

Indian Journal of Theology

Volume 64:1, 2022

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Book Review

Book Review

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1. *A Biblical Masala: Encountering Diversity in Indian Biblical Studies*. Edited by David J. Chalcraft and Zhodi Angami. Nagaland, Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2021. Pp. xiv + 390. **by B. Silpa Rani**

Editorial

This issue consists of seven articles and a book review from different areas of disciplines of theology and life in which the authors mostly brought from their area of interest and research. Everyone is adjusted with the challenges of pandemic and slowly learned how to cope up with the new situations. Even academic world has also come into normalcy. The six essays in this issue attract the reader because of the variety of the topics dealt here. The first essay “**Erasing the Racial Prejudice from the Old Testament: An Ecocritical Reading of “Goyim” and “Gerim”**” A. C. Thomas tries an ecocritical reading of two terms *goyim* and *gerim* as it is found in the Old Testament in order to erase the racial prejudices within the Old Testament discourses. He points how Ecocriticism tries to study the relationship between the literature and the environment and the treatment of nature in the literary and even the nonliterary texts. Ecocriticism studies the relationship in the binary oppositions of nature/culture and nature/human and the manifestation of these concepts and their interaction in the literature. *goyim* are the people belonging to the urban civilization, *gerim* are the people who live on the margins of the dominant society. Thus *gerim* should be treated with the loving care of God. Old Testament discourses create a binary, not in terms of race and ethnicity, but in terms of their relationship with the earth – those who care for the earth and those who rape it. While *gerim* represents a culture of participation with nature, *goyim* represents a culture of a detour from nature.

The Second essay “**Sociological Interpretation in the Study of New Testament**” Tunchapbo tries to explain the importance of sociological interpretation among other tools of studying New Testament as part of historical-critical approach.

Also he brings out the disadvantages/limitation of the approach. Sociological approach covers a vast area, sometimes it may be referred as “social-scientific study of the Bible and the biblical world. He explains why it is need in Biblical studies. Hence, he describes in length the topics such as the need of Sociological Criticism in the New Testament Studies. The Principles and Methods/Approaches of Sociological Interpretation in the New Testament Studies and Historical Development of Sociological Approach in the New Testament Studies. He adds benefits and contributions, cautions and limitations. Finally he concludes with suggestions for future development.

The third essay “**Jesus’ Attitude to People of Other Faiths in the Gospels**” Ashish Kumar explains issue of inter-relationship of Christians and People of other faith in the context of Christian minority in India. He ties to discuss his paper into three sections such as a) Jesus’ attitude towards people of other faiths b) why should a Christian be interested in people of other faiths c) and with issues that come across while dealing with people of other faiths. He deals with Jesus’ interaction with Samaritan Woman, Romans, Canaanites and people from Syria and Decapolis to show how He could continue a good relationship with people of other faiths. Moreover, he shows that why Jesus was interested in other faith’s people. Because of missionary motivation, to discover revelation of God in other faith traditions, and he asks some questions such as is Salvation present in other religions/ faiths? Do we need conversion or not, is everlasting life-exclusive etc... through this essay he closely deals with the gospel portions and analyse it for the better understanding of the readers. He brings some proposals to have religious harmony in a pluralistic society as well.

The fourth essay “**B. R. Ambedkar’s Conversion and its Significance to the life of Mahārs in Maharashtra**” Satvasheela Pandhare. tries in the article to analyze the situation of the untouchable *Mahārs* in Maharashtra, who are known as Neo-Buddhists and their conversion experience. This is an outcome

of a field research by the author and it deals with the life and experience of B. R. Ambedkar and the reasons of conversion for him to move away from Hinduism to Buddhism. As a victim of untouchability, he experienced humiliation and rejection through out his life. Hence this article describes extensively the life and bitter experience of Ambedkar and his conversion into Buddhism. The field study also clearly mentions about the challenges after their conversion and how their status of life had changed by getting education. However, the article concludes with criticism they had to face from Neo-Buddhists.

The fifth essay “**Harvest, Healing and Hallelujah: History beyond Textual Constructions and Continuity**” K. C. Varghese takes an effort to intersect some of the micro-historical and everyday experiences of the Dalit Parishes in the Mar Thoma Church and it also to look into the unique nature of parish formations. how cultural practices, everyday life and worship contests marginality. engagement demands an epistemological break with the dominant historiographical paradigms employed in representing communities. He has used the reflexive methodological engagements which lead to micro experiences, everyday religion and cultural artifacts of protest and spirituality. The history of the Dalit Christians in the Mar Thoma church and the status of the agrestic community is vividly revealed. Through his parish experience and a close connection with the historiography of the Dalit Christians and the present reality of them within the fold of the Mar Thoma church is closely observed. Hence the article demands space, power, stories and voice of the Dalits be listened and carefully dealt with in the future life of the Church.

The sixth essay “**Theological Education as Mission: A Unique Matthean Christology**” George Philip tries to explore the unique position of Matthean Christology as a way of mission in Theological education. The essay is divided into three parts such as; The first part of this article is the post-seventy historical setting of the Gospel of Matthew. The second part is an exposition

of Matthew 7:28-29 and 28:18-20, is to identify the teaching as Matthew's mission. And the third part is theological education as the mission in the Indian context. Jesus as a teacher, and his teachings including disciples become an example to the teachers. The "teaching" along with the preceding "baptizing" appears to be the real content of disciple-making in Matthew's mission. Jesus' teaching is an appeal to his listeners' will, not primarily to their intellect. The authority of Jesus and his delegation of authority to his disciples to teach or educate are intrinsically related to the mission work. Jesus commanded his disciples to teach the nations what he taught them. According to him theological education is education towards discipleship. It is a process of transformation into Christ's likeness. The objectives of theological education are twofold: understanding and strengthening responsible faithfulness to the Gospel and deepening commitment to the praxis of discipleship. The framework of theological education is contextual and ecumenical. Hence theological education crosses all boundaries and barriers to the mission. The writer concludes the essay with the challenges of theological education in India.

In the last short essay "**Enriching Human life Ecologically**" M. J. Joseph tries to bring out the eco-mission of the church and the responsibility of the human beings to take care of the nature and ecosystem for the survival of all. He brings out the biblical, ecclesial and social responsibility of the need of taking care of the ecosystem. The web of relationship and the inter-relationship with nature and human beings are inevitable. He talks about the ecological legacy and Indian understanding of the nature-human relationship. He concludes the essay with alternative solutions for the eco-crisis and the responsibility of humans along with the other living beings in fulfilling a vision of earth-community for a better future and harmonious living.

Lastly there is a book review "***A Biblical Masala: Encountering Diversity in Indian Biblical Studies***. Edited by David J. Chalcraft and Zhodi Angami." by Shilpa Rani. She

analyses the book which has a mixture of articles from diverse elements with varied range of flavours locally produced by Indian Biblical Studies. The book has got five sections and all these sections elaborately deals with its own given topic. The review concludes with appreciating the editor and writers and the title *Biblical Masala* attracts the readers and they can have the taste of each perspective, and diversities while enjoying one's own culture. And points out that it would have been good if the book included feminist Interpretation of the Bible by an Indian Feminists.

Dr. Aswathy John
Editor & Vice-Principal
Serampore College

Erasing the Racial Prejudice from the Old Testament: An Ecocritical Reading of “Goyim” and “Gerim”

A. C. Thomas

1. Introduction

The entire world is precariously disturbed today predominantly due to religious intolerance, ignorance, fanaticism, dogmatism and exhibitionism of misplaced religious superiority complex. This paper attempts an ecocritical reading of two terms *goyim* and *gerim* as it is found in the Old Testament in order to erase the racial prejudices within the Old Testament discourses.

2. Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a relatively new movement in cultural studies, which is heralded by the book *The Ecocriticism Reader* originally published in 1996.¹ The word ‘ecocriticism’ was coined in the 1970s. Most of the ecocritical works share a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the basic life-supporting systems. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe. Literary critics look for a way out of this dilemma searching for how they can contribute to ecological restoration. They recognize the fact that current ecological problems are a by-product of culture. If we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem.²

* Rev. Dr. A. C. Thomas is an ordained minister of the Mar Thoma Church. He was an Old Testament Faculty member and associate professor of Serampore College. He is known for his ecological concern and ecological reading of the Bible.

The challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on how ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists. Ecocriticism tries to study the relationship between the literature and the environment and the treatment of nature in the literary and even the nonliterary texts. Ecocriticism studies the relationship in the binary oppositions of nature/culture and nature/human and the manifestation of these concepts and their interaction in the literature.³

Ecocriticism combines literary and historical criticism of texts about nature. It is then both ontological⁴ and epistemological: that the study of the being of the world, and its relation to our being in the world, as a key to how we know the world. On the other hand, Kate Soper emphasizes the physicality of nature and the fact that human activities directly influence and often change the environment.⁵ She repudiates the constructedness of nature and insists on the existence of nature ‘outside there,’ as in her famous statement that “it isn’t language which has a hole in its ozone layer.”⁶

Thus, ecocriticism is concerned with the physical world and human relation with nature: how human is affected by it and affecting it. Cheryl Glotfelty proclaimed in her essay “Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” “All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnectedness between nature and culture.”⁷ Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocriticism helps to realize the conceptual boundaries of the physical environment and the literature through which both interact.⁸ The projects under the rubric of ecocriticism to include: (1) consideration of certain forms of scientific inquiry (e.g., ecology and evolutionary biology) and social scientific inquiry (e.g., geography and social ecology) as models of literary reflection; (2) textual, theoretical, and historical analysis of the palatial

basis of human experience; (3) study of literature as a critique of anthropocentric assumptions; (4) retheorization of literary representation of the physical environment in literary texts and (5) inquiry into the relation of (environmental) writing to life and pedagogical practice.⁹ Indeed, not all these go in any single project simultaneously. In short, the project of ecocriticism explores the interplay of time, space, symbols, visual images and stories and how it affected and reflected the ecosystem and human relation to it.

3. Social Location of Abrahamic Movement

The present writer wishes to read the history of the Abrahamic and Mosaic movements as part of a “larger story of the human family.”¹⁰ The social setting for the story is the AWA. It includes the landmasses grouped around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Basin, principally western Asia and north-eastern Africa. The American Orientalist James Henry Breasted (1865-1935) popularized the term “Fertile Crescent” to mark the fertile land in the form of an arc that extends from the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, arching west to the Mediterranean into southern Palestine. The Nile River valley of Egypt is often included as a further extension. It was here that Western Civilization and culture had their origins.¹¹ It contains the ancient countries Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt and Phoenicia from which the Greeks and Romans derived civilization. The development of radiocarbon dating since 1948 has confirmed that the earliest development of civilization originated in the Fertile Crescent with the invention of agriculture dating back to about 8000 BCE. Building the dikes and canals and use of irrigation followed rapidly.¹² The shift from food-gathering to producing was the beginning of settled life and urbanization.

With the invention of agriculture, humanity was divided into two social organizations: namely, the tribal society who followed the pastoral way of nomads for millions of years and urban civilization with settled life.¹³ Early in the sixth millennium BCE, farming communities, relying on irrigation

rather than rainfall, settled further south along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. As these new communities grew, monumental architecture and more elaborate forms of artistic representation reflected an increasingly differentiated social hierarchy. Forms of administration and recording were developed, as cities emerged across the region, especially in the south. By 2500 BCE, cuneiform inscriptions described the rivalry between city-states, with rulers building temples and palaces decorated with royal imagery proclaiming their power. Within two centuries, the city-states of Mesopotamia were unified by Sargon of Akkad, who created the first empire.¹⁴

The Mesopotamia of Hammurabi in the first half of the second millennium was the most advanced land in the world at that time. The Egyptian civilization was the other one that developed around the river Nile.¹⁵ The overuse of land for cultivation and the system of irrigation they practiced resulted in the desertification of both these areas. The desertification and social stratification of human society are the inevitable consequences of civilized life. Here a male-dominated society with elite ruling classes comprising a small minority (1-5%) of the population inhabited mainly the large walled urban centres and they controlled most of the production surplus of the farming community.¹⁶ Thus, a nation is known by the ruling class comprising of this small minority, controlled by them who are inside the fort. 95-99% of the population were subjected to extraction exploitation.

Salinization of arable land and water resources was as old as the history of human settlement and irrigation. It was a 6000-year-old problem. History teaches us that between 4000 and 2000 BCE the Sumerians ruined their land. In turn, their culture in the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris in Mesopotamia by their irrigation practices caused secondary salinization. It then eliminated the production of wheat and was subsequently replaced by more salt-tolerant barley. This led to the demise of the civilizations of

Mesopotamia and the rise of Babylon. The vast river systems in semi-arid regions with extensive irrigated agriculture not only supply the water for irrigation but also the salts dissolved in it. These river systems are therefore major contributors to salinity, which plague these regions.¹⁷

The elite ruling classes included the king and nobility, the group of merchants who generally operated as agents of the king and oversaw trade and commerce with neighbouring as well as with more distant city-states. The ruling classes counted among their number the temple personnel, the priests and scribes charged with providing the ideological justification and legitimization of the existing social and political order through the production of religious literature – myths, epics, prayers, rituals – and through the conduct of an often elaborate and impressive state-sponsored cult. Cultic activity often included the king in some way and it affirmed his rule as well as the existing order as the declared will of divine beings. The AWA creation stories arose out of such a context; they linked the eternal and unchangeable order of the cosmos to the correspondingly eternal and unchangeable because it too was willed by the gods. Thus a worldview was established and reinforced which attempted to encompass all of reality.¹⁸

The lower classes, which comprised the vast majority of the population, included the peasant farmers and herdsman, slave labourers and certain artisan classes. The peasant farmers usually worked plots of land assigned to them by the king, the temple personnel or the land-holding nobility. They operated mainly as tenants and the ruling elite classes had the control over their produce.¹⁹

It is already been noted that with the invention of agriculture, humanity was divided into two extremes groups, that is, producers and collectors. The story of the Patriarchs tells us, as is interpreted by Speiser that the homeland of Abraham was Ur, the central part of Mesopotamia and he went to Egypt and later settled in the land of Canaan, where he could find Amorites who were leading

a tribal, pastoral way of life. The migration from Mesopotamia was a quest for a meaningful way of life against a cosmopolitan, progressive and sophisticated civilization of Mesopotamian way of life. He chose a nomadic, pastoral way of life, although he was a product of the urban society of Mesopotamia.²⁰ Thomas W. Mann supports, “The tension that runs throughout these stories is one between creation and civilization (or nature and culture).”²¹ Ceresko calls these alternative stories, “dangerous memories.”²² It is evident in their attitude to Canaanite communities.

4. *Goyim* and *Gerim*

Two terms the Pentateuch used to describe other communities are worth to comparing. These are *goyim* and *gerim*. *Goyim* generally translated as “nations” or “gentiles” Exod 34:15 reads, “You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice.” Here the “inhabitants of the land” refers to the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites – commonly called the Canaanites. These are the people belonging to the nations, that is, *goyim* (גוֹיִם)²³ the inhabitants of the land, the dwelling people – יֹשֵׁב. Deut 7:2 reads, “Seven *goyim* mightier and more numerous than you and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and *show them no mercy*.”

On the other hand, the Torah speaks of *gerim* (גֵּרִים) which is usually translated as aliens or sojourners. Deut 5:14 reads, “But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien (גֵּר) in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.”

Deut 10:17-19 reads, “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome,

who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing you shall also love the stranger (גֵּר), for you were strangers (גֵּרִים) in the land of Egypt.” 1 Chron 29:15 reads, “For we are *gerim* and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope.”

From these texts, it is evident that the attitude of the Torah to *goyim* and *gerim* are diametrically opposite. It warns the people of their relation and affinity towards *goyim* and cautions them for being sinful in their contact with *goyim*. So it is surely not based on racial or ethnic prejudice. Rolf Knierim’s observation is helpful in this regard. “When the text speaks about the sins of the nations as the reason for their destruction, it is not because the nations are sinful as such, but because the sins, specifically of the Canaanites, are a temptation, a snare, to Israel’s election, monotheism, and loyalty to Yahweh.”²⁴ These are city-state nations. If it is the case, the temptation they pose before the Hebrew people is a temptation towards the urban civilization – the same way of life Abraham broke with. Hence, “show them no mercy.” *Goyim* are threat for the people of Israel, because of the temptation of urban civilization they created before this people. The examples of these temptations are seen in 1 Sam 8:5b, “appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations,” and in 1 Kgs 18 where the fertility cult that led to prostitution as it is read with Ahab-Elijah encounter. So a covenantal people with God at the head of the hierarchy, Samuel redefined the *goy* with a new hierarchy like God-Prophet-People-King where the role of a king as a servant of people to execute the justice of God among his people, ‘*ammekka* as an alternative to the hierarchy like God-King-people with *goyim*.

But who are these *gerim*? Israel is taught to be merciful towards *gerim*.²⁵ According to Bendangjungshi, *gerim* are the people without customary protection and at the same time people that are not directly related to their original social setting. The

concept of alien (*gerim*) is an integral part of the Old Testament, especially in the legal collections. The history of Israel began with a patriarch, who first appeared as *gerim* in a foreign land. And gradually his descendants continued to be *gerim* both in Canaan and in Egypt until their settlement again in Canaan. To be an alien implies an identity marked by alienation and oppression. Aliens remain on the fringes of society, deprived of the full rights of citizenship and its privileges. They are dependent on the goodwill of others because they have no natural ties to the social structure.²⁶ F. A. Spina writes,

Gerim in the Hebrew Bible refers to people who are no longer directly related to their original social setting and who have therefore entered into dependent relationships with various groups or officials in a new social setting. The ger was of another tribe, city, district or country who was without customary social protection or privilege and of necessity had to place himself under the jurisdiction of someone else.²⁷

Israelites and Patriarchs portrayed themselves as sojourners. (Deut 26:5-9) Canaanites and Egyptians were *goyim*. The Torah commands not to oppress *gerim* within their community.²⁸ Comparing the attitude of Israel to *gerim* (sojourners) and *goyim* (nations) and correlating it with their perception of civilization, we may infer that *gerim* were people of earth and *goyim* were people of the city, who belonged to city-states. So *goyim* were to be dealt with vigilantly because they were posing a temptation to the Hebrew movement with their urban civilized life. According to the narrative as well as the social world of the primeval discourse, the Hebrew movement could be placed in this context of a search for an alternative to urban civilization. Abraham broke with his past and set out on an epic journey, thereby setting in motion a process that was to be sustained throughout the entire course of Biblical history. The descendants of Abraham managed to create an alternative discourse comprising of social, political and economic

order after 1250 BCE which was supported by religious symbols, stories and cultic regulations that culminated in the Pentateuch and in particular the primeval discourse. Thus, the Hebrew discourses particularly the primeval one responded to the material culture of urban civilization with Cain and his descendants were presented as the great fathers of different stages of urban civilization – the Bronze Age, the Iron Age and the high culture (Gen 4:17-22). So *goyim* are the people belonging to the urban civilization, *gerim* are the people who live on the margins of the dominant society. Thus *gerim* should be treated with the loving care of God. So the Torah divides the people, not in terms of their caste, race or state, but in terms of their lifestyle and attitude toward the earth or in terms of beneficiaries and victims or hunters and hunted. The primeval discourse is to be read in this background.

The Hebrew movement could be placed in this context of a search for an alternative to urban civilization. This is a process that was to be sustained throughout the entire course of the Biblical history.²⁹

The Hebrew creation discourse found its final shape after the exile. That is, the final shape may be an antithesis of the Babylonian worldview in the sixth century BCE. The people of Israel were amused, lured to follow the affluent life of the Neo-Babylonian Empire at the cost of their faith in One God and the worldview generated from this. Their faith has a bearing on the social structure. Speiser upholds, “the social aspect of a civilization was intimately related to its religious aspect: the two interlocked.”³⁰ Thus, it can be assumed that these stories of pre-history and patriarchs set the parameters of the attitude of the people of Israel towards the earth and earth people over against the urban community and the culture developed out of it.

A discourse – either AWA or Hebrew or modern – should be assessed in terms of its attitude towards the earth and in terms of beneficiaries and victims of the discourse. A discourse that does not create beneficiaries and victims should be a participatory discourse in which all humanity has an important role.

