

FOR A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THEOLOGY

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1. Introduction

This article proposes some tools for the analysis of theology. An analysis is required especially because we have to evaluate why and how the Christian religion, when it came to Asian countries in modern times, was so intolerant of other faiths. What was the theological basis for this? The reorientation of the churches to meet the modern world of diversity of faiths and ideologies requires a re-examination of traditional Christian theology, which is still the prevailing doctrine among the many Christians, on certain crucial issues.

During many centuries a prevalent view, at least in the Catholic Church, was that theology is one, universal and fixed. There was one ultimate authority for determining theology. “Roma locuta causa finita est”; “Rome has spoken, the case is over” used to be a dictum following the famous words of St. Augustine concerning the Pelagian issue. Western, European Catholic theology was presumed to be the correct, true theology, implicitly guaranteed by the infallibility of the Church, vested in and exercised by the Pope of Rome.

Today we experience the existence of many theologies in the churches. Feminist theology almost everywhere and Dalit theology in India, are emerging and evolving fast. In the Asian countries, the evolution in the church teaching concerning some most important issues such as conditions for eternal salvation make us ask questions as to how we could have held the earlier views for so long and with such fervour and even holy intolerance. Thus in the 1950s the Catholic Church did not agree to allow the teaching of other religions in Catholic schools even to non-Catholic pupils, who were sometimes the majority in a school. This was because the church then held that other religions were false, and it could not make provision for the teaching of falsehood.

We need to evolve ways of evaluating theologies. Theology itself is subject to critical analysis as a branch of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge is applicable to theology too. We can work out some concepts or tools for the critical analysis of theology that could help us to discern what is essential in a theology, faith or religion and what is due to certain factors which need not merit an adherence of faith and may even need purification in a theology.

2. God, Faith, Religion and Theology

We can first discern the differences in the concepts of God, faith, religion and theology. God is the Absolute ineffable mystery incomprehensible to the human mind. Faith is our acknowledgement of a teaching (view of life) due to the confidence and trust in another, thus faith in Jesus or the church. Religion is an organised body of persons accepting a faith vision and trying to live it in a systematic manner. Theology is an intellectual elaboration of a faith concerning God, human life and the universe.

Theologies do not come directly from God. There can be many religions relating to the one God. Theologies are human-made. A theology is not necessarily the faith. Theologies can condition faith, and shape the worship and ritual in a religious

community. Theologies emerge, evolve, develop and even decay in time due to the influence of several changing factors such as the history of peoples and their inter-relations.

Within one faith tradition there can be several theologies. Jesus did not give a ready-made manual of theology. Even within the Christian New Testament there are different theological visions. The way Luke presents the birth of Jesus is different from the prologue of John which begins with: “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.” The way the prologue of John has been understood over the centuries has varied according to factors such as the interpretation of the word “Logos”. These very interpretations later on became sources of theology. Thus the subordinationist tradition and the teaching on the Trinity following the Council of Nicene.

3. Many Elements Contribute to the Evolution of a Theology

The primordial vision of the foundations is interpreted generally according to various factors such as:

- texts that are regarded as sacred and normative by a religion,
- the acceptance, translation, transmission of the texts, the interpretation of the texts according to text and context,
- the culture and social stratification of a people,
- their languages, philosophies,
- presuppositions and assumptions as the basis of doctrines,
- the myths and narratives that give a people its identity,
- ideologies, group interests, fear and prejudices,
- imagination, metaphors,
- popular religiosity and its cultic practices
- the very tradition of a religion,
 - the authority in the religious community, and several other related factors.

As the realities with which theology deals are largely beyond the scope of human knowledge and understanding, it is often necessary to speak of these with the use of concrete, known words and images i.e. using metaphors. A metaphor is an image used from one context to try to explain the reality in another; it is usually a concrete image related to a more abstract one. e.g. the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. A metaphor is likely to be helpful as well as inadequate and sometimes even misleading, especially when there is an unfathomable difference between the two realities referred to such as the created and the uncreated, the limited and the transcendent.

The choice of metaphors is determined by the culture of a people and the thinking of those who teach a religion or evolve a theology. Thus the metaphors in Christianity concerning God have been those of father, lord; judge and the Trinity of Father Son and Holy Spirit. These metaphors could easily lead to a patriarchal, hierarchical, dominant, imperial and even juridical understanding of God. Other metaphors too could be imagined such as those of God as Mother, love and friend that would give a different perception of God. It could be argued that the life and teaching of Jesus presented God as a more loving person than the traditional theology has done.[1]

All these varying factors have to be taken into account to understand the origin of the content of teachings that constitute a theology and the beliefs that form part of a religious faith. They are not necessarily all from God, the founder or the foundational vision, or even necessarily good. The growth of a theology need not necessarily mean an advance. Corruption due to human weaknesses can set in even in the best of intuitions and enterprises. Religions and theologies need ongoing renewal and purification. As Pope John XXIII once said centuries of dust could have accumulated on the chair of Peter, and hence needing purification. That was one reason why he convoked the Second Vatican Council in 1959. We can analyze some of these factors in some detail.

4. Presuppositions in Theology

A. What are Presuppositions

Presuppositions are certain propositions that are accepted or assumed as true by a community or religious group even if they are not verifiable. In so far as religions present perspectives concerning other worldly realities – such as life after death or the nature of the Divine – their acceptance belongs to the realm of faith. Their positions may not be rationally or experimentally verified by human knowledge. The propositions of religions in these fields are accepted because of faith in a person in whom there is confidence and trust and/or as presuppositions that form the basis of the teaching of the religion.

At the foundation of all the religions, that propose meta-cosmic perspectives on human life, there are some assumptions or presuppositions that are taken for granted. They cannot be demonstrated as necessarily true to the human reason but are accepted due to faith in the teachers of the religions; they are the implicit working hypotheses of the religions.

Some explanation that religions give about human life can be verified e.g. concerning the birth, growth, health, sickness and cause of death of persons or groups. Sociological factors such as the distribution of food, housing and employment and psychological realities such as love and friendship, joy and sorrow can be inquired into by the human scientific disciplines. We can also have consciousness of right and wrong, virtue and vice, of fulfillment and frustration, of acceptance and rejection, of power and powerlessness, of justice and injustice. On these there may be, and there are, differences of opinion, but they are verifiable by human experimentation and reflection. The moral teachings of the religions are developed around such a consciousness among persons of a given community.

