

# **Let God Be God**

## ***An Asian Reflection***

**TISSA BALASURIYA, O.M.I.**

### **AN ASIAN SEARCH**

The Asian continent has not responded positively to, and has even resisted, the efforts of the churches in modern times to convert it to Christianity interpreted in Western perspectives. The Philippines, where there was no organized world religion, is the only country in which Western missionaries have had widespread success. Perhaps we in Asia need to go further and deeper than elsewhere in order to understand the challenges of the world religions, the peoples' religiosity, and the injustices within our Asian societies and in the world system today. For this we can seek in many directions, such as the understanding among the religions, meeting them in their core values, and relating to Asian poverty and religiosity as shown by Aloysius Pieris, SJ in his writings.<sup>1</sup>

Here I wish, first, to go back to the early church's understanding of the identity, message, and work of Jesus, prior to the dogmatic definitions of the Councils. Reflecting on the thinking of the early church, one sees that Christianity would have been more open to the Asian religions and social issues if it came to Asia with the theology and practice of the early church, rather than in modern European colonial times. We have a legitimate right to relate ourselves to the more pristine Christianity that was closer to Jesus and purer in its presentation of teaching and of life.

Second, I seek to address the need for a change in the present world order of local and global injustice. Modern Asian theology needs to go beyond mere contextual theologies and relate to the challenges of the one-world situation and rapid globalization that are taking place in almost all aspects of economic, political, social, and religio-cultural life. Asian problems are global; hence the solutions too have to be global, while being rooted in the local realities.

Christian theology is a faith reflection on the Word of God revealed by Jesus Christ and in the Bible. There is a relationship between Christian theology and the contacts that Christians have had with the cultures and civilizations of the world over time. These contacts present the background environment in which the message of Jesus is expressed. Over time the different languages, philosophies, and myths in which people express their worldviews pose challenges to the evolution of Christian theology.

The understanding of the core message of Jesus has been expressed in widely differing ways throughout history. The church has thought out the basic message according to the situation, context, and idiom of the peoples to whom it was presented. Thus the New Testament has several Christologies, or ways of presenting the life and message of Jesus. John writes of the birth and life of Jesus from a longer term perspective of the divine "logos" than do the Synoptics. The Acts of the Apostles bear witness to Jesus and his life work in several different

ways. How Paul introduced Jesus to the Athenians in Acts 17:23 is quite different from the apostolic preaching to the Jews. In Athens he began with “the Unknown God that they worshipped and did not know,” and then spoke of Jesus and his death and resurrection. He did not speak, according to the text, of the Old Testament prophecies that were so important for the Jews.

In a similar way, we must think through the basic message of Christian faith in a new way in Asia today. The way Christianity came back to Asia in modern times has caused grave problems for our peoples and for interreligious understanding. In fact, Asians as a whole have been allergic to this message mainly due to its attitude toward other religions and cultures and to issues of justice. In this context we offer some thoughts for rethinking the basic message of Jesus and the presentation of God in our societies. These may have validity for other areas too, especially in the context of the widespread secularization among modern peoples.

### **TEMPTATIONS FOR OUR THEOLOGY ON GOD**

Religions themselves become enslaving when they distort the image of God and interpret the divine in their own favor and exclude others. Every religion is tempted to do so. A religion may tend to absolutize its own community, institution, sacred book(s), clergy, rituals, or rules. This is often the cause of interreligious conflicts.

Theology is tempted to interpret God to suit the interests of a dominant group that may try to define God, as if it could fix the Absolute into its finite words and definitions; second, when it creates God according to its image and likeness; and, third, when it tries to limit and control God. Other ways in which the doctrine of God can be fatally weakened is by attempting to monopolize God-talk, appearing to seek to placate God, and by compromising God’s sovereignty.

### **GRECO-ROMAN THEOLOGICAL DEFINITIONS**

Issues concerning human salvation and the identity and function of Jesus Christ were openly debated in earlier times when the church was not the dominant religion and ideology of the empire. Interestingly, there was more freedom in the theology of the church in the first few centuries, when the church was under persecution and sided with the oppressed rather than with the rulers. With the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, there was a corresponding conversion of the church to the values of the empire; these included a compromise with Caesar, Mammon, and Mars (the god of power and war). By the fourth century, theology became an instrument of domination, and remained so until the recent church renewal and theologies of liberation motivated Christians to opt for the poor, the oppressed, and justice.

With the ecumenical councils such as those of Nicene, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, authority became the determinant and criterion of Christian orthodoxy. It was this attitude that impeded the church rulers from appreciating human freedom and the right of legitimate dissent in the church, especially in things over which we do not have absolute certainty. Over the centuries the church authorities were instrumental or involved in the suppression of science (Galileo) or numerous reformers of the church (Savonarola and Joan of Arc) who were burned at the stake.

When such decisions became the ruling orthodoxy, when they legitimized political power,

social inequality, male domination, cultural imperialism, and religious exclusivity, there was a serious distortion of the message of Jesus himself. It was worse when they were enforced by the political and ecclesiastical authorities with moral and physical sanctions, as if these dogmas were directly revealed by God to the popes, patriarchs, bishops, and emperors and empresses and their respective theologians. In fact, these dogmatic elaborations have led to divisions among the churches for centuries; divisions which are yet unresolved, as between the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.

### **A NARROW PERCEPTION OF GOD**

Prior to recent decades, both Catholic and Protestant theology had many inadequate representations of God and the relationship between God and humanity.

These doctrines led to even worse consequences in interreligious relations. With such interpretations of the Trinity and of the Incarnation, there could be no understanding between Christianity and Judaism, between Christianity and Islam, and between Christianity and other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as the cosmic religions of the peoples of the future colonial empires of Europeans in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania.

