

# CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

**Sunand Sumithra**

Christian Theologies from an Indian Perspective

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*To the memory of my parents*

## CONTENTS

Foreword	v
Author's Preface	vii
<b>SECTION 1 Introduction</b>	
Chapter 1	Why Theology from an Indian Perspective? 3
	The contexts in which Indian theologies sprouted 7
	The socio-political context 8
	The religio-cultural context 14
	The sources of theological traditions in India 22
	Pramanas: Sources of religious authority in India 31
<b>SECTION 2 Indian Contributions to Christian Theology</b>	
Chapter 2	Raja Rammohan Roy 41
	Keshub Chunder Sen 46
	Pratap Chandra Mozoomdar 57
Chapter 3	Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya 63
	Nehemiah Goreh 76
	Lal Behari Dey 81
Chapter 4	Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai 85
	Surjit Singh 88
	David G. Moses 90
Chapter 5	Sadhu Sunder Singh 96
	A.J. Appasamy 104
Chapter 6	Vengal Chakkarai 115
	P. Chenchiah 121
	P.D. Devanandan 142

Chapter 7	K.M. Banerjea	151
	Swami Abhishiktananda	154
	Klaus Klostermaier	159
	S.K. George	165
Chapter 8	M.M. Thomas	169
	Raymondo Panikkar	181
	S.J. Samartha	187
Chapter 9	Russell Chandran	199
	Vinay Kumar Samuel	206
	Vishal Mangalwadi	209
	Paulos Mar Gregorios	211
	Saphir Athyal	212
Chapter 10	Mahatma Gandhi	215
	Swami Vivekananda	223
	Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan	230
<b>SECTION 3 What is Indian Christian Theology?</b>		
Chapter 11	The Three Confrontations	239
	Indian christian theological expressions	243
	Some guidelines for contextualising in Hindu cultures	250
	Guidelines for Indian evangelical theology	257
	Beyond contextualising	265
Appendix		271
Suggested Bibliography		273
Subject Index		281
Person Index		287

## FOREWORD

The need for attractive, readable yet scholarly Christian books was a felt need among Indian Christians for a long time, as is evidenced by numerous national level conferences and their findings on Christian literature during the last half a century. Among the valid reasons for slow progress in meeting the need lack of expertise, cooperation and financial limitations were the major ones. Though many Christian communities, particularly Christian social activists produced sizable fruits in the area, conservative had lagged behind. Now Theological Book Trust seems to be the appropriate agency under which such theological creativity can be and is undertaken. The organisation did sense the need much earlier, but printing of books at a price an average Christian reader can afford materialized just a few years ago. Encouraged in its early efforts, now TBT has launched a mammoth project of bringing out several series of Christian books, both for the seminary students as well as for the people in the pew:

**Text Book Series:** M.Div. level course-, text-, work- and source- books on theological and biblical subjects, pastoralia etc., meant primarily for theological students;

**Research and Reference Series:** such as library and concordance helps, theological dictionaries, commentaries, compendia, etc.;

**Theological Issues Series:** dealing with religious topics such as pluralism, inter-religious dialogue, syncretism, and ideological issues, revolutions and signs of the times; and

**Devotional Series:** Dealing with practical personal help for all ages in Christian growing.

*In Thinking Be Adults* (1Co.14:20) -- is the motto of Theological Books Trust. The only determining criterion for these series is that they all gladly confess their allegiance to

the Bible as the final authority for all theologizing. Within that guideline there is a bold freedom for innovative theological creativity in all the works.

We heartily commend the present volume, *Christian Theologies from an Indian Perspective* by Sunand Sumithra to theological students in particular and the Christian public in general. It is the second in our Text Book Series. Though written primarily for the M.Div. level students, the book is planned for a greater circle of readership beyond the borders of the seminary. The author is well qualified to write this book with his experience of teaching the course on Indian Christian Theology at B.D. level in the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune for more than a decade. End notes are added for ready reference. Extensive indexes include the Names of Person and Subjects. A glossary of foreign and difficult terms is another felt need for seminarians and has also been added.

We are grateful to Sevasadan printers for their very good and prompt service.

### ***General Editors***

## **AUTHOR'S PREFACE**

This book is written with the express purpose of benefiting primarily the Indian theological student—either in seminary or outside it—as a text book. Hence some assumptions are made in presenting this work, such as that the reader has certain basic theological knowledge and skills. This also explains why certain concepts and terms are elucidated and others not, which may not be useful to a professor in theology. For the benefit of the non-Indian reader a glossary of terms is provided.

The overall aim of the course on Indian Christian theology is to make the student aware of the Indian attempts to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that (s)he may relevantly interpret the whole gospel in her/his own context. With this in mind, it is hoped that at the end of this course the student will be able to achieve the following objectives:

1. to discern the Indian religious, cultural, philosophical and socio-political interaction on the interpretation and the universality of the gospel of Jesus Christ;
2. to describe both the nature and development of Indian Christian theology, the divergent Indian thought patterns and the consequent types of Indian Christian theology;
3. to develop a critical openness to indigenous theological expressions;
4. to acquire skills in creating relevant and meaningful interpretation of the gospel in a given context.

Though I have used several already existing anthologies on Indian Christian theology (see bibliography), of necessity I have drawn heavily from Robin Boyd's definitive work, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (1975). Yet not only is his analysis supplemented by going back to the

originals in most cases, but a lot more material is added, which is not found in Boyd or elsewhere.

For economy and readability footnotes have been largely avoided, but wherever needed references and notes are provided. I hope that the book would meet a crucial need not only for text book in our theological training institutions, but also for indigenous scholarly works for the thoughtful Indians. I heartily welcome your criticism on this present volume, in order that the husk may be thrown away and grain preserved.

This revised edition has some important corrections and additions. One important correction is the change in the title. We cannot talk anymore of one, single theology of Indian Christians but of a host of *theologies*. As there is no single Indian culture or forms of religion so there can be no single theology applicable to the whole of India. Each attempt to interpret the Christian message has its validity and usefulness in its locality. Apart from this change notes and references are supplied wherever necessary and a detailed index is included. I must say thanks to the friends who worked on the second edition of this book, especially, Mr. Augustine Bhasker and Mr. Philip Peacock.

Sunand Sumithra

*October 1995*

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**SECTION 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

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# 1

## WHY THEOLOGY FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Some rash critics – such creatures, we regret to say, do exist – have insisted that Indian Christians have produced not even a decent heresy, let alone theology! Like those who mocked the prophet Elisha and were eaten up by bears, probably these carpers also have received just recompense for their rashness. But they demonstrate one fact, though (beside their jaundiced eye): that they either equate theology with Tillich's system, Barth's Dogmatics or Aquinas' *Summa*, or they do not understand at all what theology is, considering how they divide theology and heresy.

The fact is, in the Indian scene there is now not only an abundance of heresies, but of theologies as well, even systems. Every time the message about Jesus Christ encounters the Indian people in their own contexts, there Indian theology is being created. This is *doing theology in Indian context*. Doing theology is inevitable – it is risky no doubt, with the possibility of the product becoming a heresy always at hand – but it is inevitable. For, from God's revelation (the Bible) to its receivers (the Church), theologizing is a necessary step. The current situation in India is so vastly different than that of the apostles, in ever so many ways. Every time a new aspect of the gospel shows its relevance to a particular Indian context, there Indian theology is born. Since this is happening all the time, it is not an overstatement to say that now Indian theology has not only arrived, but is advancing full steam!

Or to go one step further: theologizing in India (that is, doing theology in the Indian context, or verbalizing the message of the whole gospel in such a way that it is

meaningful and relevant to the Indian ears) is a matter of communication. If, for example, a boy's experience of his father is only that of a drunkard, who comes home to beat his wife and children, and does not have any thought for the education or the future of his children, then to tell to this boy that God is a 'father', would not be communicating the truth about the God of the Bible, as Jesus revealed Him. If in a tribe a lamb has the basest significance, to speak about Jesus as the "Lamb of God" would hardly express what John the Baptist wanted to convey about Jesus when he identified him as such. In these examples (which, incidentally, are true stories), it is necessary that the hearers' images of the father or the lamb be first understood, and if possible corrected, and then the truth of the Gospel be communicated to them in these redefined categories.