Presuppositions can be at different levels of the evolution of a religion or faith. They may be concerning the founder and his or her teachings, concerning the texts which contain such teachings or later elaborations by the religious community built up around the founder and the original core message of the foundation. These different levels of presuppositions do not have the same claim to the loyalty of the followers of a religion. The core values and foundational teachings are generally from the primordial religious experience of the founder. The later elaborations are influenced by the course of history and the particular evolution of a religious community. Even a founder's teachings are conditioned by the culture of that time, generally they tend to be more universalistic – at least in their basic intuitions.

Presuppositions are generally not called in question within the group that accepts them, unless they are disadvantageous to them. They are ingrained in the life of a people and become part of their cultural heritage. For centuries the Bible story of creation in six days was unquestioned by most of all the Christian people and even many theologians – until scientific data seemed to contradict it. People generally acquire a certain uncritical approach towards the presuppositions on which their religious and cultural life are based. Many religious conflicts have been concerning these perceptions which have acquired the force of deep convictions and form as it were the identity of a religious group. Hence inter-religious conflicts have been, and are common, in human history.

B. Validity of Presuppositions

A presupposition is a proposition that is assumed to be true: it is generally taken for granted; it is not necessarily the subject of proof and rational argument. To the one who believes in a presupposition of religion, it has a validity and a truthfulness based on faith. It can be borne witness to by living according to its teachings or demands. It can be inspiring and meaningful to the one who accepts it.

The presupposition of one religion may not, however, be accepted as necessarily true by persons of others religions, or of no religion. They would not accept it in faith. They can however respect the faith of the believer particularly when it leads to good of the believer and of others.

There can be differences concerning presuppositions even within the same religious tradition. Thus within Christianity there are certain presuppositions that may be accepted by all Christians – e.g. that Jesus is the supreme teacher and that he gave his life in fidelity to his teaching. There are other claims of some Churches that are not accepted by others Christians. Thus the teaching concerning the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff is a point of division of the Churches. There are other issues on which Christian Churches have divergent views; e.g. the nature of original sin, grace and redemption. There can be fundamental differences in the interpretation of commonly accepted texts such as the Bible. Many theological debates of the 4th and 5th centuries or in the Reformation debates related to different interpretations of texts of the Bible, chosen according to the interests of the disputants.

More profound issues arise when different religions present totally different sets of propositions based on different presuppositions. There may be a similarity at certain levels – as in the core values or in their applications to a concrete situation, but the overall thinking within one religion may be organized in a different manner from the thinking in another. Thus Christian theology and Buddhist religious thought or philosophy may agree on certain common values and applications, but the construct of thinking and their expression are quite different from each other.

So long as these religions are practiced by people in different contexts, there may be no issue concerning their inter relation. But when they are lived by different groups within the same country or region their interaction is important. As history shows us, the claim of one religion that it is the unique and privileged path to salvation, and that it has a right to dominate the others, can lead to much inter-religious conflict.

As religions are based on different presuppositions we need to develop criteria and methodologies for their inter-relation. The presuppositions of one religion are not necessarily more valid than those of another. Both may be assumptions about things concerning which there can be no proof. They can have a significance within a cultural matrix. We can of course see from their impact whether and how far each leads to human fulfillment. In such a context we should not compare the theory of one with the practice of another, or the best of one with the worst of another. The saintly mystic of one religion should not be compared with the evil doers in another.

We must recognize presuppositions as assumptions and hence valid only to those who accept them. We can however study the implications of different sets of assumptions or theological positions. A religion which acknowledges the equality of all races before God would have a different impact on history from one which has a concept of being a chosen people who are favored by God, especially if such favors are understood as a right to domination. Naturally in such a study it would be necessary to see the impact of an ideology which may influence the interpretation and living of the core values of a religion.

Can we have some common critical principles for evaluating all presuppositions and consequently all theologies that depend on them? Or at least within each tradition can such principles be evolved. Within the Christian tradition it is possible to evolve a critical principle that would be valid at least in its application to elaborations of Christian theology? Such a principle, if it is rationally convincing or consonant with the core values of other religions and persuasions, may have a validity for them also.

5. Role of Imagination in Theology

There is much room for the play of imagination in the evolution of theologies because theology often deals with things about which we have no verifiable information or are beyond the capacity of the human mind to understand and comprehend. God is a mystery; the origins of the human race are unknown to us. What happens to a person after death is also an unknown. But religions weave different explanations about these from their cultural tradition.

Christian theology is linked to the mythical presentations of the old testament, such as the Genesis story and the writings in the new testament. These have been developed imaginatively into theology and at times defined doctrines. Thus there are different explanations concerning the origin of Eve from Adam, but generally in favor of the priority of the male. Varying interpretations are given concerning the condition of Adam and Eve before the alleged "Fall" in a state of "original justice". This is something about which we cannot know anything by reason or experience. The Genesis narrative itself does not describe it except briefly and idyllically. It is later theological writers who refer to the action of the first parents (in the myth) as a grave sin against God's commands. The concept of original sin in Catholic theology is evolved over the centuries of Christians experience – including St. Augustine through the Middle Ages to the definitions of the Council of Trent in the 16th century.

The differences among schools of theology, as between the Catholics and Protestants, and even among Catholics and among Protestants show what varieties of interpretation are possible. Each view presents an explanation of the state of original justice, the nature of the "fall", its consequences and correspondingly a concept of

redemption. While we know from experience that human fallibility and mortality are combined with the desire for good and for immortality, we cannot know the historical origins of this predicament. Is not what is said about that state and stage very much a matter of theological imagination – e.g. Adam and Eve not being subject to concupiscence or death?

Thus in the debates between the Pelagians and their opponents in the early fifth century those who held that human nature had fallen in the sin of Adam and Eve taught that the souls of infants, who died without baptism, would be condemned, but as they had no personal sin, they would not go to hell but to a lighter punishment. Pelagians thought that as they had no sin they would not go to hell, but they would go, not to heaven, but to a lesser happiness in eternal life. On the other hand according to Augustine, if an infant had “received the sacraments of the Mediator, then, although the present life be immediately brought to an end, the child having been transferred from the power of darkness to the kingdom of Christ, shall not only be saved from eternal punishments, but shall not even suffer purgatorial torments after death. For spiritual regeneration of itself suffices to prevent any evil consequences resulting after death from the connection with death which carnal generation forms.” (Augustine: City of God XXI, 16 in “The Essential Augustine edited by Vernon J. Bourke, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1974 p.180).

It will be easily seen nowadays that both schools were giving interpretations about an unknown and unknowable hypothesis, based on the acceptance of the presupposition concerning original sin and its consequences. Their philosophical and theological reflection was very profound about freedom and the grace of God; but all was based on the assumptions drawn from scriptural quotations.