The centuries of Christian-Islamic wars were buttressed, if not motivated, by theological claims that gave each side the conviction it was engaged in a holy war for the cause of God. The interreligious history of the human race during the past 1,500 years has been written in blood, in some measure due to the intolerant exclusivity of dogmas which were deeply (and proudly) held and vigorously propagated by the dominant political, commercial, economic, and military powers from Europe.

Thus when European Christians contacted the Amer-Indian, African, and Asian peoples in the sixteenth century, their dominant, exclusive theology considered membership in the Church as essential for eternal salvation. This led to a Christian practice that was intolerant of all others.

Humanity has paid a very high price in terms of prejudice, hatred, war, and the extermination of peoples and civilizations due to the religious and military power of those who claimed to be the only legitimate disciples and interpreters of Jesus, the prophet of justice and the prince of peace whose message is God's love. The millennial consequences of this theology indicate the nature and extent of the de-routing of Christian theology.

The modern renewal of Christian theology in Europe and North America took place during this century due to the impact of trends such as the revival in biblical studies, existentialist philosophy, a better understanding of human psychology, the growth of dialogue within the churches, inter-Christian ecumenism, and respect for religious freedom. Vatican Council II of the Catholic Church was basically a reform of the Catholic Church undertaken by Western bishops according to their convictions of the needs of the churches in their situations. It was, as it were, in passing that a short document on interreligious relations that acknowledged the spiritual values in the other religions was put out by Vatican II. This has all the same turned out to be a very important turning point in the Catholic attitude toward other religions.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, there was a better appreciation of the humanity of Jesus in

Western Europe and North America. The bitter experience of World War II and the terrible Holocaust of the Jews made theologians question the traditional theology and church practices that supported the dominant European political and economic system.

The liberation theologies of Latin America and of North American Blacks also brought to the fore the human Jesus and his commitment to human liberation from the conditions of exploitation in the society of his day. The liberation theologies of the Americas did not, at this stage, question the deeper issues concerning Christian anthropology of original sin as defined by the Council of Trent, and the consequent need of redemption by Jesus Christ as the unique savior. They were concerned mainly with issues of class and race. For the Latin Americans, the principal evil was Western capitalism, while for North American Blacks, it was White racist domination. For both these groups, it was sufficient to affirm the socially liberative role of Jesus and his disciples. They made a valuable contribution to the understanding of the social dimension of Christian spirituality. They were engaged in the struggles of their people in Latin America, as in Nicaragua, and in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States. They did not have to go into the questions of the identity of Jesus in relation to God and hence as savior with reference to persons of other religions, as their environment, as then seen by them, did not demand such a reflection.

The churches have, at the world level, moved during the past two decades to engage themselves in issues of social liberation, as in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The World Council of Churches took significant steps in this direction. Yet even today some Christian fundamentalists, who claim to interpret the Bible authentically, propose a very narrow and socially conservative perspective of the salvific message of Jesus.

Feminist theologians, first from North America and later from Europe and the rest of the world, raised deeper questions from about the 1980s onward. They question the use of the Scriptures for marginalizing females in the economy of salvation. They reject the interpretation of the Genesis story of creation and the fall that presented woman as the seductress and the cause of the fall of humanity. The thesis concerning the divine inspiration of the Bible is questioned by showing how the male authors discriminate against females in writing the texts.

Some feminist theologians raise questions as to the nature of the salvific role of Jesus. They posit this function is not due to his biological nature as masculine in gender or his metaphysical reality as the Son of God, but his liberative actions and in the witness of his life for the values of the kingdom of God. Feminists thus go further than other Western liberation theologians in asking questions concerning the human predicament of original sin, the nature of the salvation in Jesus, and even the personality of Jesus Christ as the unique Son of God. Some even ask whether a male Jesus can be a savior of women.

### **EARLY CHURCH CONTACT WITH ASIA**

Before Western Europe was Christianized, Christianity advanced eastward to Asia Minor. Christians were in communication with the Asian schools of thought in the early centuries. Christian thinkers had contact with India and even China, since the routes of communication were open between what is now known as the Middle East and the Far East.

Thus we find that the early church fathers had an opening toward the other Asian religions.

Strict exclusive dogmas were not evolved and defined until the fourth century, when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. In the early writings there is no idea of a state of universal human sin as taught in the later doctrine of original sin. Baptism was delayed until late in life. There was no generally accepted concept of atonement by Jesus for such an original sin of humankind. Thus Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the first decades of the second century, “offers no doctrine of atonement. Yet he does have some interesting statements with a soteriological bearing. He refers twice to the blood of Christ (or God), although it should be observed that what he has in view here is subjective response rather than objective achievement.”<sup>2</sup>

The divinity of Jesus was not thought of as so exclusive as to prevent other divine manifestations in different times and places. Justin Martyr (100/110-163/167 CE) is keen to prove that Jesus is the one who fulfills the promises and expectations of the Jews from the Old Testament. Jesus is “a God and Lord other than, and less than, the Maker of the universe, who is also called Angel (or Messenger), because he announces, to men whatever the maker of the universe, above whom there is no other God, desires to announce to them.”<sup>3</sup> Justin teaches that although the Logos appeared in his fullness only in Christ, “a seed of the Logos” was scattered among the whole of mankind long before Christ. Thus not only the prophets of the Old Testament, but even the pagan philosophers carried a germinating seed of the Logos in their souls, as for instance Heraclitus, Socrates, and the Stoic philosopher Musonius, who lived according to the directions of the Logos, the Divine Word. In fact, they were truly Christians, even though they have been thought atheists.<sup>4</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-211/216 CE), a native of Athens who traveled widely in Italy, Syria, and Palestine, knew well the traditions of the various schools of Asia Minor. In his teaching mission, Clement was deeply interested in the search among the philosophers. He was a pioneer in the understanding of the relationship between philosophy and Christianity, of reason and faith. The important official School of Alexandria was influenced by his approach. He too emphasized the term *Logos*. For Clement, all personal manifestations of the Father take place through the Logos. “It is through the Word who proceeds from him that the unknown can be known.... The authentic guides of mankind are the ancient philosophers who, truly inspired by God, acted upon by the Logos, have taught the nations divine truth” (*Strom.*, V.12).<sup>5</sup>