It is seen that Israel divided humanity not in terms of their caste, race or ethnicity because they themselves are of a mixed community (Exo. 12:38; Num. 11:4). They divided humanity in terms of their life setting and worldview. They have to, according to Torah, show kindness to *gerim* sojourners of their land, because they are victims of city-dwellers. Or they are the people who live in tune with the earth belonging to a pastoral community. On the other hand, *goyim* are the people who belong to urban city-states. Their existence is sinful because they belong to the detoured humanity. So, *goyim* represent the detour of culture from nature, *gerim* represent the people of the soil. *Goyim* belongs to the people of the city, *gerim* belong to the people of the soil. Thus, Old Testament discourses create a binary, not in terms of race and ethnicity, but in terms of their relationship with the earth – those who care for the earth and those who rape it. While *gerim* represents a culture of participation with nature, *goyim* represents a culture of a detour from nature.

Evan Eisenberg notes that there were semi-nomads among the Israelites. The distinction between peasants and semi-nomads was rarely hard and fast. In the Levant and West Asia, semi-nomadism was an escape hatch when a peasant household found itself beset by tax collectors or armed ruffians. In a sense, it is the story of Exodus. For Eisenberg, “A nomad bends the knee to no prince.... A nomad depends only on God; which is to, on nature.” He notes that when the text adopts the viewpoint of nomads it is not because they are nomads, but because they are not. It is an alienation device. The desert is a corrective to the decadence and greed of their rulers.³¹ Thus, the text presents not a God with racial prejudice, but a God of earth perception.

5. ‘*ammi* as a Sacramental Presence on Earth

In between these *goyim* and *gerim* as a special category occur, ‘*ammi*, אַמִּי; “my people.”³² This is a covenant formula. Though the word *goy* appears as a synonym with ‘*am* (Deut 4:6 Ezek 36:15; Ps 96:3; 10; 106:34f) the word *goy* or *goyim* is never used with

the suffixes referring back to a deity, where such usage is very common in case of ‘*am*, ‘*ammi* or ‘*ammekka* etc frequently occur with reference to Yahweh (Exod 3:7; 32:11).³³ So there is a strong political colouring for the term *goy* in comparison with ‘*am*. That is ‘*am* stand for a special status for the people of Israel. The Essene writings put a special emphasis on the holiness of the chosen people by identifying them with the righteous, the “sons of light,” the holiness of the ‘*am* is expressed by ‘*am qadosh* ‘*am qedoshim*, “people of the saints.”³⁴ Taking into account the nature of call and commission of Abraham, and Israel itself as a people of mixed origin, elected from *gerim*, to be ‘*am qadosh*, “holy people” (Deut 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9; Isa 62:12) or ‘*am YHWH*, “People of Yahweh” (Num 11:29), or ‘*am Elohim*, “people of God” (Jud 20:2), ‘*am* is a sacramental presence of God on earth to witness among both *goyim* and *gerim* so that the desert may be converted to the oasis, fertile land by being the people of the land. Deut 31:12 explicitly states that the *ger* to be present for the solemn reading of the Law. So reading the Law in the absence of hunted will have serious catastrophic effects in its hermeneutics and on the land. The whole land theology of the Old Testament can be traced to this basis of sacramental choice and commission to be ‘*am* (Ps 107: 33-36, “He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water”).

6. Implications of the Hermeneutics

There is a strong tension within the Old Testament between the royal ideology and the prophetic vision about the identity of the people of Israel. It is in-between “to be a *goy*” or “to be an ‘*am*”? That tension can be traced back to the demand placed before Samuel for a king “like other nations” (1Sam 8:5). Karl J. Narr notes that the decisive factors that brought about the early urban civilizations were the new kinds of economic and social organization, the large-scale exploitation of human

energy, the formation of ruling classes, hierarchical organization and the administrative division of labour.³⁵ It is also noted that Mesopotamia has contributed more to the advancement of civilization than any other area of like size in the world.³⁶ Then, the Tower of Babel story represents the Mesopotamian civilization in particular and urban civilization in general as a detour of culture from nature. It is now an accepted fact that agricultural development in the Mesopotamia resulted in desertification, salinization caused by irrigation which reduced population numbers in the area.³⁷

The Mesopotamian civilization died not of conquest but neglect. It was a neglect of the soil, neglect of fertile land. It soon became desert sands as urban-civilized-human made scars on the face of the earth. Waterlogging and soil salinity due to the uncontrolled irrigation resulted in the expansion of desert in the region. To call today Iraq and Syria “Fertile Crescent”, formerly the leading centre of world agriculture, would be a “cruel joke.”³⁸ Nonetheless, collapse did come to many civilizations gradually. And, similar fates may await us if we do not change our practices and lifestyles. Diamond’s somewhat alarmist tone toward the conclusion of his book states that we are doomed in the next 30 years unless we act as caretakers of our environment.³⁹ The flood story warns that the descendants of *goyim*, that is of Cain will be washed out from the face of the earth. This is a historical reality. The ecological history of the urban civilizations reminds us of the famous statement of an anonymous writer, “Civilized man has marched across the face of the earth and left a desert in his footprints.”⁴⁰ The disturbing rate of depletion of biodiversity through the new way of life and human influence is summed up by Norman Myers,

Between the years 1600 and 1900, man eliminated around seventy-five known species.... Since 1900 man has eliminated around another seventy-five known species.... The rate from the year 1600 to 1900, roughly one species every 4 years, and the rate during most of

the present century, about one species per year, are to be compared with a rate of possibly one per 1000 years during the ‘great dying’ of the dinosaurs.⁴¹

7. Conclusion

Thus, the Old Testament divides humanity not in terms of race and caste, but in terms of their relationship with the earth. That is, the culture of participation with nature and the culture that takes a detour from nature. It is evident with the consequent use of the terms *goyim* and *gerim* in the rest of the Pentateuch and prophetic narratives. The terms *goyim* and *gerim* refer to these two respectively, namely the urban-human and earth-human. God created the earth-human and God is with them. It erases the racial prejudice within the Old Testament. “My People” (*ammi*, אֲמִי) sets a new paradigm for the mission. It is a challenge to witness among the urban-human with earth-human principles. The mission is to attract the people towards the earth-bound lifestyle to reinvent the Garden of Eden on the earth. The texts in the Old Testament demand the urban community to take a turn to the earth to participate with creation. Thus, these texts address the urban civilized humanity on behalf of the earth and earth-bound humanity.

End Notes

- 1 Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).
- 2 Ecocriticism is often associated with the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), founded in 1992 in the United States that is now the major organization for ecocritics worldwide. ASLE has an official journal—*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*—in which the most current scholarship in the rapidly evolving field of ecocriticism can be found. The *ISLE Reader* is an anthology of the latest articles on ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction. Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm

- (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xxi. Also Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic, eds., *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003). Other major works are Lawrence Buell, *The Environments Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard, 1995). Also Laurence Coupe, ed. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004). Also Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism. The New Critical Idiom*, Special Indian ed. (Abingdon: London, 2007). Organization for Studies in Literature and Environment-India (OSLE-India), founded in 2004 is the Indian version of ASLE. It understands ecocriticism as the application of deep ecological concepts to cultural texts. Madras Christian College, Chennai offers a postgraduate course, namely, “Ecoliterature” since 1985, which played a pivotal role for the foundation of OSLE-India. Nirmal Selvamony, “Introduction,” in *Essays in Ecocriticism*, ed. Nirmal Selvamony, Nirmaldasan, and Rayson K. Alex (Chennai: OSLE-India, 2007), xxviii.
- 3 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism. Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 21f.
 - 4 In classical philosophy, Ontology is a systematic account of Existence. However, in this project ontological means processes by which bodies are related to environments. Ontology concerns with how the text relates beings of the world with the Being. Miguel de Beistegui, *Truth and Genesis. Philosophy as Differential Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 222, 225.
 - 5 Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 12.
 - 6 Soper, *What Is Nature?*, 151.
 - 7 Glotfelty, “Introduction”, xix.
 - 8 David Mazel, *American Literary Environmentalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 2.
 - 9 Cited by Michael P. Cohen, “Blues in the Green. Ecocriticism under Critique,” *Environmental History* 9/1 (Jan 2004): 15f from Lawrence Buell, “Letter,” *PMLA* 114 (October 1999): 1090–1. This and other letters are collected under the title “Forum on Literatures of the Environment,” *PMLA* 114 (October 1999): 1089–1104.
 - 10 Anthony R. Ceresko, *The Old Testament. A Liberation Perspective* (New York: Orbis, 1993), 35.
 - 11 *Encyclopedia of India CD-ROM Encyclopedia of India CD-ROM* (2001), s.v. “Fertile Crescent.”
 - 12 *Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia* (2010), s.v. “Fertile Crescent.”
 - 13 Daniel Quinn, “A Fable to Start With” http://www.newtribalventures.com/origins/Beyond_Civilization (accessed 12 Jul 2008).
 - 14 Mesopotamia, 8000–2000 B.C., in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=02@ion=wam> (accessed 7 Apr. 2011).
 - 15 Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis*, 3rd ed., The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1985), XLIV.
 - 16 Ceresko, *The Old Testament*, 40.
 - 17 Christopher Dawson, *Enquiries into Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed and Ward, 2009), 5.
 - 18 Ceresko, *The Old Testament*, 41.
 - 19 Ceresko, *The Old Testament*, 41.
 - 20 Speiser, *Genesis*, XLV.
 - 21 Thomas W. Mann, “All the Families of the Earth. The Theological Unity of Genesis,” *Interpretation* 45, no. 4 (1991), 347.
 - 22 Ceresko, *The Old Testament*, 35.
 - 23 עַם is the plural of אָם primary meaning of the Hebrew word is “people.” Speiser says ‘am denotes consanguinity and common racial parentage, goy continually stresses territorial affiliation and the use of a common language. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* V. II, s.v. “אָם goy.”
 - 24 Rolf P. Knierim cites the following texts as examples. Exod 23:28-33; 34:11-16; Num 33:50-55; Deut 7:1-5, 16, 25; 8:17-20; 12:29-31; Josh 23:13; Judg 2:1-3 Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology. Substance, Method and Cases* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 98.
 - 25 In the Old Testament, the *ger* occupies an intermediate position between a native and a foreigner. He lives among people who are not his blood relatives, and thus he lacks the protection and the privileges which usually come from blood relationships and place of birth. His status and privileges are dependent on hospitality. The most frequent reason to become *ger* is famine (Ruth 1:1; 1 Kgs 17:20 –widow of Zarephath, 2 Kgs 8:1 –women of Shunem, Gen 26:3 –Isaac, 47:4 –Israel, 12:10 –Abraham). The military encounter can also force people to lead the life of a *ger* (Isa 16:4; 2 Sam 4:3; Jer 35:7). Deut 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19-21; 26:13; 27:19 mention the

- ger* alongside orphans and widows. The forgotten sheaf in the field (24:19), the gleanings on the olive trees and in the vineyards (24:20f) are allotted to the *ger*. The tithe every three years (14:29; 26:12) also belongs to the *ger*. The *ger* is to be treated righteously in judgment (1:16; 24:17; 27:19). *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* V. II, s.v. “גֵרִי Gur.”
- 26 Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context. Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 159.
- 27 Quoted by K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community. Tribal Theology in the Making* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2004), 124. from F. A. Spina, “Israelite as *Gerim*. Sojourner in Social and Historical Context,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth. Essays in Honour of David Noel Freedman*, ed. C. L. Meyer and M. O’Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 324.
- 28 Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 126.
- 29 Speiser, Genesis, XLV. Also Ceresko, *The Old Testament*, 42.
- 30 Speiser, Genesis, XLVII.
- 31 Evan Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 130.
- 32 אַמ the individual sense of ‘*am* was present in the covenant formula “I will be God for you, and you will be ‘*am* for me.” (Lev 26:12; Exod 6:7; Deut 26:17-18; 29:12; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1, 33:32:38; Ezek 11:20: 14:11; 36:28; 37:23, 27; Zech 8:8). The word ‘*am* was understood later in the sense of “my people.” A more precise definition later is based on the relationship traditionally established between the covenant formula and the expression ‘*am yhwh* (1 Sam 2L 24; 2 Sam 1:12; 6:21; 2 Kgs 9:6 cf. ‘*am’ elohim* in 2 Sam 14:13, a construct phrase expressing the relationship between Israel and God, which gave rise to the use of the suffix “my people.” (1 Kgs 14:7; 16:2) “your people” (Hab 3:13; Ps 3:8; 79:13) “his people Ps 29:11; 78:71).
- 33 *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* V. II, s.v. “גֵוֹי goy.”
- 34 *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* V. II, s.v. “אֶם - ‘am”
- 35 Karl J. Narr, “Civilizations Prehistoric,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suit Cd-Rom* (2005).
- 36 Tom Dale and Vernon Gill Cartor, *Topsoil and Civilization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 27.
- 37 Cavalli-Sforza, Paolo Menozzi Luigi Luca, and Alberto Piazza, *The History and Geography of Human Genes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 254.

- 38 Jared M. Diamond, *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 48.
- 39 Diamond, *Collapse*, 513.
- 40 Dale and Cartor, *Topsoil and Civilization*, 9.
- 41 Norman Myers, *The Sinking Ark* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979), 4.

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Sociological Interpretation in the Study of New Testament¹

Tunchapbo

Social-scientific study of the Bible is one of the most popular models of interpretation. Certain problems pose due to its rapid development regarding the correct and valid use of its models, which at times quite unusual from that for which its models were originally designed.² The social-scientific methods and its findings are increasingly significant for New Testament students. Although, it is difficult to know entirely how ancient people lived, as Richard L. Rohrbaugh has rightly said, "[R]eading the Bible in this strange land to which it was never addressed can be difficult indeed."³ However, to examine the world in which the Bible was written and to which the writers originally spoke is imperative and is not a matter of choice for anyone who respects Bible. As a result, there are some pressing questions and challenges lie before us such as, what exactly is social-scientific criticism? Why it is necessary and relates to differ from traditional historical methods of New Testament? How it applies or its methodologies look like in the New Testament studies? What are the major historical developments of social-scientific criticism in New Testament studies? What are its benefits and contributions made to New Testament studies? What are the weaknesses and in which areas does the discipline need to be cautious? What are the areas for further development in the New Testament studies?

* Dr. Tunchapbo is a New Testament Scholar from Nagaland and at present he is a principal of one of the Colleges in Manipur.

1. What is Social-Scientific Criticism?

Social-scientific criticism has been broadly defined as, “that phase of the exegetical task which analyzes the social and cultural dimensions of the text and of its environmental context through the utilization of the perspectives, theory, models, and research of the social sciences.”⁴ In addition, it is seen as a ‘component’ or ‘sub-discipline’ of the historical-critical method, which “investigates biblical texts as meaningful configurations of language intended to communicate between composers and audiences.”⁵ It accomplishes this task by studying in three different veins: *firstly*, the conditioning reasons and intended consequences of the communication method. *Secondly*, the connection of the text’s linguistic, theological, literary, and social dimensions. And *thirdly*, the manner in which the communication of the text was both a reflection and a response to a particular social and cultural context.⁶

It is not an easy task to define, though, social-scientific interpretation refers to biblical interpretation that draws upon ideas and perspectives from social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, social psychology, economics, and so on.⁷ It is a common misnomer in describing ‘sociology’ since the word only designates one of the social sciences (anthropology) involved.⁸ However, “sociology is certainly an attempt to understand society and social relations within society in a disciplined way.”⁹ It is interested in trying to determine what the biblical texts meant to the original audiences.¹⁰ Sociological theory at times is an abstract, about symbolic representation of, and explanation of, social reality.¹¹ Social-Scientific Criticism with all those is therefore, planned to embrace all the social sciences, not simply sociology, and to fit with all the other “criticisms” of the historical-critical method, like form, source, redaction, literary criticism and so on. Social-scientific Criticism is an “indispensable operation of an interpretive method that intends to examine all the features of biblical texts and all aspects of their social contexts and then the

relations of texts and contexts.”¹² In order to adequately determine the meaning of the biblical text without consideration of social aspects, it is not possible since the world of the modern reader is far removed from the world of biblical text.

2. The Need of Sociological Criticism in the New Testament Studies

A sociological study in the New Testament has been used ever since as a part of historical-critical approach.¹³ To a great extent, they went hand-in-hand in so far as it was used for reconstructing the historical conditions of ancient world and the early Christian life.¹⁴ However, the exhaustion of the historical-critical method as traditionally understood, and especially the failure of form criticism to fulfill its promise of identifying the *Sitze im Leben* of New Testament texts.¹⁵ Form criticism, the basic idea was from the sociology of literature, however, the ways sociological approach tackled the historical queries were quite different from the historical critical approach. It could be considered as a new way of looking at old questions that become so impressive in scholarly works. It emerged during the second half of 20th century along with various forms of new approaches in the field of New Testament interpretation.

One of the basic reasons is that, the introduction of sociology made by New Testament Form Criticism underwent fundamental shift and came out as dialectic theology and the existential hermeneutic texts and with them a focusing of interest on theology and the individual. This is because of the overriding individualistic existentialism of Bultmann eclipsed the sociological task of careful assessment of social setting.¹⁶ Despite the fact that, form criticism solely directed into finding the social basis of the gospels in the life and faith of the early church (the *Sitz im Leben*), it became *Sitz im religiosen Leben*. It means instead of “social life setting” of the text with its talk of *Sitz im Leben* it became merely a literary and theological discipline which produce

hardly no concrete historical, social or economic condition of the text.¹⁷

Hence, New Testament studies suffered dissatisfaction around 1970 especially due to parochialism and increasingly esoteric. Hence it became unappealing in dealing with Christian origins.¹⁸ The over emphasis on a literary-historical and theological point of view lead to the detriment of the sociological approach.¹⁹ After few decades there arose an interest and were convinced on the need to special attention to nonliterary and archeological data on solid knowledge about the concrete social life of the early Christian movement and contemporary world. As result, a flood of investigations is seen, “books about slavery, the life of women and children, institutions, household and family life, poverty and riches, social classes and status stratification, and many similar phenomena.”²⁰ This led a new trend began in the twentieth century having realized that the understanding of the New Testament on theological grounds alone is very inadequate. Robin Scroggs put it this way:

Sociological interpretation of the New Testament has vigorously revived with the introduction of more sophisticated social scientific theories and methods. Impatience with fragmented knowledge produced by biblical scholarship has encouraged the attempt “to put body and soul together again” after long overemphasis on the inner spirituality and doctrinal views of early Christians.²¹

He further says, “the discipline of the theology of the New Testament as operates out of the methodological Docetism, as if believers had mind and spirits unconnected with their individual and corporate body.”²² Holmberg called this strongly distorting perspective of early Christian reality the “fallacy of idealism.”²³ This is due to philosophical aberration and the serious methodological mistake in its approach since the social setting of the New Testament and early Christianity are an indispensable

ingredient in holistic interpretation.²⁴ Holmberg said, “we need not only study about the social life of New Testament communities, but the social dimension reinstated into the analysis of New Testament faith and theology.”²⁵ In order to do that, the discipline needs methods of analysis and understanding that take seriously the continuous dialect between ideas and social structures. Thus, this discipline therefore, indeed is not an attempt to limit reductionistically the reality of Christianity to social dynamics; rather it is to be seen as an attempt to guard against a reductionism from other extreme of objective-cognitive system.²⁶ The Bible mentions on every page the social events, social institutions, social relations, and codes and patterns of social behavior. The writings are those social products shaped by those socio-economic, cultural conditions, social institutions, and group ideological interests. In addition, these texts were designed as means of social interaction to analyze, understand, and illuminate those social and cultural facets of the Bible and its milieu, the social sciences that informed by its methods are vital to the exegetical endeavor, which helps to immerse ourselves in strange Mediterranean world.²⁷ The biblical studies tries to learn social and cultural background of the biblical texts is an integral part of the exegetical process in determining the historical background of the texts.

3. The Principles and Methods/Approaches of Sociological Interpretation in the New Testament Studies

There are various classifications of principles and methods in New Testament sociology, as part of the richness and diversity of the discipline lies in the fact that different principles and methods have been developed independently and at times appears, cohere each other. Proper understanding can be gained with the use of various tools and methods that can be tested and validated by others.

