

Christ and the World Religions: An Asian Perspective

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As a contribution to the tribute offered to Gustavo Gutierrez, I should like to present some thoughts on the further development of liberation theology in relation to the Asian context.

Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation* is a most important contribution to the development of Latin American theology of liberation. Liberation theology is the greatest change in theology that has taken place since the time when the Christian Church came to terms with the Roman Empire under Constantine. Since that time theology had been done, as it were, from the side of the powerful. This is true particularly of the modern period when the European countries expanded into other continents.

Latin American theology of liberation is the first school of theology that clearly reflected the side of the oppressed. They, therefore, were able to perceive many changes necessary in Christian theology for it to be faithful to the liberative message of Jesus. Fortunately, the entire Church is now becoming more conscious of its significance and importance.

All the same, we can note that the Latin American theologians in their first phase of theologizing were particularly conscious of the oppression of class and of capitalism. This was what impinged on their consciousness, given their own background. It is only in subsequent decades that they began to open themselves to the issues of liberation from the domination of sex and of race. This has been partly due to the influence of the dialogue within EATWOT and other movements, such as that of feminism and black liberation.

In this article I wish to deal with the need for developing Christian theology in relation to the other religions. Here, too, there is an element of domination and oppression in which Christianity and Christian theology have been on the side of the powerful. Hence, there is a need of a certain liberative purification of our theology in this connection, too.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

We need to rethink our theology from the point of view of religious plurality in the World. In Asia, fortunately, the other religions have not only survived the onslaught of Christian colonizers, but are also undergoing a revival, especially since the independence of formerly colonized Asian countries.

The first reason that calls for a reassessment is the tragic history of the European Christian missionary collaboration with European armed forces and merchants in colonizing the African, Asian, and American continents. It is very difficult to speak of

this to Europeans who feel that their ancestors thus carried out a “civilizing” mission. Or they argue that the missionaries were on the side of the poor natives. They give examples such as those of Bartolome de Las Casas as persons who championed native rights.

What I wish to stress is that the great evils of colonization were linked to a Christian theology that legitimized the European expansion and the missionary enterprise. This theology was based on the premise that all human beings were, trapped in original sin and condemned to eternal damnation unless they were saved by Jesus Christ. This salvation had to be obtained by becoming a member of the Christian Church. The church was the vehicle of God’s grace essential for salvation.

This theology had a Christology, an ecclesiology, a soteriology, a missiology, and a way of thinking about other religions. It all came down through the centuries, including the times of the Crusades. The Christology was from the early councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. It held that Jesus Christ is true God and true man; two natures united in one person; Jesus Christ is the universal redeemer of all humanity, the unique Son of God. Acceptance of Jesus as Lord and God is essential for eternal salvation.

This Christianity was the source of the concept of the church as the unique barque of salvation. The mission of the church was the preaching of this message and the conversion of all human beings to this message. Otherwise, they would suffer eternal damnation. This doctrine is revealed in the Bible and confirmed and developed by the tradition of the church. The church is the infallible teacher and moral guide of humanity.

Today this seems too simple. In fact, many will protest on being reminded of this, saying that the church has long since given up these extreme positions. This is true to a great extent. The point is that it was such a theology that prevailed in the time of Columbus and Vasco da Gama and up to about the middle of this century. In fact, even today there are quite a few Christian fundamentalists who hold and loudly propagandize similar views.

This theology had the impact of legitimizing the European colonizers in their cruel approach toward other religions. They went about Asia, Africa, and the Americas destroying the sacred places, literature, and traditions of other religions. They despised these religions as pagan, the work of the devil and leading souls to eternal damnation. They found in this theology some justification for their own colonial expansion and even the extermination of some unbelieving peoples. This went so far that in continents like the Americas and Oceania, the memory of other religions hardly remains.

The peoples of Asia have a historical memory of this reprehensible behavior of persons who claimed to be civilized and called themselves Christian. Hence, even today there is a deep suspicion of Christians as persons who have been against the Asian religions, cultures, and peoples.

They do not think that Christians have really rethought their theological positions. Even new, forward-looking ideas are regarded as a ruse for further conversions and for debilitating the ancient religions and cultures. The European linkage of Christians and the new colonial economic policies of Western Europe and North America gave further support to their suspicions.