Clement mentions along with others: “The Indian gymnosophists, and other non-Greek philosophers, of whom there are two classes, the Sarmanae and the Brahmanas... Some, too, of the Indians obey the precepts of Buddha” (*Strom.*, I.15). This amounts to affirming in so many words, together with the presence of the partial Christian truth in Hindu religion, its positive significance in the history of salvation.<sup>6</sup> Jacques Dupuis quotes Augustine’s *Retractiones* 1.13.3 in the same direction:

The very thing which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients, nor was it absent from the beginning of the human race, until the coming of Christ in the flesh, when the true religion which had already existed began to be called Christian. Therefore, if I have written: “this is the religion which exists in our days, the Christian religion” the meaning is not that it had not existed previously, but that it took the name Christian only later.<sup>7</sup>

The different formulations concerning the Trinity and the nature of the relationship of the human and divine in Jesus show how complex the issues were. Jesus, as reported in the

scriptures, was not at all clear on these intricate philosophical and theological issues. The New Testament is capable of different interpretations, as these centuries of debate indicate. The debates were concerning the Trinity (the origin and interrelations of persons within the Trinity; their generation, procession, or eternal begetting) and Christology (how Jesus is God and human, or Word and flesh; the body-soul relationship in Jesus; his intellect and will). To these and many more subtle and indeed truly mysterious questions, the church Councils from the fourth century onward evolved responses based on the scriptures, the prevailing philosophies, anthropology, theological reflection, authority patterns, and popular religiosity. These became part and parcel of the accepted faith of Christians. They were enshrined in the liturgy and recited by the faithful regularly every Sunday throughout the Christian world, and, until recently, in the Catholic Church in mysterious Latin.

### **IF THE DIALOGUE WITH ASIAN RELIGIONS REMAINED OPEN**

For many centuries Western European theology remained closed to the other religions and to the Asian realities of culture and social forces such as population and land. Christian theology at least implicitly legitimized colonial exploitation and benefited from it during four and one-half centuries, from 1492/1498 until the end of colonialism after World War II. There was no serious respect for the Asian religions and other realities that could generate a meaningful dialogue of Christianity with them.

The issues on which other perceptions have been excluded or on which religious wars have been waged by Christians are of later origin than Jesus Christ or the early church. In that sense we can claim that the genuine early Christian tradition was much more open, inclusive, and tolerant than what became orthodoxy from the fourth century (after the Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Chalcedon in 451). We advocate a recognition of that tradition and a re-rooting of Christian theology in such an open theology.<sup>8</sup>

The theological issues that arise for Christianity in the Asian—and to some extent African—Contexts are related to our multireligious societies. This position is now being realized in many other parts of the world also, e.g., among North American Indian tribes or nations, the tribal and indigenous peoples in many parts of the world, and even in Western countries in which Islam and other religions are often more numerous and active than many Christian denominations.

If Christian theology had been elaborated in terms of the philosophies of other people, as of Arabia, India, or China, the belief of the followers of Jesus would have been expressed differently, perhaps in a more tolerant and open manner. There would have been other ways of understanding the manifestations of the divine as theophanies or *avatars*, and other searches for expressing the relationship between God and the universe. Different expressions of the relationships within the divinity, such as the *trimurthi* of Hinduism, would have been possible. Other soteriologies closer to the perceptions of Origen with an optimistic view of universal salvation through processes of purification would have been possible, as would have different understandings of the problem of evil, of suffering, and of enlightenment such as are found in Buddhism.

## RETHINKING GOD FROM THE SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXT

These questions are all the more intriguing as in the Asian (especially Indian) context, God is thought of as ineffable, beyond all and within all, transcendent and immanent. God is the Absolute, the ultimate ground of being, creator, sustainer, the alpha and omega of all things, power, omnipresence, the inner core of being, goodness, truth, understanding, compassion, our hope, father and mother, provider, judge and rewarder, peace, beauty, bliss, and so on. In the Indian way of thinking, manifold ways of conceiving of the divine presence are not contradictory. The Indian mind-set is not built on the principles of contradiction of Western logic, but rather on the possibility of a harmony of apparent oppositions. Of course different cultures and religious traditions emphasize different aspects of the divine. In what follows we will provide a few references from the Hindu and Buddhist traditions that indicate the religious background which Christianity has to appreciate to be in genuine, respectful dialogue with our peoples in South Asia.<sup>9</sup>

### *Hinduism*

Hinduism emphasizes concepts of the Absolute as Supreme Being and Cosmic Energy (*Shakthi*). The Absolute is creator, destroyer and preserver; knowledge, consciousness, and bliss (*sat-chit-ananda*) immanence in all, God within us (*Brahman*).

Indian philosophers and poets such as the Bengali Rabindranath Tagore have insightful and beautiful reflections on God. These can relate to or complement the revelation in the Bible. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore writes touchingly and meaningfully for us, linking poetry and religion, the Absolute and the common soil, the grass and the beggars on the road—to be hummed and sung by common people, the carters, fisher people at sea. God is presented as eternity touching our daily chores of living, engaged and detached, peaceful and inspiring.