This need not be a problem if the doctrines have no unfavourable impact on the relations among persons and communities. But these concepts led to conclusions about the nature and necessity of redemption of humanity from sin and Satan. The need of a divine redeemer was deduced from the presupposition of the fall and the alienation of the whole of humanity from God. Thence the conclusion on the need of the grace of Christ and of the Churches for salvation. Hence the other religions were not salvific.

Such interpretations of myth in Christian theology had disastrous consequences on the understanding of the gender and inter-religious relations. The Adam and Eve story has been a foundation of an ideology of male domination. It led to the exclusivist and intolerant teachings and attitudes of Christian theology and “Christian” powers such as the European colonizers in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Oceania in the past five centuries.

Thus very vital theological issues were responded to on the basis of conclusions derived from the interpretation, given over time, to a mythical story. Further each succeeding generation in the Church attributed the value of “tradition” to interpretations of their predecessors in the faith.

6. The Influence of Ideology

Theology is influenced not only by the teachings of the religious founders and the presuppositions of the community but also by the interests of the group that

evolves the thinking. A line of thinking developed to foster the interests of a group may be called an ideology. All power holders tend to develop thought patterns that legitimize their power and perpetuate it.

They are not generally satisfied with physical power through legal, political and military control over people. They wish to win over the minds of their subjects. They develop ideologies for an intellectual and moral justification of their power.

Every ruling oligarchy of history has found ideological pretensions as important a bulwark of authority as its political power”.[2]

Religious establishments also tend consciously or unconsciously to evolve their religious teaching to control power in the religious community. Normally, they do not elaborate doctrines that disempower them, even though religious founders regard power as a service. “If anyone of you wants to be great he must be the servant of the rest. Mk.10.43.

But power holders may consider their own power the greatest service to the community. The Catholic Church with centennial spiritual and political power over whole peoples can be particularly susceptible to ideologizing its theology, i.e. suiting it to benefit its power holders. Thus of all the references to Peter in the gospels, the church highlights what it considers useful for empowering the papacy. “Thou art Peter...” and not “get behind me, satan” also addressed by the Lord to Peter.

“All human knowledge” continues Niebuhr, “is tainted with an ‘ideological’ taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective’ but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge.”[3]

Throughout most of its history the evolution of Catholic theology has been controlled by male, celibate clerics. Till this generation they have been mainly Europeans or the descendants of Europeans in other continents. Hence Catholic theology is likely to be evolved in the interests of the male Euro-American clergy.

A hermeneutic of suspicion is therefore necessary in the analysis of theology. Since the “ideological taint” is a common human phenomenon, it is to be expected in all theology (including the present writer’s). With centuries of feudalism followed by European domination over most of the world, Christian theology is likely to be tainted with the feudal and later European capitalist and imperialist ideology. When theology deals with matters not subject to empirical verification or rational investigation, there is more room for the influence of ideology. Then what is taught as faith may coincide with the interests of the powerful.

When theology advances and propagates doctrines with an ideological bias, there is a tendency for them to get ingrained in a people to the extent of becoming a prejudice and a stereotype for evaluating situations. This can be clearly seen from the impact of the garden of Eden story on the attitude of society towards women.

7. Myth and Theology

A myth is a narrative which seeks to express through symbols the ultimate reality which transcends both the capacity for discursive reasoning and expression in

ordinary human language. A myth is a narrative concerning fundamental symbols which are vehicles of ultimate meaning. A myth tries to express through symbols ultimate reality which transcends both the capacity of discursive reasoning and expression in ordinary human language.[4] The presuppositions of a religion may relate to myths. Thus the creation story in the Bible has the character of a myth; it contains an implicit truth which is communicated through the narrative to those who accept it. Formally myths are narratives about symbols, functionally they are vehicles of ultimate meaning.

Since the beginning and end of the universe and of human life are beyond our experiential knowledge, the religions claim access to certain revelations by God/the Ultimate, and utilize different myths to interpret their perspectives on these issues. Myth signifies some event which is said to have taken place in primeval time, and is considered fundamental for the whole order and regulation of life.

A myth should not be taken literally as if it were fully historically real and not a story. Theology may be built around a myth. Then much would depend on the interpretation given to it and its message concerning the ultimate realities. Since a myth is a narrative that endeavors to communicate an aspect of the ultimate or transcendent reality in relation to the origin, destiny and meaning of human life or for a community, it leaves considerable room for phantasy and imagination. This is true of the biblical story of creation or the peoples stories of their ethnic origins like St. George and the Dragon or the arrival of Vijaya and his followers from India to Sri Lanka. Thus Pope Leo I (440-461) combined Rome's imperial greatness with its high Christian dignity. He explained in a sermon on 29 June "that St. Peter and St. Paul had replaced Romulus and Remus as the protecting patrons of Rome".[5]

This literary form enables subsequent interpreters of the myth also to exercise their imagination in explaining and developing the myth. Power holders in a community are likely to do so to safeguard their interests.

8. A Twofold Criterion for Evaluating Christian Theologies

While appreciating the innumerable and unfathomable benefits Christian theology has brought to many millions of human beings during nearly two millennia, we need to evaluate its drawbacks for the sake of believers, the Church and of inter-religious relations specially in Asian countries.

The sources of Catholic theology, the Bible and tradition are both subject to a critical evaluation. The Bible has a core teaching of love and unselfish service which can be truly meaningful and redeeming for all humanity. This is part of the primordial religious intuition, inspiration, experience and example of the Jewish people in the Old Testament and of Jesus and his disciples in the New.

However there are many elements in the Bible which are less praise worthy or are even undefendable specially as they impinge on the rights of human beings. Thus the Book of Deuteronomy calls for the total extermination of the seven nations that will be inhabiting Canaan when Israel occupies it. (Deut.7. 1-5, 20, 16-18). The Israelites are to "utterly destroy them" (Deut. 7.2) and to "save nothing" that breathes (Deut. 20.16). Before the interests of Israel the chosen people of God, the lives of these others do not count.[6]

Likewise in tradition too there are different interpretations of texts which have led to conflicts among Christians, and teachings of the Church that have been intolerant and harmful to others – e.g. concerning other religions, cultures and women.

We propose a twofold principle – one negative and one positive – for evaluating theology. It is derived from the love command of Jesus – the core of his message.

a) Negatively

Any theology authentically derived from God in Jesus must be loving, respectful and fulfilling of all sections of humanity of all places and times. This is the nature of the just and loving God revealed in the basic (and better) inspiration of the Bible specially by Jesus. Hence any element in a theology that insults, degrades, dehumanizes and discriminates against any section of humanity of any time or place cannot be from God in Jesus. Any such element in Christian theology is an unjustifiable intrusion by later theologians and should be exorcised from the body of acceptable Christian theology. As Jesus says “from their fruits you will know them”. Fruits of hate and insult cannot come from Jesus or God.