Although modern Christian theology has brought about a certain rethinking in ecclesiology, soteriology, and missiology, it has not gone far enough for a genuine dialogue of Christianity and the other Asian religions. It is only gradually that the opening of Christianity is taking place, beginning with a recognition of some spiritual values in the other religious traditions. The Vatican Secretariat for Other Religions, after the plenary assembly of 1987, went further in affirming the salvific potential of other religions. It states:

Interreligious dialogue is thus a dialogue of salvation. It does not aim at converting others to Christianity, but at mutual understanding, collaboration, and mutual enrichment. It leads the partners “to work together towards truth” to a deeper conversion among people of the kingdom of God [art. 45].

Pope John Paul II took a very positive initiative in inviting leading personalities from all the religions to pray for peace at Assisi in October 1987. It broke new ground in interreligious dialogue, but the participants have not yet advanced to the position of being able to pray together for peace, and much less to consider together issues concerning world peace. Such a process is likely to lead the religions further in this common quest.

In the Asian countries interreligious collaboration is essential for meeting the issues of communal harmony, peace, social justice, modernization, culture, and the like. For genuine collaboration on such issues, the church needs to clarify beyond doubt its stand concerning “proselytization” or attempts at conversion by using unfair means. Any sense of superiority or privilege of Christians has to be purified by a deep theological reflection and contemplation. In this we have not gone far enough. And even as the more long-standing churches are gradually moving forward, new groups, such as different pentecostal or charismatic communities, are pushing an “evangelistic” approach of promoting conversions to their churches, using questionable methods: threat of eternal damnation or the favors of financial assistance.

We need a theology that will positively motivate toward common action for the human good of all without any fears and inhibitions concerning one another.

TRADITIONAL POSITIONS IN CHRISTOLOGY

Traditional Christology was based on the definitions of the church concerning Jesus Christ. He was defined as God-man, the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity. He was regarded as the unique and only Son of God; God in person. He is the source of all things; for him and in him were all things created. It is through him and in him alone that there is redemption and salvation. He alone is to be worshiped and adored as God. He is, above all other human beings, the source of all truth.

Traditional theology tended to deduce the rest of Christian theology from the premise of Jesus as God-man. For this it used the philosophy that was in vogue in Europe at the time. The Church came to conclusions about the nature of Jesus, the value of his life, the meritoriousness of his death, the “satisfaction” given to God by his death. Hence, also conclusions about the divinity and infallibility of the church. Jesus was said to give

divine powers to the church. Hence, the sacraments were thought of as communicating divine grace because of the divinity of Jesus defined in dogmas.

The other religions find this unacceptable. Islam sees this as contrary to monotheism. How could a human being be God? How can we worship a human being? Buddhists can think that this is the absolutizing of a human person. It also means that the Buddha is regarded as secondary and subordinate. Buddhism is considered, incapable of leading persons to their eternal happiness. To Hinduism this christology would mean the absolutizing of one particular manifestation or avatar of God.

Thus, although the members of other religions respect the person of Jesus as shown in the New Testament, this christology makes interreligious dialogue rather difficult. Christians can hardly accept the other religions as valid ways for spiritual growth and eternal salvation. On the other hand, other religions can see Christianity as seeking to possess God so exclusively as to be incapable of dialogue with others.

The Asian context raises deeper theological questions concerning doctrines and dogmas that have been held for many centuries. This is because here we face not only the reality of social and economic exploitation, as is in fact dealt with in Latin American theology; but we also have alternative ways of thinking about the human and the universe and God. There are different founders of religions, different sacred scriptures, and different views of the origin and destiny of human life. There is a great similarity in the moral teachings of the religions, or at least their implications for the important issues of personal and social life. The fundamental differences are in what we consider the dogmas of the churches. It is from these dogmatic teachings that the powers and rights of the church have been deduced concluded, enforced, and in a sense entrenched.

The relationship with the other religions in the Asian context, therefore, demands a much deeper rethinking of the total reality of the church. Its position and role concerning human salvation are called into question. Latin American liberation theology brought up the issue of how authority in the church is to be exercised and what its role can be with respect to the liberation of the oppressed. This in itself is a very valuable contribution to theology and spirituality. The Latin American study of Jesus Christ, as it were, in an ascending manner, taking into account how he lived in a given social context, is itself an innovative contribution to Christian theology - along with related studies in Europe and North America. Theologians like Jon Sobrino and Leonardo Boff reflect deeply on the real story of Jesus seen from the New Testament. They discuss the knowledge of Jesus, his prayer, his death as that of a human person intimately united to God. The motivation for their reflective study is the need to bring back the memory of a truly human and historical Jesus. The emphasis on the dogmas of Chalcedon had tended to see in Jesus more the Son of God who had divine knowledge from the beginning of his life. As Sobrino notes, Jesus did not pray to himself but to God the father.