A Hindu may understand by *Brahman* the highest reality which is necessarily impersonal, and by *Ishwara* he may understand a personal deity who is necessarily lower than *Brahman*, of second rate reality (belonging to *Maya*). So to use these terms either for God the Father or for Christ without previously 'baptizing' them carefully with Christian content would not be communicating the truth of the Gospel to the Hindus.

No doubt it is theoretically possible to introduce the Gospel message in new terms and concepts: but, such a process of creating new terms and expressions takes excruciatingly long time and hard work; besides, the 'foreignness' of the Gospel remains, since the gospel is foreign both to the hearer and to the new media created, and so cannot produce any fruit without grafting. And finally, such new expressions have often meant deformation, at least partial, of the gospel message.

As such, in order to produce fruit, theologizing in Indian context (which is another way of saying 'contextualizing the gospel in India') is necessary. It is necessary that we make use of the thought patterns (or pre-understanding) of the hearer as much as possible so that the message of Jesus Christ will be as meaningful as possible to the hearer,

evoking a meaningful response. For we as human beings grasp the new concepts only in terms of the old, the unknown in terms of the known concepts.

Effective communication of the Gospel to the non-Christian man of faith depends on the effective use made of the religious vocabulary with which he is familiar, and of the cultural pattern of life in which he finds self-expression and community being.<sup>1</sup>

Since each hearer approaches the Gospel with his/her own 'pre-understanding', to a certain extent different people may understand the Gospel differently. In Indianising Christian theology this pre-understanding is taken into consideration.

You remember the case of King Saul in the Old Testament: God instructed him to utterly destroy the Amalekites, including their cattle and property. But Saul tried to do 'better' than that! He not only killed the animals, he killed the best of them for the sake of God: he sacrificed them to God in worship! But the point is, when God asks us to do something, he expects that we do no less than what he wants, nor more! Both extremes belong to the realm of disobedience. If a tired father asks his son to bring him a glass of water, the son may do better by bringing orange juice or wine, but he is not obeying his father! Similarly, if we are serious to bring the message of the Gospel to Indian brothers and sisters, we must be absolutely careful not to bring neither more nor less than the Gospel. It is in 'contextualizing' that it is possible to remain faithful to the context of the Gospel. This is our third rationale for Indian Christian theology, namely, to show the relevance of the Christian message to Indians, by making the content of the Christian message meaningful to them in their own thought forms, yet at the same time remaining faithful to the content of the message. In short, contextualization means: faithful to the text and relevant to the context.

The phrase 'relevant to the context' has another implication. It implies that since there are ever so many contexts (Indian, Chinese, African, European...), each context may

have its own expression of the Gospel message – one context cannot impose its form as valid for another context. This is the burden of de-Westernizing theology in India. Even among the Indians, all do not have exactly the same pre-understanding and so it may be necessary that the Gospel should be communicated to each person/homogeneous group meaningful to that person/group, just as for example, Jesus communicated to the Samaritan woman (John 4). It also implies that the form of theology of one age need not be binding for another – tradition need not be followed blindly. Thus this principle of relevance helps one to be constantly in touch with the living realities of one's time and its issues. Otherwise we may be giving answers to questions which the Indians have never asked!

Some limitations of this principle of relevance also need to be noted. It was already mentioned above that the danger of producing a lopsided Gospel is always present. But a greater limitation perhaps is that once the Gospel is shown to be relevant to a particular context (say, Hindus) mostly it will be irrelevant to any other context (say Muslims). In fact, a major reason why not many Muslims have positively responded to the message of Christ in India is precisely this: it is alleged that the gospel has been 'hinduized'. Or *vice versa* in Muslim lands. It is well nigh impossible to find a common factor in all human beings to produce an expression of the Gospel relevant to all of them. Did not Paul say that he became a Jew to the Jews and a gentile to the gentiles? This is our rationale too.

There is a fourth rationale: Bishop Westcott once said that a commentary on the gospel of John which does full justice to the rich content of the book can only be written by an Indian. By this he meant that the spirituality of India was nearer to that of the Gospel, hence it is Indians who grasp the fuller meaning of John's Gospel than others. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that a theology in Indian context can re-discover those aspects of the Gospel message which have been either under-emphasized or are completely left out in other attempts. As such,

contextualization helps Christians all over the world towards a fuller understanding of Jesus Christ – to help recover the universality of the Gospel, or what Paul called "the whole counsel of God" (Ac.20:27).

For example, Jesus' deity has been a crucial issue in the West for generations, owing to their Aristotelian logic (finite cannot comprehend the infinite). But in India, where almost every other citizen claims to be some kind of a divine incarnation and where exist three hundred and thirty million gods in the pantheon, the doctrine of Jesus' deity hardly needs to be proved! This is one reason why in Indian theological thinking, especially in recent times, the humanity of Jesus gets greater treatment. Similarly, the new trend of reading the Scriptures with the eye of the third world (the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the dalits...), has led to revolutionary reinterpretations of certain passages of the Bible. This kind of reinterpretation may not always be valid; but the point is that contextualization has given the necessary corrective to the earlier one-sided interpretations. Hence we can heartily agree with the affirmation that Indian Christian theology is not the already formulated Christian theology put into Indian terms but rather it is the contribution from India in the very formulation of the human expression of the revelation of God in Jesus. Until India's contribution is received "revealed truth" has not become "the revealed truth" in its possible expressive fullness.

## THE CONTEXTS IN WHICH INDIAN THEOLOGIES SPROUTED

We have seen already in the last section that a living theology is faithful to the biblical text and relevant to the receiver's context. Both are necessary. Mere faithfulness to the Scriptures may be orthodox but fruitless; and exclusive emphasis on relevance to a given context might be beneficial but could be heretical too. Therefore it is necessary that we know both the Scriptures and the contexts well, in order to do theology. In this section we summarize only the second

part, namely, the contexts. The study of these contexts will help us see why and what kind of theology could have come out of them.

There are two important contexts to which every church must respond to – happily the Indian Church also has responded to these – the socio-political and religio-cultural contexts. A study of these contexts in approximately last two hundred years would be quite adequate to understand the present contexts.

### ***The Socio-political context***

Clearly, the dominant feature of this period is Western colonialism – of the French, British, Portuguese – predominantly of the British. It is of utmost significance that Christian missions and foreign imperialism came together and appeared to support and benefit mutually, though they were often in sharp disagreement with each other. The main result for India of such an alliance was that, to a normal educated Hindu, Christian faith became a foreign faith, the faith of the oppressors. So, more often than not, the majority of Hindus looked down upon it as the religion of *Mlechhas* (the pagan). Even today this antipathy is no less towards non-Hindu religions – only, it is now more thoroughly based and more militantly organized.

Nationalism is the inevitable fruit of imperialism. Soon Indians began to desire self-rule rather than foreign rule, and the Indian Mutiny of 1857 became the starting spark. And exactly as colonialism provoked Indian political self-consciousness, Christian missions evoked the Hindu religious self-consciousness. That is why people like Chenchiah could say that Christianity has in itself the rare gift of creating its own opposition! And when we consider that during this time – and to a lesser extent, even now – there was an amorphous unity between religion, philosophy, politics, culture and economics of which religion was the nerve centre, we can realize how a disturbance at this centre could be very far reaching in its consequences for the Indian society. But the point we want to make now is that, it is

through political nationalism that disturbances in other aspects of Indian society were catalyzed.