This gives a principle for the purification of a prevailing and predominant Christian theology. If there are such degrading elements in a theology their source must be searched. Perhaps they are an illegitimate inference from an acceptable source, or else the source itself may be a presupposition that is not justified or justifiable. In the latter case, that source itself must be very critically analyzed and evaluated. We must be careful not to attribute to God what is of mere human elaboration. This principle can lead to a review of much of the traditional construct of Western Christian theology.

b) Positively

Since all good comes from God, everything truly humanizing and ennobling in any religion or ideology is also ultimately from the divine source, and must be respected as such. As God wills the happiness and fulfillment of all persons and peoples, the more a theology leads to genuine human self-realization of all persons and peoples, the closer it is to the divine source.

This principle of critique is a rational and an ethical one. It can be applied to any religion or ideology. It is based also on the central teaching of Jesus Christ. It makes the core message of Jesus the touchstone of good theology. Should not Christian theology have this as its guiding principle? It affirms God in Jesus Christ as a God of love who cares for all irrespective of any divisions even of creed. It affirms the centrality of universal love which is made a measuring rod of the authenticity of any sacred text, church teaching or practice.

It will seem both simple and exacting. But so is the Gospel of Jesus. He himself purified the religion of the day. He struggled against the wrong interpretations of the Law and the Prophets that imposed unnecessary burdens on the people in the name of religion. The teaching of Jesus is very much concerning the moral life inspired by the love of God. The dogmatic definitions of later Christianity are not found as such in

his teaching. But the evangelical teaching of Jesus was neglected in church dogma and catechisms used for teaching religion.[7]

There would naturally be differences of opinion in the application of this principle. But the principle as such would seem to have a validity both in relation to the teaching of Jesus and human rationality. It gives us a way of applying the key value of the Jesus Gospel to the theologies that claim to be from him. It helps us liberate Christian theologies from presentations of God that are unfaithful to the Jesus teaching ego of God as intolerant, partial and cruel or fostering inhumanity, dehumanization and exploitation of human beings. It thus constrains us to seek deeper into the origins of certain theological teachings which cannot be from God in Jesus and are of purely human sectarian sources.

The critical evaluation of theologies may seem at first sight a weakening and dilution of the Christian faith. What is desired is not the diminishing of faith in Jesus the Christ but a purifying and deepening of it, in our context of a pluralist one world. Such a critical dialogue can help relativize what is not certain in theology, and give more attention to what is the core message of the faith in God communicated by Jesus.

While the particular presuppositions and some conclusions of religions and theologies may tend to divide the followers of the religions, the core message of the religions concerning human life and human fulfillment can help bring peoples together in mutual understanding and respect and in common action for the good of all. This can be a better, deeper and more lasting basis for inter-religious cooperation at all levels, including social justice and human liberation. Such a dialogue can disengage the core message of Christianity from its encrustation in a particular culture or even theological school. The faith in and discipleship of Jesus can then be seen in clear perspective. It can perhaps be harmonized with the core message of the other world religions – if these too can be seen in their essence beyond their particular religio-cultural expressions.

These two principles - the exclusion due to negativity, and the approval due to positive contribution to human fulfillment – give us two valuable approaches for evaluation of religions including the present theology and the tradition of the Churches.

The Bible and tradition are both subject to the norm of excluding what is degrading to human beings. Jesus himself changed the law as expressed in the Old Testament ego concerning the teaching of Moses regarding divorce. (Mk. 10.5) Jesus was very strong against those who scandalized or had contempt for little children.

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones”. (Mt. 18.10) Jesus did not accept the ritualistic religion of the past; or the respect for the Sabbath irrespective of human need. The supreme freedom of Jesus in dealing with the Old Testament was for the genuine freedom and fulfillment of the human persons as children of God. He tried to free his people from their prejudices concerning other peoples – e.g. the parable of the Good Samaritan. Universal love and forgiveness are basic to His reinterpretation of the Scriptures.

9. Criteria for Evaluating the Myths of a Religion

With this principle of critique we can propose some criteria for evaluating the myths of a religion. The myths, or conceptual framework which thus purports to explain human life and its meaning and destiny cannot be proved or, even disproved by empirical evidence or by rational thought, as they are beyond verifiable history. They can have a verisimilitude as a good story, as giving feasible explanations. They may have entered the cultural ethos and collective memory of a people or of whole civilizations.

The myths of a religion have to be understood empathetically from within the religious tradition and in relation to the cultural background of their origins and development.

As Raimundo Panikkar writes,[8]

“Religions deal mainly with the collective ultimate self-understanding of a human group. The truth of religion can be gauged only within the unifying myth that makes the self-understanding possible.” The myths of religions or of a particular human community are deep rooted collective perceptions that influence their thinking and actions at a primordial level. They are generally accepted unquestioningly as true and valid. They are part of the strong emotive subconscious of a people.

Myths or narratives concerning symbols which are mere pointers to the ultimate realities may themselves be taken as literal truths. Their interpretation may serve the power holders in the community. Once this route of theological development has been entered into, tradition, considered a source of revelation, can buttress the ideological positions and hand them down from generation to generation as divinely revealed truths.

Among myths, the founding myths are of primary importance as the basis of much that follows in belief and life. Such founding myths cannot be evaluated historically – unless they are clearly contrary to proven scientific data and evidence. They cannot be directly verified at source if they are claimed to be from a divine revelation, as this cannot be consulted by us.

The distinction between myth or narrative and historical fact is therefore extremely important; likewise between presuppositions and authentic teachings of the Jesus. The limitations in the past theology was partly due to a literal interpretation of the Genesis story as historical data revealed by God. This mythical narrative can have an important spiritual message concerning the human predicament, but taken as literal truth it can leave much room for ideology.

“Christian theology has found it difficult to refute the rationalistic rejection of the myth of the Fall without falling into the literalistic error of insisting upon the Fall as an historical event. One of the consequences of this literalism, which has seriously affected the thought of the Church upon the problem of man’s essential nature, is the assumption that the perfection from which man fell is to be assigned to a particular historical period i.e. the paradisiacal period before the Fall.[9]

In Christian theology the original mythical presentation of Genesis has been interpreted in later centuries by the ecclesiastical authorities. These claimed authority to do so on the basis of divine inspiration and the power given to them by Jesus Christ. These interpreters were male clergy, feudal lords and sometimes political rulers as in the Holy Roman Empire. It is therefore necessary to exercise a critical judgment on the evolution of the myth (or from the myth) into religious teaching and later even defined dogma of the Catholic Church.

