

**METHODOLOGY: ASIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY****DOING THEOLOGY IN ASIA TODAY****A Document of the Office of Theological Concerns  
of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences****INTRODUCTION**

The Church is not unaware how much it has profited from the history and development of humankind. It profits from the experiences of past ages, from the progress of the sciences, and from the riches hidden in various cultures, through which greater light is thrown on the nature of man and new avenues to truth are opened up. The Church learned early in its history to express the Christian message in the concepts and languages of different peoples and tried to clarify it in the light of the wisdom of their philosophers: it was an attempt to adapt the Gospel to the understanding of all people and the requirements of the learned, insofar as this could be done. Indeed this kind of adaptation and preaching of revealed Word must ever be the law of all Evangelisation. In this way it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures. (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 44)

Vatican II heralded a new spring in every aspect of the life of the Church world-wide and in Asia. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the

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great flowering of theological thinking evident all over Asia. The purpose of this paper is to try to clarify what is happening and to show how it is rather a continuation of the tradition of the Church, a living tradition which today in Asia experiences an encounter with other Asian religious traditions and Asian cultures. Today Asians are doing theology and draw nourishment from their Asian cultures and the lived experience of Asian Christians at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Vatican II spoke of expressing the faith in the languages and cultures of various peoples, but there is an even more fundamental aspect that must be recognised. We are Christians because we have experienced that Christ lives in us and we in him. This is an experience of individuals in Asia and of different peoples or Churches in Asia. This experience may have come through a concrete Jewish and European history, but those in Asia sharing this experience are Asians. The seed of the Word has fallen into the rich soil of Asia. It penetrates that soil and produces fruits that may be different from the results of other branches. To theologise in Asia, to give reasons, to explain and to be critically conscious of what it means to be a Christian is not an exercise of translating the experiences of past generations (be they Western or Eastern) into some modern Asian jargon, but rather an attempt to express from the depths of the Asian psyche the ineffable experience of living faith in Jesus Christ. It is the result of a genuine incarnation of the mystery of Christ in the flesh and blood of Asian peoples.

The Asian will use conceptual tools and a philosophical approach arising from the various Asian cultures. There are various Asian cultures and various philosophies, but there are certain general lines of approach that are typically Asian, certain values that are paramount in Asian cultures arising from the various philosophical traditions and the concrete social-religious-cultural situations in which Asians live. One of these values is harmony. Asians live in an atmosphere charged with communal tensions. What is needed is a vision of unity and harmony, and a language of reconciled diversity that will enable people of different communities to work together for peace and the building of a more just society.

A sense of the Sacred is fundamental in all Asian cultures. There is a respect for the Sacred and for the experience of the Sacred of various communities and religious traditions. The Asian Christian's faith rests solidly on his or her faith in Jesus Christ in whom the self-communication of God has taken place. But the Asian Christian also realises that the mystery of the depth of this self-communication remains to be explored further. Furthermore, the Spirit is at work outside the visible Christian community, through these various traditions. The Christian will always see these mediations as being related in some way to Jesus Christ, but he or she cannot deny them. The Christian will rather explore them further to sound the

depths of the mystery of God's self revelation and deepen his or her own faith. This is not to say that all ways are the same, but rather that the object of our search remains forever a mystery and the various ways and paths do intersect.

All Asian traditions have a cosmic view which integrates the question of human salvation into a unified view of the whole cosmos. Much of this comes ultimately from the primal traditions within Asia, whose practitioners are close to mother earth and have a profound reverence for all of nature, what in current parlance one would call an ecological view. This tradition is very much alive today among the tribal peoples of Asia and has been incorporated into all of the so-called great traditions.

Given the overriding value of harmony, Asian Christians will be looking for ways to integrate the experiences of Asia, the experience of their own forebears, and hence of their own psyche, into their Christian faith. The Asian way is one of integration and inclusion. Rather than saying "A is true, so B must be false," the Asian tends to say "A is true, and B is also true in some sense." This is not to say that truth is relative. There is but one Truth; but Truth is a Mystery which we approach reverently, while we try to seek to understand its various aspects and dimensions. Hence, the Asian Christian is open to dialogue, a dialogue based on profound respect for individuals, communities and their religious traditions.

Asian Christians must also be in touch with the twenty-first century Asia in which they live, an Asia rich in ancient cultural and religious traditions, but also an Asia of immense poverty, social injustice, communal conflicts, modern consumerism, and an Asia taking its place in the global village which the world is rapidly becoming today. Hence, the FABC has adopted as its mode of proceeding a pastoral cycle which begins with our faith in Jesus Christ, the experience of that faith in prayer and in the covenant relationship we share with our Christian brothers and sisters. It is because of that faith that Christians reach out in mission and involve themselves in the world around them. This experience leads to a rigorous and professional social analysis of the "Signs of the Times." This in turn is followed by theological reflection to discern these in the light of the Gospel, enabling the Church to plan for the future and specify its missionary response. This is a cycle which continually repeats itself, and which results in a theology different from that of former times, a living theology which constantly strives to discern the working of the Spirit in a rapidly changing world.

Asian theology is a new enterprise marked by a certain experimental character, a certain ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. It is not yet a finished product, given the dynamic nature of the theological enterprise



envisioned. It is rather a pilgrimage. Theologians in Asia have taken seriously the Vatican II theme of a Pilgrim People, and the theme of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, "Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium." They journey together with the Christians of Asia and the Church Universal, in the hope that the Church Universal will be enriched by an encounter with the cultures of Asia, as the early Church was once enriched by a creative encounter with Greek culture. The fruition of this hope depends upon the willingness of others to really listen, to attempt to understand the theology of Asia on its own terms, and then to dialogue, as Asian theologians themselves have attempted to understand the religious traditions of their own cultures and dialogue with men and women of other traditions.

The purpose of this paper is not to define "An Asian Method of Theology," but rather to shed some light on the emerging theological methods used by Asian theologians. The paper first addresses the question of pluralism. It turns then to a brief review of traditional Christian methods of theology in the East and the West. The Eastern tradition, which parallels so closely what is happening in Asia today, is often a closed book even to Asian Christians. A review of Western methodology shows how dependent Western theology is on the historical and cultural situation of Western Europe up to modern times. At the same time it shows that Western methods have not always been so univocal; and especially today after Vatican II, there is emerging in the West a new type of theology which is contextual, taking as resources cultural, religious, economic and political factors, a process analogous to what is happening in Asia. This leads to a consideration of the resources which Asian theologians use today in their attempts to develop an Asian theology. The source of theology for a Christian, of course, remains the Word of God in the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition. This brings up the question of hermeneutics, the interpretation of the texts. After a look at the emerging Asian Biblical hermeneutics, the paper looks at the ways other religious traditions in Asia interpret their scriptures, or how Christians might interpret the scriptures of other traditions. Finally, the paper turns to the question of the use of symbol, narrative and myth in the Asian religious traditions.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Pluralism In Theological Method

The world created by God is pluriform; in fact, our own experiences tell us that reality is manifold. Variety is the hallmark of the universe. No two planets are the same; no two living beings, whether animals or plants, are the same; and no two human beings are the same. Consequently, the way we perceive things differs, not merely because the basic elements of



reality are diverse, but because we also, the perceiving subjects, differ from one another. Cultures and religions differ, and they have different worldviews. We, who are born to a rich diversity of cultures and religions in Asia, are fortunate to experience this rich diversity in our very day-to-day living. It is in this sense that we can say that the universe created by God unfolds in a variety of ways. Pluralism generally refers to a situation in which a variety of viewpoints, explanations or perspectives are offered to account for the same reality. The essential characteristic of reality which we experience as human beings is multidimensional.

### **1.1 Pluralism versus Relativism**

Any discussion of pluralism must reckon with the question of how we understand pluralism in theology in relation to the threat of relativism. A pluralism which claims that all points of view of reality are of equal value surely ends up in relativism. When a point of view lacks a common reference to reality, it amounts to the mere opinion of the subject who holds that opinion. When each and every such point of view that is cut off from a common reference to reality is assigned an equal value, then, it amounts to relativism. In other words, relativism holds that there are many truths which vary according to the subjects who hold different opinions of reality. Such relativism destroys the rich meaning of pluralism.

There was a time in the past when to talk about pluralism almost always suggested relativism. In the so-called "primitive" and feudal societies of Asia and Europe, people knew no other model or worldview but their own. Within their limited perspectives they could understand things and they felt secure. Their entire life fabric was woven into the only worldview they possessed. In that era, cultures were somewhat immune to any outside influence. Their familiar particular worldview was regarded as absolute, and to think of any other worldview was anathema. The Rites Controversies in China and India during the missionary period are, in part, a consequence of this view.

However, in the last few centuries, owing to various historical, geographical, social, commercial and political factors, cultures, and along with them religions, began to penetrate one another. Worldviews, which once appeared so secure and static, began to crumble. People gradually came to realize that there are many points of view from which to look at reality, and many linguistic patterns through which we interpret it. Through increased opportunities for education people have come to realise that there can be more than one worldview in perceiving and understanding reality. With the rise of many independent nations, and with their eager embracing of the concept of democracy, pluralism received a further impetus. In fact, the concept of democracy advocated respect for a diversity of opinions. Ac-

cordingly, pluralism is perceived to be healthy if the opinions of other peoples and groups are seriously taken into consideration, and if nobody tries to stifle others by coercion or pressure, as long as they respect the basic freedom and rights of all. Such pluralism presupposes a cultural and religious atmosphere in which every group is willing to learn and unlearn, where all are eager to know one another better, and thus also to know themselves better, so that through common effort they may come to a deeper and broader knowledge. Modern mass media has also enabled people to realise that they live in one world, in one global village, in one mass society, but with a variety of cultures, religions and worldviews.

Pluralism need not always entail a radical subjectivism or relativism, in the sense of claiming that all points of view are equally valid. However, it is also true that the dawn of pluralistic, democratic, modern societies has paved the way to excessive individualism and subjectivism, and a consequent relativizing of all reality. Thus, today there are persons and groups who hold all reality to be relative. For such persons and groups, pluralism means relativism, in the sense that they claim all points of view are equally valid. Such philosophical or theological positions are to be rejected; and, in fact, all the major Asian religions condemn such relativizing of reality, especially the relativizing of basic human values. However, just because certain persons and groups are misled in their search for truth, and just because they tend to perceive pluralism as relativism, or just because they tend to relativize all reality, we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism. As mentioned above, reality is pluridimensional, and no one can deny this fact. Manifold too are the perspectives from which we look at it, and the conceptual frameworks within which we articulate it. The affirmation of plurality rests on the human search for an underlying unity that enables us to understand plurality better. Many Asian philosophies and theologies have shown the unity and harmony behind pluralism.

## **1.2 Pluralism in the History of the Church**

In fact, the Church has a long history of pluralism, especially in theology. Scripture scholars agree that both within the Old and New Testaments themselves, there is a rich variety of theologies. Church historians, too, affirm that each of the early Christian communities had its own experience of Jesus Christ, and, hence, its own theology. Thus, for example, within the New Testament, we have Pauline theology, Johannine theology, Lucan theology, etc. Such pluralism is further evident in the four different gospel accounts, which were based on the experiences of four different communities. In the four gospel accounts, pluralism in theology reaches a healthy climax, because each gospel account complements the other, without negating or opposing any. While all the four gospels speak of one faith in one Lord Jesus, there is a rich variety of experiences of the same Jesus. Here, we see a marvellous illustration of healthy unity in rich diversity.

### 1.3 Vatican II

Conscious of the rich diversity of theological pluralism within the Church down through the ages, the Second Vatican Council promoted pluralism in theology, when it said that the gospel message needs to be adapted according to each culture. (See the quotation from *Gaudium et Spes* at the beginning of this document.)

Elsewhere, the same Council urged each local Church to plant the seed of the faith within the rich soil of the customs, wisdom, teaching, philosophy, arts and sciences of its particular people (AG 22, SC 40). The Council further noted how the Church has used different cultures to preach the Word thus enabling a pluralism in theology:

There are many links between the message of salvation and culture. In his self-revelation to his people culminating in the fullness of manifestation in his incarnate Son, God spoke according to the culture proper to each age. Similarly, the Church has existed through the centuries in varying circumstances, and has utilised the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine and understand it more deeply, and to express it more perfectly in liturgy and in various aspects of the life of the faithful (GS 58).