- IV. Life of my life, I shall ever try to keep my body pure, knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs.
- V. I ask for a moment's indulgence to sit by thy side.
- XI. Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this dark corner of a temple with all doors shut? Open thy eyes and see thy God is not before thee. He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil.
- 45. Have you not heard his silent steps, he comes, comes, ever comes.

This is a God Asians knew before the Christian tradition, and even in spite of some of the elements of the Christian tradition.

### *Theravada Buddhism*

Buddhist doctrine, as we know it in Sri Lanka, does not claim to know the nature of the divine, of the existence of God, nor of the origins of the universe. Buddhism does not set up an infallible body of doctrine or an infallible teaching authority. The Buddha does not have a concept of divine revelation to humankind. Humans must discover the truth concerning human life. The Buddhist environment is therefore one of a certain silence concerning things which are beyond this world, or even about a soul that is immortal (*anatta*). What we know is

impermanence and suffering, expressed through the concepts of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*.

Buddhism does not teach of a God known to humankind and involved in the process of human salvation. As the Venerable Walpola Rahula writes, “Man’s position, according to Buddhism, is supreme. Man is his own master, and there is no higher being or power that sits in judgment over his destiny?”<sup>10</sup> Salvation is thus to be self-effected, or auto-salvation (hence the importance of self-reliance in Buddhism). Purity and defilement depend on oneself. There is no need of assistance or grace from an outside being for human action and self-purification; no need of an external redeemer, especially of a divine being above the human level (*ananna sarana bhava*). There is a tendency to rely on one’s self for salvation that is realized through knowledge (*gnosis*). The *gnosis* that is salvific leads in turn to concern for others, including nature.

Buddhism points a path (*magga*) to liberation (*nirvana*) from suffering (*dukkha*) by detachment from craving (*thanha*). It is a school of spiritual growth through enlightenment, achieved by meditation and self-purification. Correspondingly, Buddhism insists on mental and personal purification by meditation. Mind is very important; thought leads to personal transformation. Worship is meditation on the transitoriness (*anicca*), the substancelessness (*anatta*), and the unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) of existence. As the Ven. Narada Thera explains:

According to the teaching of the Buddha anybody can aspire to that supreme state of perfection if he makes the necessary exertion. The Buddha does not condemn men by calling them wretched sinners, but, on the contrary, He gladdens them by saying that they are pure in heart at conception. In His opinion the world is not wicked but is deluded by ignorance. Instead of disheartening His followers and reserving the exalted state only to Himself He encourages and induces them to emulate Him, for Buddhahood is latent in all. In one sense all are potential Buddhas.”<sup>11</sup>

Buddhism advocates *metta*, *karuna* (lovingkindness, compassion) toward all beings as the path to our liberation and social harmony. The Noble Eightfold Path is the Buddhist way of life. Buddhism’s critical reflections on the claims of theistic religions can help us in our evaluation of our own faith and its theological expression. A religion of *metta*, *karuna* is very close to a mystical union with the Transcendent—without necessarily saying so. This is implied in the Johannine saying “God is love and love is divine.” There is no concept of prayer as such to a supreme divine being. The Buddha is honored as one who achieved liberation and shows the path, rather than as superhuman, eternally existent being. Mere external ritual that is effective by the very fact of its being performed (*ex opere operato*) would therefore be suspect in the Buddha’s perspective.

Many of the conflicts in social life and in interreligious relationships have been due to the consequences of Christian teachings and the corresponding pastoral practices of the churches. Christian intolerance of other religions has often been based on its dogmas. It is the interpretation of the divinity of Jesus as exclusive and unique, and of Jesus as being the only son of God and the necessary, universal savior, that brought about the opposition and intolerance. Yet there is a much greater closeness in the ethical teachings of the Buddha and Jesus, the founding teachers of the two religions, than is often acknowledged. These two great spiritual leaders would have been able to accept each other. As the Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris points out: “The only meeting point of the gnostic and agapeic models of spirituality is the belief that voluntary poverty constitutes a salvific experience. Hence Jesus, as



God's own kenosis and as proof and sign of God's eternal enmity with mammon, is an endorsement of the Buddhist ascesis of renunciation."<sup>12</sup>

Buddhist and Christian groups are actually coming together in interreligious fellowship on the basis of common action for human values in the face of the advancing dehumanization brought about by the liberal neocolonialism of these days. Such fellowship and common action are promising signs of a new era of Christian action and theology in Asia. Drawing upon the insights and challenges of Hinduism and Buddhism, Christian theology can begin to rethink the very question of God in this context.

### **FOR A CHRISTIAN RETHINKING OF GOD**

The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) all stress the transcendence of God, and in this respect they are keen to safeguard monotheism. Jesus presents the transcendent God as love, One whom he called *Abba* or Father. His concern is with the realization of the kingdom of God on earth, which is the conversion Jesus wants.

#### ***Let God Be God***

Any Christian rethinking must respect the ineffable mystery of God. The human mind cannot comprehend God, the infinite. We cannot fully understand even ourselves or another human person. The Absolute cannot be contained in, or confined to, our theological discourse and definitions. Human understanding, words, and language are limited in their capacity to grasp and communicate divine reality or thought.

It is a deep intuition of the Asian religions and philosophies that the Transcendent God is absolutely beyond human comprehension and cannot be contained in our formulations of theology or philosophy. This perception is very important for our search for the Truth and for meaning in our lives. It can help in the promotion of understanding and dialogue among the religions and ideologies. Christianity erred much in the past by thinking of itself as especially privileged by God, and even persecuting other religions. We must be very careful not to use notions of God, revelation, or redemption in a way that is advantageous to one group against others. We can try to improve our understanding and presentation of God by a return to the teaching and life of Jesus as presented in the Gospel narratives.