Early Indian nationalism was anything but fascism. It was positive in the sense that it concentrated only on the freedom and development of India. It was therefore far from a fanatic my-country-right-or-wrong kind of spirit. No doubt, there were also some negative zeal, in the sense that ‘self-rule, even if it be worst, is the best rule!’ This was the period of national political organizations, activity and corporate thinking. Under the wise leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, it took the form of Indian National Congress (founded in 1885), and was kept free from all communalistic overtones. As such secularism became the ideology of the Congress party of the time. In 1942, the Indian National Congress passed its historic Quit-India Resolution and set the stage for independence struggle – of peaceful non-cooperation movements, of civil disobedience, of passive opposition, of *satyagrahas*.

All this was buttressed by Gandhi’s ingenious resources of *Swadeshiwad* (the doctrine of patriotic self-rule), of rejecting everything foreign in preference to indigenous products – from salt to clothes. The Dandi March and its sequel became nationwide symbols of the things to come. His methods of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha* (pursuit after truth, literally) mostly drawn from Christian resources (in fact, primarily from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount!), were opposed to the use of any kind of physical force. ‘Blunt-the-blade-by-the-blood’ strategy was morally bound to win: for, was it not the strategy of the Cross!

Partly in reaction, but partly also as tactics, communal parties began to attract public attention. The Muslim League (founded 1905) came into being with the express blessings of the British, to care for the allegedly neglected minority Muslim community. Later this move culminated in the Partition. This was the master plan of the British, using the ancient but corrupt principle of *divide et impera* (divide and rule). What an example of a ‘Christian’ nation confessing the name of that Lord who came to unite! In any case, the birth

of the Muslim League catalyzed many Hindu communal groups to sprout – such as Hindu Mahasabha, Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, Rashtriya Jan Sangh and the like. It was Hindu Maha Sabha which later master-minded the assassination of ‘the father of the nation’, Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi, in defense of Hindu communal rights. As such, this pre-independence era including several years after the independence is characteristically a period of Hindu-Muslim communal rivalry – future historians will add: unnecessarily. It was a British creation.

Not every one accepted Gandhi’s policy to oust the British. Subhash Chandra Bose separated himself from the Congress because he was convinced that only the use of armed force can bring for India the necessary liberation from the British yoke. But as the subsequent history shows, he and his ‘Indian National Army’ were both short-sighted and short-lived, and so came to be known as reactionaries – an indirect tribute to the foresight of the Congress leaders, Gandhi and Nehru.

On the economic front, Nehru’s vision of industrialization won the day. During the world wars, India supplied more to war arsenal than any other British colony (one estimate has it at the level of ten billion sterling pounds, and that the amount is still due to India). This supply obviously necessitated the building of rails and roads, factories, national communication systems and the like. In the face of this strong evidence, Gandhi’s revivalist ideas, such as cottage industries, *Gram Panchayat* (which, only recently, is struggling to stand) and the like could not win support, and so modernization of Indian economy has come to stay, in the form of Five Year Plans, Mixed Economy. It is significant that only in the 1989 elections these ideas began gaining nationwide support.

The post-independence India is very different from the pre-independence one, as far as the leaders are concerned. Earlier, in the heat of independence struggle the big problems nagging the nation were forgotten. But once self-rule was realized, the leaders at once awoke to the well-nigh

insurmountable obstacles towards a free sovereign nation. The greatness of these freedom fighters is that overnight they were converted into nation-builders.

In the wake of Pakistan, national unity was of first importance. As the Partition resulted in hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Muslims being massacred, Nehru and his cabinet had to reject an overtly Hindu government. India was forced to become a secular democracy. Other forces of division, such as casteism, linguism and regionalism were taken care of by constitutional measures. Discrimination of any sort was unconstitutional. This is at last partly the background for article 25 in our Constitution, which preserves the right of every Indian citizen to practice and propagate any religion he chooses. Gandhi’s *Harijan* movement, aiming at the upliftment of the low caste and especially the untouchables, was fruitful to begin with, but today the demon of caste has returned with sevenfold force.

One very significant benefit freedom brought was the emancipation of Indian woman. Traditionally, according to Manusmriti’s injunction, an Indian woman is always subjugated to men – as a child under father’s custody, in marriage under husband’s, in old age under son’s and in death under Yama, the god of death. She could not be liberated except by legal measures, such as the abolition of *sati*, compulsory female education, raising of marriage age, anti-divorce acts and social equality of sexes and, most recently, laws concerning sexual harassment on women. All these have made the modern Indian woman a person as never before in Indian History.

Another giant obstacle was the bonded labour and its allied *zamindari* system of agriculture, in which the small farmers were exploited by the richer landlords and became debt-slaves to the latter. Social justice to the farmers was attempted by a number of land reform acts and legislations by the new government. In response to these legal reforms (which necessarily would result in forcible redistribution of land) Vinobha Bhave organised the *Bhoodan* movement for a peaceful, moral redistribution of land.

Industrialization brought along with it the age of giant irrigation projects, such as Bhakra Nangal, Hirakud, Nagarjunasagar etc., which also tackled the problem of unemployment to some extent. But it also true that sometimes these irrigation projects are overdone, to the detriment of local cultures and peoples. The planned economy of the Five Year Plans put India on the map of developing countries. As one survey initiated by the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi shows, India is now a creditor country to many nations, to the tune of twenty five billion US dollars. India is also fast becoming self-sufficient in technology. The harnessing of natural resources like oil, coal, steel and minerals, gigantic strides in exports, greater international trade – all these are gradually making the nation a super-power. Quite recently the floating of the Indian Rupee in international trade is hailed as a major breakthrough for attracting foreign investments.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONTEXT ON CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The changing socio-economic situation in India had its effect on Indian Christian thinking. As we saw, colonialism and freedom are the dominant features of the early years. Patriotism is thus characteristic of this pro-independence period. To the Christians of this generation, the indigenisation of the Church in terms of its theology, worship and the like was inevitable. The theme of liberation also obviously played a major role in their thinking. For, from nationalism to indigenisation of Christianity, from political freedom to religious freedom is but a short step.

Unity is another major motive of this time, because of the communal disturbances in the post-independence months. Church unity was a barrier against any type of denominationalism or casteism. Secularization of the gospel was parallel to the secularization of Indian politics. But as caste has re-emerged as an unbeaten force in the Christian Church, the question of human dignity and equality irrespective of one's caste has become a burning issue. So Christians have often resorted to the biblical doctrine of creation, of man in the image of God for their support.

Brotherhood and fellowship were thus emphasized far more as the result of the Gospel than *shanti* or the peace one gets as an individual.

In general, Indian theologians have tended to place more emphasis on the experience of Christ and his power at the cost of purity of the dogmas. For the same reason, especially in more recent times, questions of social ethics have caught the attention of several Christian and Hindu thinkers. 'Ethics before dogmatics' is generally true of this period.

As against the traditional Hindu lack of participation in historical process, this period of activity was full of historical dynamism. Several top Hindu leaders attempted to re-interpret *maya* as a second order reality thus giving full significance to one's actions in history/society. This stress on history underlined the significance of the human person making anthropology another dominant theme. Justice to farmers, untouchables, women and other oppressed classes made social justice the hot theme of the newer theologians.

Corporate thinking is another aspect of the time. To develop not just individualistic ideas but corporate Christian thinking in the church was the burden consciously carried by many Christian leaders. Democratization of church polity, church union negotiations, the active participation of the laity could all be traced back to the organizational awakening of the Indian society during the time.

The idea of progress was another element of this period. Strangely, modernization and industrialization ushered in the idea of progress in all national level government policies. Strangely, because the two World Wars had just proved the bankruptcy of any faith in scientific, technological progress! So the attitude of 'back to the golden age of Ramraj' was ridiculed as anti-progress. Yet it is strange that hardly any Indian Christian theologian has taken up the question of eschatology seriously.

Two cautions need to be mentioned at this juncture. First, the above pairing of one element from the context with a corresponding element in Indian Christian theology is not

always so neat. Several other factors have contributed to the emphasis on certain themes in theology besides these mentioned above. But at least it shows a general pattern as to how Indian Christian theology came to be selective in its subject matter.