The Council also emphasized the importance of the theologians who endeavor to promote theologies that would be relevant to their peoples, thus, once again affirming the validity of a pluralism in theology:

Although the Church has contributed largely to the progress of cultures, it is the lesson of experience that there have been difficulties in the way of harmonising culture with Christian thought, arising out of contingent factors. These difficulties do not necessarily harm the life of faith, but can rather stimulate a more precise and deeper understanding of that faith. In fact, recent research and discoveries in the sciences, in history and philosophy bring up new problems which have an important bearing on life itself and demand new scrutiny by theologians. Furthermore, theologians are now being asked, within the methods and limits of the science of theology, to seek out more efficient ways — provided the meaning and understanding of them is safeguarded — of presenting their teaching to modern people: for the deposit and the truths of faith are one thing; the manner of expressing them is quite another (GS 62).

The Council also clearly affirms the importance of diversity/plurality



in proclaiming the good news, in theologising, when it says:

In virtue of its mission to enlighten the whole world with the message of the Gospel and gather together in one Spirit all people of every nation, race and culture, the Church shows itself a sign of the spirit of fellowship which renders possible sincere dialogue and strengthens it. Such a mission requires first of all to create in the Church itself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, and acknowledge all legitimate diversity; in this way all who constitute the one people of God will be able to engage in ever more fruitful dialogue, whether they are pastors or other members of the faithful. For the ties which unite the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them: let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything (GS 92).

The last sentence in the quotation above emphasizes the freedom which Christians enjoy for various forms of the spiritual life, for variety in liturgical celebration and in the theological elaboration of revealed truth. Time and again, the Council speaks of a "legitimate variety" which extends even to theological expressions of doctrine (LG 13; UR 17). It is also the conciliar opinion that differences need not diminish unity, but indeed contribute to it and make more resplendent the catholicity of the Church (LG 13, 23; UR 4,16; OE 2).

#### **1.4 FABC Documents**

Using these basic directions and guidelines given by the Council, FABC, too, since its birth in 1970, has encouraged a similar pluralism in theology. Thus, BISA II made the following declaration in 1975:

Pluralism is a necessity once we work through the mediation of secular analysis and worldviews. This pluralism should not be a threat to our Christian unity, but on the contrary, a positive and creative sign that our unity is deeper than whatever the concrete technical analysis or viewpoints might show: a genuine value that emphasises unity in diversity (BISA II, 10).

In 1988, BIRA IV/II clearly stressed the necessity of diversity/pluralism in our Asian context when it said:

Unity, peace and harmony are to be realised in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as "live and let live." The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of

diversity as richness (No.15).

In the same document, the attitude of exclusivity is perceived as an obstacle to harmony, mainly because pluralism gives the advantageous value of complementarity:

One of the serious obstacles to harmony is the attitude of exclusivity, not willing to open oneself and see the beauty and truth in the other. At the root of this attitude is the failure to view the complementarity which exists between peoples, cultures, faiths, ideologies, world-visions, etc. For the promotion of harmony, it is important to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking. This is something very characteristic of Asian traditions which consider the various dimensions of reality not as contradictory, but as complementary (yin yang) (No.20).

In the official magisterial documents, we see clearly an encouragement to promote a unity in diversity. Consequently, pluralism in theology is officially recognised, provided such pluralism does not lead to relativism.

### **1.5 Pluralism as Enrichment**

We know from experience that any human knowledge is limited. Moreover, there is a difference between every theological expression and the reality signified by that expression. In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas noted that the act of faith terminates not in the expression, but in the reality itself (S.Th. II-II, q.1, a.2 ad 2). In theological knowledge, the expression always falls short of the reality, precisely because we are dealing with a mystery which cannot be fully comprehended. Since no expression is perfect, additional expressions are not only possible, but beneficial for a fuller understanding of the mystery. In the Asian way of perceiving, where experience has priority over rational knowledge, this point becomes more significant because the ways of experiencing any reality are diverse; and consequently, the expressions of that experience are also diverse. Reality is one and multidimensional. However, the ways in which we, as different subjects, perceive the truth of this one reality are diverse, precisely because Truth is infinite. All these different ways of perceiving the one truth of reality enable us to comprehend that reality in a fuller, richer manner than if we had only one way to perceive it. This point is clearly illustrated by the existence of the four gospels in the biblical canon, which enable us to grasp the person of Jesus and his message in a fuller, richer manner than if there existed only one gospel.

Moreover, we Christians believe that human life stands between the now of what has been accomplished by Christ's saving deeds and the not-

yet of the fulfilment of these deeds at the end of time. This is applicable even to Christian knowledge. "Now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror; then, we shall see face to face. My knowledge is imperfect now; then, I shall know even as I am known" (1 Cor 13:12). Christ sends the Holy to guide us into all truth (Jn 16:13). Thus, with solid theological reasons, we can affirm the insufficiency of current human expressions of our faith. Such insufficiency allows for pluralism in theology.

However, in recognising the value of pluralism in theology, the Church cannot allow doctrinal irresponsibility or indifferentism. Legitimate theological pluralism ought to meet the basic standards of revelation (as conveyed through Scripture and Tradition), of the *sensus fidelium* (as contained in the faith of the People of God as a whole), and of the Magisterium of the Church. We need to emphasise three basic criteria: Revelation, the *sensus fidelium*, and the Magisterium. They help us to differentiate a legitimate pluralism of theological expression from a pluralism which would destroy the doctrinal unity of the Church. Moreover, legitimate pluralism in theology is not only essential for the Church to be meaningful for all peoples, but it is also a sign that faith is incarnated in the history and life of different peoples, showing the vitality of the Church till the end of time.

## CHAPTER TWO

### History of Christian Theological Methods

#### 2.1 Theological Methods in the Eastern Tradition

##### 2.1.1 General Observations

Corresponding to the Semitic, Hellenistic and Roman cultures and world-visions, that originally shaped the Church, we have three traditions in the Church: Syriac, Greek and Latin. To divide the Christian tradition into simply Greek (Eastern) and Latin (Western) does not seem historically fair and adequate, for it ignores the Syriac Oriental tradition. In this context Eastern means and includes both the Byzantine-Greek and the Semitic-Syriac traditions.

In the framework of the FABC it may be specially noted that the Syriac tradition is originally Asian. Further, the only Christians who were in India before the arrival of the Western missionaries in the 16th Century were the St. Thomas Christians of the Malabar coast, belonging to the East Syriac ecclesial tradition. They had their own identity in the Law of St. Thomas. These Christians exhibited an Asian face of Christianity.

Chief representatives of the Eastern theological traditions are: from



the Greek side, the Cappadocian Fathers, Chrysostom, Pseudo-Dionysius; and from the Syriac line, Aphraates, Ephrem (306-373), Jacob of Serugh (+521), and Babai the Great.

The venerable traditions of the individual Eastern churches that take their origin from Alexandria, Antioch, Armenia, Chaldea and Constantinople have preserved with love and interest the theology of the Church Fathers based on the Scriptures. They also keep up the liturgical approach of awe and devotion towards the inexpressible mystery of God. Doxologies, prayers of epiclesis, mysticism and monasticism are the common heritage of these traditions. They are proud of the spirituality, drawn directly from the Holy Scriptures, as well as of their mind-set that has not been affected by rationalism.

## 2.1.2 Special Features

### 2.1.1.1 Scriptural and Typological

According to the Eastern theological vision, what God has done for us is the primary object of theology, and not what God is in himself. Eastern theology is hence based on the economy of salvation. As the scriptures are the written records of this history of salvation, Eastern Theology is primarily scriptural. Theology is understood as interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. This is specially illustrated in the various commentaries and homilies of the Fathers.

In interpreting the Scriptures, the preferred method is that of typological exegesis which is best exemplified in St. Ephrem's writings. He employed typological exegesis to provide a network of links between the two Testaments. A good example of this is his treatment of the verse in John's Gospel about the piercing of Jesus' side with a lance from which at once blood and water poured out (John 19:34). The "side" and the "lance" point back to the opening chapters of Genesis, to Adam's "side" from which Eve came forth, and to the "sword" that barred the entrance to Paradise. The "blood" and "water" point forward to the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist (the order of the two words in John 19:34 is reversed.) This provides the following pattern: Adam's side is to Eve as Christ's side is the Church (sacraments). The first parents were stripped of their original "robe of glory" and banished from Paradise, kept out by the sword of fire. A second weapon undoes this damage by piercing another side from which flow forth the sacraments that wash away sin, and effect the re-entry into Paradise, enabling the baptised to feed on Christ, the Tree of Life. Baptism clothed them in the 'robe of glory' which Adam and Eve had lost. Eve's origin from Adam's side is in turn linked with Mary's miraculous giving birth to Christ, thus providing the chiastic pattern: Adam is to Eve as Mary

is to Christ (second Adam). Ephrem, in this connection, notes that the virgin conception and birth of Jesus by Mary, alludes to Adam's birth from the virgin earth.

The aim of exegesis is to bring the concealed mystery to light. Scriptures have two levels of meaning, an external historical and an inner spiritual meaning. According to the Syriac tradition the primary object of the search is the inner spiritual reality, the spiritual sense, rather than the external historical sense

#### 2.1.2.2 Liturgical and Doxological

Since Liturgy is the celebration of the experience of revelation and salvation, it is considered an important source of theology, next to Scriptures in the Eastern Tradition. Hence, the doxological nature of Eastern theology as manifested in the writings of the Fathers and ancient Christians in their hymns and prayers. The dictum "law of prayer, law of faith" (*lex orandi, lex credendi*) is best illustrated in the Eastern tradition.

#### 2.1.2.3 Trinitarian and Spirit-Centered

The whole framework of Eastern Theology is Trinitarian. This is very much reflected in the liturgy, as well as in the theology centered on the economy of salvation. At the same time, due importance is given to the theology of co-penetration/mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*). In expounding the doctrine of the Trinity the Eastern Church Fathers took the three persons as the starting point, and thence passed to the one nature; while the Western thought most frequently followed the opposite course — from the one nature to the three persons. The Eastern way, in conformity to the Holy Scripture and to the baptismal formula that names the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, starts from the concrete. For the Eastern Church, if one speaks of God, it is always in the *concrete*: the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob; the God of Jesus Christ; it is always the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Eastern Theology gives special importance to the Holy Spirit. In the Eastern theological understanding, much emphasis is given to the sending of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost) as the fruit of the Christ event. Christ returns to the Father so that the Spirit may be sent. According to St. Basil there is no gift conferred on the creature in which the Holy Spirit is not present. Whereas the work of Christ is seen as concerning human *nature* which he recapitulates in his hypostasis, the work of the Holy Spirit concerns *persons*, being applied to each one singly. The Holy Spirit is acclaimed as the source of sanctification. According to Eastern thinking Christ is the sole image appropriate to the common nature of humanity, and the Holy Spirit

grants to each person the possibility of fulfilling the likeness in the common nature.

In the Eastern tradition grace is treated in the theology of the Spirit (Pneumatology), as the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The theology of grace is the same as a developed treatise within the theology of the Spirit. Consequently, Easterners have not developed the concept of "created grace," a term that appeared in the Western theological tradition.

#### 2.1.2.4 Mystical

The Eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology, between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the Church. For the Easterners theology is more a matter of mystical experience than rational reflection. This is in tune with the general trait of the contemplative bent of the Eastern/Oriental heritage. In the Indian terminology *anubhava* (being with) characterizes this contemplative approach, which is by nature experiential. According to Gregory of Nyssa it is not knowing something about God that the Lord declared blessed, but having God in oneself. The focus of mystical understanding is not to know that God is immutable, unchanging essence, but somehow to participate in that immutability. Mysticism is not logical, consistent thinking about truth but the direct, immediate appropriation of that truth in conscious experience.

Easterners sometimes distinguish between theology and theological teaching. Theology is the existential experience of God; theological teaching consists, on the contrary, in reasoning and scientific exposition of the experiential knowledge of God. According to St. Isaac the Syrian "a true theologian speaks the language of the world to come, while theological teaching is made for historical work here below." Because of this special perception Easterners do not conceive of theology as bound by a systematic structure; theology has to go often beyond concepts.

The Eastern theological approach sees theology as a means subserving an end that transcends all knowledge. This end is union with God, or deification (*theosis* — Greek Fathers). According to the Eastern tradition of spirituality the eternal bliss of Heaven is not the vision of the essence of God, but deification, the union with the Trinity. This union is neither hypostatic (as in the Incarnation), nor substantial (as in the case of the three Divine Persons), but a union with God in his *energies*. In deification we are by grace, i.e., in the divine energies, all that God is by nature. We remain creatures while becoming God by grace, as Christ remained God in becoming man by Incarnation. The distinction in God between the essence and energies is a special feature of Eastern theology. The divine energies are



distinct from the essence of God, and are at the same time *uncreated*. What the Western tradition calls by the name of the supernatural is signified in the East by the *uncreated* divine energies.