#### ***The Teaching of Jesus Concerning God: God Is Love***

Jesus presented a vision of God as a father who is compassionate, forgiving, just, and caring. A central teaching of Jesus was that God is love. He had a loving trust in the father, or *abba* (papa), as he called him. Jesus claimed that God loves us, understands us, and fulfills us. In return we must love God and all human beings in God. "I give you a new commandment: love one another..." said Jesus (Jn 13:34). This is the substance of his message, of the law and the prophets. The specificity of the disciples of Jesus has to be such love in interpersonal and societal relationships. Love gives glory to God and fulfills human persons.

Jesus was God centered. He was not Jesus centered, Christ centered, or church centered. His point of reference and worship was always God. This in turn was intimately linked to a human centeredness. With this central theme Jesus introduced a new understanding of the human person and social institutions. Every human being is important and has to be cared for. This is

the criterion for admission to the Kingdom: “I was hungry, and you gave me to eat ... Enter into the Kingdom” (Mt 25). Jesus preached a new view of life as the fulfillment of the revelation to the Jews. Where there is genuine love, there is God; where there is no real love, God is not there, whatever one’s religious affiliation or form of religious worship.

Jesus spoke of God as bringing about the Kingdom of God of right relationships, in which sin, lovelessness, selfishness, untruth, and injustice are overcome and love, mercy, truth, and justice prevail. It is in *right relationships* between persons, among groups, and to nature that sin is overcome. In this respect God can be considered the source and inspiration for all human relationships. As Mary Grey points out:

if relationality is a basic category of existence, then it is also the basic dynamism of the divine nature, since all creation participates in the being of God. Christianity has tried to express this through the doctrine of the Trinity—a God in relationship ... So God must be the divine ground, the limitless creative source of relationality. Could it not be that creating forms of deeper mutuality within society is also redemptive... If broken mutuality and broken relation underlie all injustices, it is there that the redemptive task must begin.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus taught this in the prayer that states “Our Father ... Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Sharing of food is of the essence of the kingdom. Mercy and forgiveness are primordial conditions of the Reign of God over us. Jesus conditions God’s mercy on our forgiveness of others. With an unforgiving hatred of others, we cannot be friends of God, for God loves all. Hence Jesus worked for relationships in which mercy and love would be predominant.

Jesus emphasized the Kingdom or Rule of God and righteousness over us, rather than the rule by any earthly power or organization. The Kingdom of God is primarily within us. He did not stress the power of the religious authority or a church. His mission and gospel were concerning the values of the Kingdom rather than the growth of a religious institution. He began a movement of human understanding, love, and sharing, not a mere organization.

The community he gathered around him was to live the values of this divine dominion. This is a very fruitful perspective now, as humanity is looking for more universal values for human understanding. The kingdom of God is also a criterion for evaluating particular historical churches. His kingdom means that the plan of God for humankind is to be fulfilled in a radically profound way, here on earth. It is a reversal of the usual conditions of society.

- The poor become rich (Lk 6:20)
- The first are last (Mk 10:31)
- The small become great (Mt 18:4)
- Those who lose their lives find it (Mt 23, Lk 4)
- The hungry are filled, the weary find rest
- Those who weep laugh, the mourners are comforted
- The sick are healed, the lame walk,
- The humble inherit the earth, the lowly are exalted
- The blind see, the deaf hear
- The prisoners are freed, the oppressed are liberated

- And the dead live.

These are the strange promises of Jesus to be partly realized in this life by persons and by humanity over the ages. We can discern them through faith and contribute to them by struggling in hope. Love is their fulfillment, joy their fruit. To live the values of this spiritual mastery over our lives is to realize a new power, a joy and a peace that surpass all other joys. It is a pure, selfless, active, creative, and liberating joy. This is the joy of the wedding feast to which liberated humankind is invited. It is for us to respond willingly by a conversion of heart, a reversal of values, and a fundamental option for life—to live in solidarity, friendship, and effective sharing in love. Then heaven would have begun for us here on earth. This is redemption, salvation, liberation, and human fulfillment. Jesus died testifying to this.

The experience of the early church epitomized in Acts 10 and 11 shows that what is important for God, and hence for the early Christians, was that Cornelius was God-fearing and did good. It is the person's deeds that counted, rather than his birth or the letter of the Jewish law. This was a clear indication against the idea of a chosen people whom God favoured. It is a smashing of our preconceived ideas of sacred and profane, pure and impure, and good and bad. "All our pre-conceived ideas seem to be shattered. The Holy Spirit is always unpredictable; the least expected thing was that the Holy Spirit should dwell in all those uncircumcised Gentiles, and even more, should command Peter to transgress the Torah."<sup>14</sup> We cannot know what God's relationship is toward another, Panikkar argues.

Nobody knows before hand what God wants, thinks, does or is. If we behave as if we had some criterion regarding the Ultimate Reality which we here call God, we are assigning to ourselves a role which is higher than God's. Then God is not free. He has to submit to what we think He is, and what we expect Him to do because He has always done it so, or He has promised to do it so: *a Deus ex machina*. This, however, is what the text disproves. We have no criterion whatsoever, when we utter the name of God, by which we may say what this God is, thinks or wills—how He is going to act or what He is going to do.<sup>15</sup>

This experience was a primordial event for the early church. It meant a new experience of spiritual community. It clarified what Jesus had been teaching through his parables and the experience of his life. It meant a conversion of the apostles in the sense of transcending their mental beliefs and attitudes. It is noteworthy that, in this story, it is the apostles who needed conversion rather than Cornelius. The church had to be a learning church, with the Spirit guiding them through the experience of being in the world. Sacramental theology can also reach very significant conclusions from this episode. It shows that the *res sacramenti*, the reality of conversion or right relations implied in the sacraments, is far more important than the external ritual that should symbolize the reality.