Secondly, we must bear in mind that, though the contexts have their decisive role in shaping one's theology, they are not determinative. That is to say, the context does not determine the content of theology. Though the questions are asked by the contexts, all the answers must be found outside it – in the supreme authority for any Christian theology, namely, the Bible. But we shall come to these methodological questions again at the end of the book.

### ***The Religio-cultural Contexts***

#### THE RELIGIOUS REVOLUTION

It took several centuries in the Western world to prepare for revolutions of global significance. The industrial revolution, social revolution, political revolutions, educational revolution and other revolutions took place over a few hundreds of years. But in Asia and particularly in India, corresponding revolutions broke out, though on a lesser scale, within just a few decades! Dr. Takenaka of Japan beautifully calls this phenomenon the telescoping of revolution in Asia. In Asia, all these revolutions are taking place simultaneously, and so their consequences in Asia are far more complex and disturbing than in the West. In India, the land of religions, another revolution steals the main stage: the religious revolution. In this section we shall study this as the second context of Indian theologization.

#### REVOLUTIONARY CHANGES IN HINDUISM

Though religious pluralism is a stubborn fact in India, as we have already noted, by far Hinduism is the most dominant religion. More in the past than in today's competitive conversions, Hinduism had the greatest number of adherents. What was the condition of Hinduism in the last two centuries? What revolution did it undergo?

We need to realize at the outset that Hinduism is no religion. It is an ocean of different – and conflicting – philosophies and logics, religions and cultures, social and ethical systems. Modern writers prefer the term Hinduity or Hindudom (parallel to Christianity and Christendom!) thus depicting it as a way of life. It has no founder – a matter of pride for our Hindu brethren – as its roots reach back to the dark ancient past. Hence it is called the *sanathana dharma* – the religion from time immemorial, the eternal religion.

In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. The Hindu is inclined to revere the divine in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and is doctrinally tolerant, leaving others – including both Hindus and non-Hindus – whatever creed and worship practices suit them best. A Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion without ceasing to be a Hindu, and the Hindu is disposed to think synthetically and to regard other forms of worship, strange gods and divergent doctrines as inadequate rather than objectionable, he tends to believe that the highest powers complement each other for the well being of the world and mankind. Few religious ideas are considered to be finally irreconcilable. The core religion does not even depend on the existence or non-existence of God or on whether there is one God or many. Since religious truth is said to transcend all verbal definition, it is not conceived in dogmatic terms. Hinduism is, then, both a civilization and conglomerate of religions, with neither a beginning, a founder nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization.

Before the period of our consideration (that is, before the 18th century), the various schools of Hinduism had already fallen in the rut of their own traditions. There were several schools of Vedantic philosophies like *Dvaita*, *Advaita* and *Vishishtadvaita*, along with their logics. Manu's Code was in force, particularly his *varnashrama Dharma* (duties of a Hindu according to his caste and stage in life). The rebellious movements of Buddhism, and Jainism had already become separate religions themselves. Through the centu-

ries several aspect of Hinduism had become cold traditions, more a burden than a support for the common man. But as we saw already, the spark of reformation in Hinduism was kindled by the arrival of Christian missions. When we realize that neither the arrival of Arabian Muslims in the 11th century nor of Moghuls later that such an opposition was noticed, we see the significance of the truth that wherever the Christian gospel went, it disturbed. Thus during the 19th and 20th centuries Hinduism entered its renaissance period – because of the gospel.

### RENAISSANCE AND RESURGENCE

This reformation took essentially two forms. On the one hand, there were leaders who looked at Hinduism from a new set of values acquired from resources other than Hindu. They began to transform Hinduism from within towards this new set of values. The other became defensive in the face of encroaching religions and ideas. So they began to preserve the original Hindu systems as they were. The former could be called the renaissance and the latter the resurgence of Hinduism. The former were progressive, while the latter were revivalist. Self-development motivated the progressive, while self-preservation was the aim of the revivalist.

Raja Rammohan Roy is called the father of the Indian Renaissance. We shall study his thought in detail later. His criticism of Hinduism was obviously based on Christian values, and centred more on moral aspects. Abolition of *Sati*, upliftment of womenfolk, emphasis on monotheism – all these were more or less new to Hinduism. He resorted to the upanishads, instead of Vedas. Though Ramakrishna Paramahansa his guru had done the opposite: he encouraged the popular type of Hindu thought – polytheism, ecstatic experiences (by the possession of gods) and idolatry.

Dayananda Saraswati discovered the back-to-the-Vedas principle. He rejected idolatry and other corrupt elements as post-Vedic corruption and founded Arya Samaj.

Under the influence of both the Christian Gospel and British liberal politics, Gopala Krishna Gokhale gave a political face-lift to Hinduism in his Servants of India Society.

As the arch-disciple of Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda made Vedanta (*Advaita*) his basis, and sought to project Hinduism as a universal religion. Thus far, Hinduism had been the religion only of Indians. As the result of the Ramakrishna Mission Hinduism became, contrary to its own nature, a missionary, militant religion. Even now almost every aspect of this Mission (headquarters in Belur Math) is a counterpart of Christian missions, both in content and form. Philanthropic efforts, corporate discipline, religious teaching and training of missionaries – all are copied from Christianity.

Gandhi turned, like Roy, to the moral regeneration of Hinduism, but made Bhagvadgita for the first time his basis, rather than the Vedas or Upanishads or other popular sources.

Following Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan emphasized the religious resurgence of Hinduism, and saw in Hinduism the ultimate, perfect religion. Yet, in the face of the pressing need of the time, namely, the nationwide phenomenon of liberation struggle, he was compelled to reinterpret some aspects of Hinduism to move Hindus to participate in these historical struggles.

So scholars speak of two types of neo-Hinduism emerging out of this period: one in the line of Roy and Gandhi aiming at the moral regeneration and the other in the line of Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan aiming at the religious.

Beside these main changes there are no doubt scores of others, all of which are discussed in detail in another M.Div. course, “Modern Religious and Secular Movements”, so we will not deal with them here. We only note here this: the recent decades are exploding with new types of gurus, *mathas*, movements, *swamis* and what not. The picture now is thoroughly confusing. Several of these are spreading

fast in the spiritually empty West. Many of them are advocating syncretistic solutions. If we remember that syncretism and not mission belongs to the essence of Hinduism, we could say that actually these latter are genuinely Hindu! Bahai and Rajneesh teachings are good examples of this.

Some others have taken up social responsibility seriously, such as J.P. Narayan's *Sarvodaya*, Vinobha Bhave's *Bhoodan*, Ranthodji's medical missions and scores of others. Still other efforts deal with ancient values like the anti-cow slaughter movements, *gurukul ashram*, *rishis* and *maharishis* taking the vow of silence and meditation, and many following different types of yoga or tantric practices.

As never before the power and organization of four Hindu "Popes", of the four Shankaracharyas — is increasing steadily on a national scale, even in political and business circles! It is truly a rich kaleidoscope.

By way of summary we can say the following :

1) Unlike the Hinduism of last several millennia, Hinduism in the last two centuries underwent revolutionary changes with far-reaching consequences. The Christian Gospel has been the main catalyst.

2) These changes were both radical and apologetical in nature. New elements were also added, such as the dimension of mission.

3) Syncretism was another aspect of this period.

4) A new emphasis on the 'horizontal', on man/society gained ground, at the cost of the earlier 'vertical' approach to god/religion/priests. Hinduism of this period is hence slowly but definitely experiencing secularization! If we remember that in one way or the other renunciation of this world is the heart of Hindu salvation (*Moksha*, liberation from this life-death circle), then this focus on the mundane is an earth-shaking change for Hinduism.