A combination of myth interpreted by the authorities turning into Church tradition may thus be given a quasi divine sanction and considered a source of revelation. The imagination of teachers and authorities may be invoked to interpret the myth ideologically. Modern thinkers, such as Rudolf Bultmann, have developed the concept of demythization to separate the real import of a myth from its imaginative expression.

The myths generally give an advantage to a dominant group within a community. It may be an ethnic group, a class, royal family, a priestly caste or the dominant sex. Myths thus consolidate prevailing inequalities by internalizing them within peoples mind-sets and cultures. Myths even give an aura of sacredness to such convictions which are thus not to be questioned but accepted as true.

These considerations show us that it is important that we adopt **a hermeneutic of suspicion** in order to try to evaluate the impact of myth, ideology, imagination and prejudice in the evolution of dogmas. This is particularly necessary in situations in which dogmas have a divisive impact in a pluralist society or deflect the attention of Christians from the more important issues of human community living and the core message of the Gospel.

We can propose some criteria for evaluating religious myths.

i) They can be evaluated by their consequences. If the consequences of a myth are opposed to the genuine human fulfillment of one group of humanity or other, such group can reject it. Thus if the creation myth discriminates against females, they can reject it. A hermeneutics of suspicion concerning its myths is natural in unjust societies, specially among those disadvantaged by them.

ii) If a religion has an understanding of the Divine Absolute as loving and just towards all human beings, (as Christianity has), it can be concluded that any revelation said to be from such a Divine Absolute cannot be degrading and insulting to any person or group of persons within or outside that community. Such an unjust revelation would contradict the very idea of an all loving and just God or absolute, i.e. the myth and its development would lack internal coherence. This criterion is applicable to the original myth or other myths and their subsequent interpretations, even if these be by the religious authorities within that community.

iii) The emerging consciousness of humanity can be an indication of the goodness or badness of such elements within a religious tradition. Slavery once accepted as legitimate within the Christian communities is now seen as clearly opposed to the concept of God and divine revelation as understood in the main

Christian Churches. The collective conscience of humankind finds slavery a grave denial of human rights.

iv) Humanity is now more conscious of the plurality of religions and of their founding myths. If some of them contradict each other or discriminate against others, these myths could be questioned, especially, if they are claimed to be universally valid.

v) The ability or otherwise of a myth or traditional mental construct to respond meaningfully to the new human consciousness regarding human freedom, social justice, sexuality, feminism, ecology, nature, genetic engineering, astro-physics and overall human personality development is also a criterion for evaluating it. These will have increasingly significant implications in future.

vi) A myth that deflects the attention of believers of a religion from its core values can be harmful to them and others by a neglect of duties and a diversion of attention to less important issues. Thus if a myth deflects believers from taking action on the social and ecological causes of diseases by suggesting that the principal cure for diseases is in prayers or offerings to a deity, it may be harmful to the human community itself.

10. Need of a Critical Purification of Christian Theology

In our pluralistic world the several religions and philosophies offer different explanations concerning the ultimate realities. The Confucianists, Hindus, Buddhists, the Christians, Muslims, the Rationalists, and Marxists have each their own interpretations based on the positions which each of them begins with. Each one's language, culture and philosophical system are media through which a religion presents its explanations to adherents and the rest of the world. Significant questions arise for Christians from non - European cultures. They live in a multi-cultural environment. They live in their country's culture with its religions, presuppositions, beliefs, cult and community practices. As Christians their theology is based on another set of presuppositions, beliefs, cult and community life. Are they to think the latter is right, true, and from God, and that the former is not so?

Different views or presuppositions concerning human life history also influence a people's thinking and culture. The oriental view of history is more cyclical rather than linear. In Hinduism and Buddhism this life is only one stage in a vast cycle of birth and death and rebirth. The cycle continues till all reach ultimate liberation in Nirvana or Moksha. The Christian view of human existence is more linear; this life determines one's ultimate eternal destiny. This is the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. Both approaches are concerning matters about which human knowledge is very limited, if at all possible.

The **systems of logic** differ as between the major cultural groups. The Western system of logic is based on the principle of contradiction; what is, is, and is not its opposite. It is linked to a tendency to be exclusive of opposites. It makes a dichotomy of true and false not leaving room for the excluded middle. Its views of history is linear. The Oriental logic is more inclusive and harmonizing. It tries to hold together opposites in a wider whole. The eastern logic sees truth as possibly a combination of

apparently contrary views. Hence positions could be less rigid and leave more room for tolerance of opposing views.

On the basis of differing interpretations of reality the different peoples have built their philosophical systems and their religious or secularist views of life. Based on these perspectives communities of belief have been organised, ways of life evolved, schools of spirituality set up, forms of meditation and prayer, rites and rituals popularized and religious institutions developed. From generation to generation, these are handed down to their peoples. The secularists and Marxists too have their beliefs their rituals and their heroes and heroines.

Within each group, with similar presuppositions and thinking, there is a continuity of tradition that forms a part of its culture. The social authority in a community tends to consolidate the presuppositions which are favourable to the dominant groups.

Religions hold differing views concerning God – either affirming, denying or ignoring the existence of a supreme transcendental being. Among theists, there are differences of view concerning the nature of the divinity and its impact on the universe and on human beings. For some God is impersonal, for others God is a person, and even, a Trinity of persons. Some claim to have a special message from God handed down to them and indicating the path to the salvation of humankind. Some think it is even a dangerous alienation of human beings from a concern with transformation of the unjust reality of their societies. Some reject the very idea of a God as an illusion. For some God is unknown and unknowable. The reality beyond this life, they say, is something about which humans can only be silent as before a mystery. Still others claim a mystic, intuitive, contemplative experience of God that is unique and incommunicable.

In the longer term, and at a deeper level, people ask more serious questions concerning the conflicting views of the religions on the ultimate realities and on their perceptions concerning each other. Each one's presuppositions and the theologies deduced from them are open to question. The different presuppositions of religions can be an issue in the now emerging dialogue of religions and ideologies. Can they co-exist? Can people compromise by being tolerant towards them all? Are they contradictory? If so can they be from the same divine source?

These problems become more acute when one religion is declared the official state religion and its norms are made part of the law of the land as in Catholic Irish Republic or some Islamic countries. Now almost all the major countries in the world are becoming multi-religious and multi-cultural due to migration and the affirmation of the rights of the minorities as in the republics of the former Soviet Union.