Theology (theory) thus has an eminently practical significance. For Easterners, theology is not merely an academic subject among others, but the outcome of a lived experience of God.

#### 2.1.2.5 Apophatic

God is inaccessible to us; yet humankind attains to communion with God. How does Eastern theology explain this? Although God is in his essence totally inaccessible, we can participate in his *energies*. They create an experience of relationship with God. Theology is, hence, not rationalistic, but a *passionate* pursuit. It speaks the language of *silence*, which is the language of *future* reality. According to Clement of Alexandria we can be related to God, more by saying what God is not than by saying what God is. The Cappadocian Fathers were all *apophatiticians*. Gregory of Nyssa presents a paradigm based on the experience of Moses. He speaks of the manifestation of God first in light, then through a cloud, and finally in darkness. Gregory says that knowing God is a not-knowing.

Knowledge about God is beyond the human mind. This is knowing through unknowing. Eastern apophatic theology starts with the concept of an ungraspable fullness. We close our eyes against the sun, not to deny its reality, but because it is full of light, and because we are unable to look at it directly. This apophatic nature of Eastern theology is very much related to the Indian “not this, not this” (*neti, neti*) approach.

The Eastern apophatic approach, however, is not an impersonal mysticism, an experience of absolute, divine nothingness in which both the human person and God as person are swallowed up. The goal to which apophatic theology leads is something that transcends all notions both of nature and of person; it is the Trinity. St. Gregory Nazianzen writes in one of his poems: “From the day whereon I renounced the things of the world to consecrate my soul to luminous and heavenly contemplation..... from that day my eyes have been blinded by the light of the Trinity, whose brightness surpasses all that the mind can conceive.” The Eastern Fathers in general introduced a Christian apophatic theology, which transformed rational speculation into a contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity.

#### 2.1.2.6 Symbolic and Paradoxical

According to early Syriac tradition divine revelation is not the total manifestation of the Divinity, but the gratuitous manifestation of certain

aspects and realities of the Divinity that are necessary for salvation. The process of divine self-revelation takes place in three ways: through types and symbols that are present in both Nature (natural world, *kyana*), and in Scripture (above all the OT, *ktaba*); through names or metaphors which God allows to be used of himself in Scripture; and finally and above all in the Incarnation. The symbols point vertically to God's Trinitarian Being, or horizontally to his Incarnate Son. Further, symbols and types work for Ephrem *horizontally* (between the two Testaments), and *vertically* (between this world and the heavenly world). Christ is called the "Lord of Symbols," who reveals the true meaning of the Old Testament symbols. For Ephrem, symbol and reality are intimately related, for inherent in the symbol (*raza* = mystery) is the hidden power and meaning of reality.

On account of God's supreme transcendence, he is described as hidden. He reveals himself because of his mercy and loving kindness. Through symbolic actions and symbolic language the Scriptures depict the mysterious manner in which God made himself present through historical persons and events. The area of intellectual inquiry is the realm of revealed divine realities. But the *hidden* divine realities should not be unduly intruded into.

As opposed to the rationalistic method of *definitions*, the Eastern theology employs the method of using symbols and paradoxes. Definitions by providing "boundaries" are likely to have a limiting effect on people's understanding of the subject of inquiry. Since theological "definitions" (a heritage from Greek philosophy) touch upon some aspects of God's being, they attempt to contain the uncontainable, to limit the limitless. On account of these risks, Eastern theology, especially of the early Syriac tradition, avoids any systematization or definition. For this purpose poetry was found more convenient than prose, for poetry is better capable of sustaining the essential dynamism and fluidity characteristic of paradox and symbolism. Ephrem's use of hymns and verse homilies corresponds to the Indian method of *mantras* (repetitive recitation).

The Early Syriac theological vision founded on imagery and symbolism has vitality and dynamism, since images and symbols are basic to all human experiences, and remain prior to any philosophical categorisation. Some of the images used are fire for divinity and clothing for the Incarnation. The symbolic mode of theological reflection is based on the sacramental world-view. In this vision the fundamental role of symbol originates from the affirmation of the indwelling of God in humankind created in the image and likeness of God. On account of this image in humanity, it can recognise the divine power within itself and in other creatures. Symbols guide the subject into a participatory knowledge, and through it to the higher levels of transformation.

One can illustrate the basic difference between the philosophical approach with its search for definitions, and the symbolic approach as follows: visualise a circle with a point in the center, where the point represents that aspect of God under inquiry. The philosophical approach seeks to identify and locate this central point, in other words, to define it. The symbolic approach, on the other hand, attempts no such thing. Rather, it provides a series of paradoxical pairs of opposites, placing them at opposite points around the circumference of the circle. The central point is left undefined, but something of its nature and whereabouts can be inferred by joining up the various opposite points, the different paradoxes, on the circle's circumference. Some of St. Ephrem's favorite paradoxes are: "the Shepherd who became the Lamb, "the Farmer who became the Wheat, the Great One who became small, the Rich One who became poor" (*Akatistos*).

### 2.1.2.7 Iconic

Eastern theology is more akin to *art* than to *science*. This leads to iconic theology, as well as the theology of icons of the Eastern tradition. Icons can be seen as the meeting point between theology and spirituality. Their meaning can be developed in the light of incarnational theology.

The theology of icons originated and developed in the Greek-Byzantine world. This took place in the framework of monasticism and asceticism based on the spirituality of conforming to Christ, to be his *icon*. At the same time it was related to art and aesthetics in the Church. Icon is an ancient art form in the Orient. Eastern theology is said to be rooted in art. And conversely, Eastern art is rooted in a religious setting. Icons serve in the Eastern Church various purposes: symbolic, didactic, catechetical, kerygmatic, liturgical and aesthetic.

Icons result from long meditation. They are the expressions of the heart and conscience of the people of God, and are formed on the basis of the teachings of the early Fathers and traditions. So they serve as one of the best means to pass on Catholic traditions. In the icons we have a *visual* theology. Icons evoke the Church's memory of what is represented. As iconography was considered to be a holy task, the Church has therefore carefully monitored the iconographers and the regulations regarding iconography. Only a baptised person, for instance, is allowed to make icons.

A theologian's task is similar to that of an iconographer. The gospel narratives and the message of icons are closely related. The basis of both is the Incarnation. The theologian and the iconographer are engaged in the same task of proclaiming the faith. Icon is a sacrament insofar as it is the visible expression of the invisible. What the Holy Scriptures express through words is expressed through *color* by the icons. In the Eastern theological



vision, art or icon is meant to *praise* Jesus as the creator and redeemer. It is also a theology of *transfiguration*; each icon represents in anticipation the glorification to happen in the future, in the world to come. Icons are thus part of the transformed new world. Eastern theological tradition creates a new *attitude* among the believers or spectators, introducing them to a holy place and holy time. In this sense, an icon is a window onto eternity. The whole Church is and has to be an icon in this way. Icons are considered as a special help for the uneducated.

In the Greek world icons are mainly in *drawing* and *painting* (colors); in the Syriac tradition icons are also in *writing*. Here words are used as icons, giving shape to an iconic theology.

#### 2.1.2.8 Spiritual and Monastic

Theology, spirituality and monasticism are closely related in the Eastern tradition. Religious life, as started in the Eastern tradition, was meant to be a life of radical commitment of witness to the eschatological life. According to Evagrius (+399) the one who has purity in prayer is a true theologian, and one who is a true theologian has purity in prayer

#### 2.1.2.9 Ecclesial and Pastoral

In the Eastern understanding a theologian is basically an ecclesial person who shares the faith of the Church, the people of God. He is not some one who is above the other believers. On the contrary, he is a believer, as is any other Christian: as much bound and as much free as others by the laws of faith. It is this faith that molds and informs theology. Since Christian faith is faith *with* the Church, Eastern theology is rooted in the ecclesial tradition as well. Theology in the East is generally pastoral in approach and in intent. Hence, it is addressed to the believers, rather than to scholars and to students.

#### 2.1.2.10 Theo-nomous

Eastern theology takes God and his revelation as the norm for human beings. This is indicated in the theology of the image of God as elaborated by St. Gregory of Nyssa, as contrasted with that of St. Augustine, who takes as his starting point human psychology and attempts to work out an idea of God. The method he employs is one of psychological analogies applied to God, and thus to theology. St. Gregory of Nyssa starts, on the other hand, with what revelation tells us of God in order to discover what it is in the human which corresponds to the divine image. This is a theological method applied to anthropology.

### 2.1.3 The Theology of the St. Thomas Christians

According to the general opinion of scholars, the St. Thomas Christians of India did not develop any theology of their own. This opinion is based on the fact of there being no pre-sixteenth century record of their theological positions. Nonetheless, we may derive some idea of the theological experience of the St. Thomas Christians from their lives and tradition.

Examining the social-ecclesiastical life of the St. Thomas Christians, we can come to the conclusion they lived an implicit incarnational theology. They were aware that Christ in becoming man assumed everything human and redeemed all social and cultural values. This is indicative of their adapting the Hindu cultural and social realities into their own social and religious life (church architecture, marriage customs, dress, rites for the dead, etc.). They respected the other faiths of their milieu, and promoted communal harmony and cordial relations with the Hindus and also Muslims. From the Decree of the Synod of Diamper (1599) we can infer that the St. Thomas Christians believed each one can be saved in his own Law, all Laws are right. However, the Synod declared this to be erroneous. In practice the St. Thomas Christians had a theology of the Particular/Individual Church. We see here the principle of the Church as a *communion of Churches*.

From the practice of church administration, it is known that the St. Thomas Christians had a well developed theology of the role of the laity, especially regarding parish administration. Secondly, the bishop was a monk who was considered to be the spiritual leader, leaving the administrative part to a priest called the archdeacon. This is based on the biblical example of Moses following the advice of Jethro.

Enforcement of the Synod of Diamper decrees meant a process of Latinization of the St. Thomas Christians. This affected the liturgical life and spirituality, the administrative system, as well as the formation of the clergy, eventually leading to a schism of one group dissociating themselves from the Western missionary ecclesiastical rule, and becoming non-Catholic. The group that remained Catholic is known as the Syro-Malabar Church (Rite). One schismatic group that joined the Jacobites later rejoined the Catholic Church (1930), and is known as the Syro-Malankara Church.

Vatican II gave the impetus to the St. Thomas Christians to reclaim their heritage and to develop a distinct identity and theology. As a result of this, two different schools of thought in the Syro-Malabar Church have emerged. One school stresses restoration of the lost heritage and subsequent adaptation; the other school emphasises immediate reform as

inculturation. For these purposes, centers of Oriental theology and spirituality, on one hand; and centers for inculturation, interreligious dialogue, ashram ways of religious life, attempts at developing an Indian theology, on the other hand, have already been launched.

#### 2.1.4 Concluding Remarks

Asian theology will do well to imbibe the spirit of Eastern theology, with its emphasis on the Holy Spirit, mysticism, spirituality, and an apophatic approach. In the process of inculturation which is underway in Asia, the Syriac tradition in particular, which is actually purely Asian, will enhance the development of an Asian theological method.

The Syriac theological tradition is a legacy that enriches the whole Church. In particular it has to be given a very important place in the restoration/reform of the ecclesial life of the St. Thomas Christians in India today. This, in turn, will be a valuable contribution to the Church in Asia and to Asian theology.

The above-named categories of Eastern theology have also weak points. With its focus on eschatology and mysticism, the Eastern tradition lacks sensitivity to social realities and to social evils. This is an area where Eastern theology can be inspired by the new trends present in Western theology. Eastern theology is less logical and systematic but more pastoral and spiritual.

In turn, Eastern theology can offer help to peoples worldwide in their search for a deeper spirituality and meaning of life, as it calls for an approach of the heart and a poetic dimension, rather than the predominance of reason. Whereas definitions can have a fossilizing effect, the Eastern methodology of symbolism and paradoxes has a vitalizing and freshening impact. The Spirit-centeredness of Eastern theology can promote the emerging theology of religions, since the work of the Spirit in all cultures will be given due attention. In fact, the Spirit is the great Pontifex (the bridge-maker) between the various peoples, their cultures and religions. This leads to a world of harmony for which people are thirsting.

## 2.2 Theological Method in the Western Tradition

### 2.2.1 Historical Background and Developments

Decisive for the development of theological thought in Christianity is the fact that the Christian religion was transferred from its country of origin to other countries. The first *translation*, literally *carrying to another spot*, was to Asia Minor, northwest of Judea. From there, it went farther north-



westward to Greece, Rome and other parts of Europe. Early Christians throughout the Roman Empire, but in particular in Rome, were persecuted by the imperial power. It was only with the Edict of Milan 313 C.E. that the Christian faith could be practised in the open. This set the stage for great thinkers like St. Augustine and other "Western Fathers of the Church" to make their contribution to theology. The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were translated into the Latin Vulgate largely through the efforts of St. Jerome. Soon, however, the Dark Ages descended upon Europe with the destruction of the old Roman Empire by Northern invaders. During this period, the sacred scriptures and commentaries on them were preserved and copied, meditated upon and studied in monasteries in rural areas. These monasteries were also oases of liturgical and devotional prayer. It is also in this period that the people in the new countries of Europe were evangelized, mostly by evangelizers from the monasteries.