What is the relevance of all these changes to Christian theology? We could say several things. Firstly, in the light of these revolutions in Hinduism, there is a constant effort

made by Indian Christians either to reinterpret Hinduism to become a fitting container for the message of the gospel, or to reinterpret Christianity to make it more palatable to Hindus.

Secondly, since primarily it is the Christian gospel which sparked off this change, there are numerous attempts by Indian Christians to see the effect of Christ in Hinduism in particular, and religions in general. This is why we have themes like the Unknown or Undiscovered or Acknowledged or Unbound Christ of Hinduism running like a refrain in modern Indian Christian theology.

Thirdly, the question of syncretism has become a live subject for almost all Indian thinkers. As such, inter-religious dialogue is becoming India's contribution to world christendom, and not spirituality itself, as is often judged!

Fourthly, for the same reason, the question of philosophy or sociology of religion along with the allied question of secularization has become an issue of repeated discussions. Without mentioning details (which will emerge in the course of this book), we merely note that a lot of theology is being done in these corporate discussions on the question of religious pluralism.

Finally, in the light of the Hindu sociology of castes the doctrine of the Church also has become a burning issue for all of us Christians — Protestant, Orthodox or Roman Catholic. The amount of literature produced on Indian ecclesiology is quite substantial in recent years.

## CHRISTIANITY AND THE OTHER RELIGIONS OF INDIA

Beside Hinduism there are other religions in India — Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and tribal religions. Very strangely, there is minimal attempt made by Indian Christians to develop theologies relevant to these religious contexts. Many factors explain this lack.

Firstly, since Hinduism is the most populous religion, it was studied more than any other religions. The study of Islam was confined primarily to the Muslim countries and

the study of Buddhism to countries in the Far East, while they seemed too small in comparison with Hinduism to draw enough attention. Secondly, as the gospel was translated more and more into Hindu thought patterns, it was misunderstood to be a syncretistic product by people of other faiths and so they shunned it.

Thirdly, as early missionaries concentrated, except in a few cases, on evangelizing Hindus, those who wrote theologies later also came out of Hindu background and so could not relate the Gospel to other religions. It is a vicious circle indeed. And Hinduism being a non-missionary religion, response from Hindus was greater than that from others. Even the so-called people-movements took place mainly among the Hindu Castes and the casteless.

There are also some in-built oppositions to Christianity in other religions, such as the *Jihad* (religious war) of Islam, atheism of Buddhism, extreme asceticism (World renunciation) of Jainism, militarism of Sikhism, etc. so that Hinduism was comparatively most responsive.

Finally, compared to Hinduism these religions are new, and so are considered foreign (Sikhism being a syncretistic religion has already taken into itself some Christian and Muslim elements consciously); hence they had to hold to their own for survival. In any case it must be admitted that indigenisation of the Christian message in India has meant largely Hinduisation, and there is a lot to be done as far as other religions are concerned. We shall briefly survey the condition of these religions.

### *Change in Islam*

The dictum that "Reformed Islam is no Islam" was negated by the new developments in the Indian Muslim community during these last two centuries. In Islam also one can discern both renaissance and resurgence movements. Leaders like Mohammed Iqbal and Syed Ahmed Khan were consciously under the influence of Christian values of Western education, and so tried to bring Islam up-to-date, at par with Christian values, through the abolish-

ing of ancient and irrelevant customs. Interpretation of tradition in the light of modernity was their goal. Syed Ahmed Khan went so far as to found a Western type of education system for Muslims at Aligarh. Even now Aligarh Muslim University is the main Indian centre for training Muslim leaders of every sort.

After the emergence of Pakistan, an average Indian Muslim considers himself an alien in a Hindu society, and has developed a minority complex. This has resulted in some resurgence movements. *Haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) has increased. A sense of solidarity with Arab countries is stronger. The rich petro-dollar countries are regularly pouring vast amount of money into India toward Islamization. The Ahmadiyya movement of Mirza Ghulam Ahmed is a militantly missionary Muslim sect. It is true that Indian Muslim community is not yet *Dar-ul-Islam* (house of Islam) but is still *dar-ul-Harh* (House of war), but things are moving rapidly towards that goal. At the same time, the Christian attitude to Muslims in India is changing, as evidenced by a more sympathetic study of Islam by the Henry Martin Institute, the emergence of missions to the Muslims such as the Fellowship of Neighbours in India and other indigenous efforts.

### *Change in other religions*

Among the other religions, changes in Buddhism are more conspicuous. The neo-Buddhism of Ambedkar and the recent conversion of several hundreds of thousands of Harijans to this movement has made it a force to reckon with, but the issues in these conversions are not really religious but rather humanitarian and economical. The recent extremist events among the Punjab Sikhs in claiming a separate autonomy for the Khalsa have brought Sikhs into conflicts with the secularist central government as well as to a fanatic militancy. Jains and Parsis, as the Jews of India, control the riches of the land as no other community in spite of their size. Perhaps for this reason their need of Christian faith and hence their response to Christ have been very meagre. On the other hand, the unprecedented response of the tribals in the middle belt of the land as well as among the

northeast and northwestern regions has been recorded as the greatest recent growth of the Church in India.

In conclusion we can say that only with the birth of indigenous missions and of non-denominational movements is there a Christian interest among groups other than Hindus. The field is vast and almost entirely new, waiting for pioneers. Let us pray to the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into His field.

## THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS IN INDIA

Beyond doubt the question of authority (to be discussed in the next chapter) is the first question in any theological undertaking. We Indian Christians should be thankful that our own traditional thought-patterns also lead us to the Scriptures, as we have seen above, to be the supreme authority, whatever secondary authorities people may resort to. Once this is settled, the next question would be: what kind of theology is being done in India? By whom, where, when and in what situations? What is their validity and fruitfulness?

The answer to these questions is not as unambiguous as one wishes. Having come out from under the foreign yoke politically, we are still accused that our theology is not yet genuinely indigenous! Therefore, it will be most relevant to study these various streams of creativity, mainly under two questions:

- 1) *Who* is engaged in doing theology?
- 2) *In what contexts* is it being done?

After these inquiries, we will study also a third area, necessarily with a sense of shame. Now, don't rush to this third area! Unless you become aware of the first two areas I am afraid the third may not be meaningful to you!

### ***The Churches and their Traditions***

This is what Boyd calls the sources of theological tradition, and he mentions three of them.

(i) The first of course is the Syrian tradition, because this is the oldest, claimed to date back as early as 52 A.D., to the landing of the Apostle Thomas in Malabar (Kerala). During its nearly two thousand years of history, it included a number of traditions, not just one – Nestorian, Syrian, Jacobite etc. But not until the influence of Western theology did any substantial writing emerge from this tradition. There were two reasons given for this lack of creativity. Firstly, the Syrian Churches, living in the midst of an alien Hindu environment for centuries, became introspective; and they also fitted into the caste-system as a special caste. A concern for evangelism or apologetics was missing. Secondly, the church language was Syriac which the people did not understand. Even the translation of the Bible into Malayalam was done only recently. So the Syrian theology remained completely Syrian. This meant of course the rejection of the Chalcedonian formula (The christological formula adopted by the Chalcedonian Ecumenical Council in 451 AD, that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man in one person) and a support for monophysitism (the doctrine of one nature in Christ, not two).

(ii) The second tradition is the Roman Catholic one. This dates back to the sixteenth century, when Francis Xavier came to Goa in 1652 A.D. In this case Christian missions definitely allied with imperialism. Boyd comments, "The Padroado had laid down the Christianising of India as one of the aims of the imperial expansion, and so a link was early formed between evangelism and imperialism . . ."2

When Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) came to Madurai in 1606 it was this Europeanised Christianity, which was deeply detested by the respectable Hindus which met him. At once he decided to change all this. So, in order to win the high-caste Hindus he became one like them, took to *sanyasa* and studied Sanskrit and Vedas, used Aquinas and Aristotle, Sanskrit in the place of Latin. But unfortunately without much success. He wrote in purely Indian forms of literature, *Puranas*, *slokas*, commentaries and refutations, both in Tamil and Sanskrit. In spite of all this, it is only fair to say

that he simply reproduced the theology of the Council of Trent. Several of the later Roman Catholic traditions built upon de Nobili (later on in this course there is a chapter on de Nobili and other names mentioned here). Subsequently, it is in this line that greater theological creativity is to be seen, to this day.