More serious theological questions however arise if we go beyond these and try to interrelate the presuppositions of the religions concerning the ultimate meaning and destiny of human life and the perceptions each religion has of itself and of others. In this we have to go deeper than the external expressions of a culture and ask whether, and how far, the stories, myths, metaphors interests and philosophical presuppositions of a people have gone into the making of its religious thinking and theology.

The foundational char-ism, primordial spiritual experience and core values of a religious community in a religion must be discerned to see how far a religion has been faithful to them. What additions have been made to this core by succeeding generations? Thereby we can ask what type of faith a believer of a religion has to give to a particular teaching or practice of that religion. All the teachings of a religion do not merit the same type of faith – some of them are directly from the founder, others are elaborations by successive generations of members – often evolved to suit their self interest.

When we find that some teachings of Christian theologies have been harmful, injurious and degrading to human beings, and/or legitimizing – grave injustice, consciously or unconsciously, we should institute a critical re-examination of such theology. This is required for the good of the Church itself. Jesus did so in his day. He was critical of what passed for religiosity but was harmful for people. “The sabbath is for man, and not man for the sabbath”.

The needed reform of the Church comes through such auto-critique. When the Church was unable to accept and integrate such criticism there were ruptures in the life of the Church as at the time of the Protestant Reformation. With the development of historical studies we see that many controversies of religion have been due to mutual misunderstandings of each other and each other’s positions. It is only in our day – after over four and a half centuries – that Catholics are beginning to acknowledge that there were several valid criticisms in the positions of reformers like Martin Luther. The failure of open and frank communication within the Church at that time was tragic for Christians. The Church was badly splintered, and whole communities were at war with each other for several decades.

The principle of critique can help evaluate the presuppositions and content of Western Christian Theology. What leads to killing of human beings because of religious beliefs cannot be from God and Jesus. Thus the theology prevalent at the time of the European invasion of the Americas after 1492, at least colluded with the extermination of millions of natives of that Continent over several decades. Long internecine conflicts of religions is an indication that some of their presuppositions and even teachings have elements which are not from God but are expressions of human selfishness and perhaps communal aggrandizement.

The presuppositions drawn from one world view or culture may not be seen as mere presuppositions (proven or improvable) if the corresponding theology is limited to the peoples who draw their inspiration from the same culture. Europeans will not normally find difficulty in accepting Adam and Eve as the first parents of all humanity; and their fate in the garden of Eden is not such a tragedy for them as the teachings of the Church provide them a way out of the debacle through the Church itself. But other peoples may not necessarily accept this story and its consequences. Likewise European women in that this theology is used to legitimise male domination.

A doctrine, seemingly harmless in one context, may have bad effects in another. Thus Christian theology elaborated in relative isolation in Europe of the middle ages may be harmful in a plural context of different religions and social systems. From the 7th or 8th century to the mid-15th century the Moslem powers isolated Europe from

Africa and Asia. Christians regarded Europe as the center of the world, and the others known to them were infidels and enemies viz Moslems. They theologized in a situation in which all the people with whom they were in regular peaceful contact had the possibility of being Christians. Hence a theology that considered baptism essential for salvation was not seen as harmful or inconvenient to anyone there. Thus it could easily go unchallenged for centuries; everyone could take it for granted. Now large scale secularization and religious pluralism raise serious issues concerning such theological positions.

Such an approach can also help us understand why many in the West are 'unchurched' and no longer church-going Christians, except perhaps for a few formal occasions as funerals, marriages and baptisms. In many parishes in Britain only a bout 10% of Christians attend the Sunday services. They reject it for various reasons such as rationalism, secular humanism, atheism, Marxism, hedonism or mere indifference concerning an institution they consider irrelevant to life.

Secularization is often a rejection by people of the teachings or practice of a religion that they do not find respectful for them, or necessary as an explanation of the meaning of life. This is not necessarily the rejection of the divine (as in an atheistic secularism) but the affirmation that a given interpretation concerning the divine is not acceptable to them. Secularization has helped in the purification of religion and religious teachings. The world has thus taught the Churches to purify their theologies.

Other schools of thinking are also in crisis. The world is far from experiencing continuing progress; Western civilization is in a deep moral crisis; family life is breaking down; children are alienated; injustice is growing and social life is disintegrating. The West is searching for values on which to rebuild itself. Marxist socialism too has failed to solve the problems concerning the ultimate meaning of life even when it has contributed in some directions towards a more just social order. The Churches are now together searching their identity as disciples of Jesus in more open dialogue with the world religions, which, till recently, they considered as pagan.

This principle of critical evaluation in relation to the degrading and dehumanizing impact on any human persons or groups is **applicable to other religions too**. Thus if any teaching or practice of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Shintoism, Judaism or any other religion looks down on other religions, considers itself as exclusively possessing the truth, is intolerant of others, or marginalizes a section of humanity such as the poor or women, to that extent it is subject to self purification. The situation can be worse when one religion uses state power to impose its norms on all others, especially on matters in which genuine difference of opinion is possible. Such approaches would be against its own better inspirations. It cannot be from God, the Absolute who cares for and loves all humankind. Nor can be a principle of genuine enlightenment that liberates persons to lasting happiness.

11. Factors in the Formation of Christian Theologies

Some of the basic issues, concerning which theologies deal, are inaccessible and incomprehensible to the human mind. Among these are:

- a) the nature of the Absolute,
- b) the origins of the universe, and
- c) the origin, ultimate nature and destiny of humanity or of a human person; the means to realize a destiny beyond this life.

Each of these, the Absolute, the universe and the human person is a mystery for the human mind. The inter-relations among them are also clouded in mystery. Hence we cannot fully comprehend the relationships between the Absolute and the universe, the Absolute and the humans, the universe and humanity. Even the relations between two humans have an element of mystery: of the incomprehensible, unfathomable and unpredictable. We cannot know for certain what ultimate human fulfillment after death (if any) would be. Yet it is concerning these and their relationships that theology purports to explain. In a given theology we should try to discern the various influences that have gone to form it.

Christian theologies have been formed by varying admixtures or combinations of several elements viz:

- i) Jesus as the founder, and his disciples' message, first preached, then written in the books of the New Testament meant for different churches as of Rome and Asia Minor, and understood by their recipients in their socio-cultural context.

- ii) The canonical Bible, and understanding of inspiration as taught by the churches. Thereafter these in turn become sources of theology.

- iii) The copying, translation and interpretation of the scriptures over several centuries, in different contexts, with many possibilities of mistakes in the process.