The issues of Christian dogma on which there is profound difference of opinion between Christianity and the other religions are ones that cannot be proved by human reasoning or comprehended by the human intellect. Nor are they clearly borne witness to in the Christian sacred scriptures in the manner in which they are proposed now as dogma. Thus, the New Testament does not say clearly that Jesus is the unique Son of God. There is no teaching concerning the two natures of Jesus attributed by later

theology. Nor is there certitude about the specific redemptive role assigned to Jesus. The divine foundation of the church hinges on our understanding of Jesus as God.

All these are based on some fundamental assumptions or presuppositions: that we can know the nature of the divinity, that we can make certain propositions concerning God. The story of the fall, and the condition of humanity before and after it, are also largely theological elaborations about which we cannot have historical evidence and we do not have even biblical certitude. The view that Jesus is a God-man who brings about such a redemption is dependent on such presuppositions. If the proposition of two natures in one person is accepted, what would be the nature of the consciousness of Jesus? What merit would his actions as a human being have if his personality is divine?

Many questions arise from these presuppositions. What would be the position of a Father who agrees to, demands, or condemns his beloved son to such a death? If Jesus was so divine as to have the fullness of knowledge from his birth, then his whole life would be a mere role playing or a theatrical performance in which he knew how everything would evolve. What would be the merit of a death in which Jesus knew that in three days he would rise from the dead by his own power and confound all his enemies? How could such a death be really painful or difficult and meritorious? It is difficult to see how such a concept of a “hypostatic” union of two natures in one person does not gravely reduce the value of the actions of Jesus the human being. In fact, this was the result of long centuries of Christian theology when the human agony of the life of Jesus in the context of his society was largely neglected. The Latin American theologians try to revalorize this by developing a theology of Jesus that does not begin with his divinity, but takes the historical data from the scriptures and builds around them an understanding of Jesus.

THE NATURE OF DIVINITY OF JESUS CHRIST

In the understanding of Jesus Christ in the Christian scriptures, we can distinguish:

1. Jesus who was born of Mary, at Bethlehem at a given time;
2. Christ as an anointed person, or the one awaited by the Jews as the Messiah, “the King of the Jews” – to restore the kingdom of Israel (Mark 15:26,32; Acts 1:6f.);
3. The second Person of the Trinity – the Logos, the Word also identified as Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus. The Word was at the beginning - before all things and all things were created in and for the Word, as John says;
4. Those who are baptized in Christ put on Christ (Gal. 3:27); Christ is formed in them (Gal. 4:19); to live in Christ (Phil. 1:21), the Christian is incorporated into the church (Rom. 6:11).

Against this background, the term “Jesus” is not necessarily synonymous with that of “Christ.” Jesus is Christ; but the whole of Christ is not Jesus. It can also be said that Jesus is God, but God is not limited to Jesus.

A problem in our background is that these senses are all used without adequate distinctions: Jesus is called the Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, Prophet, Christ, the Word, the second Person of the divine Trinity. The second Person, Logos, is prior to the historical Jesus, is uncreated, and cannot die.

Though there are many senses in which the terms “Jesus,” “Christ,” “Son of God” are used, subsequent Christian teaching and life have identified Jesus the human being with the second Person of the Trinity. Accordingly, philosophical explanations and theological dogmas were developed as in the Council of Chalcedon. In countries where the population is, at least nominally, Christian (as Europe was until recent decades), this did not present much of a problem. But the situation is quite different in Asian countries. This poses issues for our theological reflection. We are compelled to deal with it for we cannot have a deep and genuine dialogue with the other living faiths without discussing and discerning this issue.

In our context, especially in the Indian subcontinent, we can say that Jesus is God, provided it is not understood in an exclusive sense of Jesus monopolizing the divine. In fact, in the Hindu perspective there is a spark of the divine in all beings; some may be closer to the divine than others. Therefore, we do not say that Jesus is not divine. On the contrary, we can affirm that the life and teachings of Jesus are most divine. He is the one in whom we may find no fault, and in whom there is every perfection. But what we cannot affirm is that Jesus is so unique that he alone of all human beings is divine, that God could not reveal to others and through others a message of similar significance to other peoples, that God could not be present in other persons in similar manner.