One of the earliest studies which sociology illuminates New Testament was Jonathan Smith who outlined four areas in 1973 in

Chicago, which has served as a starting point for many subsequent surveys and classifications of work in New Testament sociology. *Firstly*, describing the social facts of early Christianity and place it in its social context. *Secondly*, constructing a social history of Christianity. *Thirdly*, investigating the social forces in society that led to the rise of Christianity and analyzing the social institutions that resulted from its foundation. *Fourthly*, investigating the construction of the Christian's worldview that communicates and sustains through language and symbol, which is the construction of reality and the structures that maintained that worldview as plausible.²⁸ They remain helpful even today and many scholars like M. Robert Mulholland,²⁹ Bruce J. Malina,³⁰ John Elliott,³¹ G. Theissen³² and others continue to put forward similar features as the desiderata for a good social-scientific model and ways for biblical interpretation. The first three is more or less falls under social description using traditional historical methods and the last directs to the application of sociological theory.

Sociological approach covers a vast area sometime it may be referred as "social-scientific study of the Bible and the biblical world," or "sociological exegesis," or "social description," or "social history," or "materialistic reading," or "cultural anthropology studies," or "socio-scientific criticism," and so on.³³ Broadly for Elliott, the socio-scientific criticism has two focuses namely, socio-cultural anthropological studies and social-scientific exegesis.³⁴ The first *socio-cultural anthropological studies*, which emphasis on the "social and cultural conditions, features, and contours of early Christianity and its social environment."³⁵ In this, the descriptions of economic life, religious practices, geography, daily life and other topics are usually discussed. The two most significant works are *Handbook of Biblical Social Values* edited by John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, which describe on some of the famous values in the New Testament by referring generally in the Bible,³⁶ whereas *The Social World of Luke-Acts* edited Jerome Neyrey,

is perhaps most inclusive of both the former and later. It not simply attempts to reconstruct the history of the world behind Luke-Acts. Rather, it tries to "discover the meanings implicit in Luke-Acts though attention to the values, social structures and conventions of Luke's society which determine and convey those meanings."³⁷ In cultural anthropology, three main types of models are used, namely, the structural functionalist, the conflict or coercion type and the symbolic.³⁸ This can be generally paired with the social history/description.

Second, a *Social-Scientific Exegesis* gives attention more exclusively on the exegetical study of biblical texts. In a broad way, it is "the analytic and synthetic interpretation of a text through the combined exercise of the exegetical and sociological disciplines, their practices, theories and techniques."³⁹ It focuses in determining the meaning of the biblical texts without neglecting other procedures of the exegetical enterprises such as textual, tradition, literary, historical, form, rhetorical, narrative, redaction, criticisms and so on.⁴⁰ It is also called **sociology** and its approach exercises with "the presuppositions, theories, analytical methods, and comparative models of the discipline of sociology."⁴¹

The According to David Roades, the social-scientific study of the New Testament consists of four approaches, namely:⁴² the *social description* evaluates information gathered from New Testament literature and archaeological and inscriptional evidences, etc. The work of E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of the First Century Groups in the First Century* (1960) is one of the classic examples. The *social history* studies the social developments and movements of the early Christians within the Greco-Roman world. The best example of this approach is the work of Abraham J. Malharbe's *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (1977). The *Sociology of knowledge* looks at particular social groups how they maintain and holds such a worldview. It tries to correlates such worldview with particular group. The work of W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, (1983) is more of this

approach. The *Models from the social sciences* examines of a number of similar cultures issues. Theissen's work *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (1982) is one of the examples.⁴³ In Roades' classifications, the first two is more or less on social description/history and the last two in Roades and the third in Rictcher falls under the social analysis/social explanations. In fact, there have been attempts to distinguish between social description/history and social analysis/social explanations. It is often not easy to draw a clear line of demarcation of the two and other sociological approaches since they all deals with social aspects of the community under consideration.

Then, one can generalize the approaches with separate names, where all the sociological theories perhaps come under these rubrics, the *Social Description* deals with the "what" aspect of social and historical circumstances of given traditions or compositions. In another words, the *Social Explanations* focuses on the "how" and "why" aspects of the circumstances that give rise to the production of given traditions.⁴⁴ Whereas former appear to favor leaving its reading scenarios and models *implicit* to appear objective and free of interpretive constraints, and later make its theory and methods *explicit* so as to allow for evaluation and its theory to be confirmed or disconfirmed. The two – description and explanation have even appeared sharply in the historical development of sociological approach in the New Testament.

4. Historical Development of Sociological Approach in the New Testament Studies

There has been a long story behind the emergence and development of sociological approach in the New Testament studies. From the 1920s until the 1970s, the interest in the social dimension of the early Christianity declined. The tide began to turn with a new renewal of sociological exegesis in the 1960s with the growing awareness of sociological studies in the secular field. The work of E. A. Judge *The Social Patterns of Christians Groups in the First Century* (1960) marked the beginning of

new waves of interest in the sociological study of the Bible after a long halt.⁴⁵ By 1970s, the interest in social facet of early Christianity was revived with the used of new creative and varied methods, theories and models from the social sciences in the New Testament studies has burgeoned.⁴⁶

Two important "events" deserves special notice in the assessment of social-scientific study of the New Testament of the early 1970s, one in USA and the other in Germany. **First** was the formation of Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). With this, in 1972 the discussion of "social description of early Christianity" has initiated by Wayne Meeks and others. In 1973, a study group sponsored jointly by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) was convened to explore "The Social World of Early Christianity."⁴⁷ The **Second** notable event was by Gerd Theissen series of articles' publication in between 1973 and 1975. These articles that encompass the Palestinian Jesus movement and also the Pauline church at Corinth, which remains among the most significant and influential ground-breaking contribution to the sociology of early Christianity.⁴⁸ Other many major scholarly works eventuated during this decade, and there have been periodic updates and helpful amply surveys done by many.⁴⁹ As Robin Scroggs put it, what these works had in common was "a shared aim to show how the New Testament message is related to the everyday life and societal needs and contexts of real human beings, how the texts cannot be separated from the social dynamic without truncating the reality of both speaker and reader."⁵⁰ Along with those many systematic study of the New Testament came out. Elliott listed more than eighty-one works on this subject that came out since 1980.⁵¹

There was an on-going tension in the Social Description Seminar between those, such as Malherbe, Gager, Grant, and Meeks who were primarily social historians and those, such as Elliott, Kee, and Scroggs who were more into sociological method

and concepts and a move beyond description to explanation. Howard Clark Kee (*Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective*, 1980) and especially John Elliott, which is more into, who called “a genuinely sociological perspective and a sociological technique.”⁵² However, for Elliott, the used of ‘*social*’ and ‘*sociological*’ have generally been used indiscriminately so that mere social description has been equated erroneously with sociological explanation.⁵³ By 1983, the social historians and the biblical sociologists split into separate seminars and enclaves.⁵⁴

In fact, any categorization can be of course questioned, as the boundary demarcations between types are never neat or clear.⁵⁵ However, the difference in methodologies became manifest and institutionalized from this point onward in the SBL programmes. In meeting of the AAR/SBL at the Dallas, Texas in 1983, two new “consultations” appeared on the programme. Robert Jewett chaired one and entitled “Social Sciences and New Testament Consultation.” Dennis Smith and Michael White co-chaired the other and entitled “Social History of Early Christianity Consultation.” Since then, both groups have continued to the present usually having two sessions each year usually with co-chairs.⁵⁶ The two group of loins can be sharply seen among the prominent scholars’ works: *Social History and Social Description* led by early work Kee (1980), Hock (1980), Balch (1981), Theissen (1982), Malherbe (1983), Meeks (1983) and others, and the deliberate use of *Social Science Models* took the lead of the pioneering work of Gager (1975), Theissen (1978), Holmberg (1986), Elliott (1981), Malina (1981) and others.⁵⁷ Also with the “Context Group” formed in 1986, and since then, the bibliography has expanded enormously and burgeoning till today in the sociological studies of New Testament.⁵⁸ With this, the research shall critically assess that has been voiced over since then.

5. Critical Assessment

5.1. Benefits and Contributions

Social-scientific criticism offers many potential benefits and contributions to biblical studies.

- (1) *It Broaden the Horizon of Exegesis*: Sociological approach broaden the horizons for exegesis of the texts. The traditional historical-critical approaches to exegesis have provided insights into cause and effect relations of a diachronic sort; social-scientific criticism offers insights of a synchronic sort.⁵⁹ It gives new perspective, critical theoretical resources, and alerts the research to previously unexplored aspects of social behaviour.⁶⁰
- (2) *It Becomes Gap-Fillers Where Evidence has to Say Nothing*: Social-scientific criticism benefit biblical interpretation by providing a way to fill in gaps where traditional historical approaches may not be able to do so. Sociological theories to be indispensable “gap-fillers,” indeed, “providers of information” in the cases where “the alternative,” given the state of the evidence, “is to say nothing.”⁶¹ In that way, sociological approach also helps to understand better the meaning of New Testament texts in their original settings and this made the approach an indispensable tool for New Testament interpretation today.⁶²
- (3) *It Adds Methodology*: Sociological methods have added needed methodological operations not only to the historical-critical method. Today, the ancient world is seen not only how it *looked*, but how it *worked* as well. It has given us better picture for investigating the social and cultural province of the biblical milieu, comprehending these alien biblical texts with better cultural understanding, and seeing more obviously “the possibilities and limits of finding in the Bible guidelines for addressing the pressing issues of our own time.”⁶³

(4) *The Charge of Reductionism has Elevated*: At least in the first years of the recent interest in social scientific biblical study, the criticism was often heard that theology has being reduced to social science. However, Osiek is right in saying, “this objection has been laid to rest. Rather than treat theology reductionistically, one might argue, social science analysis saves it from the docetist, dualist tendency to split off social realities from revelation.”⁶⁴ In terms of the study of early Christian theology, the social sciences offer tools to enrich the historical study of the social context within which such theology was formed, and provide theoretical tools to analyse the ways in which the theology acted back upon, the social interaction in the early Christian communities. In this field of study, then, the social sciences have an important role to play.⁶⁵

5.2. Cautions and Limitations

There are also ebbs and flows in sociological analysis that need to be cautious or avoided:

- (1) *Over-Interpretation*: Any method of interpretation flirts with the danger of over-interpreting a text, but social-scientific criticism may be more susceptible to this trap if not closely scrutinized. A main reason for this is that interpretive models in social-scientific criticism are largely devised by abductive logic. This logical process, though widely employed by all people with capacities for reasoning, is ultimately a way of “guessing” what factors precipitated data that has been observed.⁶⁶ Holmberg says, “the symbols are our only or most important means of information about the social situation, we must state that nothing can be known about it.”⁶⁷
- (2) *Over-Enthusiasm*: Malherbe warns against the danger of over-enthusiasm in drawing analogies with the non-Christian movements or to apply sociological theories to the pertinent data.⁶⁸ On the sociological approach’s emphasis

on the community’s contribution on the societal ethos rather than that of the individual, Malherbe cautions, “A more balanced approach might be to recognize the importance of the communal aspect of early Christianity while retaining importance of the church’s founders and leaders and what was received to their theology.”⁶⁹

- (3) *Methodological Egoism*: Social-scientific exegesis is prone to claim too much about its contribution. Social-scientific criticism, indeed, can offer fresh and illuminating approaches to interpretation.
- (4) *Anachronistic Fallacy*: There is a very real danger inherent in using models developed by a modern discipline like sociology to interpret the ancient world and text of the Bible.⁷⁰ In fact, “many modern constructions of either social positions or belief systems of ancient person would not be recognized by those ancient persons themselves as what they think they believe.”⁷¹ Some models are better at *eisegesis* than *exegesis*, which likely or fall into a trap of anachronism by claiming too much than what the studies really assumed.
- (5) *Danger of Reducing all Theology to Mere Sociology*: It has been admitted that sociology involves the interpretation of social behavior, structures that “reduces” the religious beliefs to nothing more than social products, thereby necessarily rendering the beliefs not “true” in the sense in which they are held by the believers.⁷² In fact, Sociological theory relies on evidence from the senses and from the social world to arrive at its conclusions. Therefore, the religious explanations point to faith and revelation has no place in sociological theory,⁷³ and it has less significance of Holy Scripture for the church today. Rather, it is true that sociology can be a disturbing discipline as it is not conducive to an onward-and-upward outlook rather its disenchantment of one’s faith.⁷⁴
- (6) *Lack of Adequate Sources*: Any problem with relate to a sociology of the New Testament is the reliability of

the evidence given in the New Testament from which a sociologist would construct his interpretation.⁷⁵ Because the data available with regard to the early Christianity are often too meager for supporting or refuting any theory that may be advanced. Several conclusions made by sociological analyst can be one of the biggest challenges in New Testament studies as it lacks concrete historical materials and sources.

- (7) *Danger of Parallelomania*: Howard Kee points out another reason that is the danger of parallelomania. This problem comes out especially when two institutions in two different cultures suggest resembling each other. The danger is when superficial analysis and a sweeping comparison having conclusion saying that they are parallel of phenomena. In fact, their function may be very different in their differing contexts. What is needed is careful study of the New Testament itself before cautious conclusions are drawn.⁷⁶

5.3. Suggestion for Future Development

The continued creative and careful use of a variety of social-scientific approaches are in the making, therefore, no doubt some are yet to be discovered by biblical scholars or applied to early Christianity by social scientists should enable revitalizing to progress further.

- (1) *It Can Stimulate Deeper and Enrich in Hermeneutics*: Hitherto social-scientific interpretation has largely contributed to historical criticism. Indeed, how the biblical text to be meaningful for the contemporary readers will increasingly utilize this approach. Therefore, it can further enlighten especially the exegetes' interest in the 'social cultural dimensions' of ancient hermeneutic and modern settings. The vigorous dialogue between our culture and theirs will continue to stimulate a lively and enriching sense of a real effect in our lives itself.⁷⁷
- (2) *Theology and Sociology Need be More Open to Each Other*: A conflation of both theology and sociology disciplines need

to be more open to each other's findings in a discerning way. Then, both disciplines can develop more in a healthy way. Neither discipline can exist in a watertight compartment without doing itself a disservice. The interaction between the two disciplines is important and need not in any way be destructive either to Christian faith or to sociological understanding.⁷⁸ Indeed, social-scientific approach can be sharpened and, at the same time, broadened in and beyond the so-called social sciences themselves since there are hardly clear disciplinary boundaries. A marriage of social-scientific critical studies of the Bible with others might make not only better biblical scholarship, but also better sociology.⁷⁹

- (3) *A Look Back in Order to Look Forward*: This is one of the purposes of histories of research which is very imperative in social-scientific criticism. One of the examples of this is *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later* edited by Todd D. Still and Davide G. Horrell. In this book from the foregoing seven chapters together constitute a model of such a history with a comprehensive review in discovering the evidence unexplored and the questions unasked in each chapter, forward-looking in their focus on the next steps to be taken.

Conclusion

The use of social sciences in the New Testament studies are now widespread and firmly established. This approach not only validates the traditional historical-critical approaches but also paves new developments in the twentieth-century theology. There are still signs that in a variety of directions social sciences can and will enrich and develop in the study of the New Testament. Though social-scientific criticism has limitations and is susceptible to serious pitfalls, overall, it is beneficial for the biblical interpreter to add this method to his or her exegetical toolbox. This means that sociological tool should be used with extreme care and the

results it provided should be accepted only after a careful critical evaluation. Indeed, there is no single approach that can be given sufficient meaning or that can be applied universally; rather an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary interactions having of cross-disciplinary engagements can play major roles for more suitable methodological approaches. In other words, social-scientific criticism with the other conventional methods of historical-critical interpretation - may provide a check and balance system and broadening its area can illuminate the text of Scripture for the interpreter. Therefore, looking appropriate approaches become a pressing need for biblical interpreters especially in the Indian context. In doing so, in any hermeneutic while theologizing or analyzing, the heuristic key must centre in the Bible and should frame within which any contextual biblical theology should be maneuvered.

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Jesus' Attitude to People of Other Faiths in the Gospels

Ashish Kumar

Introduction

I am writing this paper as a South Asian Christian who lives among followers of the majority religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism etc. In such a context, I cannot but need to face this truth that I have an existence among people whose beliefs and patterns of life are different from mine. In this regard, I am not just an individual who believe differently, but I am also an individual belonging to a minority group. People of other major faith consider my faith as a threat to their existence. It often becomes a challenge when the majority group (Hindus in India, Muslims in Pakistan, Buddhists in Myanmar etc.) adopt political means to disarm and control the minority religious group. One of the major allegations of the majority group against Christianity is their activism towards conversion.

This paper attempts to address this issue of inter-relationship of Christians and people of other faiths. On the one hand, Christians believe that their faith is exclusive. Or, people of other faiths who celebrate their culture and history are offended when a different set of beliefs is presented by Christianity. What are we to say in such a scenario? Where is the path for peace and harmony? How shall we deal with people of other faiths? Amid these life issues,

* Rev. Ashish Kumar is the Principal of Nav Bharat Bible Institute, Purnia, Bihar. Ashish worked with Compassion Internationals based out of Kolkata leading the Training and Support Team. He has also served at the Senate of Serampore College (University).

we cannot but look at the life of Jesus in the Gospels and delineate an approach adopted by our Saviour himself towards people of other faith.

This paper consists of the following parts: a) The first part deals with Jesus' attitude towards people of other faiths b) Second part deals with why should a Christian be interested in people of other faiths c) the last section deals with issues that come across while dealing with people of other faiths.

Attitude of Jesus Towards People of Other Faiths

1. Jesus Attitude Towards Samaritans

The Gospel of John mentions Jesus' entry into a city of Samaritans while on the way to Galilee.¹ It is interesting to note that Jesus chooses to pass through Samaria to go to Galilee while Jews of those days would prefer to cross Jordan and take a different road that does not touch Samaria to go through Galilee. The text of John² introduces the phrase "*edei*", meaning "he must", describes the strong intention of Jesus to relate to people of Samaria even though Jews of his time would prefer to remain disconnected.³ Jesus' attitude towards Samaritans here is very clear of building a bridge to disrupt the gap among them. This approach took disciples with a surprise as they never expected Jesus a Jew to have any relationship with the Samaritans who were considered of perverted faith.

The dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman also needs to be taken into account before we make any conclusion about Jesus' attitude.

Samaritans were of mixed race of the ten lost tribes of Israel and the gentile settlers. They worshipped many deities, including Yahweh. Also, they marry women from other communities/tribes. These different practices led Jews to distance themselves from Samaritans. Samaritans were treated of inferior faith, people outside of the Covenant and untouchables who would potentially defile a Jew of ritual purity. The fear and hatred mixed evolved in this distancing. However, it is apparent that Jesus did not

appreciate the distance/gap between Jews and Samaritans and hence chose to dialogue with Samaritans. The same spirit towards Samaritans was carried forward by the early church.⁴ The early church was quick to absorb this emphasis of Jesus in bridging the gap with the Samaritans and reach out to them.

In today's context among Christians, a similar attitude of closeness must exist while dealing with people of other faiths. A sense of superiority that Christian faith is higher than others' faith or a sense of hatred that people of other faiths are detestable for their preferences is against the spirit of Jesus. It will do greater harm than good to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus talked in length with this woman who was a Samaritan and extended that God is God of all who is not reserved in the confinements of Judaism alone. He broke all existing cultural practices in reaching out to Samaritans. He did two things that were rather radical in those days:

- a) He spoke tenderly to Samaritan woman for whom the usual treatment was rather of contempt and indifference.
- b) He asked for water to a Samaritan. This touch from a Samaritan woman would contaminate him and make him legally impure.⁵

Matthew and Luke have presented some more interactions of Jesus with Samaritan. Both have portrayed a very open, positive and proactive attitude of Jesus in contrast to the delimiting attitude of people of his time. Luke mentions Samaritan two times: the first reference is of Good Samaritan (Lk 10:33 ff), a model to be followed, and the second of the tenth healed Samaritan leper (Lk. 17:16) who also is presented as a model to be followed. Jesus elevated the poorly treated people of "other" faiths of his time into an exemplary approach to be adopted by Jews. By doing this, Jesus disrupted the gap that continued for many centuries. He brought to the front that God is not limited to "ethnos", and the horizons of God is beyond human traditions.

God's approach is inclusive and incorporates those who were not yet understood well.

2. Jesus' Attitude Towards Romans

Romans were known for a great number of deities whom they revered. Romans also absorbed Greek deities and myths in their religious observance. The Roman religion was based on ritual, prayer and sacrifice and not on faith or dogma. Romans used deities, culture and religion, not just for worship but also to control the empire.⁶ Romans encouraged people to worship Greco-Roman deities and erected the temple of Jupiter and Hadrian on the site of the Temple of Yahweh.⁷ For a common Roman, religion was a part of daily life. Every home would have a small shrine where people offered prayer and libations. Even the Roman calendar was structured around religious observances.