European culture emerged from the Dark Ages as the result of the process of mingling Hellenistic elements with Roman and German traditions. This led to the development of the "Holy Roman Empire of The German Nation," with its inbuilt antagonism between the Holy Power of the Pope and the Holy Power of the Christian Emperor.

In this historical context, the European theological tradition is the result of an ever new *reception* of the Christian faith, expressed in *reformation* and *renovation* from within its own territorial confines. In the Eastern Church, on the other hand, one finds the Christian faith enriched in its expressions by Syrian, Coptic, Chaldean, Byzantine and other traditions, that were already ancient when the Church emerged from persecution. These ancient Eastern traditions were not changed by political and cultural upheavals like those that occurred with the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

The difference between Western and Eastern Christian theology has been characterised by the emphasis on rationality within the Western tradition, where the transition from *myths* to *logos* was effected by stressing the historicity and rationality of the Christian faith. The Great Schism of 1054 marked the end of the dialogue between Eastern and Western theology, with great consequences for both. European theology grew and developed in isolation from the Eastern Christian traditions.

Missionaries from Western Christianity ventured into the "new world" discovered by European explorers in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, that is to say, into North and South America, Africa, Asia-Pacific, China, India and their neighbouring regions. When this happened, Western European culture was understood by these missionaries as the model for the whole world. In the encounter with other cultures, this viewpoint led to generally negative reactions towards other traditions. The missionaries may

have granted that other cultures had their values and even great achievements, but these were deemed deficient or in need of purification vis-à-vis Western culture.

Eventually, however, European thinkers realised the limitations of their own cultural traditions, and with the help of progress in knowledge and science, people in Europe tried to promote a new culture that would transcend the old. This effort went hand-in-hand with some forms of cultural relativism which cannot be found in other great cultures, like the Chinese or Indian traditions.

### 2.2.2 Eastern and Greek Roots of Western Theology

At the dawn of Christian theology stand the Apologists, who defended Christian doctrine, in the first place against Greek philosophers and their ideas, and only secondarily against the adherents of Greek or Roman religions. From the beginning, the position taken by Christian apologists was that of the absoluteness of Christianity, that is, the claim that everything which is valid, worthy and true rightly find its fulfilment and destination only in Christianity. This implied that when Greek philosophers had insights into the truth, they necessarily must have been in contact with the *Logos*, whose real nature, however, remained closed to them, because the mystery of incarnation was revealed only in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the true and only incarnation of the eternal *Logos*.

The theological school of Alexandria developed from a school for catechists in the second century. It took on academic forms of teaching to explain the Christian faith to people trained in Greek philosophy, and to answer the objections levelled against Christian tenets by non-Christian philosophers. Representatives of the school of Alexandria are Pantaenus (ca. 180), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 140-216), and Origen (ca. 185-254). Clement is important because he developed the idea that it is one and the same *Logos* who illumined the prophets and the philosophers. The source of all truth is this *Logos* who has become man in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the one and only teacher (*paedagogos*) of all humankind. The typological-allegorical exegetical method developed by Clement enabled the theologian to detect the "germinative words" (*logoi spermatikoi*) in the teachings and doctrines of Greek philosophers and poets. Origen developed the doctrines of Clement further, using the philosophy of Plato. Origen laid the foundations for the Christological and Trinitarian theology formulated and defined in the first Councils. He developed the ideas of the "God-Man" (*theanthropos*), the "consubstantial" (*homoousios*), and "the mother of God" (*theotokos*) for Mary. His eschatological ideas of the final salvation of all created things have influenced Christian thinking deeply.

The theologians in Antioch relied more on Aristotle than on Plato in their way of doing theology. In interpreting holy scripture the theologians in Antioch were closer to the rabbinical tradition and did not use the Hellenistic forms developed by Jews living in Alexandria. The best known theologians of the Antiochean school are Paulus of Samosata (+272), John Chrysostom (ca. 344-407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428), and Nestorius (381-451).

The Fathers of the Church generally recognized the value of pagan culture and its usefulness in thinking out the faith. Augustine (354-430), in a special way, stressed the role of human wisdom in helping the believer to deepen his understanding of the Mystery. The intellect is fully assumed by the dynamism of faith, through which God is not only the object of knowledge, but the source and the goal of love, embracing the whole of life.

### 2.2.3 Scholastic Theology

In the early Middle Ages theological training emerged from the monasteries to take pride of place in the universities of Europe, especially Paris. At first, theological reflection was restricted, because it lacked a metaphysical basis which could organise the complex subject material. It was Peter Lombard (1095-1160) who created the first systematic approach to theology with his *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum* in which he organised the material of theology according to four subjects: 1. The Doctrine of God, 2. The Doctrine of Creation, 3. The Doctrine of Salvation, and 4. The Sacraments and Eschatology. Nourished by continuous reading of the Holy Scriptures and of the Church Fathers, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) developed theology as a science which was both faithful to the primacy of God's revelation and to Aristotelian dialectics and philosophy. This synthesis of "believing and understanding", however, could later degenerate into a mere "science of conclusions", when revelation was no more studied for new meanings, but the revealed data were considered already given in the dogmatic formulations.

The contributions to theology and philosophy of the great Franciscan and Dominican theologians, teaching in the great universities of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were decisive, and mark Western theological tradition to this very day. It was a time when Christianity tried to find its bearings after a grave crisis. The crisis was the trauma of the emergence of Islam and its swift military expansion from Arabia to the Holy Land, the birthplace of Christianity, and then across North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula, and even into the heartland of France (the decisive battle of Tours and Poitiers in 732). It left Western Europe isolated from the East and cut off by the Islamic states surrounding and encircling it. The Great Schism (1054) separated the Eastern and Roman Churches and brought



about the separation of theological traditions. The West would henceforth develop in isolation.

Living in a Europe surrounded and in some areas penetrated by the phenomenon of Islam, some theologians dealt with the challenge of this “new religion” and its belief to be the “fulfilment” of what Judaism and Christianity had failed to accomplish. Among such theologians are Peter Damian, Thomas Aquinas (*Summa contra Gentiles*) and Raimund Lullus.

## 2.2.4 Mystical Traditions in Christian Theology

Christian mysticism is influenced by the Neo-Platonic ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius. Plato spoke of a double movement of the human soul emanating from God and returning into God. In Christian thinking this idea was transformed: humankind was created by God and redeemed in Jesus Christ, who in his incarnation transforms humankind into his likeness and enables the creature to find its destination in the mystical union with the Creator. The exponent of the Netherland Mysticism was Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381). The *Devotio Moderna* founded by Geert Grote (1340-1384), and the seminal work of the *Imitation of Christ*, stand in this tradition. The height of Christian mystical theology in the West was reached with the life and work of the great Spanish mystics, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and John of the Cross (1542-1591).

## 2.2.5 The Theological Agenda of the Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was started by Martin Luther (1483-1546) and his theses in 1517; it was continued and enlarged by Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Jean Calvin (1509-1564). The theological agenda of the reformers was expressed in the formulas of “only scripture, only faith, only grace (*sola scriptura, sola fide and sola gratia*).” Tragically, various reform movements resulted in the split of the Western Church and the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in Central Europe.

The Reformation was answered by the Counter-Reformation initiated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). For the later missionary expansion of Christianity into Asia and Africa this meant that mission by the divided Christian churches and denominations became an export of division. Only with the emergence of the Ecumenical Movement in the 20th century did a process of understanding and healing of these divisions within the Christian Churches begin. Vatican II was a watershed as the Catholic Church responded to the positive contributions of the Reformation in the field of biblical theology, and made “the restoration of unity among all Christians one of its chief concerns” (UR 1). In cooperation with the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church there have been further devel-

opments in reaching agreements in disputed theological areas like justification.

## 2.2.6 The Challenge of the Enlightenment to European Theology

The emergence of the theories of Enlightenment can be seen as a reaction to the dogmatism and restrictions by the ecclesiastical and secular authorities on theological research. The philosophers of the Enlightenment reacted against these restrictions by postulating the freedom of reason, the end of intolerance, and the right of the individual to use his or her intellectual faculties freely. The key concepts were rationalism, mathematical clarity, optimistic belief in the power of reason and a critical evaluation of all theories.

The period of the Enlightenment gave birth to subjectivism and individualism. In the search for an unshakeable foundation for human thinking, Descartes found certainty only in the self-awareness of the thinking subject: *Cogito ergo sum*. From there Descartes proceeded to divide reality between the “thinking subject” (*res cogitans*) and “extended beings” (*res extensa*). This resulted in two separate realms which finally led to a dualism of spirit and matter, and to a theory of man as subject and all other things as objects of human reasoning and activity.

On the positive side, the Enlightenment brought new freedom to all layers of society. The influence of ecclesiastical and secular authorities receded. There were many corrections with regard to an excessive dogmatism, overreliance on sacraments and liturgical practices, excessive belief in miracles, use of relics, pilgrimages and other practices. The fight for the freedom of the individual, equal rights for all humankind and solidarity among people—in the famous triad of the French Revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—was originally opposed by Church authorities because of their social-political repercussions. It took more than a century before Christian theologians recognized these values, as well as their socio-political consequences, as being in conformity with the Gospel, and as genuine offsprings of Christian insights into the nature of humankind and society.

## 2.2.7 The Neo-Scholastic School

The revival of Thomism and the Scholastic method of doing theology in the 19th and 20th century, in the time of Pope Leo XIII, arose from the perception that the central topics of theology had been dealt with long ago. The best thing for theologians to do was to revive the teachings of great theologians of the past, giving priority to St. Thomas Aquinas. New insights into theological problems were seen as logical developments of the data contained in the dogmatic formulations of past Councils. Genuine

development of dogma seemed restricted to minor issues. In this theology, history, the lived experience of the faithful, as well as economic, political and cultural factors, did not play much of a role. Relying on abstract philosophical principles, which were assumed to contain universal truths, this deductive theology considered itself to be, in its form and conclusions, of universal validity. The idea that historical circumstances could and should play a role in the theologizing process, was rejected: this was seen only as a danger for the universal validity of Christian dogma.

For the missionary activity of the Church, the proclamation of the Gospel, and the establishing of the Church and its structures in other continents, this conviction of the universal validity of Western European theology meant that the missionaries in their encounter with other cultures and religions considered the Western method as the only possible way of doing theology. The difficulties they encountered in presenting the message of the Gospel in this Eurocentric form made some missionaries reflect, and motivated them to look for a more appropriate way of presenting the Christian message, making use of different philosophical and theological patterns for theological reflection. This did not meet with much acceptance at the center, and they had to wait until the time of Pope Pius XI and his revocation of the condemnation of the “Chinese Rites,” followed by Vatican II, for their attempts to become respectable.

## 2.2.8 Theology and the Crisis of Modernism

The theological crisis of Modernism in the nineteenth century, and its reaction of Anti-Modernism, gave rise to a certain stagnation in Western theology. Attempts by the Church to counter certain ideas and propositions which seemed to threaten the very foundations of the Faith and the Church resulted in increasing control by the Magisterium over the theological process. The general pattern of theological methodology during this period consisted in following the traditional triad: of starting from Holy Scripture, then having a look at the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, and, especially, reflecting on the position of the Church’s Magisterium. Only then could there be a personal reflection on the theological problems at hand. This method led to a seeming uniformity of theological thinking in the Church. This “seeming uniformity” was deceptive, and new forms of doing theology, like the *nouvelle théologie* in France, evolved and laid the ground for the New Spring of Vatican II.

## 2.2.9 The Impact of Vatican II on Western Theology

New forms of theology developed, perhaps first in France, but spread to Germany and other European, as well as North American countries. These laid the foundation for Vatican II. The encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*



of Pius XII breathed new life into the study of the Bible and allowed scholars to develop new forms of studying the Bible. The renewed Holy Week Liturgy of Pius XII showed that change was possible and acceptable. The liturgical movement, the ecumenical movement, the priest-worker movement, and many other such movements, were instrumental in developing new theological ideas and methods. Furthermore, for the first time in the history of the Church theologians from Latin America, Africa and Asia began to make their voices heard. With Vatican II a new era of a truly world-wide Church began. With regard to theology this new era brought with it the realization of the need of a contextual theology that takes into account cultural, religious, economic, political and other factors as essential data for theological reflection. The insight into a new way of being a world Church as a community of many local Churches signalled, at the same time, the end of the myth of a one, universally-valid, Catholic theology.