This makes it difficult for us to express our theological teachings in terms of some of the classical definitions of the councils. Christians do recite and chant the Nicene creed at the liturgy, but this is hardly intelligible to persons of other faiths: “consubstantial with the father.” (?)

This is another reason why we have to be cautious of these theological definitions: because they have helped Christians to develop a theology, ecclesiology and missiology that have been devastating for others. It has led to the genocide of several peoples. Therefore, we can ask whether a theology that has had such an iniquitous and nefarious impact on Asian peoples can be correct, true, and from God. The basis of the theological approach to other religions as “pagan” was closely linked to the christology that held Jesus to be the unique Son of God and universal savior of all humanity. He was said to have given all power to his church to carry the redeeming message to all peoples. In the course of history the use of force for this purpose was legitimized. European peoples convinced themselves that they had a God-given responsibility to convert the rest of the world to Christianity, for otherwise these peoples would be condemned to eternal damnation.

I am proposing a hermeneutical principle: a theological teaching that despises, marginalizes, and discriminates against some persons cannot be from God who loves and cares for all humanity. It cannot also be from Jesus who was so kind and understanding to all.

If we say that the church was mistaken in such a presentation of its mission and role in salvation as to lead to genocide, then we can ask when and how is the church to be sure that it is not wrong in its theological teachings and activity.

The above is an argument from the negative impact of the teachings. A positive approach is that such a Christianity makes it difficult for Christians to be in frank, humble, and respectful dialogue with persons of other religions. Much as we may not desire it, this conviction of having the truth, of being the privileged offspring of God, tends to make Christians think they are superior in their religious thinking, or even better in their relationship to God. It tends to make them rather uncompromising, inflexible, and even arrogant in these matters--and with a conviction that they are holding on to a revealed faith out of loyalty to God. Christians become less open to see God in others and respect them for it.

Christian theology and Christians need a certain purification and humility in our approach toward other religions and relevant theological issues. Therefore, although we say that Jesus is divine, we cannot claim to know how and to what extent Jesus is God. We cannot affirm it in an exclusive sense. An inclusive sense, with openness to the divine in others, is an acceptable position. Then we would have to go further to find ways of considering how and to what extent any person is divine. In this process, both Christians and others will be prepared to see and acknowledge that the divine is in Jesus in a certain plenitude. We would at the same time be prepared to recognize the manifestations of the divine in others, according to certain criteria we may agree on.

The cosmic Christ, the uncreated Word, the Logos in St. John's term, the fullness, the beginning and end of all beings as in St. Paul, is beyond time and space, transcendent and universal. Christ in this sense is neither Greek nor Jew, neither male nor female – and, we might add, neither Christian nor Zoroastrian.

The cosmic Christ can be identified with the divine in such a way as to be as the divine principle all theists acknowledge. Such a Christ is beyond all religions and can be the principle of the widest human communion or ecumenism. Identified with all humanity and the whole universe, while transcending it, this cosmic Christ can be the inspiration for the care of nature and of Mother Earth – the source and term of all life in the world.

Christ thus understood is present to all, is the source of all inspirations, the Eternal Word, the Light of Lights. This divine truth is the source of all religions, all motivations for good, of liberative movements, ideologies, and processes for human betterment.

This cosmic Christ is then identical with the supreme being in other religions understood as life and light – and with Yahweh, Allah, Atman-Brahman, the Tao, and in a sense Nirvana or Moksha. Those who are not Christians may then see the cosmic Christ as God who is not a particularist deity, a monopoly of Christians and their churches. Liberated from captivity to Christians, Christ would be seen as the God whom all theists accept, and the bliss all seek – Satchit Ananda, the source of a just and peaceful world.

Concerning Christ in us, there are many statements that can be understood as identifying Christ and his disciples. St. Paul speaks often of it. "I live, not I, Christ lives in me." In St. John, Jesus says, "When that day comes, you will know that I am in my

father and that you are in me, just as I am in you.” All these can be understood as indicating a close relationship between the disciples of Jesus and God. But we cannot conclude that they *are* God, which would be totally unbelievable. The texts speak of divinity and association with Christ, not in a philosophical and exclusive sense, but in a spiritual and even mystical union with God.

Concerning Jesus we can acknowledge him as divine in a manner we cannot define and that is non-exclusive. What is more important is to see how Jesus lived, what he taught and why he was treated as he was by the people of his time. It is more important to see the life and death of Jesus as it is actually portrayed in the Gospels. The so-called descending theology has done immense damage to Jesus, Christianity, and the world by giving us a theology that did not bear witness to the real human life of Jesus, and on the contrary made him so divine, and Christians so much in control of him, that they felt superior and acted arrogantly and intolerantly.