(iii) The third tradition is the Protestant one, the last of the three to arrive in India. The East India Company was established as early as 1608 in Surat, and chaplains came to minister to the company's employees. But they were solely confined to the foreigners. When missionaries came in the 18th century (Ziegenbalg in 1706 and William Carey in 1793), there was a kind of tension between these chaplains and the missionaries, as the former were serving exclusively the British, while the missionaries primarily the native Indians. Naturally some relevant and creative work was done by the latter, and in a rich variety as well. Carey's translation of the Bible into thirty four Indian languages opened up a floodgate which was to be decisive for Indian Christian thinking in ever so many ways. This was followed by the printing press, which became instrumental in disseminating Christian literature.

There were also other trends. Alexander Duff maintained that the British education and culture must be considered as *preparatio evangelica* (preparation for the Gospel), that therefore it was of utmost importance that these be given to the Indians with urgency. But there were also those like J.N. Farquhar who considered Hinduism as a *preparatio evangelica*, and Christianity as the fulfillment or crown of Hinduism, and so demanded a thorough study of the same. Thus the product of this period in Protestant circles seems to be an innovative, mixed variety than a single tradition.

On the whole we could therefore say that theological creativity in India began as early as in the first century, though a genuinely indigenous product did not gain momentum till the Christian missionary movement, when the Bible was available in vernacular languages.

In recent times the Church's corporate creativity is seen in a new dimension, namely that of Church Union negotiations. The constitutions of these unions, and the literature in connection with the negotiations and their consummation offer a large bulk of theological material, which are yet to be analyzed and used fruitfully for the benefit of Indian Christian communities.

### **Individuals**

Though in the church traditions also it was individuals who thought and wrote, here we are talking about those individuals who were not strictly bound by particular church confessions, and so were freer in their opinions. As such creativity is greatest here – in fact, the bulk of theological writings we study in this course is written largely by such individual thinkers. At the same time they were not isolated islands but had a good deal of interaction, following and fruitfulness, so one can study them profitably.

We can truly say that it is here that real theological raw material was being processed. There were first of all those who belonged to the fold of the Hindu religion, after hearing the gospel grappled with the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, either in defense of their age-old beliefs or in refutation of certain Christian teachings (e.g. Ram Mohan Roy, Radhakrishnan, Mahatma Gandhi). Then there were others who belonged to the 'mainline' (that is, standing in the line of established churches) Christians who defended Christian faith against any Hindu attacks. (e.g. Nehemiah Goreh, Paul David Devanandan). These were perhaps more diligent to preserve the tradition of the fathers than to give new directions in theological activity. Thirdly, there are those who, while still remaining in the Church's fold, yet, because they did not approve of certain aspects of the church's doctrine or practice, raised a prophetic voice against such deficiencies. Thus they had a reformatory effect on Christianity as a whole in India, (e.g. Manilal Parekh, Subbarao, Chenchiah). Finally, some of them went right out of the Church traditions and became the pioneers of new directions. Many attempted to reconcile Hindu and Christian

messages and roughly chalked out the path for a movement from the former to the latter (e.g. R. Panikkar, M.M. Thomas, Samartha). Even a good sample of their creativity is not readily available. Books like Boyd's or Samartha's or Baago's are at best selections according to the author's self-chosen criteria. A definitive historical theology in India, that is, a history of the development of Indian theological thought is yet to be written.

### **Conference and Para-church Organizations**

This is basically a twentieth century phenomenon, for twentieth century is the century of organisations. No doubt the early Ecumenical Councils are the forerunners, but in India, because of communal disharmony even in Christian communities, there was a conscious effort made to develop a 'corporate Christian thinking'. Another major reason for such efforts is involvement in the life of society, and the demonstration of the credibility of the gospel. One can find the roots of such approach in the watershed World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, 1910. As a consequence of this meeting, several international co-operations sprouted, The International Missionary Council, The Faith and Order Movement, The Life and Work Movement, World Council of Churches and the like. On the Evangelical side there were the World Evangelical Fellowship (1951), the Berlin Congress on Evangelism (1966), the Wheaton meeting of IFMA and EFMA (1967), the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation (1974 & 1989), and a host of their consultations and conferences.

At a regional level, in India also all such international efforts had their counterparts. The findings and reports of these meetings are vast and rich in theological content. *Christian Participation in Nation-building* and *Debate in Mission* are two outstanding examples of such efforts — each of these books is the outcome of numerous national level Indian theological consultations.

The efforts of the National Christian Council of India (now National Council of Churches of India) and its numerous

national level meetings, Evangelical Fellowship of India and its numerous conferences, Federation of Evangelical Churches of India are other important examples. In higher theological education, researchers are resorting more and more to the findings of these corporate bodies and less to ecclesiastical or individual works. Association of Evangelical Theological Education in India (AETEI) is emerging as a credible national body handling theological education issues.

One note should not be out of place here. Almost certainly you would have participated in at least one such conference in India or even at international level abroad. In such meetings one has the feeling that these meetings bring mixed blessings. Though on the one hand they do blunt one's sharp edges and fanatic tendencies and thus correct our lopsidedness, on the other hand they seem to be effectively silencing the prophetic voice. For example, if two thousand three hundred world level leaders of the evangelical faith decided such and such an action as mandatory for the church at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation, it is very, very hard for a 'prophet' to have the courage to speak up against any deficient or even wrong or unbiblical tendencies of such world bodies. Thus, these corporate decisions are to some extent influenced by group dynamics and so must be taken with a pinch of salt. For the same reason, the Ecumenical Councils of the first five centuries are not infallible, but still stand under the judgment of the final *pramana* (that is, authority, see next section), the Bible.

On a different level, many non- and inter-denominational organizations like the missionary associations, social action institutes, philanthropic or relief efforts, also have their own theological emphases. But their theological output is far less than that of the conferences.

### **IN WHICH CONTEXT IS THEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY CARRIED OUT?**

There is no doubt a slight overlap between this section and the previous one, but yet, this section must be separately dealt with, because there are two contexts to which

Indian theology has been addressing itself and will be addressing in the future as well.

The first is the context of religious pluralism. Perhaps more in India than anywhere else in the world, a solution to the question of the relationship between Christianity and other religions becomes an acute need. This is why a lot of material has come from Indian writers on the issues like inter-religious dialogue, discovering Christ in other religions, cultural synthesis, syncretism etc. Even at the world level Indian theologians, like Stanley Joseph Samartha take the helm in the theology of inter-religious dialogue. This is also the area rich with Christian apologetics and that also of a very high quality and, as we noted in the first lesson, prone also to the danger of becoming heretical!

The second context is that of socio-political revolutions. Nation building efforts preceded by the independence struggle, is perhaps the most influential secular context (next only to religious pluralism) which has shaped the recent Indian Christian theologies. A theology of nationalism (in the sense of nation-building), of liberation and social justice are the key motifs of this context. The whole question of the secular interpretation of the Christian message, and the development of relevant Christian ideologies will occupy several years or decades of future Christian thinkers in India.

In both these contextual theologies there is hardly any consensus which can be labeled as the Indian position. The spectrum varies from extreme conservatism to extreme liberalism, and as such is still in a volatile state. The one great distinctive advantage of these contextual theologies is that there is an in-depth struggle with the contexts and so most relevant and meaningful theologies are produced in such struggles. You know of course that the outcome of the Christian approach to these two contexts determines the credibility of the Indian church in the years to come.