It is interesting to note that Jesus chose to interact with Romans who believed and practiced religion different than that of Jews. The Gospel of Luke notes Jesus' interaction with a Roman Centurion in Luke 7. This potential discourse provides an insight into Jesus' attitude to Romans. I want to make three insights here.

- a) The Roman centurion sent friends to request Jesus not to come to his house (v. 6). This Roman centurion did not count himself worth of Jesus' presence inside his house. It is also noted that Jewish considered themselves superior in faith compared to Romans, who were polytheists.⁸ However, Jesus kept the prevalent Jewish intolerance and negativism aside while dealing with the Roman centurion. The phrase Luke uses is "not far from [centurion's] house" indicates that Jesus was on the way to the centurion's home (a Jew going to the house of a gentile). It was then the centurion requested to say a word and heal his servant. Jesus again accepts his request and heals his servant by a word from afar.
- b) Slaves were considered inferior to free humans. However, in this case, the Roman centurion greatly loved his slave. The love of the centurion towards his slave is admirable. This love

towards his slave compelled him to send a special request to Jesus to heal his slave, who was likely a non-Jewish person. Jesus did not restrain his healing to this non-Jewish slave rather shared it freely without any religious tag. Usually, when Jesus relates with a person, he advises them "to follow him." Here, Jesus healed the slave of the Roman centurion without any invitation to be converted or follow the new faith. It is not to say one must not extend the invitation to follow Jesus to people of other faith. Rather, it emphasizes that healings and benefits/blessings of Jesus must not be used as tools to prey/lure people of other faith.

- c) The faith of the Roman centurion was praised by Jesus, saying, "I tell you; I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Earlier, we noted that on two occasions, Jesus praised the faith of Samaritans. Here Roman centurion's faith is presented as a role model for others to follow.

3. Jesus Attitude Towards Canaanites

According to Genesis 10:15-19, Canaanites occupied the land of Canaan, all the territory from Sidon or Hamath in the north of Gaza to Lasha in the southeast. Canaanites were the original inhabitant of the land of Israel, and upon the commandment of God, Israelites drove them out of the land of Canaan. It is also to note here that In Genesis 9:20-27, Noah cursed his grandson Canaan for the transgression of Canaan's father, Ham. Ham himself was not cursed, but his descendent Canaan was. This curse of Canaan carries a strong connotation whenever Bible mentions Canaan or Canaanite.

In the discourses between a Canaanite woman and Jesus in Matthew 15:21-28, we can note subtle details of Jesus' attitude towards Canaanites. This passage talks about Jesus going to the distant land of Tyre and Sidon. Meeting a Canaanite woman in this region is no coincidence. This is a land where Canaanites dwell, or to say Jesus went to this region only to meet Canaanite people and meet a Canaanite woman. The conversation in these passages

gives us the impression that Jesus was unwilling to answer her request because she was a Canaanite. It is noteworthy to mention that Jesus most often discouraged people or placed stumbling blocks to see if they had faith to step over them. For instance, when a man called him "good", Jesus said, "Why are you calling me good? There is no one good by God."

The response of Canaanite woman made Jesus rejoice over her faith, and he declared, "Woman, you have great faith!"⁹ Jesus again affirmed her as a role model of persistent faith, and the woman recognized Jesus as the Lord.¹⁰ In response to her faith, Jesus then healed her daughter, confirming that his healing mercies are not restricted to Israel alone.

The following are clear from this passage:

- a) Jesus went to the region of Tyre and Sidon (to the region of Canaanite) on his own uninvited. This journey to the Canaanite region was an intentional move by Jesus to relate to the Canaanites. Jesus had done this kind of thing earlier also when he took along with him his disciples to the land of Samaritans, what Jesus want to achieve by going in these regions other than to establish a relationship with them. He indeed left a president to his disciples to bridge a chasm created by forefathers and freely made available the things he had to offer to all. The Canaanite women went home satisfied, praising God.
- b) Secondly, Jesus meeting this Canaanite woman is also no coincidence. He was in a Canaanite region, and in this region, he will meet Canaanites. The text describes that he meets a woman. The woman received some tough remarks from Jesus. However, Jesus was not playing any game with her or to say he did not go all the way to her region to avoid her. This temporary crisis that Jesus created for her was to reveal the faith in her, and soon it became evident that she is persistent in her faith. Also, in irony, when Jews doubted Jesus as Messiah, this Canaanite woman acknowledged that Jesus is Messiah.

- c) Jesus' attitude towards Canaanites was not that of avoidance rather of building up. He wanted to disrupt the chiasm and fill it with mercy and love. This discourse does not end in disappointment and discouragement. Rather the woman was uplifted after this discourse and her request granted. It is this attitude of affirming and comforting which Jesus used when he dealt with Canaanites.

4. Jesus Attitude to People of Syria and Decapolis

The word Decapolis means *ten cities*. These cities were on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. These cities were autonomous city states dependent on Rome. Most of the Decapolis region is located in modern-day Jordan, Damascus falls under Syria and Hippos and Scythopolis under Israel. The Decapolis were a region beyond Jordan¹¹ where two cultures interacted: the culture of Greek colonists and the indigenous Semitic culture. Assimilation and syncretism were common experiences as far as culture was concerned. Under Roman rule, the cities of the Decapolis enjoyed autonomous status. The Romans sponsored numerous temples and public buildings in these cities.

The Gospels mention Decapolis as a location of the ministry of Jesus. Gentiles largely populated the city of Decapolis.¹² Jesus drew a multitude of disciples in these cities, and people warmly welcomed him as Jesus' healing attracted the crowd.

Matthew 4:3-25 and Mark 5:1-10¹³ mention Decapolis and Syria. Also, the latter depicts the gentile character of Decapolis when Jesus encountered a herd of pigs. Jews would not rear such animals as Jews dietary laws restricted it.

New Testament mentions Decapolis only three times and in all three times concerning Jesus. These cities were largely gentiles, along with a minority of Jews. Most of these cities had synagogues, and most of these were constructed after the time of Jesus. The Jews of Israel considered these cities as pagan cities. Jesus visit to these cities signals the very aspects of his ministry. The Decapolis cities practiced Hellenism. Alexander the great had

a mission to spread Greek culture, religion, language, philosophy, political structure and values to the entire world. He was largely successful in doing this in the region he dominated.

Jesus choosing to go to the cities of Decapolis forbidden by Pharisees in light of prevalent paganism in these cities indicates the mission of Jesus. Jesus not only brought God's message to the people of Decapolis, but he also responded to Pharisees who restricted people's entry to these cities on the ground of uncleanness. The crowd of Decapolis responded to the message of Jesus and followed him. Jesus chooses to relate to the people of Decapolis by physically visiting the place on many occasions. Jesus did not avoid the people of Decapolis nor branded them as pagans and untouchables. The power of Jesus' message lies in this expression of love that he violated Jews' laws of cleanliness and uncleanness in bridging the gap between people of many faiths. He refused to follow the rule-bound community guidelines rather took a radical approach to relate to the ones who also needed love.

Why Should we be Interested in People of Other Faiths?

1. Missionary Motivation

This idea is the oldest of all motivation among Christian missionaries. Condemnation of other faith undermines the very spirit of missionary strategy. Condemning other religions as "outer darkness" will only disrupt harmonious and peaceful living. Jesus, while dealing with people of other faiths, was aware of his mission towards them. He loved the Samaritans as Samaritans. He loved the Canaanites as Canaanites; he loved the people of Decapolis in their own city and culture. Not one among them complained and raised an alarm that Jesus has pervert and selfish interest in reaching out to them. Jesus wholeheartedly loved them. It was not the Romans (people of other faiths) who crucified him. Rather, it was his own (Jews) who led him to cross. Pilate (a Roman) was sympathetic to Jesus and wanted to release him. Jesus built a bridge with people of other faith, a bridge of love and respect in his effort to bring the message of God's love. Christians,

too, must recognize that condemnation of other religions will only lead to hatred and communal disharmony and waste entire missionary work carried so far in the name of God who is love. A true missionary motive¹⁴ begins from a true sense of love towards people of other faith in the way they are.¹⁵ This aspect is a step towards appreciation of culture, values and morals of the people of other faith and building them up towards the love of God.

2. To Discover Revelation of God in Other Faith Traditions

The Bible affirms that God cannot be without a witness in other religions and cultures. God expressed himself universally through the created order in nature, conscience, ethical impressiveness and examples of religious piety.¹⁶ All religions have evolved and shaped by and, in turn, shaped the theology and culture of the society. Since there involves an evolution in the understanding of God, various forms of religions need to be considered for a greater understanding of God. In missionary work & evangelism, while working together for peace, justice and sustainability, the theological interest in other traditions would imply one to be open to the awareness of the reality of God in other faith traditions and through unfamiliar means. Distancing or acceptance of any notion or concept varies from context to context.

The awareness of God witnessing himself in other faith traditions itself is a humbling event when we recognize that we are not the sole proprietor of God's revelation. However, when this happens, it paves the way for a mutual appreciation and respect towards individuals as human begins distinct from religious identity.

Issues that Come Across while Dealing with People of Other Faiths

1. Is Salvation Present in Other Faiths?

There are three positions on this issue at the moment in Christendom. A group of people under the banner of *Exclusivist* quote passage like John 14:6 where Jesus declares, "I am the

way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The Exclusivist view is shared by John Piper,¹⁷ Hendrik Kraemer, Douglas Gevitte and R. C. Sproul etc. However, the intensity of this problem is such that most exclusivists of these scholars are also revising their position to include deceased infants under the saved category.

Another group of scholars are called *Inclusivists*, who often draw an analogy from the Old Testament saints who were saved without knowing Jesus Christ.¹⁸ They consider that those who live faithfully within their religious context without having an opportunity to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ may qualify for salvation. The argument of Inclusivist is drawn from Romans 2:12-16, which considers that unbelieving gentiles who “do not have the law” will be judged according to their “conscience.” Inclusivists apply this logic to those who die without having an opportunity to hear Jesus in their life. The opinion of Inclusivism stems from the belief that when God is present in the whole world, his grace and salvation also is present in the whole world.¹⁹

Pluralism holds that other religions are legitimate paths of salvation. Pluralism affirms that people can find salvation in any religious stream in many different ways and rejects the claim that salvation is ontologically founded upon the person of Christ. John Hick, Raimundo Panikkar etc., are the proponents of this position.²⁰ Religious pluralism holds that a) No one religion holds the sole and exclusive source of truth b) Two or more religion's claims of exclusive truth are equally valid and tolerable c) Exclusive claims are only variations of universal truth continuing from time immemorial d) co-operation and mutual understanding must co-exist among various religions.

The problem of the possibility of salvation in other faith is relative and various with people to people. However, as far as the text of the New Testament is concerned, it presents Jesus as the Messiah who carries away the sin of the world, and all who believes in him will be saved. The text of the New Testament neither affirms nor denies the presence of salvation in other faith.

In light of this, assessing which of the above three positions is the most accurate position depends on personal opinion and consideration. We cannot establish a pluralistic position based on the text of the New Testament, which specifically and most explicitly presents salvation with faith in Jesus Christ. The Gospels also present the self-awareness of Jesus as the Saviour of the world.

2. Conversion – Should or Should Not

India is a pluralistic country with followers of many religions thriving under the freedom of religion provided by the constitution. The constitution aims to provide its citizens with a place of harmony, peace and equality. On the one side church in India belongs to India, and on the other side, she stands as salt and light to India. The Church celebrates the Great Commandment given by Jesus Christ to preach, teach and baptize every nation to make them disciples of Jesus Christ. Hence, conversion, according to conservative Christians, is an act of obedience to the master. However, the majority population of India are instigated to interpret conversion as a threat to the unity of the nation and the existence of *Sanathana Dharma*. As a result of the conversion, the Church has seen unforgettable and painful years of persecution in 1998, 1999, 2007 and 2008. After the rise of the Bhartiya Janta Party, the *Hindutva* and fundamentalist groups became open in targeting Churches. Violence are being carried out on false charges. The RSS or Sangha Parivar forms a minority of the majority population; however, they attempt to manipulate the majority population by presenting a false image of Christianity and portraying them as anti-nation.

In light of the opposition from people of other faith, several Christian theologians and church leaders proposed several alternative positions (pro or against) conversion. A. J. Appasamy opined that “conversion should lead [one] from the longing for God rather than from an individual guilt feeling.”²¹ Another opinion stems from S. J. Samartha, who considers that

God reveals his saving activity in different streams, which merge into one river. He proposes to redefine the very term mission. Hence for him, if God has reconciled whole creation in Jesus for him, then the distinctiveness of Christian mission needs to be restated so that a Christian mission does not betray cooperation with other faiths and our neighbours in society.²² Various shades of opinion stem from the above understandings. The Subba Rao movement aggressively preached Christ outside the church. This movement was a Hindu initiative to preach Christ independent of the church. In another varied attempt to comprehend Christ in Hinduism, O. Kandasamy Chettiar accepted Jesus Christ but rejected baptism and church membership.²³ Another variation is proposed by Chenchiah, for whom conversion means coming into an experience of Christ and accepting the gift of a new power in him. He proposed church-less Christianity where there is no baptism, no confession of faith, no creedal profession.

The Indian government provides freedom of propagation of religion. The Christian act of conversion must respect this freedom and ensure measures that this freedom is not abused. Specifically, conversion can happen both at the intellectual and grassroots levels without any force or coercion. Also, the aim of conversion is not to increase the strength of the Christian population rather to uplift the spiritual life experience of the person committing to a new faith. Further, attacks on other religious faith and practices must be avoided at all costs and hence, must not become a tool for conversation. Also, a person's conversion must happen transparently, where a person accepting new faith is ready to witness their conversation experience to other people/households or before public officers if needed.

3. Everlasting Life – Is it Exclusive?

Jesus proclaims, "I am the way, the truth and the life." How do we understand this? Is this an exclusive or inclusive claim of Jesus Christ? We need not twist the arm of John to say what we want to say. Rather look into the very Jewish expression assumed by the

context to understand this. This expression "I am" comes from the "I am" of the burning bush where Yahweh revealed himself to Moses.²⁴ The burning bush symbolized the persecution of Israel, who were put under oppression by Pharaoh as slaves. Amid the persecution, Lord revealed and presented himself as a liberator to Moses. God did not reveal himself as the God of Judaism rather God, the liberator who hears the cry of suffers. The real revelation about God always happens among the burning bushes of the world. God reveals himself as a liberator after noticing the tears of the people. He does not reveal himself as God of any particular religion or faith. God is beyond religion and hence, must not be framed under the boundaries of religion. Jesus's saying of "I am the way, the truth and the life" also incorporates similar interpretations. Jesus revealed himself amid the persecution from Romans who mistreated Jews/peasants of the first century and exploited the riches of colonized world to build Rome. Jesus must not be framed under the boundaries of Christian religion because he is not the "god" of Christians but God of the entire (observable and unobservable) universe. Jesus' self-revelation defines that Jesus saw the plight of the people and presented himself as the liberator of the people. It was not a political liberation that Jesus was proposing the wholistic liberation rather what Jesus had in mind. Hence, his claim of "I am" is beyond exclusive, indicating that the God of the Old Testament is now revealed in Jesus Christ as the liberator of those who are suffering, needy and looking for liberation.

Secondly, the "I am" [YHWH] of the Old Testament also bears the pain of God that people never fully lived as YHWH's people.²⁵ Hence, the "I am" is God's experience and abandonment by his people. When Jesus uses the same expression, "I am," he is sharing a similar and literal experience of rejection and abandonment by people who finally nailed him to cross. Hence, John's "I am" points to the God abandoned by people both by internal faith and by other faith (partly shared by Romans).

The above two connotations of "I am" thus show us that God cannot be confined within the boundaries of religion. On the contrary, God is beyond the horizons of religion and is interested in reaching the marginalized and oppressed. In this regard, Jesus Christ is a liberator of people and brings them to truth and eternal life.

Conclusion

As a political enthusiast loves to talk to others about politics or a movie enthusiast loves to talk to others about a newly launched movie, a religious enthusiast is motivated to talk to others about their religious belief. This attempt must not be coerced as an attempt to convert. Jesus was a God-conscious spiritual enthusiast who was every willing to share the love of God to people. He did so with Samaritans, Canaanites, Romans and Jews as well. He did so because he was full of enthusiasm towards this. When a Christian missionary shares their set of faith to others, this only shows their enthusiasm towards one's faith. However, when this sharing is linked to increasing the church's strength, such intentions immediately come to be perceived as pervers.

To establish religious harmony in a pluralistic society like ours, the following are the proposals:

1. People of one faith must avoid attacking the culture, values, texts, rituals, belief systems of people of other faith.
2. Similarly, people of one faith must live with a realization that the church in India belongs to India and lives as salt and light to India. In this regard, the church is primarily responsible to India and must cherish the Constitution's rights and fulfil the duties laid down by the Constitution.
3. Whenever there is a difference of opinion, an argument with people of other faith will disrupt harmony and peace. The belief of one's own religion must not be presented as contesting idea against another person's faith/ belief system.
4. The Bible describes that God is revealed in all nature; hence, we cannot deny the knowledge that the ultimate God is present

in all faith traditions. The extent and depth vary from religion to religion.

End Notes

- 1 Gospel of John 4.
- 2 Gospel of John 4:4.
- 3 Samaritans were the descendants of intermarriage between Israelite of the Northern Kingdom and colonists whom the Assyrian conquerors had settled in the land. Their religion was basically Mosaic but with syncretic practices. They accepted only Torah and rejected all prophetic books. Also, they rejected the importance of Jerusalem Temple. This caused great hostility between Samaritans and Jews. Around 100 B.C. (approx.), the Jewish high priest had destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 19.
- 4 A. Wind, "Destination and Purpose of the Gospel of John," in *The Composition of John's Gospel*, Volume 2, Compiled by David E. Orton (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 103 (63-106).
- 5 Gerardo Daniel Ramos, Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42) (January 2009) Research Gate. Accessed online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269874461_Jesus_and_the_Samaritan_woman_Jn_41-42/ on 20 Feb. 2019.
- 6 John Riches, "Introduction," in *The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context*, ed. by John Riches and David C. Sim (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 7 (1-8).
- 7 Philip F. Esler, "Rome in Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature," in *The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context*, ed. by John Riches and David C. Sim (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 17 (9-33).
- 8 Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 365.
- 9 Perhaps Canaanite women impressed Jesus and as a result Jesus declared this praise of faith. Cf. John Riches, "Matthew's Missionary Strategy in Colonial Perspective," *The Gospel of Matthew in Roman Imperial Context*, 129.
- 10 Carl R. Holladay, 202.
- 11 Carl R. Holladay, 194.
- 12 Carl R. Holladay, 197.

- 13 C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), 190-94
- 14 Cf. the various missionary motivation provided by Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Bakers, 2010), 186-187.
- 15 Craig Ott et al., .186.
- 16 Alan Race, "Theology of Religions in Change: Factors in the Shape of a Debate", *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, ed. by Paul Hedges and Alan Race (London: SCM Press, 2008), 6.
- 17 John Piper, *Jesus, the Only Way to God: Must You Hear the Gospel to be Save?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), p. 11.
- 18 Todd Miles, *A God of Many Understanding* (Nashville: Academic: 2009), 210.
- 19 Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 20.
- 20 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 3-4.
- 21 D. A. Thangasamy, "Views of some Christian thinkers in India on Conversion and Baptism" in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XIX/ No.1. (Bangalore: CISRS, March, 1997), 42. Cf. Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 29.
- 22 S. J. Samartha, *One Christ Many Religion: Towards a Revised Christology*, Indian Edition (Bangalore: SATHRI, 1992), 171.
- 23 J. R. Chandran, "Baptism-A Scandal or a Challenge", in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XIX, No. 1, (Bangalore: CISRS, March, 1972), 63.
- 24 Cf. Catrin H. Williams, *I Am He: The Interpretation of Anî Hû' in Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 6.
- 25 Luke Emehiele Ijezie, *The Interpretation of the Hebrew Word Am [Hebrew Script] (People) in Samuel-Kings*, European University Studies (np: Peter Lang, 2006), 251.

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Indian Journal of Theology 64:1, 2022, pp. 56-69

B. R. Ambedkar's Conversion and its Significance to the Life of *Mahārs* in Maharashtra

Satvasheela Pandhare

Introduction

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, popularly known as B. R. Ambedkar, one of the most outstanding personalities has played a major role in Indian politics. His contribution towards uplifting the downtrodden is well-known worldwide.