Jesus needs to be liberated from such a theology. The church too has to liberate itself to follow more closely the teaching of Jesus as we know from the lifework of Jesus rather than from later theological elaborations.

The life that Jesus’ example can give to the world is one based on the belief, that all human beings are sisters and brothers. For each of us, personal and collective fulfillment lie in self-giving for others. Jesus chastised formal and legalistic religion and opposed the evil doing of the rich and powerful. What he wanted was justice in economic and social relationships, and the sharing of possessions was a way of life among his first disciples. For living and speaking as he did, he was killed by religious leaders and political rulers.

The *historical Jesus* gave a message and a witness that can be the life of the world if Christians live as he calls them to. Christ as the cosmic Lord is the universal motivator of all humans – to truth, harmony, and oneness in the divine. How, then, is Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of Christianity, related to the cosmic Christ of biblical revelation? Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ in the sense of being the Messiah expected by the Jews, the anointed one of God. He is also spoken of as Jesus Christ, meaning the divine Christ. How the historical Jesus is related to the transcendent Christ is part of the mystery of the incarnation, which we cannot comprehend or explain fully. But the fact that the historical Jesus is Christ does not prevent God from manifesting the divine in and through other persons in human history. The cosmic Christ present in all beings is the reality whom Jesus calls us to recognize.

Jesus Christ, as a historical person intimately related to God, can, as the cosmic Christ, objectively be the life of the world. And as Jesus who, faithful to his convictions, gave his life for his people, he can be the way, the truth, and the life for meaningful human fulfillment in holiness.

Today we need contextual theologies that relate to the circumstances of different peoples and their struggles for personal and social liberation and fulfillment. These can be understood in relation to both Jesus of Nazareth and the cosmic Christ. But merely contextual theologies are inadequate for understanding Jesus the Christ as the life of the world or for motivating the churches in their witness and mission.

The elements of a more universal planetary theology need to be delineated, taking into account the life and teaching of Jesus, the cosmic significance of Christ, the human search for meaning in personal life, and the oneness and interdependence of the world today.

Such a theology can be evolved by correlating the more universal truths of the biblical revelation – for example, the oneness of God, creation, the unity of the human race, salvation and liberation in Jesus the Christ, the demands for justice, the care of the earth, and peace. A theology like this will be universal – human and global - not the justification of domination by any race, sex, class, or religion.

Churches in the years ahead will have to sharpen their abilities to analyze both local and global situations, and encourage options and strategies relevant to different levels of action. They can also articulate a thinking that interrelates the different struggles of today: of race, of class, of age, or sex, of North/South and East/West. Recognizing what is valid and authentic in each struggle, the churches can help correlate them in a perspective of integrated human liberation.

The theology of the kingdom of God can be helpful here. It can link the Christian mission of inner personal liberation with liberation in society. It can articulate how Christian communities must be built in and through service to the world. Were that to happen, Christian commitment to justice and peace would be both socially prophetic and an act of worshipping the God who wants the fullness of human life.

Internally, the churches would become more participatory: externally, they would be more open to each other and to the wider human community. And the Spirit of Jesus would animate Christians to grow in the service of the cosmic Christ who is present and seeking full realization to all persons and in the whole world until the end of time.

Thus can Jesus Christ be the life of the world.

Here I am proposing only an insight that needs to be further developed. The liberation of theology in this direction can make Jesus more presentable, especially in our Asian context. It will also challenge Christians to be more committed to live what Jesus taught. His message is primarily one of love and self-giving for others. Theology made it too much a matter of redemption from some guilt that humanity was alleged to have incurred. The overcoming of selfishness is important, but it has to be proposed in the context of God's great love for all human beings of all times and places.

This approach will give us a missiology that is more sincerely respectful of others of all faiths and persuasions. Ecclesiology will have to be rethought more profoundly, without the exclusive claims to truth, grace, and power that the church has asserted for centuries. This is a phase of liberation of theology that would seem to be required in the coming years. In going forward in this direction, Christians and Christianity can open up to the presence of the divine in all humanity, and humbly come forward to transform this unjust and cruel world to be more akin to the kingdom of God that Jesus preached and gave his life for. I hope Gustavo Gutierrez and our friends in Latin America will contribute to such a growth of theology and life in the coming decades as they have done in the past twenty years in several other valuable dimensions.

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