#### THEOLOGICAL CREATIVITY IN THE AREA OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Though there is a significant amount of theological activity in the area of theological education (that is, by the

theological seminaries, professors, their publications etc.) compared to the other areas described above theologization is least here! If we consider the expertise, the resources, the tools of research available and influential position such educational institutions hold in India, it should have showed much more creativity than is now the case. This puts those of us in the enterprise of theological education to shame, as we said above.

One reason is that unlike those "lay theologians" who were in direct contact with life situations, the academic nature of these theologies betrays their lack of contact with Indian realities. Theological writings thus became "professional", originating from the scholar's pen and settling down in another scholar's notebook! Also, most of these teachers are from 'Western Christianity' background, which fact may explain the inertia of the *status quo* in the business of doing theology. Only a few of the theological teachers have substantial pastoral or missionary experience.

For a long time now, the whole theological education has been hijacked for the sole purpose of producing candidates for ordination. Further, to a large extent seminaries still follow basically a Western pattern in these institutions in their education, spirituality, life-style etc. The Serampore Senate (which coordinates theological educations for Protestant and Orthodox Churches in the Indian subcontinent) and similar bodies still base themselves largely upon Western textbooks, periodicals, methods of education etc. In the last few years some indigenous efforts are discernible, for example in the Indian Theological Library Series or the CISRS series. Most recently, it is encouraging to see that Theological Book Trust (TBT) has undertaken an extensive theological text-books programme, written and published by indigenous experts. Yet, generally speaking, indigenisation in India has indeed sprouted, but it is yet to be watered and cultivated to bear its due fruit.

Several national level consultations have been held in India on the subject of theological education. These conferences struggle to evolve an indigenous theological educa-

tion for India which is at the same time Christian, relevant and fruitful. The reports of many such conferences, such as those of Charles Ranson, M.H. Harrison, and the Board of Theological Education of N.C.C. recommend that in the future Christian theological education must share "in India's search for new meaning, New Humanity", "to be open-minded, in encounter with renascent religions", to "minister to men who face new and unprecedented decisions in their political, economic, intellectual, religious and cultural life". What do you think?

Let us conclude, with the following evaluatory comments:

1) Of the five aspects of theological creativity we have been considering (ecclesiastical, individual, consultational, contextual and academic), each has some weaknesses also: the ecclesiastical and conference theologies tend to be too traditional and static; individual theologies tend to be lopsided, truncated, or partial. Academic, institutional theologies are guilty of irrelevance and impracticability. Thus it is in the case of the theologies produced in raw struggle with the context of the secular and religious world that the hope is best and strongest for a really authentic and fruitful Indian Christian theology, though right now such efforts seem very radical.

2) Men (not principles) are still God's methods, and prophets (not councils) are still the conscience of the Church. So in our land more than anything else the voice of the one who could say, "Thus says the Lord" must be encouraged and heard. Each of us are called upon to theologize, in however small measure in contexts God has placed us. May God make you a prophet — one who comes from the holy presence of God and says like the prophet Isaiah of old, "Thus saith the Lord!"

3) The theological seminaries and colleges must be encouraged to relate their programmes more relevantly and realistically to the Church's life as well as society's needs. For, theology is after all a function of the Church as a whole.

Seminaries must serve the Churches, not *vice versa*. This means that concrete approaches like appointing teachers in our theological institutions on the basis of their fruitfulness and commitment to the churches by way of pastoral experience, churches' input in developing the theological training programmes and curricula are among some of the implementations which are needed if seminary theological creativity is to become relevant and fruitful.

## **PRAMANAS: SOURCES OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN INDIA**

### ***What is Authority?***

Suppose you had a dispute with one of your colleagues, for example about the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To prove you are right, you quote from this textbook. Would your adversary be convinced? Not at all! Because, as far as (s)he is concerned, this book will be a weak support. Not because it is wrong (I hope not), but because its credibility is not yet universally recognized. No doubt your quoting the book will be far more convincing than quoting, say the Prime Minister, for the simple reason that theology is our field of specialization, and so rightly or wrongly we the authors are supposed to be experts in the field — while the Prime Minister, in spite of his high power, is just a layman in this area. But what happens if you quote, say, Martin Luther? that would be more convincing, since Luther is more or less universally accepted — *but only among the Protestants*. Thus in order to establish your point, you will have to take support from some authority which is acceptable both to you and to your colleagues — the nature of the authority you take for support depends upon who your questioner/colleague is — the more universally accepted 'authority' you quote, the more convincing your position becomes.

As can easily be seen, this question of authority comes up not just in the matter of disputes, but at the deepest level of our beliefs: On what basis (authority) do I believe anything?

The question, which authority is the basis for your theological truths thus becomes a crucial – and so the first - question in any study of theology. The shape of the superstructure in any building is to a decisive extent dependent upon the foundation it has. Similarly, *what* you believe is decisively dependent upon *why* you believe, the authority for your belief. This is the reason why most of the systematic treatises on theology start with the question of authority, and the doctrine of the scripture as the supreme authority in matters of faith and conduct.

### **Authority in the Christian Church**

In the history of the Christian Church throughout the ages, the question of authority for one's beliefs came up at several points. In the second century, Tertullian and Iraneus, for example, discussed the question of authority of the Bishops, Church and the Scriptures. But the importance of the issue was not fully realized till the time of Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

One of the most crucial subjects of dispute between Luther (for that matter, all Reformers of the time) and the Roman Catholic church was precisely this question of authority. In the dispute, unfortunately, the Roman Catholics crystallized their doctrine of authority in unmistakable terms in the Council of Trent (in session IV, on 8th April, 1546) in the following words:

The foundation of all saving truth and moral discipline . . . is contained in the written books and in the unwritten tradition, which later have come down to us at the dictation of the Holy Spirit by unbroken secession from the mouth of Christ himself or his apostles; hence we receive and venerate both Scripture and Tradition with equal piety and reverence.<sup>3</sup>

The last phrase, 'with equal piety and reverence' was their way of saying 'with equal authority'. In Vatican II this equality of tradition's authority with that of the Scriptures was crystallized into the infallibility of the Pope, leading to the supremacy of the Tradition in the Roman Catholic Church.

Against this, the Protestants developed what is known as the 'material principle' of Reformation, namely, the *Sola Scriptura* – that *only* Scriptures are the supreme authority for faith and conduct (the complementary 'formal' principle was faith). Both Protestants and Orthodox rejected the papal claims, while the Orthodox gave a greater weight to the authority of Tradition (Ecumenical Councils) than the Protestants.

### **Authority in Indian Philosophy**

It is fruitful to see that in India the question of authority has occupied a central point in all the systems of Indian Philosophy from their beginning. In fact, one of the crucial differences between these systems is the nature of authority of religious knowledge each uses. It must also be noted that in earlier times in India, as elsewhere, there was no differentiation made between philosophy, theology, religion, culture, etc., and so what was authoritative in one area was valid also for the others.

Hence, in developing a relevant theology for India and especially for the Hindus, it is imperative that Christian views of *why* we believe must first be established and communicated to them. In the following sections, we will first deal briefly with the Hindu understanding of authority, then describe summarily (details in the following units) some Christian attempts to 'Indianize' the Christian approach.

### **Pramanas in Hindu tradition**

The term for authority in Hindu philosophy is *Pramana*, way of valid knowledge (from *Prama*, right knowledge, knowledge which cannot be falsified). Each school of Hindu thought accepted a set of *pramanas* as the true foundation for right knowledge. Knowledge gained in ways other than these was not true knowledge – it was either inadequate, transitory, and belonged to the category of falsehood, doubt, illusion, dream, etc., but not true knowledge.