- iv) The understanding of different words, metaphors, and symbols in different times and climes e.g. myth taken literally as historical truth, understanding of different paths to salvation.

- v) The culture, philosophies and popular religiosity of the peoples who joined the Christian communities: especially the Jews, the Greeks and Romans. The Jewish Old Testament including its mythology, Greek philosophy and the Roman empire and its legal system impacted the evolution of theology.

- vi) The dominant powers in society and in the Church were more directly responsible for the formal expression of this theology, through the scholars whom they accepted and affirmed. This may be called the ideology that influenced theology.

- vii) Imagination of theologians and church magisterium, as many issues on which doctrines were evolved were things beyond human ken and competence. Thus at the Council of Florence- Ferrara in the mid-15th century there was deep division of opinion concerning whether souls, after death, go straight to heaven or hell or stay a shorter or longer time in purgatory. They were also long divided as to whether and how the Third Person of the Holy Trinity proceeded from the Father and the Son, or

not ... the famous “filioque” debate that divided the Latin and Greek churches. Scholars on each side quoted scripture texts in support of different views, or sometimes interpreted the same texts for their differing views.

viii) Faith expressed in worship, ritual, and preaching; these depended very much on the culture of the different peoples. The worship can in turn give a direction to theology. *Lex orandi est lex credendi*.

ix) Dogmatic definitions of the church as at the Councils. As the Church became the religion and a unifying force of the Roman Empire, different theological interpretations were elaborated by the church authorities, partly to settle religio-political debates. The church evolved the process of ecclesiastical councils for determining doctrinal issues. In this way theological teachings were adumbrated concerning Jesus Christ and proposed to the faithful as divinely revealed truth.

The emperors have had a major say in the formulations of doctrine by ecumenical councils from Nicaea 325, onwards. The emperors had a say in the convoking of councils, in the attendance of bishops, the agenda, the debates and even their termination. The emperors were keen on doctrinal uniformity for the unity of the empire, rather than because of any intellectual or spiritual intuition of the truth. They naturally preferred teachings that would uphold the dignity and power of the terrestrial ruler, where possible buttressing it with ecclesiastical blessings and in turn supporting the church rulers with the temporal power of the emperor.

The fate of bishops after a Council had also relation to their support for the position favoured by the emperor. Some bishops who disagreed with the emperor, or the dominant theology, were exiled from their sees as happened in the Anan controversy concerning the incarnation.

x) Church tradition accepted as divine revelation.

The influence of these factors, in varying combinations, on theology can be good, bad or indifferent. Theology may thus confirm, develop, dilute, neutralize or negate the core message of the religious founder and of the primeval spiritual insight that led to the foundation of the religion.

The theology thus developed tends in turn to become part of the tradition of a people; and it acquires a certain credibility or sacredness in the community. Thus the Adam and Eve story became part of Christian theology as well as of folk-lore and a help to the ideology of patriarchy. The relationships of races, social classes, sexes and castes as well as religions are deeply influenced by the stories believed by them about each other.

12. Same Presuppositions of Traditional Christian Theology

In multi-religious Asia there are several different responses to the basic questions raised by the perennial quest for the Absolute, the meaning of the universe and of human life. These depend on the claims of different religions to divine revelation, as well as on the many Asian cultures, philosophies, varied myths and their interpretations, often ‘related to the ideological interests of power holders and religious establishments. In such a context it is to be expected that the presuppositions

of each religion will be subject to question. This is especially so of Christianity, due to its claimed uniqueness, exclusivity, and historical intolerance of others.

Some presuppositions of Christianity that are questioned are:

i) revelation by God, and that exclusively in Jewish history, through Jesus and the church. Is revelation closed? Is there divine revelation in other religions? Is contemporary experience a revelation of God?

ii) relation of God to the universe ...creation, pantheism; dualism, monism, pan-entheism?

iii) concerning the human predicament ... how can we know about the creation, state of original justice, fall, and redemption and the conferring of divine through such means as the sacraments?

iv) how are the claims made about Jesus Christ being divine-human be verified? There is a natural tendency to exalt Jesus, the founder of Christianity. The founders of religions have often been praised and attributed qualities of a superhuman nature; or they are given a reverence and veneration that is close to that for a divinity. The words of the Koran are taken as literally from divine revelation. Tradition tends to present him as the unique son of God, universal redeemer of all humanity – things Jesus himself does not see to claim even according to the New Testament witnesses. Do we presume to be able to know and define the relationship between the Absolute and a conditioned human existence? How do the claims concerning Jesus correlate to those made for other founders and seers of religions?

v) the nature and powers of the church in relation to human salvation; is the church necessary for salvation? The church, being the supreme religion, in the world then known to Europeans or in contact with them, made its own norms for deciding doctrinal issues. The Church claimed to be and became the sole authority on and interpreter of Jesus' teaching. As the church became allied to the secular power, she neglected the radically liberating and challenging message of the gospels.

vi) Do the different paths of religions lead to the same ultimate goal of human salvation? If so, was the church wrong in its earlier teachings concerning the salvific value of other religions?

These are a few of the fundamental questions raised in the multi-religious context. Several other issues would be raised from other perspectives such as of feminism, Marxism, secular humanism.

In the search for the understanding of Jesus we should also consider the ways in which the Christian religious institution has consciously or unconsciously interpreted him to suit the interest of power holders in the church. We can then apply the critical principles we developed earlier, taking as our point of departure the position of the victims of the theology and of the power holders who benefitted from it. This will help us question, if not eliminate, many of the historical accretions in the presentation of Jesus which are not from him or of evangelical origin and vision. Jesus needs to be liberated from the captivity to the church establishment, which itself has been, and seems, somewhat collusively allied to the dominant powers of the world.

We can ask what elements prevalent in Europe and among the Jews prior to their acceptance of Christianity have entered Christian theology. In modern Western theology can the Christians from other continents and cultures distinguish between the elements of a purely Jewish or European (or North American) culture and what is of Jesus Christ. Can they express the specifically Christian content - or what comes directly from Jesus, in the philosophy, culture, stories, myths and even rites and rituals of the people of their countries?

This is naturally a very difficult question. We would have to begin by first trying to discuss what is incumbent on all in Christian theology as the message of Jesus and what is its particular clothing in Jewish and European world views, philosophy, culture and popular religiosity which pre-existed the conversion of these people to Christianity. Often Western theologians tend to relate the Christian faith necessarily to Western philosophy and its categories of thought.