Though the disciples of Jesus learned this very early, yet it is a lesson they have to learn in an ongoing manner. The claim to limit God's favors to one's religion is what I have called religionism in an early book.<sup>16</sup> Like sexism and racism, religionism is when one religion considers itself superior to others, and that it alone has the key to salvation or has a privileged path to it. Such perceptions are not reconcilable with an all-loving God. A just and perfect God would provide for each person and culture all that is required for the spiritual fulfillment of each one. God would not treat some as stepchildren! We must see that our interpretations of doctrine or the Bible do not render God unjust toward some others. Thus the Bible does not

limit God to the Bible; it is our interpretation that tries to do so. We would be exercising power over God if we presumed to prevent God from speaking to other peoples and religious groups. Even all the religions together cannot limit God from self-revelation in any form God desires.

### **GOD AND GLOBAL JUSTICE**

The development of rapid, instantaneous, worldwide communications through computers, fax machines, and E-mail has made the contacts and injustices in and among the peoples of the world ever more intense. Hence also the need to reconsider our theology in the new world situation of globalization and capitalist domination almost everywhere.

A renewal of Christian theology with the Asian context in mind will have to consider that Asia and Africa have been given a raw deal by modern history, due to the carving out of the world system by the Western powers. Asians are more than half the human race. Africa is the poorest continent, and millions are prematurely dying. Some Asian countries are Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs), yet Asia still has the largest number of poor people who live below the margin of subsistence. Today the poor throughout the world are exploited by the same global forces, often in collusion with local elites, and using local rivalries of nationality, race, ethnicity, tribe, and religion.

#### ***Global Theology: One God, One Earth-Nature, One Humanity***

The God of Jesus' revelation is the creator, lover, and provider of all humanity. See the birds of the air, the lilies in the field? All of us are of one common humanity, live on this limited planet earth, and come from the one God. *God is the God of life*. God alone has the right over life and death. God opposes the idolatries of absolutist rulers and false principals, such as the "free market," which leads to the death of so many through unnecessary starvation in a world of plenty. On the other hand, God alone is the fullness of life, and all who seek God find life (Am 5:4,6,14). All who seek righteousness find God in some way.

The redemption taught by Jesus shows us the path to deliverance from mammon and selfishness through commitment to others in self-giving love. He came that we may have life, and life more abundantly (Jn 10:10). Fullness of life is more than mere existence or mere duration. It includes also health, happiness, and community. Life is a participation of humans in the life of God in such a way that earthly life makes possible and prepares for eternal life (as Mt 25 indicates). Life for others on earth is the condition for eternal salvation. The realization of the kingdom of God is in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). Eternal life is already present here (Eph 2:5f). We must live no longer to ourselves, but to God (Rom 14:7). This perception and value-of-life orientation is altogether different from the intolerant, classical Western European theological position, in which the right to life on earth could be limited by the openness to eternal life through membership in the church.

#### ***A Vision***

The present, powerful world political system is unjustly structured. It was built by force, especially after the European invasions of the other continents since 1492. It is maintained by force, buttressed by a system of international law that has been developed within its parameters. The international economic system is an accompanying structure of global exploitation of the poor and of nature. This is mainly a male-dominated world order in which physical force is the

ultimate determinant of issues. The present distribution of resources among human beings and nations is utterly inequitable.

From these realities and teachings flow several consequences in relation to a global theology. We are the first generation in humanity's long history that has the means to ensure to all an adequate means for a decent human life, and that almost in abundance. A just solution to the problems of the vast and harrowing global imbalances requires a just world order. This needs more than changes within individual countries.

Its objectives should be to insure that every human person has a right to life and should be ensured the basic essentials of life. Consequently each one has a right to the means of livelihood to be obtained from our common planet earth; that each society is able to provide the basic amenities, including educational and health services for the well-being and cultural development of its members; that our planet earth is cared for and is so treated that it would be a suitable home for present and future humanity.

From these objectives would follow the following points. In interhuman relations, there should be no discrimination against any persons or groups on account of gender, color, race, tribe, religion, or caste. Creation is more important than a Christian claim of a special role in salvation. God is concerned about all human persons from all time.

The resources of the earth should be shared equitably among all human beings, both present and future. We have to rethink God and human relationships to relate Christian theology to these challenges. The whole world (dis)order needs to be reshaped for world justice, including justice for Asia. The people without land have a right to the land without people. Asians have a right to a due share of the resources of the earth. Today the Asian peoples (especially the Chinese) have to restrict their families to one child due to their inability to move to any other lands. All the open spaces of the world have been occupied by the European peoples. They neither cultivate the land nor allow others to come into the areas occupied by them, except under racially discriminative immigration laws and practices. There is no free market for land as such.

Nature, God's handiwork, the substratum of all earthly existence, should be cared for by all, for the sake of all. To destroy nature is to destroy human life itself, as human life is possible only within a well-balanced natural environment. Hence human beings who, as intelligent and free persons, are the custodians of nature, should not exhaust or destroy the earth's natural resources, especially those which are nonrenewable. This implies an intergenerational contract by which each generation cares for itself and succeeding generations in the use of natural resources and the stewardship of nature. The dominant capitalist values and life-style of Westerners (now shared by many affluent Asians) uses up an unbearable amount of the earth's resources. They are the principal polluters of the earth and destroyers of nature. This life-style is neither replicable throughout the world nor long sustainable.