B. R. Ambedkar was a victim of the caste-based discrimination. Right in his childhood he experienced seclusion and deprivation. B. R. Ambedkar opposed the caste-based discrimination in India and argued that the gap between the uppercaste and the untouchable Dalits must vanish by bringing Social Change. He worked tirelessly for the cause of equality. However, he faced heavy criticism and wrath by the uppercastes for his open agitation to caste-discrimination. Even the untouchables faced tremendous violence at the hands of the uppercastes whenever they tried accessing their right.

This made Ambedkar feel confident that the untouchables cannot be escaped from the oppression and humiliation if they continue to be in the fold of Hinduism. Therefore, he himself decided to denounce Hinduism. He decided to accept Buddhism because of Lord Gautam Buddha, whose philosophy aimed

at the moral regeneration and social emancipation of human beings. Ambedkar saw conversion as a device of protest to gain social acceptance. He held conversion as emancipation from the oppressive Hinduism that excludes the lower castes from the main stream.

This article tries to analyze the situation of the untouchable *Mahārs* in Maharashtra, who are known as Neo-Buddhists and their conversion experience. The writing is based on the findings of a field research conducted by the presenter in some of the prominent areas in Maharashtra.

I. Biographical Information about B. R. Ambedkar

Maloji Sakpal, Ambedkar's grandfather, hailed from Ratnagiri district. He was retired from the Bombay Army of the East India Company as a *Havaldar*. He was allotted some land for his outstanding performance in the service. For their hard-works, *Mahārs*, who worked in the service of the government, were given a piece of land which was called as *watan*.¹ His son, Ramji, (Bhimrao Ambedkar's father) was also a retired military man and had fourteen children. Bhimrao, the last child, was born at Mhow in Central India on April 14, 1891.

Ramji rose to the rank of a Subedar-Major and served at a military school as a head instructor for about fourteen years. In 1891, after his retirement he settled at Dapoli in Ratnagiri district. In 1894, while working in the Public Works Department at Ratnagiri, he was transferred to Satara. It is here that Bhimrao entered the Government High School in the first standard by the name Bhiva Ramji Ambavadekar in the year 1900. His ancestors renounced the family name Sakpal and preferred to be called after their ancestral village – Ambavade in Ratnagiri district.²

In those days, the untouchable children were not allowed to study. It was because of the mere influence of his father's military association that Bhimrao and his brothers could go to school. Nevertheless, they were not spared from the experience of

* Rev. Dr. Satvasheela Pandhare is an ordained minister of Church of North India and she was a former faculty of Bishop's College Kolkata.

discrimination. The childhood experiences of such discrimination made Ambedkar realize that his status in the society was very low.³

In spite of his low caste status, one of his teachers, named Ambedkar loved him for his sharpness. In future, as a mark of love and respect to this teacher, Bhiva started calling himself Ambedkar. Thus as he grew up, he came to be known as Bhimrao Ambedkar.⁴

II. Ambedkar's Experience with Untouchability

Untouchability, as a social concept has been personified in social traditions. However, social traditions are never similar to each other; so also the understanding of untouchability, which differs from one society to the other. The untouchables are believed to be abnormal and odd people, since they are not part of the caste system. However, for political purposes they are considered as part of the Hindu society.⁵

As seen before, Bhimrao Ambedkar, during his school days itself realized what the stigma of untouchability was due to the continuous rejection and humiliation he and his community experienced. Some of the incidences in his life would make one understand the traumatic experiences of untouchability.

As a young boy, once he and his brothers hired a bullock cart for the journey. On the way when the cartman realized that the boys sitting in his cart were untouchables, he refused to go with them further. It was an odd hour. On offering double the fare, the cartman allowed them to use his cart and Ambedkar's elder brother drove it, while the cartman followed the cart on foot for fear of pollution. The whole of the journey, they were denied drinking water. As a result, in spite of having enough food which they carried from home, the boys went to sleep without eating anything.⁶

This incidence made Bhimrao understand that the untouchables were subject to certain indignities and discrimination. Even his school experiences were quite disappointing. He was made to sit on the floor in the class using

his own gunny, separated from the uppercaste students. Even his belongings were considered as defile. Ambedkar used to take it home and bring it back the next day. He was not allowed to touch the water tap to take water when he would be thirsty. The school peon was the only person who could go with him to open the water-tap for him. In his absence the untouchable students had to survive without drinking water. Ambedkar sums up this situation as, '*no peon, no water.*'⁷

Ambedkar experienced humiliation and rejection from the uppercaste students, who took all measures to keep themselves safe from the 'defilement' of the untouchable students.⁸ The teachers never touched the notebooks of the untouchable students, asked questions or included them in any activities for the fear of pollution. In spite of his hard desire to study Sanskrit, Ambedkar was not allowed to do so since he belonged to a lower-caste.⁹

Ambedkar was thoroughly shocked to see that even the Barber denied him a hair-cut. The Barbers considered shaving a buffalo as holy than cutting the hair of the untouchable. Even after holding the high posts in the workplaces, Ambedkar continued facing such discrimination at the hands of his uppercaste subordinates. Because of such humiliating and cruel treatment he received from other Hindus, his mind was filled with hatred for caste Hindus and Hinduism.¹⁰

III. Conversion to Buddhism

Ambedkar spoke against untouchability through his publications and through openly rejected Hindu scriptures for sanctioning caste. He and his followers burnt a copy of *Manusmṛiti* for upholding caste and untouchability and giving them a legal sanction. It keeps the untouchables outside of the Hindu fold. Ambedkar became quite clear that the untouchables cannot be escaped from the oppression and humiliation if they continue to be in the fold of Hinduism. Therefore, he himself decided to denounce Hinduism.¹¹

As soon as he declared it at Yeola in the year 1935 that even though he is born in Hinduism, he will not die as a Hindu¹² he

received offers for conversion and invitations from Christian and Sikh religious leaders. Also the Nizam of Hyderabad promised him a large sum of money if he embraced Islam. However Ambedkar, an independent thinker, wanted to make his final choice by himself basing on his thorough study of religions.¹³

Ambedkar was impressed by the spirit of fraternity and equality inherent in Buddhism as opposed to Hinduism – an inherently unequal and hierarchical religion. He liked the teachings of Buddhism that talk about prajna (understanding against superstition and supernaturalism), karuna (compassion) and samata (equality). Therefore, he finally decided to embrace Buddhism. On May 24, 1956 he announced his decision of conversion to Buddhism and on October 14, 1956 along-with his wife he took the *diks+a* (initiation) by the hands of *Bhikku* (Buddhist Priest) Chandramani. In his address to the gathering, Ambedkar announced the twenty-two pledges, that he himself formulated and called those who wished to embrace Buddhism. To this the entire gathering responded. On the same day N. B. Niyogi, ex-Chief Justice of the Nagpur High Court, also embraced Buddhism.¹⁴

IV. Ambedkar's Thoughts on Conversion

Ambedkar maintained that conversion of religion would bring peace to both the communities – the untouchables as well as the Hindus. As long as the untouchables remained Hindus, they faced isolation and discrimination. The struggle for identity continued and thus the struggle between the two communities. Therefore, conversion, he saw not as escapism or cowardice but as the mean to end the quarrel and the happy path of securing equality for the untouchables.¹⁵

Ambedkar believed that conversion may not necessarily help the untouchables become rich or achieve material gain; in fact that was not the intention behind their conversion, but certainly they would be free from the compulsory situation of remaining poor in Hinduism. Conversion would help them have political rights

as the minority community, even-if they had to give up their right as untouchables. Because of their conversion to Buddhism, the untouchables were elevated socially since Buddhism is a universal religion with equal values and they became kin of the other members of the community in which they would be treated not as different entities but very much as an integrated part.¹⁶

Ambedkar held conversion as emancipation from the oppressive Brahmanism / Hinduism which did not sympathize with the lower class for the struggles of life. On the contrary, they were treated as slaves of the uppercaste Brahmins. They never had freedom to hold property, wear good clothes or use metallic utensils and so on.¹⁷ Ambedkar thought it was important that the untouchable community join the non-Hindu community that does not believe in caste because it is only then that the liberation of the untouchable is possible. Thus he saw conversion as the solution to the problem of untouchability and marginalization. He also observed that in spite of few records of compulsory or deceitful conversions in history, it is not right to term all conversions as forceful and offend people, who have the capacity to choose what is right for themselves.¹⁸

Thus, Ambedkar adopted religious conversion as a method to oppose and eradicate the caste system that Hinduism practiced. He saw conversion as a means to live with dignity, of which the untouchables were deprived.

V. *Mahārs* in Maharashtra: A Dalit Community

Mahārs are believed to be the descendents of the original inhabitants of Maharashtra. They are the biggest number among the other caste groups in India. *Mahārs* had a glorified history of bravery. According to Shankarrao Kharat they were the original politicians of the country.¹⁹ However, after the successive waves of Aryan and post-Aryan invaders they were dispossessed.²⁰ Thereafter their dwellings were situated outside the gate of a village, in a separate place without any walls around. Their special dwelling – the *Mahār Wāda* is situated on the lower side of the

village. This arrangement is particularly made to avoid polluted wind and water contacting first the *Mahārs* than the uppercastes in the village. Alexander Robertson observes,

But the flow of air and water cannot be the whole explanation of the orientation of the *Mahār wāda* in the Deccan; for the rule of its eastern orientation does not hold in villages of the Central Provinces where *Mahārs* are more numerous than they are in the Deccan and where their occupation is more varied. Indeed in some old places in the Central Provinces, as at Dhapewada in the Saoner taluka of the Nagpur District, the separateness of the untouchables is not so marked as to strike a stranger. In the cities which draw people from many districts for industry and administration, this separation cannot be maintained. In the city of Poona there are from ancient time three groups of *Mahārs* living at different parts of the city; and Europeans are there the dwellers of the East end. In the city of Nagpur Europeans are found as West Enders. In those cities immigrant *Mahārs* are now found on all sides wherever they can find convenient room.²¹

The role of the *Mahārs* differed from region to region. Though they did not have a distinct “traditional occupation”, their service held much importance at the village level. The *Mahār*'s evidence was considered as important in every dispute since he knew everyone's affairs given his curious nature, e.g. the fight between two cultivators over the boundaries of their fields would be settled basing on the *Mahār*'s testimony. He acted as a personal servant and messenger to the *Patil* of the village and for cultivators as a torch carrier in the field at night or as an escort. For these services, the cultivators gave him the grains. The *Mahār* also worked as a gatekeeper. At night he would walk on the roads of the village with a long stick in his hands with small bells on it

to guard the village. For this service he was given *Watan* (reward) land. Such reward was even called as *Mahārki*.

They were employed in the execution of village duties of social and religious nature, which according to the law of a particular village and custom can be performed only by the *Mahārs*. The performances of these duties were associated with some rights and privileges.²²

A *Mahār* is not allowed to go to the shrines to worship because she/he is considered as unclean. The high-caste *Brāhmins* never compromised the idea of purity and pollution; so much so that, if a *Mahār* labour, while digging the well worked down to the water level, the high-caste people would not use the water from that particular well. However, such kind of restriction is not seen in regards with the use of the houses built by *Mahār* masons and labourers. The *Mahār* is considered as undignified; hence, the uppercastes do not feel it necessary to know her/his name. When a *Mahār* used to confront with a high-caste person on the way, she/he would greet him by saying, *Johar*,²³ *Mayabap*²⁴ *Johar* (meaning, Greetings to my God). By greeting in this way, a *Mahār* reveals her/his identity as *Mahār*. Nevertheless, in ancient Hindu society the *Mahārs* were an important part of the village organization.

Mahārs are noted as a vigorous, adjustable, intelligent, aggressive, bold and leading community among the untouchable communities in the fold of Hindu society. They were the first to come into contact with the Europeans in India. Initially quite a good number of *Mahārs* were recruited in the army; but in 1892 the discontinuation order of the recruitment of *Mahārs* was introduced, against which Ramji Ambedkar protested and spoke to the Governor of Bombay. As a result of his persistent efforts the order banning the untouchables in the army was withdrawn on February 6, 1917 and a *Mahār* Battalion was raised in the First World War (1914 – 1918).²⁵

In earlier days the relationship between the uppercastes and untouchable *Mahārs* was that of the master and the slave. A *Mahār* acted as a personal servant and messenger to the *Patil* of the village and for cultivators as a torch-carrier in the field at night or as an escort. The cultivators considered *Mahārs* as a boon because they were saved from being called to offer personal services to the uppercaste *Brahmins*. For these services, the cultivators gave them the grains. However, the mode of calculation varied from village to village. In some villages it was depended on the total area of the cultivation. Their roles differed from region to region, e.g. in the *Konkan* region of Maharashtra the *Mahārs* were engaged in making baskets, stone slabs, beating the drum near the temple, playing bands and doing labor work for which they received rewards from the uppercastes in the village; whereas in Nagpur district, they were known as the oil-carriers.

Mahār acted also as a gatekeeper. At night he would walk on the roads of the village with a long stick in his hands with small bells on it to guard the village. For this service he was given *Watan* (reward) land. Such reward was even called as *Mahārki*.

It was one of the duties of the untouchables to carry the dead animals of the Hindus out of the village. They would remove its skin, out of which they used to make drums. Also they would sell the skin to the cobbler to make footwear. The meat of the dead animal was distributed among the *Mahārs* and the other untouchables in the village to eat. It was mandatory for the untouchables to perform their due responsibilities as assigned by the uppercastes; failing to do so would require paying the penalty by giving away the land on which they lived.

In earlier days the relationship between the uppercastes and untouchable *Mahārs* was that of the master and the slave. However, in the present situation it has been changed. Today on a large scale the standard of living of the *Mahārs* is improved because of education and they live independently.

The research done by the presenter reflects that 65.7% *Mahārs* felt that their relationship with the uppercaste is no more like the master and slave, rather it is indifferent. Nevertheless, 29.3% respondents expressed that they have cordial relationship with the uppercastes. They ascribe the due credit to Ambedkar, who introduced them the path of conversion because of which the caste-tag is removed and they are treated with respect. Thus, with a new identity as 'Buddhist,' they experience cordiality with their uppercastes counterparts.

Since there is a great change that has occurred in the life of the Dalit community, they no more serve the uppercastes as they did in the history. Hence, 5.0% respondents felt that there is absolutely no relation between the uppercastes and the Dalits. Nevertheless, such dissociation is dangerous for the growth of the country. Isolated communities cannot contribute in social change. There has to be collective efforts.

VI. Significance of Conversion to *Mahārs*

The implication of conversion of the *Mahārs* could be seen from two dimensions: 1) the external and 2) the internal.

The external dimension points to the political and economic life of the Buddhists. In political sphere universal suffrage, reservation seats in the Parliament for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the mobility has been increased. The internal dimension points to the changed status of the *Mahārs*. Before conversion they were looked down with hatred; whereas after conversion they have excelled with education and their social status is certainly changed.²⁶

The survey conducted to find out whether there are improvements in the status of the *Mahārs* after conversion. The findings are presented as follows:

35.0% respondents feel that they are relieved from the socio-religious bondage hence a certain psychological change is experienced by the *Mahār* community. In the past as *Mahārs*, they were always reminded of the pot (a personal spittoon which was

always hung around their neck while walking on the roads) and the broom to clean the village. However, after conversion, since they are part of a new religion that does not demand them follow the norms set by the Brahminical society, their identity is changed. They do not experience religious discrimination anymore since they do not aspire to go in the temple to worship. They have their own spiritual gatherings wherein the Buddhists come together and recite *Vandana* (praises) in the honor of Lord Buddha. The Buddhists claim that after the conversion their resources are being saved for they do not have to spend to perform the rituals when they were in Hinduism.

Nevertheless, the fact cannot be ignored that the Buddhists have not been able to completely detach themselves from Hinduism. In spite of embracing a new religion that does not expect idol worship, some Buddhists are seen worshiping the Hindu idols in their own family set-up. They continue to demonstrate their allegiance to Hindu God / Goddess on festivals and special occasions alongside the Hindus. Nevertheless, they do not share the common platform for such celebrations.

As seen earlier, the occupation of *Mahārs* varied from place to place. In Western Maharashtra, they were cleaners, whereas in Vidarbha, they were road-makers and the laborers at the oil-produce, who would carry the oil container to the upper caste homes. Nevertheless, conversion to Buddhism helped them get good education that they were deprived of in Hinduism for being the lower caste. With education they could avail higher jobs; hence their economic condition has been certainly improved. They received recognition in the society as '*Bhāu*' (brother).²⁷ Thus conversion changed the status of the *Mahārs* from a slave to a brother.

Thus the *Mahār* converts to Buddhism say that their overall condition is certainly improved. They expressed joy of not being called as '*Mahārs*' and be humiliated anymore.

VII. Some Challenges after Conversion

32.7% people, who mostly comprised of uneducated class, maintain that conversion, in no ways, have changed their situation. They are deprived of the privileges that they received as *Mahārs*. Thus, the economic situation of the uneducated class is not much changed.

20.7% respondents believe that conversion has brought some changes in their situation. However, there should be hard efforts made towards uplifting the deprived classes. The reservation policy should be made more effective in this regard.

11.7% respondents were not able to say whether their situation is changed in any ways. As Buddhists they strive hard for progress, but the previous caste-tag always blocks their way. A saying in Marathi follows, '*Jaat nahi ti jaat*', meaning caste does NOT go. No matter whatever religion or name a lower-caste person changes, she/he continues to be remembered as the lower-caste person, thus her/his caste identity never changes.

Nevertheless, from the above discussion it is clear that in spite of some discouraging factors, conversion has certainly changed the socio-economic situation of the *Mahārs*. However, conversion has not been able to foster unity of the untouchables. After conversion the Buddhist identity has become rather distinct that separates Hindu *Mahārs* from Buddhists and from other untouchables and of course from caste-Hindus. *Mahārs* are rather looked down for not following the Buddhists in taking the path of conversion for a dignified life. Thus, social relationships among untouchables have not been changed positively. It has been more resentful especially when it comes to the discussion and debates as to whether Buddhists can have access to constitutional reservations.

Conclusion

B. R. Ambedkar's personal experiences of untouchability made him realize the need for conversion. As long as the untouchables

remained Hindus, they faced isolation and discrimination and violence. He thought that conversion of religion would bring peace and help them achieve equality. He saw conversion not as escapism or cowardice but as the means to end the quarrel that would further lead a path to securing equality for the untouchables.

Conversion of the *Mahārs* to Buddhism has certainly brought positive changes in their life. With the changed status as Neo-Buddhists, they could have access to education and thus now they are able to achieve higher status in the society. Nevertheless, the deep-rooted sense of discrimination and caste-hierarchy is still visible. The Neo-Buddhists criticize the *Mahārs* for not joining them in the path of conversion. Hence, they consider the *Mahārs* and other lower-caste communities as separate entities. On the other-hand the upper castes consider the Neo-Buddhists as the part of the untouchables. Thus, the struggle for identity still continues so also the struggle between the two communities.

