countries. In most Asian countries, Christianity continues to remain a minority religion and is required to face challenges of diverse nature, the most demanding of which, would be the need to maintain trans-religious and trans-cultural communication. As Charles Springer from Ohio rightly notes, the “relation between religions is not only an academic concern...Consider the fact that we live in one world.”<sup>1</sup> Hence we need to approach the matter at hand (the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the gospel) with seriousness because we are in want of a response that is pragmatic in its approach, practical in its application and ensues from biblical faith reflection, rather than mere theological articulation for contextual application.

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<sup>1</sup> Springer, R. Charles. **Christianity and Rival Religions, Philadelphia,** Fortress Press, 1966, p3.

Asia is also unique because, for most, if not all, of its citizens, religion is more than a mere sociological phenomenon or a system of faith adhered to due to heritage. Religion is life. Hence, people are willing to give their lives for the sake of religion when situations demand it. Such religious fervency, be it in Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Taoism, is a resultant factor generally derived from an understanding of, and respect for, their respective Holy Writs. As a primary element of faith one is taught to hold in deepest respect and honour, that which is handed to us as the Holy Writ, bearing God's revelation. It emanates, too, from a consciousness and conviction that the Divine revelation contained therein, is authentic, authoritative and may not be altered. Asian Christianity would therefore be in agreement with Morris Inch, when he says: "The low view of the Scripture strikes at the heart of the Christian faith – at the person and work of Christ,"<sup>2</sup>

Further, inclusive and exclusive claims are common to all religions in Asia, and therefore need only be presupposed and respected. In each of the Holy Writs of living religions in Asia, one may note there are exclusive claims, which are implicitly noted as UNIQUE claims of truth, offer of love and hope. These are particular claims and particular only to a given religion. On the other hand, inclusive claims are noted as doctrinal precepts, religious values or socio-ethical norms common to many religions (usually helpful for dialogical purposes).

Hence, in its theological articulation and practical application of the gospel truth (the inclusive and exclusive claims of the gospel), the Church needs to take advantage of all

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<sup>2</sup> Inch, Morris. **Doing Theology Across Cultures**, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1982, p20.

available resources and opportunities, those avenues conducive to expressions of love, peace, justice and solidarity, to enable it to fully realize its objective: namely, communicating the gospel and accomplishing the missional task. We may quote Luther at this point: “Then let it be your chief work to proclaim (the gospel) this publicly and to call everyone into light into which you have been called.”<sup>3</sup>

Further, to achieve a perceptive balance in the presentation of the gospel (in agreement with its exclusive and inclusive claims), there, first, needs to be clarity concerning the relationship between the gospel and culture. Second, in order to avoid religious extremism of any nature, and by any length, the Church, amidst other spiritualities, must express it with love, sensitivity, a high level of respect and mutuality. As Bonhoeffer directs us to think: “Christian radicalism, no matter whether it consists in withdrawing from the world, arises from the hatred of creation,”<sup>4</sup> Or in the words of Luther, gospel strength is ‘*beneficium not dominium*’ (grace not power). Hence, preaching the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the gospel constitutes both sharing and caring. Sharing the goodness would certainly require that the Church does not become overwhelmed by the sentiment of emotionalism, that could easily lead to being JUDGMENTAL or DEFENSIVE. Caring, is to speak a language of love and as such, is indispensable to religious co-existence, true expression of the gospel message, and what the Church and the Cross objectively symbolize in Asia: the inclusive and exclusive God of Christianity.

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<sup>3</sup> Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed) **Luther’s Works – The Catholic Epistles (Vol. 30)**, St Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1967, p65.

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. **Ethics**, Macmillan, New York, 1955, p129.

By affirming the legitimacy of diversity and pluralism within the socio-cultural and religious context of Asia, it requires that the Lutheran Church, too, offers a more decisive and practical explanation concerning what is implied and practiced in the context of 'the inclusive and exclusive God of Christianity': inclusive in the extent of His love towards His creation (Jn 3:16) and exclusive because He has set clear boundaries for His creation concerning the way in which it could commune with Him (Ex 20:30). Since we note that God is both inclusive and exclusive, it becomes necessary that his followers recognize and apply the inclusive and exclusive principles of the gospel of Christ in the right manner, purpose and context.

The gospel of Christ is inclusive in that it is about sharing salvation and God's love. "The gospel is preaching God's deeds. They are the deeds and works we have often mentioned, namely that by the power of God, Christ has swallowed up death, devoured hell, drunk sin to the dregs, and placed us into eternal life."<sup>5</sup>

The gospel of Christ is exclusive in that we uphold its claims, namely that Jesus is the Incarnate Word, Saviour and Son of God (Jn 17:3).

### **How To Understand the Inclusive and Exclusive Claims of the Gospel in the Asian Perspective**

The gospel of Christ, in the first place, is Truth, and the Truth is about God's offer of grace to all people (Jn 10:10) in

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.p.65.

and through Jesus Christ. This is the work of the gospel. The 'proper' task of the gospel is to offer a good message, good tidings or a song to rejoice.<sup>6</sup> In a nutshell, we could summarize the gospel message of John 3:16 in the following manner:

**THE INCLUSIVE CLAIM OF THE GOSPEL** is that the gift of salvation, offered in and through Christ as a matter of grace, is for all people. The invitation to follow Christ is unambiguously inclusive (1Tim 2: 4).