This theological insight has brought many changes in the way of doing theology in the West, as well, bringing new theologies like the Latin American liberation theologies, theologies of inculturation in Africa and Asia, and specific forms of liberation theologies in various areas. It has highlighted one of the inherent difficulties of the previous academic type of theology: the academic theologians often had very limited contact and rapport with the common faithful in the local Churches who lived the Faith.

#### 2.2.10 European Theology and Secularism

In the second half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century Europe in its colonialist and imperialist expansion was the dominant power in the world. During this period theologians and missionaries exported the advanced ideas of European technology, natural sciences, education, means of communication, and political ideas, as universal values which could and should serve everywhere for the development of humankind. In Europe and in North America this led to a domination of rationality and a strong belief in the powers of modern technology and the natural sciences to foster the general progress of humanity. These ideas had their repercussions on Western theology. The worldview in the West changed, and the understanding of the relationship of humankind to nature and creation lost its sacred and mythical character. Nature and creation were seen as the objects of human productivity, to be used as material to build a prosperous world, controlled, if not produced, by humankind. Secularization was seen no longer as the loss of a sense of the sacred and a diminution of the influence of Christianity and the Christian Churches on society, but as the liberation of humankind from the fetters of irrational influences, mythological ideas and other factors hindering the seemingly unlimited, progress of humankind.

Typical for this position were the ideas advanced by J. B. Metz of the “worldly world,” the “humanization of the world,” and the process of “secularization,” as an inevitable development of humankind to a new form of existence which brings to an end the many forms of cultural and religious diversity in the “one world of modernity.” These were the ideas of the Sixties, when the “Secular City” (Harvey Cox) was praised as the model of a new world in which God was seen as the God of history, leading humankind to a new form of living without idols, in a world which was entrusted to humankind as object to be shaped and dominated. Teilhard de Chardin presented a new universal pattern of explaining the course of history and the destiny of the cosmos as a process of humanization, finding its apex in Jesus Christ, that is, in the “Christification” of the cosmos. Secularization was seen as an irreversible global process which would free humankind from the fetters of old beliefs, from the ghosts and spirits contained in religious traditions. For the first time in history humankind would be free to see the world as a “worldly world” and “God” truly as “God.”

The experiences of World War II, the growing poverty and dependence of Africa, Asia and Latin America (the so-called, “Third World”), and the awareness of the ecological devastation that modern technological and industrial development has brought with them, led to the sobering realization that the model of the modern industrialized world could not be a universal model of development for all humankind. The individualist and consumerist type of society developed in the West met with growing resistance from the side of other cultures and religions.

### 2.3 Summing Up

This brief overview of many centuries of theological reflection in the West shows the earnestness and intellectual capacity of the many persons engaged in the theological enterprise, and the scope and variety of the methods employed in interpreting the original message of the Gospel by using the tools of philosophy and other human sciences. For many centuries this type of Western European theology guaranteed unity in cult, in Church law and in the expressions of the Christian faith. It can be seen as a kind of privilege for Western European theology to have preserved the theological and philosophical heritage of the past, to have handed down the knowledge of the biblical languages and commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, and the speculative reflections on the Christian faith. The vast amount of special studies on certain theological problems is a contribution towards the richness of Christian tradition and to human culture as a whole.

However, besides the light there are heavy shadows. The impressive unity in the theological enterprise could only be achieved at the expense of theological pluralism. It is striking how Eurocentric, and even parochial,

this theological enterprise now appears. The claim of being *the* universal way of doing theology is negated by the obvious limitation that it really is restricted to the particular context in which it originated. It is enough to point out that the Roman Catholic theology developed in Western Europe practically ignored the existence of the orthodox theological enterprise within the Oriental Churches. The developments in Protestant theological thinking were mostly seen as unorthodox deviations from the true doctrine, which had to be combated apologetically. As regards the challenges of extra-European religious, cultural and philosophical traditions, these were practically ignored. If they figured in at all, it was again more in the form of reaction to the fact that some of these religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, still existed, and even brought forth movements of renaissance and reform. This phenomenon, however, was seen as disturbing, because it challenged the assumption that the superiority and absoluteness of Christianity would do away with these religions in the long run and absorb the positive values, which might be contained in them, as "germinative seeds of the word" (*logoi spermatikoi*).

Theology in the West is alive and developing in many new directions, but the time of the dominance of Western theological thinking and methodology has definitely come to an end. The Church is faced with the challenge of theological pluralism. This was signalled, for example, by African, Latin American and Asian theologians at the founding of the *Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians* (EATWOT) in Dar-es-Salaam, in 1976, when they rejected a merely academic theology of the European type, which is separated from action, as irrelevant to their way of doing theology. In their eyes the domination of European and North American theologies in their Churches constituted a kind of cultural control, no longer to be tolerated. The EATWOT theologians pointed out that these European and North American theologies originated as responses to certain situations and challenges in these countries, and that, therefore, they cannot claim universal validity. This criticism was repeated in other assemblies of EATWOT in Accra (1977) and in Delhi (1981), when they said that a theological tradition, which makes use of Western methods and is developed on the basis of the Western view of the world and of humankind, has little or no relevance for theologians in the Third World.

These and other criticisms of Western theological thinking and methodology are diminishing, because the development of contextual theologies all over the world has effectively diminished the influence of any single theology, including Western theology. On the other hand, the compatibility of theological pluralism with the unity of the universal Church is a new theological problem which should not be underestimated. Within the history of the Church this is a new phenomenon which raises the question of the limits of inculturation and contextualization. How are we to understand



the expression of the Christian faith of the first ecumenical councils, which formulated the basic dogmas of Christology with help of Greek philosophical terminology, as binding on Christian theologians everywhere and at all times? In theological discussions among Asian theologians, the real issue at stake is whether Asian theologians have the freedom to make use of their cultural and religious heritage and use a terminology developed from their philosophical traditions, and from their lived experience of multireligious societies beset by demeaning poverty and economic injustice, to express the message of the Gospel and the Christian faith.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Theological Method in an Asian Context

#### 3.1 Sources and Resources of Theology in Theological Method in Asian Context

Doing theology in an Asian context means taking into account contextual realities as resources of theology. Methodologically, these enter into a theology done in a given situation. As Christians, we rely first on the Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, which form the one sacred deposit of the Word of God (*Dei Verbum* 10). The teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Christ, has the task of authentically interpreting the deposit of the Word of God in the Spirit, in the ongoing life and mission of the Church. However, as Asian Christians, we do theology together with Asian realities as resources, insofar as we discern in them God's presence, action and the work of the Spirit. We use these resources in correlation with the Bible and the Tradition of the Church. Use of these resources implies a tremendous change in theological methodology. The cultures of peoples, the history of their struggles, their religions, their religious scriptures, oral traditions, popular religiosity, economic and political realities and world events, historical personages, stories of oppressed people crying for justice, freedom, dignity, life, and solidarity become resources of theology, and assume methodological importance in our context. The totality of life is the raw material of theology; God is redemptively present in the totality of human life. This implies theologically that one is using "context" (or contextual realities) in a new way. To clarify this one can distinguish two different senses in which the word "context" is used in theology:

1. Traditionally, the use of contextual realities meant that the context was the background against which one did theology. This background was the people, their culture, religion, history and struggles. The faith or the Gospel and tradition must address the questions and challenges thrown up by the context and respond to them. This kind of theology was concerned with the ways of adapting and applying the message to people in

their concrete socio-religio-cultural situations

2. Today "context" has a new meaning and perspective. Context, or contextual realities, are considered resources of theology (*loci theologici*) together with the Christian sources of Scripture and Tradition. Contextual realities become resources of theology insofar as they embody and manifest the presence and action of God and his Spirit. This is recognized through discernment and interpretation. It calls for theological criteria to recognize and assess the *loci*. This will be taken up below.

The above two meanings of context are related to each other, but the second meaning has new connotations that bring fresh questions into theology. This must be borne in mind as one considers theological method in an Asian context.

As a background to this presentation, one can recall the methods of theological reflection which have, in fact, been used by FABC. Since its inception in 1970 FABC has consistently used a contextual approach to theological reflection. It has interpreted contextual realities as resources for theological reflection, with a view to interpreting the mission of the Church in Asia. Using these resources has become integral to theological and pastoral reflection. One need only recall the method "The Pastoral Cycle" of the FABC. In all the general assemblies, the position papers, statements of the general assemblies, the various institutes and workshops organized by the different offices of FABC, in particular, the Office of Theological Concerns, we see a consistent pattern of theological reflection done with the resources of cultures, religions and sociopolitical realities. This method of using such resources, and of interpreting them as embodying God's presence and action in our history and world, have come to be accepted, and is bearing fruit in the life of the Church.

### **3.2 Contextual Realities as Resources of Theology**

#### **3.2.1 Cultural Resources**

Under this category come the constellations of collective symbolic values, world-views that touch the totality of life, human relationships, community, people's relation to nature, and people's beliefs, customs, etc. In a sense, culture is a people's way of being human and inter-human. It embodies the values of the human person and the community, esteemed virtues such as hospitality, compassion, faithfulness, sense of the sacred, and society's institutions. It includes people's stories, myths, the folk wisdom, etc. These are gifts of God and fruits of the Spirit. They too contain "germinative seeds of the Word" sown by the Spirit.

Further, there is the moral wisdom embodied in the cultures, philosophies and religions of Asian peoples. This is also a resource of theology, since both *knowing* God's purposes, and obeying and responding to them, i.e., *doing* God's will, belong together. The moral dimension is constitutive of the wholeness of theology. In Asia morality is integrated into culture and religion. The moral law is ethico-theological. The fundamental concept of the Hindu--Buddhist tradition is *dharma* or *dhamma*, which is always understood as ethico-theological or ethico-religious; and is, hence a *locus theologicus*, as are Confucian thought and other ethico-religious traditions of the different Asian peoples.

### 3.2.2 Religious Resources

Religions formally treat the Divine, the Sacred and the Ultimate. Religion is a depth dimension of culture. When treating of religion, one can consider creed, cult, code and community as one. These categories are proposed by anthropologists, but may not be fully adequate for the purpose of a Christian theology. They are categories for scientific study. A Christian will also be deeply concerned with the Divine, the presence of the Word, and the action of the Spirit renewing and transforming people, their life and behavior, and leading them to salvation.

Among the elements of religion, scripture is one of the most important. For the believers, scripture is the carrier of divine communication, and testimony of God's presence and action. They are related to soteriological concerns for the ultimate meaning and fulfilment of human life.

For theology in Asia, the Anselmian formula defining theology as "faith seeking understanding" is insufficient. In Hinduism, importance is given to vision (*drsyā*), not reflection, or to the experience (*anubhava*) of the sages. The study of religious tradition or scriptures of the past needs a critical interpretation and sifting, so that they become meaningful today. The study of scriptures is not an archaeological research but a hermeneutical task, an actualizing interpretation. Asian people believe that the Transcendent is present and active in all religious traditions. In discerning and interpreting the word of God present in them, we take seriously the doctrine of the "Word of God coming to enlighten every man" (John 1:9). We read in Acts (14:17) that God never leaves himself without witness. The scriptures of other religions can be said to be witnesses of God, a providential means of God's communication.

We know in fact how much our brothers and sisters of other faiths are spiritually nourished by their scriptures. We need to recognize that in God's providence, the scriptures have helped the followers of other religions to mediate to them a God-encounter. In turn, our own faith has been clarified,



deepened and enriched by their inspiring texts, embodying spiritual ideals. If these texts are willed by God in his providence for them, one can call them in some sense the word of God in the words of men.

People of other faiths consider their scriptures normative for them, providing guidelines for their faith experience, but we do not consider them "inspired" in the sense the Bible is considered inspired. We hold that these scriptures are also willed by God in his Providence. When we use the scriptures of other believers in our theology, we read them in the light of their faith and their discernment. However, our reading of these scriptures reflects a Christian perspective. But, insofar as we are heirs to this heritage, we recognize God's presence in them, and guidance coming from them, and submit ourselves to him who guides all to salvation. Hence, for us the foundational writings of the Asian Experience of the Transcendent God are an important resource for theology.

For Christian theology the Bible remains the primary source, because the Bible mediates the revelation of the mystery of God manifested in Christ, God's eschatological saving presence among us, testified to for us by the apostolic preaching ("faith of the apostles"). The Bible is the primary source because it is "the authenticated expression of God's eschatological revelation which gives the final meaning to all history."