End Notes

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- 2 The name plays an important role in identifying one's caste identity. Many Dalits in *Mahārashtra* have changed their names to their village to be escaped from social discrimination.
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- 4 K. S. Bharathi, *Encyclopaedia of Eminent Thinkers Vol. 9: The Political Thought of Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1998), 12 available at https://books.google.co.in/books?id=ku2b5Qv-nnoC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (20 April 2018).
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- 18 Ambrose Pinto, "Hindūtvā vs Ambedkarism: Views on Conversions", in *Economic and Political Weekly* 35/41 (7-13 October 2000): 3633-3636 available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4409827.pdf> (12/1/2019).
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- 21 Alexander Robertson, *The Mahār Folk* (Mysore: The Wesley Press and Publishing House, 1938), 7.
- 22 Alexander Robertson, *The Mahār Folk*, 8.
- 23 *Johar* or *Juhar* is used as a replacement of *Pranām* like in other parts of India to show respect to gods or elders.
- 24 Literal meaning Mother and Father. However here it means Sustainer.
- 25 W. N. Kuber, *B. R. Ambedkar*, 9.
- 26 Sunanda Patwardhan, Social Mobility and Conversion of the Mahārs, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23619310.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A0f68d40c8e160c91cae369b90fea3672> (19/07/2021).
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Indian Journal of Theology 64:1, 2022, pp. 70-82

Harvest, Healing and Hallelujah: History beyond Textual Constructions and Continuity

K. C. Varghese

Introduction

This paper tries to intersect some of the micro-historical and everyday experiences of the Dalit Parishes in the Mar Thoma Church. Also, this is an effort to look into the unique nature of parish formations. This engagement demands an epistemological break with the dominant historiographical paradigms employed in representing communities. This paper tries to articulate, how cultural practices, everyday life and worship contests marginality. Michael Foucault in his book *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) rejects the core concepts of modern historiography such as subject, origin, continuity, teleology, causality, change, period and totality. He criticizes the epistemology of history. He threatens every canon of the craft of history writing and through this he unmasks the epistemological innocence of the historian (Poster 1989, 116). For him history is a form of knowledge and a form of power at the same time. It is a means of controlling and domesticating the past in the form of knowing it. Historian through this domestication tries to paint the landscape of the past in the form of the present. Historian in the process of asserting the claim on the so-called truth accomplishes this goal without placing himself or herself in

* Rev. Dr. K. C. Varghese is an ordained minister of Mar Thoma Church. He is a part time faculty in the department of Social Analysis at Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam.

question (119). The study of the Dalit parishes in the Mar Thoma Church negates the possibility of total history. The reflexive methodological engagements lead to micro experiences, everyday religion and cultural artifacts of protest and spirituality.

Historiography of Christianity in India

Protestant missionaries who arrived in India were the first to write the history of Christianity in India with an intention to explain Indian Christianity to the Europeans. They wanted to make the missionary organizations they represented informed about the progress of their work. These historians were influenced by the enlightenment concepts of progress and universality. The historians were all highly educated and they all worked hard in the collection of exhaustive data and records. There was a general understanding among many of the scholars that the colonial subjects are inferior, fallen and need to be civilized, reformed and redeemed.

George Oommen (2002) while enlisting the developments in the historiography of Indian Christianity notices a gradual shift from mission centered approach to a Church centered approach. He sees this transition as a postcolonial search by the Church in India to find its own personality. There is an elitist historiography which celebrates the contribution of the theological and ecclesiastical leadership of the elite groups. He notices another strand which places history as part of the wider narrative called 'mass movements.' There is another shift, which focuses away from the Christian elite and dominant groups to the vast majority of Christian people who were involved in the historical formation of Christianity in India. In this process the members of the Dalit communities found a significant voice within the mainstream historical discourse on Christianity in India. Oommen finds out that Dalit Christian history emerged as a legitimate and autonomous branch of study in its own right, rather than an auxiliary to the study of some other aspect of the history of Christianity in India.¹

Dalit Parishes in the Mar Thoma Church

The history and growth of the Dalit Christians in the Mar Thoma Church is a unique one and is less visible in academic discussions. The following reasons can be enlisted for this invisibility. The Dalit congregations in the Mar Thoma Church are small in number when compared to their counterparts in the Church of South India or in the Catholic Church. The appellation ‘Syrian’ dominates the Church with its social and symbolic capital. It is a fact that the formation of Dalit parishes in the Mar Thoma Church is a post-missionary scenario. But these parishes were not formed by the work of the missionaries. So, they lack a missionary, mass movement patronage. An organization namely Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association (hereafter referred as MTEA) was formed in the year 1888 and this organization took initiative in working among the ‘sadhu jathis’² of that time. The majority community around, the Hindus and the Syrian Christians were not supportive of the new propositions of emancipation and were not ready to practice the emancipatory love of God in caste related interactions. Thus these small parishes grew steadily and with great difficulty.

The parishes within this study attained official parish status only in the year 1980. Till then they were known by the name ‘*Puthu Sabhas*’ (new congregations) and they were under the patronage of the nearby Syrian Mar Thoma Parishes and the MTEA. This led to the erasure of their history and their experiences. A reflexive engagement with and careful listening to the members of the community is the only way to understand the formation and life of such congregations. This paper will look into the complexities involved in the formation and growth of two Dalit parishes in the Mar Thoma Church.

Karuvatta Salem Mar Thoma Church: A Story of Harvest

Karuvatta is in the Karthikappally Taluk of the Alappuzha District of Kerala. This Parish is constituted of members from the *Sambhava*³ background. This place consists of large paddy

fields. The agricultural laborers were living in the available dry lands near the paddy fields. In the beginning of the 20th century, there were no good roads except small stretches of embankments and dykes leading to inhabitation which usually gets inundated during the monsoons and remain grubby except in summer, horrid forms of caste discriminations were practiced during those days. The slave castes had no access to good roads or right to decent travel. There were no land rights and titles for the members of the community and all these swampy stretches were also owned by the land lords. Large contingent of *Cherama*⁴ agrestic labourers used to come to this area at the season of harvest. Many of them came from Tiruvalla region and were attracted to the Gospel through the missionaries. The annual report of the Parish and the elders say that some of them were attached to the Salvation Army gatherings in Tiruvalla. They used to build tents and live along the paddy fields for the season of harvest. The members of the *Sambava* community who used to live along the remote stretches of the paddy fields were attracted by the life style of the *Cheramars* who were working as agricultural slaves. The jubilant singing and prayers of the slaves were a surprising experience for the native *Sambava* community. It was not easy in those days to think of agrestic slaves doing their duty accompanied by such singing and loud prayers in the morning and evening. These prayers were accompanied by songs and tears. The evangelist who used to visit the *Cherama* agricultural labourers started visiting the nearby *Sambava* families also. He was welcomed whole heartedly as he was bringing a message of comfort and freedom. That was a time when there was a wave of revival happening in Travancore. In the year 1905, 50 *Sambava* families got baptized to the fellowship of the Mar Thoma Church with the support of the nearby Mar Thoma Parish. They were known as *Puthu Sabha*.⁵ There was a School along the main road owned by a land-owning Nair family which was neither accessible, nor even approachable for the depressed classes,

including the new converts. One land owner donated 13 cents of land to construct a thatched shed for assembly and it became the school building for the education of the Children of the new converts. The same thatched shed functioned as the worship place for the community of believers. The school grew up with a caste appellation '*parappallikkoodam*'⁶ bearing the stigma of caste. Teacher evangelist were appointed in these Schools by the MTEA. They engaged the community with basic education and literacy on week days and biblical knowledge on Sundays. These dykes were converted to sacred spaces of worship and learning.

The history of the congregation says that, they were attracted to Gospel because of the jubilant singing of a community who were laboriously working in the fields with only basic facilities of life. This congregation is also full of singing on Sundays. The children continue the tradition by their excellent participation by playing percussion instruments.

Kumbanad St Thomas Mar Thoma Parish: A Story of Healing

Their history is one of redemption from slave life into a life of the love of God revealed through Gospel. The origin of the Sabha is described in their history published in the year 1970. All the memories go back to the year 1891 when there was a spread of the epidemic Cholera in and around Kumbanad, in the present Koipuram Panchayath in Pathanamthitta District. This epidemic had its worst manifestations among the houses of the depressed classes. There was no immediate medical help available during those days. Four to five people in each house of the depressed classes lost their lives. Their traditional supplications to the deities were of no use. There was no proper medical care too. Since it was presumed to be an epidemic, others were reluctant to visit the houses of the depressed classes. Even otherwise no one was interested to visit these houses which were considered as the houses of untouchables. Some of the Christians living nearby ventured in to the huts of this people and started helping them.

These volunteers helped them by giving them care and comfort. They all started praying relentlessly together. There was a series of prayer sessions in the houses of the affected people and the epidemic was stopped. Those who got healed assembled under a Jackfruit tree and listened to the Bible. Some of them went to the CMS congregation in the nearby place Eraviperoor. These people together with the volunteers sat together, they started singing, started wearing white clothes and started walking along the main roads. The assembly under the Jackfruit tree and singing was a visible sign of claiming space which was hitherto denied to them. MTEA took initiative to establish a Church building and also to coordinate worship services.

Jubilant Bodies and Bent Knees

In the traditional caste society slave castes usually assemble only for their daily labour. Sometimes they may assemble for some traditional ritual practices. They lived a life of limited interaction. There was a self, always been dominated by the earthly master and the slaves moved, thought and worked only for the earthly master. With the advent of Christianity, the word of God, Prayers and Sacraments helped them to see beyond their slave status and think about a life of freedom. Ashok Kumar Mocherla (2021) while studying the lives of Lutherans in South India tries to prove that lived religion of Dalit Christians contests the structures of caste domination. He tries to prove that religious celebrations are serving as anchoring points and platforms to contest caste rankings and social status.

Holy Communion

Among the sacraments, Holy Communion (Eucharist) involved physical practice of sharing the bread and wine which signified the body and blood of Christ. It was a communion with the divine and with the fellow believers. This provided a new notion of community which involves sharing of the divine among the humans. It was sharing of the same bread and the same cup. The practice of such

a meal were completely against the prevailing norms. It opened to the slave castes a multilayered spatiality of social emancipation and religious freedom. Theophilus Appavoo, (who is also known as *parattai*) late teacher at the Tamil Nadu Theological seminary Arasaradi, Maduarai, initiated a theology of common meal (*Oru-Ulai*). Each month, on the last Wednesday, a hosting team will move around the campus informing the preparation of a common meal. This common kitchen was practiced in the Seminary where people from different caste backgrounds lived. The inner dining experience here was a protest against all forms of separation and stigma that prevented inter-dining. Appavoo developed a theory that Dalit theology should be embodied in a medium accessible to and transmittable among the poor Dalit villages that need it the most.

Songs, Prayer and Drumming

Vinil Paul (2019, 147) tries to explore and study the liberation through singing. He traces out the origin and spread of a song which was used to communicate on the ban on slave trade. Slavery was abolished in erstwhile Travancore in the year 1855, but the lower castes were unaware of this. Henry Baker Sr., a Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary printed copies of the order and adding a few passages from the Bible he distributed this among the slave castes. The missionaries travelled across Travancore to proclaim the abolition of slavery to the slave castes. In 1867, native LMS agent William Fletcher (1837-92) took great interest and he was asked by Samuel Mateer, the ethnographer missionary to write a hymn for the liberated slaves. Fletcher composed a song in Tamil language declaring the liberation from slavery. Mateer translated that song into English. It was later translated also into Malayalam. Music was given in carnatic tune *ananadabhairavi*. The song was titled '*Adima vela Azhinju...*' meaning our slave work is over and our slave bond are gone. Sanal Mohan (2015, 187) reports that this song was sung in Dalit congregations in Kerala till 1960s. Hymn book prepared by CMS missionaries were distributed

among Church members and the missionaries and other leaders taught them to sing. The songs were sung with jubilation declaring liberation from slavery.

In the Dalit parishes of the Mar Thoma Church also singing occupies a major part of the worship. The use of percussion instruments in parishes like Karuvatta Salem exemplifies feelings of relief and consolation. Household meetings are an occasion for singing and intercessory prayers. They just pray and sing without any inhibitions leading to a sense of relief. Their resistance finds expression in songs (Paul 2019, 155). Songs enable them to imagine a new social thought and worldview that was devoid of oppression and constituted strong resources for their spiritual and social awakening. These songs got erupted from terrible social conditions and deprivations and acted as a spiritual tool to claim their space.

Sanal Mohan (2015, 30) identifies the significance of prayer meetings in the lives of the slave castes. People assembled for prayers had to violate the restrictions imposed on their use of public spaces. Coming together for prayers became instrumental in creating new social spaces. Also, the ideas and metaphors that they have learned through prayers were fundamental in transforming their social and cultural practices. Drumming while singing in Karuvatta Salem is both a participation in worship and an expression of resistance. This Sunday exercise is an energy booster for the whole week. Sathyanathan Clarke (1998, 109) discusses drumming in Tamil villages as a deliberate resistance. He identifies the drum as 'a dominant aniconic symbol of the text of resistance and Emancipatory Theography.' Through drumming and dance, the bodies that were under static subjugation are getting transformed to dynamic spaces of resistance and jubilation.

Hugo Gorringer (2016) is of the opinion that drumming challenges the existing oppressive cultural codes. They face socio political powerlessness and an absence of caste-neutral jobs combine with socio-religious indoctrination to perpetuate caste practices. The oppressing cultural codes are replaced by

drumming which challenges the cultural codes. The members of the oppressed community got an experience of liberation through the recreative power of music.

History as Stories

According to Ranajit Guha, historical discourse is the world's largest thriller (1988, 55). The most decisive historical experience of Dalits had been their slave experience and the oppression and sufferings accompanied it. Recalling such a past history and experience ultimately becomes a resource that would enable them to provide a critique of the past and also to show the politics of knowledge that downplays their history both in the understanding of history as well as the past Mohan (2015, 272). In the case of Dalit Christians in the Mar Thoma Church, they have a history of their own like their counterparts in the Hindu fold and also like that of the believers in other denominations. There is an absence of documented and written history with textual constructions. Both past experiences and also the knowledge of the past presented in oral traditions shed light to history. Their encounter with Christianity has provided them some tools to re-capitulate the experience.

The Dalit Christian parishes usually present and glorify the self-sacrificing and life-giving involvement of the missionaries. While accepting that this factor is important to be acknowledged, Oommen (2012, 7) is of the opinion that in this process other important aspects of the past might be neglected. Also, there is an upper caste stereotype that the Dalits converts doesn't know much. This becomes substantiated because the poor lacks documented records of the past. This is to be seen in contrast to the claim of the nearby Syrian parishes claiming to know everything (Oommen 2012, 86). This reality takes us to the fact that the upper castes produced the so-called historical knowledge and the corresponding protocols and procedures. They claimed what they produced as authentic knowledge. This question of knowledge production and the corresponding control of the domains by the

non-Dalit upper castes were the reason for such a loss of history. But the information and the stories which they hold in memories and oral narratives is indeed revealing and significant.

The present Dalit parishes of the Mar Thoma Church were having only 'congregational' status in the beginning and attained 'Parish' status only in the year 1980. Hence, the details are not easily traceable about the beginning and growth of the congregation. The Dalit parishes in the Mar Thoma Church are now trying to reclaim their histories. They share such micro stories in the process. The redemption and liberation they enjoyed with the coming of the Gospel is the main content of the reports. The continuing upper caste hegemony in the Church is left unattended in these reports.

Representations

While identifying the limitations of representations, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003) intervenes with her serious proposition about the 'Unspeakability of the Subaltern.' By critiquing the *Subaltern Collective* in their effort to give voice to the voiceless subaltern in India, she asks the question "with what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak? Spivak argues that colonialists and post colonialists have (mis)-represented the subaltern subject in colonial-elitist textualities, and on the other, there cannot be an 'essentialist subaltern subject' to speak against the colonial/post-colonial (native) representation as it was proposed by the *Subaltern Studies Collective*. It is out of this epistemological context that the Spivakian thesis arises: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" For Spivak, the voice of the subaltern cannot be heard because its language cannot be understood within the dominant discourse (Donna and Gerard, 1996, 4).

Amandeep (2008) tries to compare the Dalit representations with the elitist ones. For him, Dalit representation creates a texture of self-narration. Here the speaking subject is the untouchable and the concern of the literature is to represent the authentic experience of the subject who is a Dalit in the best possible

way. The realism of mainstream fiction appears phony and even spurious and in its effort to construct a convenient narrative it excludes vast chunks of society, hitherto condemned to the margins. Autobiographies like ‘*Akkarmashi*’⁸ present examples of extreme poverty and dejection. Such pathetic conditions won’t get a faithful presentation through a non-Dalit writer. May be we can say in literature like *Akkarmashi*, the Dalit subaltern is appearing as the speaking subject uninterrupted by the tone and style of the elite. These voices and stories originate from the realm of sufferings and exclusion.

Conclusion

Michel De Certeau (1984) talks about rhythms of everyday life. He elucidates the relationship between practice and spatiality. Certeau is concerned about the ways in which in everyday practice people alter, adapt and appropriate cultural products and make them their own. For Certeau, production of space takes place within specific power relations and spaces are constantly changing as power relations and practices alter. Everyday life and practices are both a spatiality of exploitation and also that of resistance. In distinguishing between ‘spatial strategies’ and ‘spatial tactics’, he draws attention to the different positions from which spatial practices emerge. Here he embeds the production of space within frames of power.

Certeau’s categories help us to understand the spatial complexities of Dalit Christians. For them as Certeau says, it is both a spatiality of exploitation and resistance. They occupy these spatial positions in the mega space of caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Undoubtedly, Dalits are occupying a marginalised spatiality. But when it comes Dalit Christians, the spatial location moves to a complex heterogenous spatiality. For them the spatial location moves to different types of marginalities. This spatial location of multiplicity helps us to ask one more question whether they can be seen, because there is not only unspeakability, there is an ‘unseeability’ also of the marginal. Their Space is not simply

an innocent place. It’s an acted, constructed, created space. Stories of the past, songs, prayers and worship of the present challenge the dominating cultural codes of the community which occupies the margin of margins. Here universal features which guides historiography like Brahmanic artifacts, family lineage, Church architecture, big narrations give way to lived religion. We need to have a theoretical sensitivity⁹ which prevents the use of pre-existing conceptualizations. This sensitivity is gained through a careful observation and careful heeding. The so-called researcher has to disown or de-robe his or her positions to listen and to observe the stories with reverence and awe.

End Notes

- 1 See John C B Webster (2012) on *Historiography of Christianity in India*, New Delhi, Oxford. Also see John C. B. Webster (2009) *The Dalit Christians A History*, New Delhi, ISPCK.
- 2 Sadhu Jathi literally means depressed classes.
- 3 Sambava is another name used in Kerala for the Paraya caste.
- 4 Cherama is another name used for the Pulaya caste.
- 5 *Sabha* Means Church. *Puthu Sabha* literally means new Church..
- 6 School of the *Parayas*.
- 7 Subaltern Studies, is a scholarly effort to identify and reflect on the margins. These are intellectual engagements undertaken in writing and re-reading history. See David Ludden (2002).
- 8 *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)* is the autobiography of Sharankuamr Limbale, a dalit. Translated by Santhosh Boomkar (2007), New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- 9 For discussions on theoretical sensitivity and grounded theory, see Glaser B. (1978), *Theoretical Sensitivity*, California Sociology Press, Mill Valley.

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Theological Education as Mission: A Unique Matthean Christology

George Philip

Introduction

Scholars who deal with the Matthean mission generally deal with Matthew's particularity or universality or both.¹ Beyond this divide one can identify theological education as a major mission motive in the Gospel of Matthew. In order to identify this mission motif, an analysis of post-seventy periods and its theological conflict on Matthew's community are to be identified as the fabric of Matthean teaching. Within such a framework, this article proposes that Matthew's emphasis on the transmission of the authoritative teaching of Jesus as the Christian mission. It is the assumption that theological education suitable to the context does justice to Matthean mission.² After defining the term 'authority', the first part of this article is the post-seventy historical setting of the Gospel of Matthew. The second part, an exposition of Matthew 7:28-29 and 28:18-20, is to identify the teaching as Matthew's mission. And the third part is theological education as the mission in the Indian context.

Unique Role of Teaching Authority in Matthew

The English word 'authority' comes from the Latin *auctoritas* which in turn derives from *augere*-means 'to increase.' The meaning of the term 'authority' changes according to the context such as the absolute power, the right or ability to do something,

* Rev. Dr. George Philip is an Associate Professor of New Testament at Union Biblical Seminary, Pune.

might, legitimate use of power, and so on.³ The Hebrew scripture portrays God as the ultimate authority. Authority of human offices, such as king, priest, prophet, and judge is derived from God alone, for such individuals were representatives of God. There is an inherent authority of God on every human being by virtue of being created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27).

The rabbis of Judaism received their authority to teach the scripture from the traditions they belonged to. And no sermon of any scribe had any authority or value, without *a tradition or the wise men say* or some traditional oracle of that nature.⁴ However, it is also said that rabbinical authority is the power or right of deciding the Law, in dubious cases, interpreting, modifying or, amplifying, and occasionally of abrogating it, as vested in the Rabbis as its teachers and expounders.⁵

What is the uniqueness of the authority in the Gospel of Matthew? In one way or other, all the Gospels witness to the authority being exercised in the ministry of Jesus. However, the concept of authority is not unique to Jesus alone in other Gospels. They use the term in a wider dimension including civil and religious leaders under the concept of authority (Mk. 13:34; Lk. 12:11; Jn 19:10). The Gospel of Luke usually connects the term *authority* with *power* (Lk 9:1; 10:19) whereas Matthew never connects the authority and the power together. Matthew describes the authority in teaching without getting it connected to miracles.