We must have a vision of alternative values, relationships, and structures at local, national, regional, and international levels. This vision needs to be articulated regarding specific areas such as transportation, housing, health, education, land use, and land distribution. Thus we can see the limits of the present system of private motor car transportation due to the limits of oil

resources, pollution, and the unbearable and growing traffic jams in towns and cities. The need for alternative modes of transportation and care for nature belong together. Though we do not still see how the alternative society will emerge, and an immediate overall change in the whole structure may not be feasible, we can work toward realizing the vision, even in a piecemeal manner, joining other committed groups.

A reevaluation of modern history will bring us to the right and needs of compensation of former colonized peoples for centuries of exploitation by the European peoples since 1492. This should lead at least to the cancellation of the present foreign debt of poor countries, which is an unjust and unbearable burden on them. This requires a mission from the poor countries to the rich peoples.

### ***Strategies***

Strategies of action for integral human liberation need to be developed. A common query is, What can we do, given the immensity of the problems? Where can we begin? We seem so helpless and hopeless in this situation. We need to go beyond the position of powerlessness and try to discern the trends and the kinds of solutions that are necessary and feasible in the long term. We need to realize the power of the weak and the exploited of the world. That is a prophetic task and option.

Faith in Jesus is belief in his values, and hope is the confidence that the God of history will see to their realization in some measure on earth in our time. For us faith is belief in those values in relation to our situation, and trust that our lives will be meaningful in working in hope toward such objectives. Such a Christology can be a source of self-empowerment toward liberation for ourselves and for others. One of our theological strategies can be the development of the understanding of the Jesus mission and spirituality in building human community according to the values of the kingdom that Jesus proposed: love, sharing, justice, freedom, truth, and peace. The Cosmic Christ, the Logos universally present and active as in John and Paul's writings, can be understood as operative in the entire human history, leading it to its desired goal, even today. Combating the forces of personal and societal exploitation should be an essential element of Christian spirituality and the mission of the church.

The struggle against the forces of evil in each one and in the world requires a clear *analysis* of the forces that are operative in the world. There has to be an identification of the allies and enemies of human fulfillment, and consequently of God's plan for humanity. We need to evaluate reality carefully, with a consciousness of the impact on the poor and in consultation with expertise that is sympathetic to this cause. Mahatma Gandhi's principle of evaluation of situations and policies was: "How does it help the poorest of the poor?" Theology needs to follow the same principle today.

Today global problems need global responses. Asian-level problems need Asian remedies. A structural problem needs a structural response as well. We must realize the inadequacy of our past methods. We can learn from transnational human rights movements such as Amnesty International (AI), which have evolved global-level strategies in particular areas of concern by using modern means of communication—in the case of AI, challenging governments to respect human rights.

Transformation requires a struggle against all forms of discrimination and exploitation, particularly those of gender, race, ethnicity, color, tribe, caste, class, religion, and nationality. Each of these requires a transcending of one's natural group and its interests and identification with the wider human community and its interests. Developing consciousness and peoples' power across national frontiers is necessary. We need to begin with feasible objectives and felt needs of the oppressed.

An essential element of a strategy of liberation is the self-purification of groups in the process of the struggles, so that the different groups may understand each other and cooperate for the common good and for victory against the overall forces of domination. This is a challenge to each group—workers, women, Third World movements, religions, human rights groups, and apostolic movements in the church. Each group has to see that it is necessary to work toward global objectives while being concerned with one's own particular objectives.

Human beings, however, will not easily change substantially. Change is prevented by ignorance and attachment to one's self-interest, even when this is seen as harmful to others. We must be aware of the obstacles to such transformation. These are both internal to ourselves, our organizations, and our movements and external to them. Religious legitimations and other rationalizations may come between the somewhat-informed conscience and the effective goodwill of persons and groups. The social conditioning of the affluent prevents them from appreciating or seriously sympathizing with the plight of the poor in their countries, and especially in other countries. Hence the resistance to change, even among persons of apparent good will.

In an ideal situation, an equitable sharing of the earth's resources would be brought about peacefully by a common global authority. In any case, there seems to be no power today capable of violently overthrowing the world power of global capital and the trilateral alliance of the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. The first colonialism was successfully contested country by country, due to the conflicts among the colonizers themselves. Their colonial political domination collapsed after World War II. In today's neocolonialist situation, the exploiting forces are linked together globally and include the colluding local rulers and elites. The dominant political system will not permit the capitalist economic system to be violently overthrown in any significant country. Thus developing the spirituality and strategies of nonviolence is a major need at the present. Gandhian spirituality and methodologies of struggle show alternatives that may have at least limited success.

The liberation of the European and North American peoples is one of the most important and necessary, but difficult, tasks in this process of humanization of the world for furthering the values of the kingdom of God in the 1990s. They have set up the present world order, its legal and ideological legitimations, and its military defenses. The world system, led by the transnational corporations, today oppresses the poor among them also. The result is large-scale, long-term structural unemployment leading to much social unrest and the alienation of the poor and the weak from the system, in spite of the limited material social securities that it grants them.

The immense goodwill among ordinary Western Christians needs to be harnessed for the transformation of the world, especially of the so-called Christian countries. Such a conversion

of Christians should be the highest priority of the churches. The mission in foreign countries undertaken by Europeans and Americans can serve as an eye-and-heart-opener for the affluent Whites. They should not be satisfied with the traditional work of the missions—building the church overseas—or with social work in the poor countries. They can use their awareness of the exploitative system to generate consciousness and action in the seats of powers in their home countries. Hope for the poor in the poor countries depends in good measure on the contestation of the evils of the system from within the centres of power.