**THE EXCLUSIVE CLAIM OF THE GOSPEL** is that it is only through Christ's atonement that anyone may be saved from sin, and inherit eternal life and salvation (Jn 3: 16).

### **The Gospel is Radically Inclusive and Positive**

The gospel, in being radically inclusive, focuses on preaching GRACE and COMFORT: offered by God through Christ.

**Universality of Christ** – The universality of Christ is confessed and proclaimed with love, irrespective of racial, religious and cultural boundaries. Christ is an open invitation for all. The invitation is offered with love and peace. (Jn 17:13).

Christ is in everyone: that is everyone who accepts His offer of grace and forgiveness. (Jn 11: 21-26).

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<sup>6</sup> Pelikan, Jaroslav (ed) **Luther's Works: Selections from the Psalms (Vol.12)**, St Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1955, p14ff.

Universality of the hope in Christ – Such hope introduces the individual to the mystery of God’s kingdom, and its socio-religious and ethical system. The love principle predominates in the expression of this kingdom value system, and people are directed through it to positively infect the world with spiritual values such as peace, love, equality, solidarity and justice (Jn 14:6).

Universality of the knowledge of Christ – Such knowledge could be complemented by general revelation and common grace. People of other faiths could help augment and enhance our understanding concerning spirituality, morality, culture, etc. through knowledge and revelation from their faith.

**a) *The Inclusive Gospel***

**i) *The gospel is inclusive in its persuasive intercession.***

- Witnessing to God’s love involves a quest to be, and become like, Christ in faith, attitude and service.
- The inclusive nature of the gospel draws Christians away from an egocentric ecclesiology and spirituality into an empathetic Christo-centric ‘koinonia’: a community of service.
- It celebrates the variety, and gifts, found in different spiritualities or cultures, as affirming the generosity and goodness of God.
- It allows for prayer, healing and reconciliation, through dialogue with other spiritualities.
- The gospel is inclusive in its persuasive intercession for solidarity, mutuality and peace in society. Inclusivity of

this nature epitomizes the cross as a symbol of faith, hope and love.

ii) ***The gospel is inclusive in its mission.***

It offers a loving call to all (John 3:16)

iii) ***The gospel is inclusive in its process of contextualization.*** Contextualization or indigenization is the process, or attempt, to make the gospel applicable, understandable and relevant to the given context. In so saying, we affirm that there are inherent positive values and spiritual elements in other spiritualities.

***b) The Exclusive Gospel***

- i) Although we reject the “possesio”<sup>17</sup> approach in gospel contextualization, nevertheless we maintain a conscious guard against ‘syncretism,’<sup>18</sup> (both assimilative syncretism<sup>19</sup> and accommodative syncretism)<sup>20</sup> of the gospel. This is to maintain that there are elements of the gospel that need to be stated only in biblical terms. By this we also affirm that the gospel is not above the culture, or below the culture, but transforms culture without losing its unique elements.

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<sup>17</sup> **Possesio** – the gospel possesses the context since there is nothing good in it.

<sup>18</sup> **Syncretism** – all the tenets of the gospel become lost in the process of contextualization.

<sup>19</sup> **Assimilative Syncretism** – the claim that there is no qualitative difference between the Christian gospel and other faiths.

<sup>20</sup> **Accommodative Syncretism** – using non-biblical pointers to describe and determine the content of the Gospel.



- ii) Constructs positive and legitimate boundaries through which the supremacy of biblical revelation can be maintained and explained as normative Christian faith and practice. This certainly would safeguard the exclusivity of the gospel, the uniqueness of Christ (Acts 4:12) and the finality of the Word. (1Tim 2:5)
- iii) Requires a perceptive balance in understanding the immanence and transcendence of God in the gospel, He is not part of the created order, nor is the created order a part of God.<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to the words of Morris, in relation to maintaining the ‘inclusive and exclusive’ stance within a diverse socio-religious and cultural context. Referring to Paul in the Corinthian context, Morris notes that Paul’s reasoning to the Corinthian Church was “that we must not compromise our distinctive as the people of God, that we ought to enjoy God’s bounty to the fullest, that we should be sensitive to how our behavior affects others, and at fullest, that we should be aware of how the principles of our particular calling can best be worked out in various cultural settings.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gnanakan, Ken. **Biblical Theology in Asia**. Bangalore, Asia Theological Association, 1995, p56.

<sup>22</sup> Inch, Morris. **Doing Theology Across Cultures**, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1982, p41

Be it with regard to indigenous spirituality or the living faiths of Asia, the praxis of Christianity remains the same: promoting the celebration of humanity, mutual empowerment, reclaiming cultural identity, the struggle for justice, reconciliation etc. through the affirmation of unity in diversity, through the preaching of the gospel of Christ. Therefore the 'neighbourology theology' of Asia is a healthy track for the holistic mission and ministry of the Lutheran Church in Asia: an approach that takes non-church people as neighbours and the fellow creation of God, whom we ought to respect and treat with dignity. Thus, understanding the gospel of Christ, in Asia, requires that we view inclusiveness as a command to love (God and people), and exclusiveness as a command to serve (God and people), that we may witness to Christ, teach the Bible, learn how other spiritualities may complement the gospel, and journey together.