Matthew describes the unique authority of Jesus over against the other teachers of the law. The Gospel of Matthew also makes an indirect comparison between Jesus' authority and the authority expressed in the Old Testament. The antithesis, "I" Sayings, *elthon* (I came) sayings, etc., point to the supreme authority of Jesus over against the authorities of the scribes, the prophets, the priests, the Kings, and even Moses.⁶ Matthew also presents Jesus as constituting a new authority alongside the Old Testament.⁷ That is, Jesus' authority is not derived from the revelation alone that had gone before, but even completes and transcends it.

Therefore, the theological definition of the term authority is very important. As per J. Jeremias, authority presupposes the possession of the Spirit and victory over Satan.⁸ The authority of Jesus, according to Rudolf Schnackenburg, denotes his fullness of power and his relation to the Father.⁹ The Evangelist perceives divine authority and power as the mighty revelation of God in Christ in order to advance his Kingdom (G. S. Shogren).¹⁰ C. H. Dodd comments: 'the divine authority of Christ is inferred from his power to enable men to see God'¹¹ also, Jesus' inner life possessed a unique moral perfection, which would account for the unique authority. What could be the reason Matthew introduced the authority of Jesus with respect to his teaching. The socio-political milieu of the Matthean community in the post seventy, as it is the writing period, clarifies this aspect.

Conflict of Mission: Formative Judaism and Matthean Community

Because one cannot specifically locate Matthew or his community/-ies with absolute certainty, reconstructing specific settings remain hypothetical.¹² The author of the first Gospel was probably a member of a Jewish Christian community which had left Judea before the Jewish war and settled in a predominantly Gentile area, probably Syria. The addressees of the First Gospel were sometimes linked with Christians in Galilee,¹³ others link it to Antioch¹⁴ and Jerusalem.¹⁵ However, Richard Bauckham is of the view that individual Gospel writers wrote it for the whole church, not particularly for a community.¹⁶ Though there is no unanimity on the origin of the community, most agree on the date of composition between 80 to 90 CE.

Matthew's conceptual world is primarily identified as Jewish.¹⁷ Christianity originated as a reform movement or a sect within the second temple Judaism nevertheless, it retained a few differences as its chief traits.¹⁸ According to W. D. Davies, Jewish Christians participated in Synagogue worship and remained in the broader framework of Judaism prior to the Jewish revolt. Judaism

after the destruction of the Temple went through some turbulent period till it consolidated in the second century CE as Rabbinic Judaism. The process of Judaism in its fluid state acquiring the social and the religious definition, until its consolidation, is known as Formative Judaism. The most prominent group survived after the destruction of the Temple was the Pharisees. The beliefs and organizational structure of the Pharisees made them the most viable option for acceptance among many of the Jews after 70 CE.¹⁹ The sages of Yavneh under the leadership first of Yohannan ben Zakkai, and later Gamaliel II, began the process of rebuilding of Judaism against other groups of the Second Temple Judaism including Christianity.²⁰ After the Yavneh council, Jewish Christians were no longer able to join with other Jews in a synagogue.²¹ There was a wide variety of opinions about the relation between the Matthean community and their parental community.²²

On the one hand, the Matthean community had a mission to their parental community, which seemed to be difficult because of the opposition from the formative Judaism, and on the other hand, they had a mission towards the Gentile community which seemed to be more successful.²³ Everybody in the Matthean community did not agree with the new directions that they had taken at their juncture. Some emphasize faithfulness to the Law, even to the smallest letter; others claim to have the Spirit through whom they perform miracles.²⁴ With his remarkable pastoral care, Matthew prepares the way for reconciling, forgiveness, and mutual love within the community.

Thus, the Matthean community faced two major problems in the post seventy periods. First, a serious threat from outside as the leaders of “Formative Judaism” excommunicated Jewish Christians from the synagogue worship. The rabbinate was introduced as authoritative interpreters of the Law. Matthew tried to defend his community against the Jewish theologians of his day and their use of scripture. Second, a problem from within

as the conservative Jewish Christians was critical of the new developments because of the incorporation of Gentile Christians into their community without circumcision. Therefore, the authoritative teaching of the community from Jesus had to confront on both fronts. Within this conflict, Jesus as the teacher and the authority of Jesus’ teaching are highlighted as paradigm for Matthean community.

Two passages, (A) Matthew 7:28-29 and (B) Matthew 28:18-20, are selected for the exegetical study. The former passage comes as a conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, explains the meaning of the expression “authoritative teachings” (of Jesus) within the post-seventy periods, and latter passage explains the delegation of authority to his disciples as they engage in mission work and particularly to the mission to all nations. Matthew reports what astonished the crowd was Jesus’ claim of authority (7:28-29), a theme that climaxes in 28:19.

A. Authority in Teaching: Matthew 7:28-29

These two verses should be seen as a summary statement of the first discourse of the Gospel of Matthew. From the beginning until the end of the sermon, Matthew focuses his total attention on Jesus alone. The crowd is silent and passive. Jesus speaks without any break. There is a great silence on the side of the audience till the end of the sermon. Thus, focusing the attention on Jesus alone, Matthew implicitly highlights the great authority of Jesus.²⁵ At the end of this passage Matthew openly reminds his readers of the response of the crowd toward Jesus’ teaching.

Kingdom Teaching

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew is a collection and meaningful arrangement of the sayings of Jesus.²⁶ Jesus refers to his own words as Jewish teachers generally referred to God’s law.²⁷ In 7:29, Jesus’ teaching (διδασκων) or the Kingdom teaching is used as the subject of ‘having authority’ (ἐξουσιαν ἔχων). The term “his teaching” is again repeated in 22:33 as the

object of the crowd's amazement. When the Synoptists speak of teaching (*διδάχη*) of Jesus, they do not mean a particular dogma or ethics, but his whole *teaching* is his proclamation of the will of God.²⁸ Rengstorf comments that "when it (*διδάχη*,) is linked with the name of Jesus, the term enables us to see to what extent the New Testament or its authors recognized that it is finally the God who speaks in the teaching of Jesus..."²⁹ As it is explained, the Kingdom of God is to be understood as the reign of God in the coming of Jesus.

What are the peculiarities of Kingdom teachings? Jesus calls people to repentance (Mt 4:17). The imperative 'repent' indicates that God can be encountered either as the judge or as the savior (Jer 4:1-10; 7:5-34; 17:24-27). Matthew depicts Jesus as the savior (Mt 1:21). Therefore, the imperative 'repent' called people for a new relationship with God.

Kingdom teaching has concerns for marginal groups. The beatitudes address towards the poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungry, and the persecuted (Mt 5:3-12). True happiness comes through the acceptance of the Kingdom. Jesus is considerate and sympathetic to the suffering of the people.

The crowd astonishes because Jesus teaches with authority. This authority shows first in his teaching; it will be shown in his deeds in what follows (chapters 8-9). Jesus, as herald and instrument of God's reign, exerts the "authority" of God in the proper sense of God's right to rule the universe.³⁰ Thus, Matthew wants his readers to submit to the Lordship of Jesus. For the early Christians, Jesus was not one way among many but Jesus was the standard of judgment.

Antithesis

It refers to the central section of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:20-48), which records the teacher's frontal assault on the casuistry of the men of learning.³¹ Jesus as Fulfiller of the Law gives six examples of his eschatological fulfillment in the six

antitheses (Mt 5:21-48).³² In six instances of Pentateuchal law, Jesus contrasts what God said to the wilderness generation of Israel at Sinai with what Jesus himself says to his disciples now.

The Messianic authority of Jesus was manifested through these solemn teachings introduced by the "I" formula.³³ It can also be understood as Jesus' consciousness of being the Son, as reported in 3:17 and 17:5, is expressed in this "I" sayings. In the "I" Sayings Jesus makes an impression of God's own authority and Matthew portrays that Jesus stands where God stands. In a Jewish or Jewish-Christian context, a higher status could not be imagined than this. There is no parallel to these sayings in any of the ancient writings in the Jewish circle.

Not as their Scribes

Many commentators explain an essential difference between Jesus' Spirit-endowed Charism (Mt 3:16-17), the hereditary, and the derivative scholarship of the scribes.³⁴ Another difference is that the source of Jesus' teaching is from heaven and their Scribes are from human tradition (Mt 15:3, 6). Jesus is empowered by the advancing reign of God, whose eschatological moment is now fulfilled (Mt 4:17). By contrast, the Scribes are spokesmen of the old and bygone (Mt 9:16-17). Therefore, as per the evangelist's sense, they possess not lesser authority but no authority at all.³⁵ In a sociological sense, all these teachings make perfect sense when one reads as part of the conflict within Judaism after A.D. 70.³⁶ Matthew presents Jesus' teaching as the authoritative interpretation of the Torah and rejects his rivals and their interpretation.³⁷ With greater authority than the scribes and far more the authority than Moses who gave the law (5:1), the authority of the Son (who) will judge humanity on the final day (7:21-23).

In this section (Mt 7:28-29) Jesus expressed the authority through his words. It is concluded that the authority of Jesus is in the content and the expression of the message. Here the teaching of Jesus known to be the Sermon of the Mount is the foundation

of the Kingdom of God. In contrast to John the Baptist, the proclamation of the Kingdom reaches a new phase in the teaching of Jesus. This superiority of Jesus and his message over against his contemporary Jewish rabbis and equality with God are mentioned as ‘having authority.’

B. Delegation of Authority: Matthew 28:18-20

As Jesus started his ministry in Galilee, Matthew culminates the ministry of Jesus in Galilee as the disciples were commanded to go to Galilee (28:16). The angels (Mt 28:1-8) and the risen Jesus (Mt 28:9-10) informed the women to go to Galilee along with other disciples. As Jesus delegated the disciples to carry out the mission in Israel (Mt 10:1), now Jesus commissions his disciples to carry out the mission to whole nations. The ongoing ministry of Jesus through the Church is a special theme in the Gospel of Matthew.

All Authority (28:18)

When they gather together, Jesus does not rebuke their doubt but he begins with a vitally important prelude to the formal commissioning of the disciples, namely, the assertion of his authority: “To me given all authority in heaven and on earth.” In comparison to 11:27a, it evokes Dan. 7:13-14, where God gives “dominion and glory and reign” to one “like a son of man.” Here the dominion (ἐξουσία) is everlasting. Therefore, Jesus receives “all authority” (πασα ἐξουσία) from God as God’s beloved son or agent faithful to God’s purposes (Mt 3:17; 17:5).³⁸ And Jesus participates in God’s reign over all things.³⁹ Charles H. Giblin says about all authority as the fullness of power that has been given to Jesus and remains his.⁴⁰

All authority in heaven and on earth, according to Donald Hagner, is the sovereign authority of God, who now sends out his disciples on the mission to evangelize the world. Matthew pictured both earthly Jesus and the risen Lord as acting in the place of God (Mt 9:1-7; 25:31-46; and the Father, the Son, and the

Holy Spirit appear in the same scene-3:13-17). Now Jesus became the cosmocrator, with all authority to establish his universal reign by a universal mission.⁴¹

All the nations (παντα τα εθνη-Mt 28:19) is a phrase that denotes all nations including Israel.⁴² This is to provide them in turn with authority and supply them with confidence as they go. The authority of the risen one is not categorically new but now depends upon a new basis—the arrival of a new stage of salvation history.⁴³ Now the disciples are entrusted with God’s own authority in mission.

Matthew has strong universalistic missionary interests. The disciples have “two different assignments: on the one hand, they are to gather Israel around Jesus as the messianic shepherd; on the other hand, they are called to integrate the nations into their own community as disciples of the Son of Man.”

Abiding Presence (28:20)

As God promised his divine presence to the people liberated in the exodus from Egypt (Deut. 31:23) and from exile in Babylon (Isa. 41:10; 43:5), disciples are promised with His abiding presence to carry out their mission. In other words, Jesus assures his presence to the disciples the way Yahweh assured his people in the Old Testament.⁴⁴ Jesus does not promise that the teaching of his commands will mediate his presence to those who obey, but that his presence will be with those who go and make disciples by baptizing and teaching.⁴⁵ Now the disciples are given authority not only to baptize but also to teach.

The abiding presence of Jesus is already promised at the beginning of the Gospel (an *inclusio* with Mt 1:23) and wherever two or three gathers in his name (Mt 18:20) and in the mission of the Church (Mt 1:23; 10:40; 13:37; 16:18; 17:17; 18:5,20; 26:29). Moreover, the Matthean Jesus does not ascend. His last words are a promise of his continuing presence during the church’s mission.

Matthew 28:18-20 comes as a conclusion to the whole Gospel of Matthew. As the people of Israel were promised of

God's presence (Gen 26:24; Deut 20:1; 2Sam 7:3), Jesus promised his presence to be with the disciples. Thus Matthew portrays the authority of Jesus neither derived from nor delegated by a secondary source but the same as that of God's.

Sharing Teaching Authority

The teaching authority is a unique aspect in this passage. Till the Easter event, disciples did not participate in the teaching authority of Jesus (Mt 7:29), although they had participated in the other aspect of Mission (Mt 10:1). As the disciples participate in the mission of God (by making disciples), they can experience the same sovereign authority to teach as that of Jesus exercised as narrated in Matthew 7:29.

Matthean Jesus seems to be extremely didactic. The "teaching" along with the preceding "baptizing" appears to be the real content of disciple-making in Matthew's mission.⁴⁶ For Matthew, teaching is by no way a merely intellectual enterprise. Teaching doesn't involve inculcating the precepts of the Law and obeying them as contemporary Judaism interpreted it. Jesus' teaching is an appeal to his listeners' will, not primarily to their intellect. It is a call for a concrete decision to follow him and to submit to God's Will. What the apostles should teach the new disciples is to submit to God's will as revealed in Jesus' ministry and teaching.

Teaching and Mission

The authority of Jesus and his delegation of authority to his disciples to teach or educate are intrinsically related to the mission work. Matthew uses different terminologies to set out the missionary practice of Jesus and the disciples. The terms include, "send," "go," "proclaim," "heal," "exorcise," "make disciples," "make peace," "witness," "teach," etc. The road of the mission is open on the basis of the earthly ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁷ Matthew 28:16-20 can be considered as a mission charge of the risen Jesus towards his disciples. The command to "go"

is part of Jesus' commissioning. Keener comments that Jesus' "authority" (28:18) includes authority to tell his subordinates to "go" (cf.8:9).⁴⁸ The phrase "all the nations" (παντα τα εθνη) includes both Jews and Gentiles.⁴⁹ The command to disciple "nations" is a unique command of Jesus which is to be carried out by "teaching." The disciples are called to proclaim the ultimate victory of Jesus over the powers of evil, to witness to his abiding presence, and to lead the world into the love of God. In Matthew's view, Christians find their true identity when they are involved in the mission.⁵⁰ Therefore, Arulsamy commented that the Church which was missionary by her nature was called to carry out his mission.⁵¹ The application of Jesus' command is the need of the hour in India. Theological education in India takes the command of Jesus into application.

Theological Education as Mission

As per the final command given in the Gospel of Matthew, whoever engages in the Christian mission has the authority of risen Jesus. Jesus commanded his disciples to teach the nations what he taught them. Therefore, theological education, which is an initiation into a transformative process, is the task of the Church, inclusive of able and disabled, marginalized and neglected, men and women, youth and children, emigrant and immigrant, educated and uneducated, and rich and poor. Theological education is education towards discipleship. It is a process of transformation into Christ's likeness. The objectives of theological education are twofold: understanding and strengthening responsible faithfulness to the Gospel and deepening commitment to the praxis of discipleship.⁵² It is oriented by love, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and so on. The framework of theological education is contextual and ecumenical. Therefore, theological education crosses all boundaries and barriers to the mission.

Theological education in India got various problems. First of all, most Indian churches do not consider theological education

as the means of mission. Therefore, except for a few churches, the majority of the churches do not own theological education. None of the theological colleges in India is self-sufficient; neither is it income generative. For this reason, some churches consider theological education as a burden to venture upon. Some church leaders give recommendations for candidates at the most and disown the students. Yet others ask candidates to “somehow” complete the theological education by individual initiative and join with the churches after completion of the course. Because of the above factors, some individuals have taken the initiative to start theological education as an individual enterprise and run it independently.

Second, theological education in India looks at the western world and tries to imitate the western scholarship. In the west, theological education is one of the branches of studies in a university set up for those who are interested to learn theology as a professional course, whereas no UGC affiliated universities in India offers theology as a major branch of study. K. C. Abraham while speaking on “theological education” points out that imagination and passion are two essential components of an ‘empowering—others—for-mission.’ Such an education model is rarely operative in many of our colleges. Instead, many of our present programs are characterized by a concern for a cool, dispassionate, neutral, and objective (*whatever it means*) scholarship.⁵³ Our need for theological education in India is not to consider theological education as a professional degree but as a means to equip the Church to witness and serve the community.

As a result of the above factors, it is a common saying in churches that theologically non-trained pastors are more “successful” than theologically trained pastors. Those “successful” pastors are not “neutral” as that of the theologically trained pastors. They connect more effectively to the needs of people and more appealing to the masses. The aim of Theological education is to connect theological candidates easily to the context and needs of the people.

The Task of Theological Colleges

Theological colleges are not mere training centers but are directly involved as servants of the Church in the mission and ministry. Ravi Tiwari points out that “theological colleges are meant to educate the entire people of God so that authentic Christ-centered communities are formed.”⁵⁴ Men and women are to be exposed to Indian realities and thoroughly be trained to take up the ministerial task and missional activities. Dr. Tiwari continues, “Theological colleges, therefore, need to involve the whole church, and have to become instruments of the Church, in equipping the believer to be an active agent of the liberating mission of God through witness, service and teaching.”⁵⁵ In the field of theological thinking, the colleges must *stimulate* the church, must be *with* the church, and *ahead* of the Church. In one of the old reports of the BTESSC, it is made clear as follows,

...the college must understand the meaning of *pioneer theological thinking*. Christ the Logos is at work in the world today rescuing men from many kinds of bondage, and it is the task of theology to make clear to the Church and the world how He is acting to redeem, to heal, to lead, to reconcile. Theology is not a mere academic discipline but has reference to the world today, and the college’s theological activity must demonstrate this to the students of the Church.⁵⁶

Ministerial formation of the candidates suitable to the Indian context is the need of the hour. The candidates should not compromise mission with other ‘secondary’ issues. Raising social concerns alone should not be the concern of pastors, to such concerns other social reformers also stand for. Making disciples for Jesus has been the mission of the Church throughout the ages.

Conclusion

The authority of Jesus according to the Matthean presentation has enormous importance for the Indian Church. There is a gross

misunderstanding of the concept of authority in Indian society. Throughout history, human authorities used their power to exploit people groups and nations for their own vested interest. It was tyrannical, oppressive, and subjugating. Jewish, Greek, and Roman nations were examples of the same. During Jesus' time, it reached its zenith. The present scenario is also not much different. The Matthean presentation of the authority of Jesus finds various expressions in the Indian social, ecclesiastical, and personal level. The right use of authority finds its expression in the service and becoming an alternative model and vision to the Indian society. Reinstating the subalterns into the mainstream of the society has a close parallel to Jesus' expression of authority in terms of teaching, forgiveness, and healing in first-century Palestine. As part of the extension of the Kingdom, Indian Church has to come together irrespective of doctrinal differences for the mission. The mission of God calls people to conversion from all sorts of social, political, and economic oppression. Matthew's teaching emphasis is to be noted for such an integral mission. Christians are called to use the teaching authority to fight against the evil and for the establishment of the Kingdom. The teaching authority of Jesus finds its expression in the dynamic Christian community's mission activities. Theological colleges in India have an enormous role in training and equipping the people of God for the mission.