Third World elites are often partners of the rich countries in the exploitation of the poor. Many influential Christians in poor countries belong to this category. They seek their self-advantage to the detriment of the poor and of their countries. They too need conversion like the affluent Westerners.

### ***Transformation of the Churches***

Such radical transformation of the world order should be a primary objective of Christians and the churches. The goal should be for all humans to live peacefully and justly on this earth, sharing equitably its resources.

In this difficult situation we can reflect on the potential impact of the Christian groups in the world. The churches, at the present moment of human history, can be valuable multinational agencies of integral human liberation and of the care for nature. To do so, they must awaken themselves effectively to this historic calling and join with others of goodwill in joint action for the common cause of each person and all humanity. The conversion of the nations to the core values of humanity and of the religions can be a prime task of the religious communities themselves (including the churches). From the Christian perspective of world history, this could be a way toward the recapitulation of all things in Christ, understood in a cosmic sense.

Christians are in most countries and cities of the world today. We have many “full-timers” who are well motivated to serve the people, though many may still lack the analysis of the global system. The churches have a major responsibility in educating their elite members not to be such exploiters of their own poor, a task which requires a re-education of the clergy and educators themselves. Very often the school systems of the poor countries convey the values of the affluent and exploitative society to the younger generation. Effective re-educational strategies are as necessary in the poor countries as they are among the affluent nations.

Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter on the Third Millennium, *Tertio Adveniente Millenio*, reminds Christians of our deficiencies during the second millennium, especially with the colonial expansion of Europe. He calls for continental Synods in preparation for the jubilee of the year 2000. The World Council of Churches has accepted the concept of jubilee, including reparation for 500 years of colonial exploitation, within its theme for the WCC General Assembly in Harare in 1998.

The development and acceptance of a global theology evolved on the basis indicated here could contribute toward a realization of this jubilee by bringing about a deeper conversion of Christians to God and the Jesus of the gospels. It can help to integrate the positive insights of the theory and practice of different movements such as feminism, secularism, democracy, human rights, modernity, socialism, the religions, pentecostalism, mysticism, popular



religiosity, action groups, peoples' movements, cooperatives, co-dependency groups, and others, deepening them and assisting them in realizing their fullest dimensions.

Such a global theology will dramatically reshape the pastoral action of the churches. The life of the parishes, religious congregations, lay movements, and other church groups will consequently have to be rethought. Movements that neglect the social and global dimensions of the demands of the Spirit of God will have to be converted to God as revealed by Jesus. The sacraments must be related to redemption in real life on earth by right relations among persons and nations, and with nature and God.

A reorientation of Christian life and thinking in these directions will lead to conscious Christians contesting the dominant system of power in society at all levels, including in the churches themselves. This will mean that Christianity will become once again a counterculture, opposing the evils of the dominant killer system in the world and in the societies where Christians live. Martyrdom in different forms will be the lot of those who thus opt for the values of the gospel. Christians would then have returned full circle to the basic orientations of the early disciples of Jesus.

The God of history would thus purify theology of its traditional irrelevancies and motivate it to a commitment to present human exigencies. Christians would then be more humble servants of the human cause. They will be glad to suffer, where necessary, for the same causes for which Jesus and the martyrs of all ages, including ours, have given their lives. The cross will have a renewed practical meaning in our times. Christians will at the same time celebrate where truth, justice, love, and life prevail, and thus where the reign of righteousness is being built on earth.

Christian spirituality, meditation, and prayer should bring us to a deeper realization of God's concern for all, especially the poor and the weak. The closer we go to God, the greater will be our participation in the struggle for better relationships at all levels. The spirituality of the cross informs us that if we take such steps we will come under attack from the powers that be, just as Jesus had to face. But in the weakness of the cross is a transforming power. Seeing God in the poorest of the poor is a contemplative union with God leading to commitment to change these evil situations. Through such union we not only meet the God who is God, but we truly find our lives transformed.

## NOTES

1. Aloysius Pieris, S.J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988) and *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).
2. Geoffrey W Bromiley, *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), p. 5.
3. Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. A. L. Williams (London: SPCK, 1930), 11 (*Dialogue* 56.4).
4. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 1 (Maryland: Newman Press, 1950). 209 (*Apology* 1.46).
5. See Jacques Dupuis, *Jesus Christ and His Spirit: Theological Approaches* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1977), p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

8. Cf. Tissa Balasuriya, *Right Relationships: De-Routeing and Re-Rooting of Christian Theology* (Colombo: Logos CSR, 1991), chapt. 3.

9. Islam also proposes challenges in Asia, from the perspective of a radical monotheism that calls into question the Christian presentation on the Trinity, the Incarnation, and redemption by Jesus Christ. The dialogue with Islam requires a clarification of the Christian teachings on all these issues. We can not go into these here, but rethinking in terms of the theology in the early church would be very helpful in this regard too.

10. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Bedford: Gordon Fraser, 1967), p. 1.

11. Narada Thera, *Buddhism in a Nutshell* (Colombo: Vajirarama, 1947), pp. 3-4.

12. Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, pp. 86-7.

13. Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 86-7. *See also* Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982).

14. Raimundo Panikkar, "Closeness and Universality: Can Christians Claim Both?" *Cross Currents* 38:3 (Fall 1988): 310.

15. *Ibid.*, p.312.

16. Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), pp. 117-19.

Source: THE AGITATED MIND OF GOD, The Theology of Kosuke Koyama, Edited by T. Irvin and Akintunde E. Akinade: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York