We must distinguish between faith in what Jesus teaches and what the Churches have subsequently developed as interpretations of his teaching. The direct teachings of Jesus are a communication of his primordial spiritual experience and core values. Of course we depend on the Gospels for information concerning this teaching, even though they were written several decades after the death of Jesus. It is remarkable that the teaching of Jesus is not divisive of religions. Rather it is a call to an interiority of life and a love of neighbor in union with God.

In faith we acknowledge Jesus as the supreme teacher and guide who shows a path to deliverance from sin and union with God. Personal experience of life may corroborate this. The intimate union of Jesus and God is also a matter of faith. In faith we accept the Gospels, the New Testament and the Bible as a divine revelation. Many elements in Christian theology are, however, developments based on the presuppositions accepted by Christians in different communities or Churches. Thus the manner in which Jesus is united to God and the way the Bible is inspired have been elaborated later on in the history of Christianity. Christian doctrine concerning these can claim only a faith that is due to the Church in her teaching power. They are not necessarily directly from Jesus.

Much of the later conflicts among Christian Churches and differences of opinion among theologians are concerning these secondary or derived conclusions which are themselves based on presuppositions. Likewise the difficulties in inter-religious relations have also been concerning these secondary teachings that tend to make Christianity normative, exclusive and dominant. In this we should not forget the role of the Roman and Byzantine emperors in the resolution of dogmatic conflicts in fourth and subsequent centuries.

We need to distinguish the essential teaching of Jesus from later elaborations. Such a clarification of Christian theology can indicate the core teaching of Jesus which is what Christian faith is about. This is likely to be a difficult and trying process as Christians are accustomed to consider many teachings as the tradition of the Church and hence part and parcel of the Christian faith. It is likely to be misunderstood and even misinterpreted. A theological rethinking can involve us in an assessment of our own lives and spirituality. This may be painful as it may show that

we had insisted on certain elements as essential, whereas they have been hurtful to others and are not from Jesus but later insertions by the dominant in the church.

Past theologies have to be understood and evaluated in their context. They have a continuity from and connection to Jesus through the tortuous paths of human history and varied cultures. For us they have had their meaningfulness as well as disasters. We have to seek in the 1990s how that same core message can be understood and lived in a manner that is liberating for all in our one world situation.

We need to investigate critically the content of theology – precisely in order to discern the core of the faith from its less essential elements. For this we should try to establish some norms of critical evaluation that have a foundation in the teaching of Jesus and/or in the common sense of humanity – as in our “Principles of Critique”. Can we develop criteria for critically evaluating the presuppositions and the theologies (and ideologies) themselves.

A genuine dialogue of religions requires that we relate to one another at this level too. Then, the dialogue is deepened and hopefully enlightening for all involved.

13. A Consequent Rethinking

In multi-religious contexts with different explanations of the origins, destiny, salvation and liberation of humankind, Christian theology needs to be rethought at a deeper level than is done otherwise. At present in Europe, North and South America the need to rethink the key dogmas of the Christian tradition do not seem to be felt so acutely as in Asia. The other religions are not yet regarded as a major issue for Christian theology and life, even though we can see the beginnings of a reaction as in the book on “The Myth of Christian Uniqueness”.^[10] Hence there is a greater attachment to tradition, and reluctance to question it even when its deficiencies are seen.

European and Latin American Christology and Mariology do propose an “ascending” approach to the understanding of Jesus and Mary. They are not satisfied with the traditional deductive approach – e.g. of first beginning with the assumption that Jesus Christ is the son of God second person of the Trinity and universal saviour of humanity. They contribute very valuable insights to the understanding of Jesus and Mary from a study of the scriptures and from their experience of the struggles for social liberation. These are valuable and most significant contributions to theology.

Latin American liberation theology brings in the concept of human liberation in society through social analysis and re-reading of the scriptures and of tradition from the point of view of the poor. But they do not yet seem to question adequately the traditional bases of theology based on the Christology of the Councils (such as of Nicaea, Chalcedon and Trent) which affirm that eternal salvation is only through Jesus Christ. They seem to be content to place in greater relief the message of societal liberation and as it were juxtapose it to the traditional theology of salvation through Jesus Christ. The traditional concept of mission is not yet so much of a problem as they do not meet acute questioning by persons of other religions.

In Asia we have to question more deeply the bases of a theology that has been hurting our peoples for centuries, and which are still an obstacle for Christians to be

fully open to inter religious dialogue and to be accepted as such by others. We have to probe further to find out what has gone wrong in our countries in the presentation of Christianity during these past five centuries since Vasco da Gama. At present the new “evangelical groups” are making much effort to bring people to their confessions on the understanding that salvation is available (only?) in and through Jesus Christ. Their efforts are raising once again grave suspicion of proselytism advanced with finance or by taking advantage of people’s poverty.[11]

In all this the critical rethinking has to be on the basic construct or framework of Christian theology. We discuss these issues in other chapters concerning original sin, the message and identity of Jesus, the nature of salvation, the role of religions as organizations in salvation.

The critique of the formation of traditional Western theology and of its presuppositions in the inter-religious dialogue can thus take us to a better understanding of the limits of religions as organizations, and of their potential contribution towards ennobling human life and safeguarding Nature on this planet.

[1] cf. Sallie McFague: *Models of God, Theology for a Ecological, Nuclear Age*; Fortress Philadelphia, 1987.

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Nature and Destiny of Man”, Scribner’s, New York, 1964.

[3] Op.cit p. 194.

[4] *The New Dictionary of Theology: on Myth*.

[5] Henry Chadwick: *The Early Church*, Penguin, London, 1967/1990, p. 243.

[6] George Soares Prabhu: “Communalism and the Role of the Theologian”, MS New Delhi, 1987.

[7] cf. *The New Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism No. 2*; Catholic Book Publishing Co. N.Y. 1962. The U.S. Baltimore Catechism had three parts: the creed, the commandments, and the sacraments and prayer; the emphasis was on the life of the church; less on the core message of Jesus of love of neighbour and its implications in the world of the time. “Everyone born into the world had original sin on his soul and was therefore a slave of the devil. p. 36.

[8] Raimundo Panikkar, in “Towards a Universal Theology of Religion”, Ed. Leonard Swidler, Orbis, New York, 1987, p. 129.

[9] Reinhold Niebuhr: Op.cit pp. 267-268.

[10] St. John Hick and Paul Knitter, “The Myth of Christian Uniqueness” Orbis, New York 1987.

[11] In Sri Lanka there is widespread anxiousness among the public concerning the proselytizing activities of the “new evangelical groups”. People do not often distinguish between these new groups and the mainline churches. In 1991 a public Commission was appointed by the Government to inquire into the activities of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The Commission has given a considerable time to examine the activities of certain new evangelical groups.