End Notes

- 1 David E. Aune, Ed., *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001); Herman Waetjen, *Matthew's Theology of Fulfillment, Its Universality and Its Ethnicity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2017); Warren Carter, *Matthew And the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000).
- 2 In my definition, theological education is a systematic learning of theology. In general sense, theological education includes all affairs of God, and in a particular sense, theological education deals with the teachings of the Church. It is a means to equip a person to the service of the church. Thus, the task of theological education is to penetrate Christ into all dimensions of life.
- 3 W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, A translation and adaptation of the 4th revised and augmented edition of Walter Baur's *Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der ubrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago, Illinois: The University Chicago Press, 1957), 277.
- 4 Hillel the Great taught, '...but, although anyone discoursed of that matter all day long, *they received not his doctrine,*' until he said at last, so I heard from Shemaia and Abtalion.' John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica Matthew-1Corinthians* vol. 2 (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 159.
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- 27 Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 255.
- 28 Rengstorf, "διδαχή", *TDNT*, edited by G. Kittel vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 164.
- 29 Rengstorf, "διδαχή", 164.
- 30 Richard J. Dillon, "As One Having Authority" (Mark 1:22): The Controversial Distinction of Jesus' Teaching," *CBQ* 57/1 (January, 1995): 98.
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- 34 In 5:20, Matthew contrasts the superior lifestyle of his community members with the justice of "scribes and the Pharisees." Warren Carter, *Matthew and The Margins*, 33, 195.
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- 36 Two reasons could be cited for Matthew's polemic against the Jewish religious leaders: first, Gentiles were incorporated into the Matthean community without circumcision; second, the emergence of Pharisaic leadership after the destruction of Jerusalem created problems for Matthew and his community. Culas, *Good News*, 142f.
- 37 Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 110-111.

- 38 In a strict sense the comparison of Dan. 7:14 and Mt. 28:18b is not possible because the identity of the one like the son of man in Daniel is not clear. In Mt. 28:18 it exclusively talks about Jesus by Jesus himself.
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- 40 Charles H. Giblin, "A Note On Doubt and Reassurance in Mt. 28:16-20," *CBQ* 37/1 (January, 1975): 75.
- 41 Meier, *The Vision of Matthew*, 38.
- 42 Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew*, 595; John P. Meier, "Nations or Gentiles in Matthew 28:19?" *CBQ* 39/1 (January, 1977): 94-102.
- 43 Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 886.
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- 45 Gundry, *Matthew*, 597.
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- 48 Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 718.
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- 51 Arulsamy, "Leadership," 185.
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- 54 Ravi Tiwari, "Theological Education in Context: Serampore Model," *Partnership between Churches and Theological Institutions* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2010), 1.
- 55 Tiwari, "Theological", 1.
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Enriching Human Life Ecologically

*M. J. Joseph, Kottayam**

1. In Search of an Eco-vision

The Christian Church has the gospel mandate to take care of the entire creation. The compassion of the Lord as we read in Ps.145:9 "is over all that he has made" (cf. Sib.18:13). There is also a gospel mandate in Christian ministry (Mk.16:15). In the encyclical document, *Laudato Si* (I praise Thee) by Pope Francis, it is clearly stated that human responsibility across any religious or cultural divide should take into account 3 major issues impacting our common home-Earth. They are pollution and global warming; the looming crisis of fresh water and the loss of biodiversity. Climate change and ecological crisis know no geographical borders and they do not need any passport.

What is Ecology? "A branch of science concerned with the inter-relationship of organisms and their environment." The word- "**relationship-**" is significant as it speaks of the co-existence of all the living and the non-living entities in God's created order. ***Remember, the fluttering of a butterfly in Amazon region has an effect on the weather in the Himalayas. One cannot pluck a flower without disturbing the overall ecology***

* Rev. Dr. M. J. Joseph is a retired clergy of the Mar Thoma Church and currently he is the Convener, Ecological Commission of the Mar Thoma Church. He was the former Principal and Professor of New Testament at Mar Thoma Theological Seminary Kottayam. He was also a former director of Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore, and former Secretary BTESSC and a Member in faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

of the Universe. This is the universal spiritual law of ecology which forms the very fabric of the web of life. In the Christian perspective, it is a matter of faith. To illustrate this let me quote from the Convocation speech of Dr. A. P. J. Abdul kalam, the former President of India, at Putaparathi Satya Sai Baba University on Nov. 22, 2002: “Look at a flower in your garden. How generously does it share its fragrance and its honey with us. It gives all its life force freely. When it finishes its mission, it falls silently down at the root of the plant. Try to become a flower in the pilgrimage of life.” Learning from nature is the first step in the art of life. “The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps.19:1). The Psalmist is quite vocal when he shouts with joy: “All the earth worships thee; they sing praises to thee, sing praises to thy name.” (Ps.66:4).

Nature is the art of God and there is so much mystery in it to be unraveled. Truly, the Ancients believed that “God sleeps in the minerals; awakens in the vegetables; walks in the animals and thinks in humans.” In a friendly dialogue between the Lord and Job, we find the most unanswerable questions like: “*Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this?*” (Job.38:18). “*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding?*” (Job. 38:4). A quote from Thomas Aquinas will shed light on our understanding of God’s creation: “Any misunderstanding about nature leads to a misunderstanding of God.” Louis Pasteur also said the same thing in a different tone. “It is impossible to be a scientist without developing a special liking for nature.” According to Martin Luther, the great Reformer, “the gospel of God is not only seen in the Bible, but it is also inscribed in trees, flowers, clouds and stars.” In pastoral ministry our responsibly must be two-fold by becoming God-consciousness and nature consciousness as

stewards and parents of God’s creation. Our attitudes to nature must have a three-fold direction for an effective action plan: eco-awareness, eco-spirituality and eco-justice. Our understanding of sin should be board- based ecologically. It is not simply embracing evils, but it is misusing and denying justice to what God has declared good. We have now started speaking about ecological sins and their remedial measures. Pope Benedict the 16th had called upon the Catholic churches to speak aloud about ecological sins such as water pollution and air pollution along with the 7 mortal sins for an integrated view of life for all.

2. Ecological Legacy

Contributions of the Indian Scientist-Jegadish Chandra Bose-the Plant physiologist, must be remembered with respect. Plants are sensitive to heat, cold, light, noise and other external stimuli. (see his book-*Response in the Living and Non-living*-1902). The very concept of Tree Therapy developed by the Japanese is worth recalling. The New York Times Bestseller, *The Hidden Messages in Water* (2001) by Masaru Emoto, a renowned Japanese scientist, carries an ecological revolution by saying that “molecules of water are affected by our thoughts, words and feelings.” John Stott’s book, *The Birds our teachers-biblical lessons from a lifelong bird watcher* carries umpteen spiritual lessons for us.

Living with ecological sensitivity is the hallmark of the Indian classic *Shakunthalam*: Shakunthala bid farewell to the plants and the deer at the ashram of Kannvan *Muni* when she had to embrace another phase of human pilgrimage. Peace with nurture should be an eco-slogan for all the nations of the world. The ecological Psalm of the Bible, Ps. 104, invokes us with a human-divine benediction: “Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all...” (v. 24). Ps. 8 reinforces the creative genius of God recorded in Ps. 104. Neil Armstrong, while landing on the Moon at the Sea of Tranquility on July 21, 1969 uttered the following words of ecstasy which is remarkable “Earth-Big, Bright and Beautiful.” The great hymn “All things

bright and beautiful; All creatures great and small; All things wise and wonderful; The Lord God made them all” must be sung with humility and wonder .

Panchaboorthas-earth, water, air, sky and fire-the symbols of life, have now become the symbols of Death. When we are violent to our environment, we brutalize ourselves (Arunrathi Roy). Relationship between humans and the earth has been well established scientifically i) Human body contains $\frac{3}{4}$ water; earth’s surface $\frac{3}{4}$ water. (ii) The percentage of minerals and metals in human body is in the same proportion (iii) Human beings have pulse rate where as the earth too has pulse rate: i.e; - the rhythm of days and night. (iv) Both the human beings and earth cannot survive without sunlight. (v) Just like we have healing mechanisms, so does earth is continuously adjusting its chemical, physical and biological processes. (vi) Human beings have fever. So also earth has fever which we call global warming. India’s cultural slogans- *Loka Samastha Sukino Bhavantu*, and *Vasudaivakudumbakam-are indeed Oikos* concept dealing with the household of God. The well-known quote from the *Adharva* Vedas- “We are birds of the same nest....” also carries a universal message.

3. UN- Environmental Concerns-global and Local

The UN mandates to seek political will, practical steps and partnership are being implemented to remain relevant in finding answers to the ecological crisis of today. However, the nations of the world have miles to go to find satisfactory solutions. The UN-stands for sustainable development and its 17 declared developmental programs to be realized before 2030 have only one goal: *Life for all*. The churches all over the world should support its 2015 UN message which carries several programs and projects dealing with the 5- Ps. They are people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. As a pilgrim community, theological educators should implement the eco-mission call from the garden of Eden as divine commission, permission and prohibition. The ecological responsibility consists in our response to the plan of action at

the local level. “Think globally and act locally” must be our ecumenical slogan.

4. Problem of Climate Crisis

Life being the gift of God is to preserved and promoted at all levels. The groaning of creation through climate change affects the poor of the world. “Global warming is the undeclared war on the poor” (Konard Raiser of the WCC). One may notice that flora and fauna are in birth pangs due to the rape of the Mother earth and violation of moral laws in eco-ethics. The contributions of Al Gore and Pachuri confirm this. Climate crisis is attributed to human intervention in the rhythm of nature. The charm of religion is that it can evoke a kind of response that is different from scientific and technological reasonings. All the religions of the world speak about the sacramentality of creation. In green spirituality nature itself is not divine rather it is a place where humans encounter the divine as Moses experienced Yahweh in the burning bush or Adam in the garden of Eden. The ecological crisis of today is about us, our lives and the way powerful and rich of the earth have dominated others to accumulate private wealth. The Gadgill and Kasthurirangan reports about the Western Ghats in India speak about the grave situations in these regions. The most affected people of the world are related to the earth: dalits to the land, fisher-folks to the sea, *adivasis* to the forests. As a faith community, our preferential option for the poor and the marginalized must be made more visible through projects and programs.

5. Solution-Alternatives

Reduce, recycle and reuse are known as the common eco-mantra. The words of Mahatma Gandhi- “Enough for our needs; not for our greed” are indeed prophetic words for all generations to come. “You may milk the nature, but don’t slaughter it” (Prof. S. Shivadas). Pilgrimage towards eco-justice and peace with nature be initiated. A quote from the speech of Yugaratna Srivastha

(13 year-Lucknow girl) at the UN assembly in 2009 is worth quoting.: “What kind of a world you elders are leaving behind for us, children? There is the melting of ice in the Himalayas, and other ice-caps, polar bears are dying due to climate crisis, millions of people are not getting safe-drinking water, the atmospheric temperature is soaring high, the sea level in the Pacific Ocean is rising high which would devastate a few countries of the world in the twinkling of an eye.” Response to her speech at the UN Environmental Conference in 2012 was indeed great.

6. Fulfilling Ecological Responsibility

The following guideline may help us to create an earth-community for ensuring a better future for all of us.

1. Recognition of interconnectedness is to be regarded as a universal spiritual value in the order of creation.
2. For societal formation, the promotion of ecological spiritual values such as love, justice, simplicity, humility, sufficiency and gratitude are needed.
3. The concept of the integrity of creation and its sacramentality be observed as theological educators, enlightened lay people and ministers of the Church.
4. Environmental rights of the marginalized sections of the human community have to be affirmed by upholding creational responsibility in God’s order of creation.
5. As land, water and people belong to the one cluster of creational solidarity, the idea of sustainable development be promoted remembering that “social justice is integral to justice for natural environment” (Jurgen Moltmann).
6. Peace with nature and eco-justice are to be demonstrated through word and action by all particularly theological educators and ministers.
7. Friendship with nature be included as a major item in the mission agenda of the Church. Theological educators are expected not to be pantheistic, but to be ‘pan-en-theistic’ (seeing the divine presence in all creation).
8. The concept of eco-spirituality put forward by the Chief of Seattle (USA) to the Whites in 1854 be remembered as an eco-commandment for all ages: “The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family Man does not weave the web of life; he is mere a strand of it...Defending the earth is not a project, but a way of life.”
9. Practice and propagate the ecological mantras at the grassroots level: Reduce, reuse and recycle.
10. As a green commandment remember the Chinese proverb: “If you want to keep the city clean, begin by sweeping in front of the door of your own house.”
11. Preach and practice the spiritual lessons that we learn from each of the calamities that we experience for strengthening the community to live with hope by the positive vibes. (For example the Tsunami (2004) in South East Asia, the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster in Japan (2011), the Flood scenario in Kerala (August 2018), the Cyclonic disasters in the USA and other parts of the world).

Indian Journal of Theology 64:1, 2022, pp. 108-112

Book Review

A Biblical Masala: Encountering Diversity in Indian Biblical Studies. Edited by David J. Chalcraft and Zhodi Angami. Nagaland, Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2021. Pp. xiv + 390.

By B. Silpa Rani

The book, *A Biblical Masala: Encountering Diversity in Indian Biblical Studies* is a collection of essays in five sections exploring Indian biblical studies by Indian and British Biblical scholars. The title *Bible Masala* refers to the mixture of diverse elements with varied range of flavours locally produced by Indian Biblical Studies. David J. Chalcraft introduces the book, firstly, by narrating what the book title, i.e., *Biblical Masala* refers to; secondly, the origin of this volume, how the idea developed through the course of time with various conferences of biblical scholars in India and abroad, thirdly, by providing a brief note on the diverse contexts of India, relating it to the development of a democratic biblical studies in India; fourthly, by asserting identity in Indian biblical studies to celebrate and promote diversity, reflecting on various identity in terms of articulation, by bringing identity into existence by openly declaring and illustrating. He furthers with summarizing the sections and chapters in the book.

Section one of the book focuses on the *Historical Episodes of the Biblical Studies in India from a British Perspective* that contains three articles. The first article: “Strategies Past, Present and Future: The Context and Variety of Biblical Studies in

Indian Culture and Society” is written by David J. Chalcraft emphasizing the range of strategies, which are committed to develop a non-Western approach to the Bible. The Introduction ‘Desi starters from a Firangi’ (Native introduction from a Foreigner) is such an apt introduction to the article to delve into the matters the author intended. The article draws attention by briefing on the colonial practices and encourages to consider the relationship between Christian missionary propagation of the Bible (gospel) and the higher criticism. The second article in this section, “English and Indian Reading of Naboth’s Vineyard: The Role of Identity and Context in the Sociological Meaning and Use of Biblical Texts” is also written by Prof. Chalcraft. In this article he courteously reviews the history of English uses and re-telling Naboth’s vineyard found in 1 Kings 21 with its English approach and the Indian Interpretation of the same narrative as an indictment of the State, rich, and illegal appropriation of Tribal, Dalit, ancestral, peasant including colonial appropriation. The third article in this section by Hugh S. Hyper “Nation and Text: The Biblical Roots of Hindu Nationalism” emphasizes that the roots of Hindu nationalistic ideas have biblical basis. By analysing the relationship between the Bible and the European models of Nationalism he stresses that those were influential on the founders of Hinduism.

The theme for section two is *Reading with a Social Conscience*, containing two articles, focusing on the sociological Interpretation of the Bible, analysing the contemporary Indian contexts. The first article “Holiness Schools Response to the Economic Injustice: Reading Leviticus 25 in the multi-Religious and Cultural Context of India” by Joseph Titus, who focuses on interpretation of Leviticus 25 applying Hans George Gadamer’s concept of *Horizontverschmelzung* (Fusion of Horizons) emphasizing three parts: the horizon of Leviticus 25, the horizon of Indian readers and the possible fusion of the two horizons which is a reader-oriented approach. Sabbath and Jubilee principles protect and

* Ms. Shilpa Rani is a research student in the Old Testament at the United Theological College, Bangalore.

liberate those without a voice and power. Moreover, Biblical Jubilee is an attempt to build a just society what the author has rightly pointed out. The second article “Dialogue Between Indian and Biblical Social Settings: Reading Two Parables of the Rich men (Luke 12: 16-21 and 16:19-31) Contextually” by Professor V. J. John throws light on the two parables of the rich men in Luke 12 and 16 and interprets them from the contemporary setting of the present-day India.

Section three of the book is devoted to *Dalit/Madiga Hermeneutics* with three articles. The first article “The Context of Dalit Christians in Rural Andhra Pradesh: Christian Faith, Caste and Culture” by Jeeva Kumar Ravela, explores the Christian lives of Dalits in contexts focussing on the Madigas who have a strong Christian identity though surrounded by oppressive caste systems. Firstly, the author overviews about Christianity and missionary activities among the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh, particularizing the village of Dharmapuri in Guntur district. Secondly, the author concentrates on Christian identity among the Madigas who maintain Caste identity to unite together to voice for their rights. The second article in this section, “Encountering the Bible: Listening to the voices of Madiga Christians” authored by Jeeva Kumar Ravela and David J. Chalcraft, presents an analysis of some of the field work data about Madiga Christians encounter of the Bible which is influenced by their socio-economic and cultural situations. The third article in this series, “Why are times not kept by the Almighty? – Job, Violence and God: A Dalit Contextual Reading of Job 24” by Jeeva Kumar Ravela, demonstrates the voice of the suffering community in the context of socio-economic and political oppression and violence and the struggle to understand God amidst social disturbances especially in Job chapter 24.

Section four of the book concentrates solely on *Tribal Hermeneutics*, especially the North Eastern Tribal hermeneutics

which contains four articles. The introductory article entitled, “An Introduction to Tribal Interpretation of the Bible” by Zhodi Angami begins with Tribal and Adivasi identity and further depicts the Tribal Biblical Hermeneutics in North East India which has two important elements: 1. Bible Translation, and 2. Tribal Hermeneutics. The author provides a summary of the Tribal Hermeneutics which have been undertaken in the past and calls for exploring resources and methods which have not been explored by the tribal biblical scholars, reading the Bible from the current experience of the tribal people, from the context of the tribal communities. This article serves as an apt introduction to the following chapters in this section. The second article in this series “Reading Amos 6:1-7 in the Light of Mizo Values and Ethos” by K. Lallawmzuala reads the socio-economic concerns of Amos in the light of the social ethos and economic values of the Mizo people. In the third article, “Seeing Jesus through Tribal Eyes,” Zhodi Angami turns our attention to the figure of Jesus. He affirms that Indian Tribal reading of the Bible resists the dominance of Sanskritic Philosophy and Western Biblical interpretation. The fourth article in this section, “A Tribal God for Tribal People: reading the Creation Narratives of Genesis and the Prologue of John’s gospel from an Angami Perspective” which is also written by Zhodi Angami, where he re-reads the Genesis creation narrative and prologue of John’s gospel from an Angami tribal perspective and continues to draw attention to the tribal stories.

Section five which is the final section of the book, with the title *An Empirical Turn? The Visual Ethnography of Biblical Encounter* contains two chapters that are based on the field work enquiry in India. The first article, “The Use of the Bible in the Institutional Body Language of Christian Schools in India: Mediating Western: Christian or Western Christians Culture in Contemporary India?” by Sally Elton-Chalcraft who uses ethnographic approach to investigate the mediation between of the western culture and Indian culture in Christian schools with specific reference to

the Bible and how the ethos of the school is projected through institutional body language in five different states of India: Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Mizoram through her perspective as a white, female, agnostic, teacher, educator and mother. The purpose of the investigation was to explore the inclusion of SEND-*special educational needs/physical disability* children, to examine how Indian Christian identities informs professional practice in a range of schools in different Indian states and to understand the developing debates about the place of Christian foundation schools within the growing context of Hindu nationalism. The final article of this volume “Bad Fellows Doing a ‘Cursed Job’: Reading the Bible with Ordinary Autowallahs in Chennai” by Arren Bennet Lawrence, reports on some qualitative field work carried out with auto drivers in Chennai and turns the readers attention to some of the suggestions for ethnography of Biblical Encounter in India: 1. Interpreting few selected passages with them would be useful for long term ethnographical research. 2. It is advised to consider the symbolic representation and the non-literary dimensions while encountering the Biblical texts.

The reviewer’s evaluation: firstly, the unique attempt by the editors David J. Chalcraft and Zhodi Angami is commendable as they have not only compiled the volume but also have contributed most of the chapters in the book. Especially, bringing out the historical, social, cultural, religious, economic and political contexts of India through empirical studies and Interpreting the Biblical texts through the contextual methods both by the Indian and non-Indian authors are admirable. However, as the book named “Biblical Masala” which is a mixture of spices, it was expected to include some of the contextual interpretations by the Biblical scholars in India as the major part of book focussed on the Dalit and Tribal interpretation though there were few interpretations which were different than those. Moreover, the reviewer feels that the inclusion of Indian Feminist Interpretation of the Bible by the Indian Feminists would have been better as this volume ignores the feminist interpretation of the Scripture by Indian feminists.