Hinduism, divides its scriptures into self-authenticated texts (*sruti*) and dependent tradition (*smṛti*). For Asian Christian theology, both are significant resources (*pramanas*), to the extent that they mediate God's word to the people, and are a standard of sure and right knowledge of God or of revelation. We accept this possibility, because God's saving will and plan encompass the totality of humanity and human history, including the scriptures of other religions. Many who have had closer contact with and experience of dialogue with Hinduism, recognize the presence of such divine communications, even if they are not perfect. The most important thing is how these texts are discerned and interpreted as embodying authentic elements of the Word.

In our situation of plural traditions of culture and religions, the way to interpret and discover the resources of theology and God's Word in them is to listen. Ecumenical dialogue, interreligious dialogue, and inculturation are expressions of such listening and discernment. At the same time, the experience of dialogue and inculturation, and the accumulated insights from these experiences testify to the work and fruits of the Spirit. We need to learn from the way Jesus recognized and admired the faith of a non-Israelite: "Nowhere, even in Israel, have I found such faith" (Mt 8:10).

One must also note that there are religions that have no formal scrip-

tures but only oral traditions, as is the case of tribal religions with a primal vision of life. Oral traditions are also important resources of theology. It is a happy development among tribal theologians in India, the Philippines, Japan and Malaysia that they have started recovering oral traditions of the tribal religions, their myths and stories as resources for tribal theology. The primal visions of tribal religions and worldviews are significant *loci theologici*. Local Churches of Asia become truly local when they take root in these indigenous traditions.

Other important elements of religion are worship or cult (both its way and its content), the code as a demand of the faith of the people, the commitment people live by, and the life of the community. Worship includes the popular religiosity of the followers of both the world religions and of primal religions, which is manifested in the celebration of feasts, rituals, pilgrimages, which are observed in significant life situations, life cycle rites, etc. Popular religiosity is a *locus theologicus*.

It is important to note that the religious faith lived by the followers of other religions can be learned and retrieved only through intense listening in dialogue. In interreligious dialogue one learns how people's faith and hopes are experienced and lived, and how they are transformative of peoples. The transforming potential of religious faith, and the hope that we witness and touch in the dialogue of life and of spirituality with the followers of other faiths, are significant theological resources. This is an arena revealing God's grace at work.

### 3.2.3 Social Movements as Resources

Movements for social transformation in different areas of human life constitute another resource. All movements for social change, and events marking such a change, can be considered *loci theologici* (accepted theological resources) insofar as they embody the commitment of people to transform themselves and society. This commitment manifests the Spirit's presence. The saga of human struggles for liberation becomes a significant contextual resource.

In liberation movements there is an awakened consciousness and commitment to justice, dignity, freedom, solidarity, and for the transformation of life and society. Reflection on these movements gives birth to new theologies. Examples of this are the Minjung theology in Korea, the theology of struggle in the Philippines, Dalit theology in India. All of these are theologies resulting from a liberative awakening. The liberative interpretation of Hinduism made by Swami Agniwesh, the Dhammic socialism of Bhikku Buddhadasa, liberation theologies in Islam and in other religions are examples of similar processes taking place among followers of other religions.

### 3.2.4 Movements Of Special Importance

#### 3.2.4.1 Women's Movements

There are women's movements and a rising feminine consciousness in all Asian countries. They struggle not only for justice, equality and rights, but also for a new vision of society, for a wholeness in human relationships. This includes a critique of the existing society, its institutions and arrangements, with a vision to move towards a just, humane, participatory, compassionate, peaceful world. Theology in Asia has to reckon with this in a very significant way. Here too, among Christians there is a growing theology with a feminist perspective, such as the ecumenical forum for Asian feminist theology. Women in their theology use their feminine experiences as a resource. The task before theology and theologians, men and women, in Asia is to appropriate this resource in theological reflection.

#### 3.2.4.2 Tribal Movements

Another resource for theology is found in the various tribal movements. Tribal peoples are struggling to protect their identity, their value heritage, and their rights, in situations where they are exploited, displaced and marginalized, such as the Jharkhand movement of the tribals in the Chotanagpur area in India. In their primeval vision of life, religion, culture, land, forests, agriculture, community form one integrated whole. The sense of community, the relationship of people to the land and forests, which are not a commodity but gifts given to all to be protected and conserved by all and for all, is a precious heritage. These realities are for them and for us *loci theologici*, a theological arena where God and his Spirit speak.

#### 3.2.4.3 Ecological Movements

One can mention ecological and environmental movements that link the rights of the people and justice to the goals of preservation of a healthy environment and conservation of nature and its resources, with a sense of intergenerational responsibility and care for the earth as the home for humans and other living beings. These movements of urban, industrialized and technological societies also become *loci theologici*.

#### 3.2.4.4 Reality of the Poor as *Locus Theologicus*

In Asia millions of people still suffer from massive poverty. These victims of deprivation, dispossession, humiliation, exclusion and oppression, who struggle for dignity, freedom, solidarity and a life worthy of their humanity, are privileged resources for theology. The *anawim* are the medium par excellence for a God-encounter. From a Christian perspective the



poor, in the totality of their life, draw God's liberating presence. His option for them, and his covenant with them for their liberation, is also a call for a life of equality, dignity, freedom and solidarity for all. Liberation movements of the marginalized, along with their beliefs and their hopes, are a privileged *locus theologicus* insofar as God is with them, to do justice and to vindicate them. This is also a judgement on their oppressors. The poor mediate God's challenge to them for conversion. Biblical revelation unerringly and pointedly emphasizes the preferential option for the poor.

When the poor, or the non-persons of history and the of contemporary world, come together to struggle for the common project of creating an alternative society that is just, humane, participatory, caring and compassionate, a society of freedom, equality and solidarity, then they become a people. The process by which they become a people should be considered a theological reality. Moreover, the poor, the non-persons and non-peoples live a cosmic religiosity which is a specifically unique resource of theology. Their spirituality is marked by a this-worldiness focused on life's basic needs, which defines their relation to God. Having little, they are totally dependent on God. God is a "God of rice and curry." They cry to God for justice in their struggles here and now. In their cosmic spirituality women find a space for freedom to express their oppression in symbolic ways. Their spirituality is ecological, and their idiom of communication is the story.

The cosmic religiosity of the poor, marked by these characteristics, manifests God's own special love for and pact with the poor, a very significant *locus theologicus*. Christians affirm, in the light of biblical revelation and the social teaching of the Church, that God's preferential love and option is for the poor. This means that the poor are the bearers of the Word of God in their faith in the preferential love of God for them. In other words, they are sacraments of God's preferential love. This sacramental word from the poor will tell us of God's norms for personal and social life as the norms of God's Reign. "To listen to God is to listen to the poor." In the Biblical tradition, "the little ones" are the favored ones of God, to whom the Father and the Son reveal themselves.

There is another sense in which the poor become vicars of Christ, affirmed especially in the last judgement scene. (See Mt 25:31-46; Mk 9:36-37, 41, etc.). In women, children, the sick, the prisoner, the hungry, i.e., the poor, we meet Christ and serve Christ. This is a faith affirmation, and for committed persons an unambiguous experience of God and Christ. Hence, theology has to reckon more and more with this theological reality of the presence of God and Christ. The poor brothers and sisters represent Christ. We must listen to them in discerning the mission of building God's Reign. Here one must mention the significant New Testament thinking that Jesus identifies himself with the poor (Mt 25:31-46), and shares in the

condition of the poor. In the context of his own appeal to help the needy Church and the poor, St. Paul says: "you know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ: he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).

For Christian theology, the foundational principle and central criterion of God's presence and action in the world, in peoples, in religions, in cultures and their history, is the total mystery of Jesus Christ -- incarnation, ministry, passion, death and resurrection, ascension and the Gift of the Spirit (Pentecost), as presented in the New Testament. A deeper and all-embracing grasp of this mystery will be decisive in discerning all the resources of theology: scriptures of other religions, culture, the history of people's suffering and struggles. The same mystery brings an openness to God's liberating truth and saving grace, which is manifested as action of the Spirit in other religions and peoples. It further deepens and expands our own theological resources.

### 3.2.4.5 Peoples' Movements

People's movements for human rights, workers' movements, etc., develop stories of people's struggles for a new humanity, and are important signs of the times which we have to interpret theologically for the mission of God's Kingdom. Based on these resources, there has been a flowering of people's theologies.

Moreover, today we have to read the signs of the times in the economic and political realities of our continent. These, too, are theological resources, to be interpreted and utilized. They may promote human well-being in a way worthy of human persons and communities; or they may be destructive of the same. Economic activity can be humanising and liberating or it can be dehumanizing and oppressive. Today, economic progress is vitiated by the acquisitive goals of profit based on the greed of some groups to the detriment of justice to others. Globalization and the international debt of poor countries are important issues challenging the moral and religious sense of humanity.

Political realities linked to economic, sociocultural and religious realities, the political histories of peoples and nations, insofar as they impact the present and affect the future, can also be *loci theologici*. For example, we can mention the movement for national independence in India and other countries. We also need to remember important persons and events, e.g., Gandhi and the Non-Violence movement, and political developments, e.g., the UNO Charter of Human Rights, the Indian Constitution.

In all these realities, we need to read the signs of the times, interpret

them for their human, religious and spiritual content, and respond to God's mission in our times.

### 3.3 Specifically Christian Sources

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, as one sacred deposit of the Word of God, enjoy primary normativity and fundamental importance for theology. The Church believes that the revelatory Word of God is supremely fulfilled in the Christ-event.

A dynamic understanding of the Sacred Tradition in the ongoing life of the Church includes the doctrinal teachings of the councils, symbols of faith or creeds proposed by them, as well as the liturgical traditions of the Church (*lex orandi lex credendi* — "as people pray, so they believe"), and the accepted teachings of the Fathers of the Church, both East and West. Growth in the understanding of the realities and the words handed on takes place "through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (Lk 2:19, 51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth" (DV 8).

Moreover, the Council says: "God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the Spouse of his beloved Son. And the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church — and through it in the world — leads believers to the full truth and makes the word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness (Col 3:6)." (DV 8) In the Church, both Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence, as both flow from the same divine wellspring (DV 10).

### 3.4 The Theological Basis of Resources

Based on these Christian sources one reflects on the new resources of cultures, religions, peoples, their history, struggles, movements, their sufferings and hopes, as well as economic and political realities and sees in them the action of the Spirit. The action of the Spirit can be seen in the increase of faith, hope and love in people, in their being strengthened in struggles for new life in hope. The Spirit vivifies, renews, transforms bestows life on humanity in all its diversity of peoples, cultures and social mores. It is always liberative and promotive of the well-being of people and, therefore, redemptive and salvific. Its work is seen in an increase and enrichment of human life, and in the resurrection of the humiliated and the downtrodden. We know from our faith that God and his Spirit are present and active in creation and in the whole of human history. God encompasses



all dimensions of life, leading it to transformation and redemption. It is the liberating and transforming presence and action of God and his Spirit in the cosmos and in history that makes contextual realities theological resources.

Doing theology with Asian resources means that these *loci theologici* are integrated into theology, together with the Christian sources of faith which guide our theological enterprise decisively, though not exclusively. We thus move into new frontiers of theology — the history of Asian peoples. We expand our horizons, gain insight into God's mystery and his ways operative among the peoples of the continent.

One might ask: What is the theological basis in the Christian tradition for the discernment and interpretation of contextual realities as *loci theologici*? First, Christian faith considers the whole universe, all of creation, as a manifestation of God's glory and goodness. As St. Bonaventure says: "God created all things not to increase his glory and goodness, but to manifest them and to communicate them." Christian tradition and spirituality have recognized that the universe reveals God and is also a sacrament of God's love for all beings. The Spirit fills all things and holds them together (cf. Wisdom 1:7). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that all creatures reflect in their own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom (n. 339). The whole of creation bears for us "a reflection of God's truth, goodness and harmony" to serve the well-being of humanity and integrity of creation.

Secondly, Christians affirm that God is the Lord of history. This means that God, who created the universe and humankind, is present and active in and through his Spirit in the whole gamut of human history, leading all to the eschaton of God's Kingdom.