The number of *pramanas* differs from school to school. To start with, some accepted only two, namely, *pratyaksha* (perception which comes through sense experience) and *anumana* (inference, logic, also called *yukti*) Only the atheistic schools, namely Charavaka, Jaina and Bauddha schools, limited the number of authorities to these two, since they did not want to come under the authority of the Vedas. The rest of the schools, namely Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimansa and Vedanta schools, accepted a third *pramana* – *Sabda* (the word of testimony, either human or divine). It was the chief contribution of these schools to develop *Sabda* as the supreme authority, by limiting it to mean the Vedas, which were assumed to be the superhuman, eternal and creative Word of God. As such, Vedas were accepted as the true and infallible *pramana*. So of all the literature passed on from time immemorial, the Vedas were carefully distinguished as *sruti* (that which is heard – the voice of the rishis/gods) and *smriti* (that which is remembered, by the scholars, community – that is, the tradition). For the theistic schools, it became mandatory to find some kind of support ultimately in the Vedas.

To these main three *pramanas*, others had been added at various stages of development of different schools of thought. The two most common additions are: *upamana* (analogy/comparison) and *arthapratti* (implication other than logical). The lesser known additions were: *Tarka* (rationalization), *Anupalabdhi* (non-apprehension), *Sambhava* (inclusion) and *Aitihya* (tradition).

As the English translations of these terms show, the exact meaning and differentiation of these Hindu *pramanas* is quite an involved affair. Sometimes some of the latter *pramanas* are included in the major ones. But one can certainly conclude that in general the main authorities for entire Hindu thought were three, *Sruti*, *Anumana*, and *pratyaksha*. Since the last one deals with primary experience, it became equivalent to *anubhava* (direct experience or intuitional experience), though often it meant intuitional experience.

## **The Pramanas and Christian Faith**

What can we say about the use of these *pramanas* in indianising Christian faith?

First, it is important to note that these three correspond well with Christian understanding of authority, and what is more important, both Christian and Hindu systems ultimately resort to ‘revelation’ as the final authority, thereby implying the rottenness of human reason or experience. Is it accidental? Or is this a *preparatio evangelica*?

Secondly, as Robin Boyd points out, the meaning of *sruti* as revelation is much nearer to the Hebrew concept of the word of God than Latin revelation (*re-velare*, to take away the veil), derived from its Greek parent word, *apokalypto* (the same meaning, to take away the veil). Both the Greek and Latin concepts of revelation appeal to the *eye*, to vision. But the Hebrew *dabar* (word, speak) and *sruti* are closer to one another since both resort to the *ear*, the hearing. God created the world with His word. When Yahweh gave the decalogue at Mount Sinai, the Israelites only heard His voice, but saw no form. And Jesus is called *logos*, the Word. Thus it is in the concept of *sruti* that one can far more effectively recover the Hebrew concept of God as the one who speaks.

Thirdly, the meaning of the Hindu *pramanas* is not exactly the same as their Christian equivalents. Reason or logic in Hindu thought has more than one form, beyond the deductive and inductive logics. Hindu thought also includes a new type of logic, which Boyd aptly calls the logic of “reconciling the opposites”. This kind of logic comes very handy when we consider some doctrines which seem to have in-built ‘contradictions’, such as: the Bible as the Word of God and word of man at the same time, Jesus as fully God and fully man, etc. Experience also means more in Hindu systems. It is not just sense-experience alone, but includes also intuition and even mystical experience. Thus it is very necessary that before using the Hindu *pramanas* as valid for Christian theology, we adequately baptize or define them.

Finally, there are some authorities in Christian thought which have no essential place in the Hindu system of authorities. Tradition, which plays a key role in the Roman Catholic theology (as corporate reasoning), History (as corporate experience) and conscience are not really considered in Hindu schools.

### **Christian pramanas**

It was Bishop A.J. Appasamy (whose thought we will study later) who first called attention to the primary task of theology: to establish its *pramanas*, as Hindu thought does. Hindu thought usually develops in three steps: 1) What do the Vedas say on the point at issue? 2) Can it be logically demonstrated? 3) Does it tally with human experience?

It is most heartening to see that the Indian Christian theologians, all but three, give to the Bible the first place as authority. One exception is Chenchiah. He gives first place to *anubhava* (experience). Though Sadhu Sunder Singh gives great importance of his mystical experiences – “a revelation which I have received in ecstasy is worth more to me than all the traditional Church teaching” – it is safe to say that he still places all his experiences under the authority of the Bible, though above the Church tradition. The only other exceptions are Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya and Raymondo Panikkar, both of whom give first place to the teaching of the Church. But both of them are Roman Catholics, so their approach is quite understandable!

One could now say that honouring the Bible as the foremost authority is quite Indian! This is also the emphasis of the Reformers and a host of theologians even before them. So Boyd is very right in strongly underlining that “the supreme *pramana*, must be the Scriptures, and that no philosophical or ecclesiastical tradition must be allowed to challenge this authority.”<sup>4</sup>

If this is valid, then it is high time that Indian theologians concentrated on producing substantial exegetical works. Sad to say, lack of such a serious study of the Bible is perhaps the most serious weakness of Indian Christian

theology today. Would you like to take up this as a challenge and ministry, as the Lord guides you?

Experience comes second both for Hindus and most of Christians. Vivekananda became a disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa after the latter answered affirmative to his question, “Have you seen God?” If only we Christians could concentrate on witnessing to our experience (for no one can ever question one’s experience!) like the blind man in John 9, “One thing I know: once I was blind, but now I see”, I have no doubt that the fruitfulness of the Gospel would be multiplied. Here we are not talking so much about the Hindu experience of mystical union with the All or *Brahman*, but rather the experience of the power of the Holy Spirit in the character and conduct of the Christian disciple or community. Needless to add, whatever experience we may have they all must be evaluated in the light of our supreme *pramana*, the Bible, for the simple reason, our experiences can be subjective or illusory – one may not argue about it, only accept or reject it; yet, their validity is not self-evident.

Bishop A.J. Appasamy places – notice he is a bishop! – the Church tradition (*aitihya*) as the second *pramana* along with experience. The work of the Holy Spirit during the last two thousand years of Church history cannot be easily put aside (my own view is that the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the believer’s life now, direct and personal, is perhaps a more reliable guide than the general guidance in Church history, being impersonal, past and divergent). One need not be dogmatic here, once the Scriptures are given the first position; and I would put tradition in the third place.

It is in the fourth *pramana*, namely, *anumana* or reason that there is a rich variety of Indian Christian theologies. In the west, different systems came into being following different philosophical/logical systems, such as Platonism, Aristotelianism, Positivism, Idealism, Existentialism, etc. So also in India: following the six *darsanas* (philosophical schools, mentioned above) a variety of Christian theologies are possible, at least in principle.

Thus far, among these schools *Vedanta* has been used extensively. Brahmabandhab's use of Sankara's *advaita* and Appasamy's use of Ramanuja's *vishishtadvaita* are the outstanding examples. Besides *Vedanta*, other systems also are used – e.g. Chenchiah's use of Aurobindo's Creative Evolution; Nehemiah Goreh uses, in the Thomistic fashion, the Hindu logic to refute his adversaries.

The fifth *pramana*, (which Boyd considers as a type of logic) is *upamana* or analogy. Just as Jesus used parables and Thomas Aquinas used his 'analogy' most effectively, so in India Sadhu Sunder Singh has used this method of *upamana* fruitfully in all his writings and messages. Once the Bible is accepted as the final authority, then the resort to *upamana* can be perhaps more fruitful than other *pramanas*.

What can be said in conclusion? At least this: The primary task of theology is to establish the nature of authority on which one's faith/theology is based. As we have seen, this is the first question both in Christian and Hindu systems. Also there is a good deal of similarity between the sets of authorities, so that adaptability becomes easier. Once the Scripture is accepted as the ultimate authority (as in Hindu systems), then other *Pramanas*, Experience, Reason, Church's teaching, Analogy become supportive authorities.

## NOTES

1. P.D.Devanandan, *Preparation for Dialogue*, CISRS, Bangalore: 1964, p. 191.
2. R.H.S Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, CLS, Madras: 1969, p. 11.
3. Karl Rahner (ed.), *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. 6, Scripture and Tradition, p. 54.
4. Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 228.