God as redeemer reveals his salvific plan, which is one for all humankind. This salvific plan explains the presence of God's saving grace in religions, cultures, movements, history of peoples, their struggles. The presence of rays of truth, elements of holiness, "germinative words" (*logoi spermatikoi*), and the fruits of the Spirit in other religions and cultures, events social and religious are accepted in the documents of the Church. The Second Vatican Council speaks of the action of the Spirit in the heart of everyone, "seeds of the Word," found in human enterprises, including religious ones, and in the efforts men make in search of truth, to attain goodness and God (*Ad Gentes*, 3, 11, 15; *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 10-11, 22, 26, 38, 41, 92-93). The Spirit is at work in all the existential questionings of human persons in their search for meaning, goodness, truth and salvation. In the *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) of Pope John Paul II, we read that "the Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions" (28). The totality of life and of cre-

ation is the locus of the presence and action of the Spirit of God. Further, "the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history" (28). The same encyclical affirms the presence of the Risen Christ through the Spirit, generating a desire for the fullness of life, purifying and strengthening all noble aspirations and making life more human (28). Moreover, it is the Spirit who sows the seeds of the Word in customs and cultures of peoples preparing them for the fullness of the Gospel (28).

*Redemptoris Missio* also speaks of the universal presence of the Spirit in time and space. The Church accepts the presence of grace working in the hearts of people in ways unknown and unseen, and of the Holy Spirit who "offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with the paschal mysteries," that they have left records of their enlightenment in their sacred books.

Prayer life and spirituality of other religious traditions manifest the presence of the Spirit. "Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart" (29). The Biblical tradition affirms that the Word enlightens every human person coming into the world (Jn 1:9).

Christ came to take away the sins of the world. He is the salvific event of all humankind. In the arena of contextual realities one must also recognize the presence of evil and sin in the world, in socio-cultural and religious realities. This affirms the need of redemption for all. While reading the signs of the times and interpreting the contextual realities as resources of theology, one must discern and be attentive to the negative reality of evil and sin.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting a text, especially a Biblical text. Christ himself interpreted the text of the Scriptures for his listeners, and down the ages the Church has continued to interpret the Bible in an ongoing attempt to understand the message and apply it to the concrete lives of the Christian people. With the explosion of biblical studies since the end of the last century, considerable progress has been made in the science of biblical hermeneutics. This section will briefly consider the question of biblical hermeneutics in Asia, and then turn to the ways in which followers of other religions interpret their texts and from this develop a theology. If Christians wish to understand and dialogue with peoples of other faiths, it is important that they understand how they have interpreted

their texts down the ages. Furthermore, these ancient approaches to texts developed in the various cultures of Asia are part of the heritage of Asian Christians. We will also some examples of how Christians might understand and use these texts in their on-going search for a deeper and inculturated understanding of God's revelation in Christ.

#### 4.1 Asian Biblical Hermeneutics

Like all Christians, Asian Christian exegetes accept the inspiration of these Scriptures as a mystery that harmonizes with the Incarnation of the divine Logos in Jesus Christ. The first and most important resource for the interpretation of the Bible is the Christocentric faith that accepts Jesus Christ as the eternal Word of God who became incarnate to save the human race. He redeemed humankind through his passion and death on the cross. He transforms humankind and the whole cosmos through his resurrection and glorious Lordship. This transformation will be completed at the end of time when he returns. Through this Christocentric faith the Jewish Scriptures were reread by the communities of Christian believers led by the twelve Apostles. Through the principle called the *analogy of faith* passages of Scripture clarify one another and seeming contradictions are reconciled.

##### 4.1.1 Revitalization of Ancient Hermeneutics

Asian biblical interpreters find in Asian cultures and religions *convergences* with the ways of interpreting that are found in the Bible itself and those used by the Church Fathers, and even by later theologians, until the advent of modern historico-literary criticism. The most significant convergences are in *typology* and *symbolism*; in the *allegorical*, *moralistic* and *anagogic* (*eschatological*) approaches. *Dhvani* or *resonance* hermeneutics is of particular interest in India (see n. 4.2.6 below). Using resources from their cultures and from Asian-born world religions, Asian exegetes today have revitalized these methods or approaches, harmonizing them with the modern historico-critical method, and putting them to the service of life in modern Asia.

##### 4.1.2 Primacy of the Literal Sense

In harmony with the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, published in November, 1993, contemporary biblical exegetes in Asia continue using "the historico-critical method (as) the indispensable method for the study of the meaning of ancient texts" (I, A). They reject the fundamentalist or literalist stance that "excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development" (I, F). They keep an openness to hermeneutic approaches that aim to make the text relevant and spiritually fruitful to present-day readers.



The historico-critical method of exegesis gives primacy to the *literal sense*. There is a world of difference between this and the *literalist sense* that is sought by fundamentalist interpreters, who give an almost absolute value to the *words* of Scripture, without any attempt to relate them to the life-context of the human author, that is indispensable to a proper understanding of the original meaning of any given text. The *literal sense* is the meaning of a text in its original context, which is recovered through a critical, historico-literary study.

Historically, the search for the literal sense is a thrust that biblical hermeneutics owe mainly to Western scholars, but the cultures and religions of Asia are not without elements to corroborate it. Interpreters of Asian scriptures other than the Judaeo-Christian ones have given rules to their disciples on how to recover the original meaning of texts (see 4.3 below). Christian interpreters will do well to apply judiciously and with faith and prayer such rules to their own quest for the meaning of biblical passages.

Asian Scripture professors should have an academic degree in exegesis, and not only in biblical theology, which does not require expertise in the original languages of the Bible. This is necessary for Asian biblical theologians to be competent in dealing with interpreters of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic scriptures, who have access to their sacred languages. The Churches of Asia will do well to urge their university and seminary professors of Scripture to interpret the Judaeo-Christian teachings from the original languages. More importantly, our Asian Churches are to insist that they be served by a good number of exegetes who have acquired at least a licentiate in Sacred Scripture. In this way, biblical hermeneutics in Asia will be assured of having a healthy critical thrust, and the primacy of the literal sense will be upheld.

#### 4.1.3 Contextual Hermeneutics

While the literal sense takes account of the context of the human authors of Scriptures, the *sensus plenior* is the surplus of meaning that God, the “totally other” Author of the Scriptures intended to convey, through providential indications in the text, to future readers in their own contexts, which could be quite different from the context of the original readers. Many exegetes, both in the West and in Asia, are becoming more and more convinced that passages in the Bible do have a *sensus plenior* or more-than-literal sense, which should be judiciously discovered. The adoption of this position in practice has led Asian biblical exegetes to the new Asian biblical hermeneutics. Asian interpreters of the Bible, both at the scholarly and the popular levels, search for the meaning of biblical texts: (1) in relation to Asian worldviews and cultures which are cosmic, Spirit-oriented, family and community-oriented; and (2), in relation to Asian situations in the socio-

economic, political and religious fields.

Through this new Asian biblical hermeneutics Asians hope that the task of Asian inculturation will be accomplished more quickly. They also hope that this new Asian biblical hermeneutics will become a resource for interfaith dialogue. They are confident that, when this is practised, there will be a mutual spiritual enrichment of Christians and their partners in dialogue.

The new Asian biblical hermeneutics have already borne fruit among the millions of poor people of Asia, many of whom are oppressed. There are, for example, the Liberationist interpretation adapted from South American liberation theology; the Minjung interpretation that attends to the empowerment of the “little ones” in Korea; and the Dalit interpretation contextualized by the struggle for dignity and equality of the marginalized “fifth caste” of Indian society.

#### 4.1.4 People-Based Hermeneutics

The new Asian biblical hermeneutics should not only be a resource for scholars but for the whole People of God in Asia. For this to happen, however, the people must be “empowered.” This is done when their pastors recognize that Jesus Christ is the Teacher who speaks directly to the minds and hearts of the people. The Holy Spirit is then “another Advocate” who reminds them of Christ’s teachings and helps them to put these into practice. Bishops and priests will do well to urge the laity to experience these verities in their lives. The “empowerment” is also done by providing people with translations of the Bible in their own languages, using a “dynamic equivalence,” whereby the translation renders the original text meaning for meaning rather than word for word formally. Study bibles for special groups, like young people, married couples, workers and so on, are to be prepared by experts. Bible-sharing guides are to be prepared, preferably by exegetes, so that the meaning of Scripture that is shared from experience will not be arbitrary but within the ambit of God’s salvific plan of leading people to spiritual maturity through word-events. To some extent this is already being done in the Philippines, by the approach called *Bibliarasa* and by the Bible study methods adopted in the FABC Asian Integrated Pastoral Approach (AsIPA). Theologians will do well to accept the interpretations of Scriptures that emerge from the people, in the manner just described, as an important resource for doing theology in Asia.

#### 4.1.5 Reality Greater Than Text

Asian Catholic exegetes are challenged by the observation of the Pontifical Biblical Commission that the task of the Catholic exegete “embraces

many aspects. It is an ecclesial task, for it consists in the study and explanation of Holy Scripture in a way that makes all its riches available to pastors and the faithful. But it is at the same time a work of scholarship, which places the Catholic exegete in contact with non-Catholic colleagues and with many areas of scholarly research. Moreover, this task includes at the same time both research and teaching. And each of these normally leads to publication” (IBC, 1993, III, C).

In addition, however, the Asian expert in hermeneutics must grow in holiness as he grows in expertise. Grasping the meaning of a text for the cultures and religions of Asia is not enough. That meaning is only a window on the mystery of God with whom the interpreter must harmonize in prayer and submission.

It must be acknowledged that the greatest interpreters of Scripture coming from the Western tradition in former times were holy persons. Their example can certainly inspire interpreters of Scripture in the relatively young Churches of Asia today. The Churches of the West and of the East today need to recover, with the help of the Asian Churches, a forgotten, or beclouded, vision and thrust of biblical interpretation: the search for holiness or harmony with the mystery of God, the mystery of Jesus Christ, the mystery of the Church.

## **4.2 Hinduism**

### **4.2.1 Introduction**

This section makes some soundings in the Hindu traditions of theologizing. “Soundings” because an adequate treatment of the topic would surely require a full book. “Traditions” because it is clearly impossible to reduce the history of Hindu theologizing to one system or one trend. In classical India alone there are two traditions, the two *Mimamsas*, with similar presuppositions and methods, but different goals and starting points. Then there is the *Nyaya* tradition, which might rightfully be considered more a philosophical than theological tradition, although it has obvious affinities and points of contact with theology. There is the *Yoga* school of spirituality, whose methods are largely independent of the Vedic scriptures but whose aim is surely within the scope of the theological enterprise: the attainment of perfect or absolute peace in a new consciousness of reality that liberates one from all evil. The devotional (*bhakti*) tradition is again different: less intellectual, more emotional and interpersonal, more poetic, more imaginative. Especially in the early period, its theology is largely based on myth and narrative. The modern Hindu theological tradition is surely influenced by all these trends.



## 4.2.2 Hindu Theology?

First, one must address the question: Can we speak of a *theological* method or methods in the Hindu tradition, accepting that there are differences in schools, periods, traditions, individual thinkers? Generally, books dealing with Hindu thought are presented as manuals of Hindu *philosophy*. In spite of this strong academic tradition, much of classical India's intellectual output is a theology, closer to the tradition of Thomas Aquinas or Augustine than to that of Aristotle and Plato. This is especially true of the dominant Vedanta tradition, but can be equally applied to the earlier Mimamsa, to other traditions and the later strands of thought. The characteristic genre of this theology is the commentary (*bhasya*). A commentary comments on the Scriptures which are considered authoritative, i.e., the Vedic literature — the Four Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads. It may also comment on digests and summaries of the Vedic literature, like the Vedanta Sūtras of Bādarāyana (fifth century C.E.), or on quasi-scriptures like the Gīta. There is indeed much philosophy involved in the commentary, but the ultimate criterion of truth is scripture (the Vedic literature), understood as an eternal wisdom gifted to the community and embodying its foundational faith. "For it is heard" (*śrūyate hi*) is the opening line of many commentaries. What is heard is contained in the "hearing" or *śruti*, the Veda. This Vedic wisdom is taken to be the means of ultimate liberation, however much the traditions will differ in their understanding of the essential message of the Vedas. Because one deals with liberation in its ultimate sense, with total salvation, and because this salvation is attained by obedience to the path of the Vedas, the texts are theological, and the commentary on the same is theological, but reason plays a role subordinate to "hearing."

The "liberating knowledge" which is available through the Vedas must be obtained by following a *tradition*. This means that the Hindu method does not consist in taking the ancient text and analysing it scientifically, so to speak, with the mere exercise of reason. The interpretation falls within a commentarial tradition. The whole informs the text, articulated by a long line of witnesses who are the living carriers of the received wisdom. In ancient times this wisdom was literally carried in the memory of the tradition, i.e., it was memorized. The use of palm leaves or other written material came late in history.

The Upanishads themselves, the primary source of the inspired wisdom according to the Vedānta, are a collection of oral traditions of reflections on the ancient practice of the sacrifice, and, in turn, regulated it. In the forests the practice of the sacrifice was reinterpreted and interiorized. It came to be seen as symbolic of inner attitudes. To these reinterpretations were added disputes on the mysteries of life and death or on nature. The

Upanishads also contain long lists of *vamsas*, the lines of teachers who from hoary times enriched the tradition. The teachings of the Upanishads were later somewhat systematized by the authors of the sutras, beginning with the most successful, Badarayana, and continuing right down to modern times. These commentaries themselves became objects of further subcommentaries and annotations. Thus, the tradition continues to grow in insight and subtlety, although it may also become superficial and get lost in the dreary sands of pedantic reasoning.

#### 4.2.3 Nature of Theology

Three important words may give a first insight into the nature of Hindu theology: *darsana*, *mimamsa*, *jijnasa*. *Darsana* is the word used in the Hindu tradition for what Western authors call the “systems” of Hindu thought. In India they are called the six *darsanas*. *Darsana* literally means “means or instruments of seeing,” or, as one dictionary defines them, “instruments by which reality is known in its truthfulness.” They are thus the means of perfect knowledge, a knowledge that in the Vedanta tradition is considered transformative and salvific.

*Mimamsa* is a desiderative noun from the root *man*, “to think”. Hence, *mimamsa* means “an analysis or discernment of the essence (*tattva*) of truth, which must be concretized according to the context.” One can specify three layers of *mimamsa* in the Vedanta tradition: *mimamsa* is a discussion and cogitation concerning the nature of things, enabling one to arrive at the right conclusions either about the *sacrifice*, or about *theology*, or about *behavior*. In the traditional Purva, (Earlier) *Mimamsa* school, the discussion and cogitation were on the ritual praxis, and it centered on doubtful points in order to arrive at the right conclusion. At the level of texts, *mimamsa* has developed rules of hermeneutics enabling it to interpret the meaning of the sacred tradition. The three levels should not be compartmentalized: reflection on the text is in order that the activity might be rightly performed, but the aim of the sacrifice, or of the mental meditation that took its place, leads to a knowledge and possession of the true Reality. It is not important that the liberating state is conceived of differently by the various schools: either as heaven (*svarga*) in the company of the immortal gods; or liberation (*moksa*), a merging with the Absolute Reality of Brahman. In either case, it is always a state of liberation.

*Jijnasa* means literally “desire to know.” In practice, this is also identified with the concrete way in which this desire finds expression, i.e., the *inquiry*, specifically, inquiry into texts following the rules of hermeneutics outlined by the Purva *Mimamsa*.

## 4.2.4 Theological Exercises

Classical Vedanta (eighth to fifteenth centuries C. E.) outlined the process by which the seeker passes from the desire to know Brahman to the liberating experience of Brahman. The process as traditionally understood consists of three steps, already mentioned in the Upanishads: hearing, reflecting, meditating (*śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana*). Actually these steps only outline the process, and by themselves are not yet liberating. They must open up to a *new vision* of reality, and, therefore, to a transformation of life. Theology itself does not bring it about; it still remains in the realm of “not-knowing” (*avidyā*). It only prepares us for the qualitative jump, which is always necessary to reach liberation. Neither “works” nor “theology” produces salvation!

### 4.2.4.1 *Śravaṇa*

*Śravaṇa* is “hearing”. If faith comes from hearing, the theological process too begins with hearing. This implies that one is *taught*. There is really no autodidact in theology. One enters into a teacher-disciple (*guru-shiṣya*) relationship. Brahman must be heard “through the traditional teaching of the preceptor, and not by reasoning, nor by disquisition, mental power, learning, authorities, sacrifices,” etc. The stress is not on the textual source but on the living tradition. The guru is indispensable, a guru who has had the liberating experience and is well versed in the tradition (*śruti*) is, in a sense, a living embodiment of Brahman. A true guru is not easily found and finding him is itself a true grace.

The guru leads the disciple through various steps to the liberating vision. The process is outlined in the Upanishads in the dialogue between the Guru Prajapati and his disciples Indra and Virocana, the leaders of the gods and the demons respectively. The instruction uses the method employed to show the polar star, which is not easily discernible among a cluster of brilliant stars. The more easily visible stars are first pointed out, to be denied immediately in favor of some other nearby, which in turn is denied again and so on, until one reaches to the star of the North Pole. There is in the process a false superimposition (*āpavāda*), a denial: the process leads one beyond.

However, the guru is not himself the source of the liberating wisdom. He is not the founder of a religion. He is part of a tradition, and his role is intrinsically related to the foundational “hearing” of the tradition (*śruti* = the Vedas). The guru has to give an exegesis of the Vedas, but, more importantly, he must embody in his own spirituality the path marked by the Vedas so as to be able to lead the seeker to the fulfilment of his desire.



The *sruti* has to be studied in accordance with the sophisticated hermeneutics developed by the first Mimamsa. There is first an analysis of the different genres of which the scripture consists, and a classification of the importance of the genre in accordance with the basic theological orientation of the school. The genres and their classification vary with the schools. For the sacrifice-centered Purva Mimamsa the most important genre is the injunction (*vidhi*) which encloses the “must” or “should” of the Vedas. The injunction for some *deed* or ceremony to be performed may refer directly to the action itself, or to a restriction of one kind or another, or to details of the action, or the order of performance, or the determination of the qualifications required in the sacrifice.

Closely associated with the *vidhi* is the *mantra*, or the Vedic text which accompanies the rite, and gives it power, the power of the word. This can be compared to the form of the sacrament (*forma sacramenti*) in scholasticism, provided one does not miss the aspect of power involved in the word. The performance is a performance of the word, even as it is a ritual: e.g., the Agnistoma is a “praise of Agni.”

Below these two genres are the texts giving names (*namadheya*), the prohibitions (*nisedha*), and the immense body of the *arthavada* or commendatory statements, which are subsidiary to the injunctions and may be known from other sources, or may be simply hyperbolic, or facts and historical data.

The second Mimamsa, or Vedanta, almost inverts the pyramid of importance of these genres. Here, some of the commendatory statements describe the reality of Brahman, which it is the very purpose of the Vedas to teach. These texts are primary: the *sruti* offers them to us as means of arriving at the liberating and transformative knowledge, which is the goal of theology. The most important are the “great sayings” (*mahavakya*) which concentrate the essence of revelation. Some of these sayings are: “Thou art That” (*tattvam asi*); “Not thus, not thus” (*neti, neti*); “This whole universe is only the Self”; “Brahman alone is this Immortality”; “Know that to be Brahma.” These sentences describe the Reality alone, and do not intimate any activity, but remove the consciousness of any other entity but the Self or “Brahman.” Note, however, in which sense the *sruti* is revelatory: the authority or non-authority of the *sruti* does not consist either in commanding an action or stating a fact, but in its *capacity to generate certain and fruitful knowledge*. These are effective enunciations, even if spoken in the language of “ignorance.” But they can lead one beyond ignorance.

#### 4.2.4.2 *Manana*

Shankaracharya (ninth century C.E.), in his commentary on the *Kena*

*Upanishad*, gives one concrete example of what is implied in the intellectual discourse that must accompany any assimilation of the Vedic revelation. The disciple, says Shankara, having been instructed by the teacher, sits in a solitary place, gets concentrated, ponders over the traditional text given by the teacher as to its meaning or significance, ascertaining (*nirdharya*) it by reason (*tarkatah*), and making it his own experience. He then goes back to the teacher with the results: "I think that I know Brahma."

The process may take a long time. There is no instant awakening, or what is called in the Japanese tradition, *satori*. The process needs constant direction and correction. The struggle needs strength and perseverance. Not all have it.

This may be the place to mention the subsidiary but positive role of reasoning (*tarka*) in the theological task. The Hindu tradition is quite clear that *tarka* is not the right means to reach the mystery of the Absolute. *Tarka* is always "without a solid foundation" (*apratisthita*), and, therefore, it cannot be the foundation of the search for Brahman. The fact is clear: words cannot apprehend the Transcendent. They return empty-handed. Yet, *tarka* has its role in the theological journey, and appropriately we may place it at the stage of *manana*. Its purpose is to ascertain or discern in a negative way, removing other alternative options to the true teaching of the Vedas.

Words themselves do not apprehend the Absolute. But the Hindu Masters developed a sophisticated understanding of the polyvalence of language: words have many "powers" (*sakti*), and if they cannot express the transcendent, they may "point at" it or "aim at it" (*laks*): analogy. Moreover, their power of suggestion (evocative power) is still wider and stronger. Language is a help to theology, provided it retains its role as means and is aware of its limitations, and is used in its full potentiality.

#### 4.2.4.3 *Nididhyasana*

The second step, described above, was characterised by an activity of dispersion, *vica-ra*. The third moment of the theological enterprise has another dynamic. *Vicara* spreads out, because to understand, one must relate to and correlate with the vast field of one's manifold experiences: one walks around, in the etymological sense of the word (*vicar*). But this is not sufficient for the understanding of the theological object that would lead us to the liberating experience. One must concentrate, integrate, fix. One must reach the position of holding the thought in one fixed point, and repeat it constantly. This is the stage of contemplation (*nididhyasana*), or attention (*dhyana*), which is the immediate step to liberating knowledge. This contemplation requires holding and repeating: it is a process of interiorization, not by paying attention to the relation but to the simplicity

of truth. Vachaspati of the 9th century C.E. gives a comparison, based on the training of the musical ear:

Just as through the sense of hearing, aided by the impressions brought about by the repetition of the knowledge gained from the science of music, one experiences directly the different musical notes, *sadja*, etc., in their different cadences, even so the human person, prepared by the impressions brought about by the repetition of the meaning of the Vedanta texts, through the internal organ experiences its own nature as Brahman. (Comm. on *Uttara Mimamsa Sutra* 1.1.1).

*Nididhyasana* takes the form of the *upasana*, or identifications, which form the matrix of the Upanishadic spiritual discipline. Shankara shows at the beginning of his *Brahma Sutra* commentary that the state of alienation in which we find ourselves, the falsehood (*avidya*) that controls our lives, is due to a false superimposition of the objective reality, the field of the "you," onto the subjective essence. The pure being can never be attained by way of objective knowledge. It is only in deepening the consciousness of the subject as subject (*atman*), that one may hope to come to realize the true nature of the absolute Brahman, which Shankara so often describes as the eternal, pure, conscious and free Brahman. We can only be conscious of It "as subject".

The means of alienation can also be the means of integration. The masters recommend the meditations of the Upanishads. The *vidyas*, by which the realities of the ritual world, the physical world, the self (the world of the body), and the heavenly bodies are superimposed one on the other, bring one to an understanding of their unity. This superimposition is conscious, and, therefore, not controlled by the power of *avidya*, proper to the *adhyasa*. The purpose is to concentrate more and more on the reality of the self as the substratum of such identifications or superimpositions. Slowly, the objective reality is dispensed with, and the subject becomes paramount. The Yoga concentration enables ones to quieten all the mental modifications and arrive at a perfect attentiveness on the subject (*atman*). It is at the peak of such a discipline of concentration (*dhyana*) that the perfect integration (*samadhi*) takes place: the self is not the other, the self is Reality itself. But this stage is not really the fruit of one's meditation. Work (*karma*), even mental and spiritual work, cannot produce salvation. The Self that is realized is a self-existing Reality -- one must come to realize it directly, not produce an idea of it, through meditation.

At the end of his commentary on the first *Vedanta Sutra*, Shankara gives a kind of description or definition of theology and its method: "Therefore, under the heading of an investigation into Brahman, the Sutras intro-



duce an exegesis of the presuppositions of the end of the Vedas, supported by a reasoning that cannot contradict it, and having for its purpose the Supreme Good." Earlier in the commentary he specified that the knowledge at which one aims in this theological exercise is not any kind, but a knowledge that ends in comprehension, or "reaching down", the revelatory consciousness that removes the veil of ignorance.

Among the prerequisites to the theological task there is, of course, first and foremost the study of the scriptures, at least of those portions assigned to each according to caste and school. But apart from this intellectual attainment, one needs spiritual and cultural dispositions, which the stay of the student in the guru's house is meant to develop.

We have so far spoken mostly of the two Mimamsas as if they formed a single theological school. But there is a fundamental difference between the metaphysics of the two that necessarily affects their theological method. Although both study the Vedas as sacred text, the focus or the formal object of the study is different. For the earlier Mimamsas the Vedas teach basically the sacrificial activity. Its perspective is what *has to be done* (ritually). The sacrifice is the action par excellence. The Vedas teach us not just the sequence of actions involved in the ritual, but their *dharma*, i.e., the sacrificial quality and role of every activity or reality in relation to the whole sacrificial mystery. The *dharma* is the meaning and the purpose of the sacrifice: where the sacrificer has his goals, the words have their meaning, where the sacrifice itself has a goal beyond that of the sacrificer. The sacrificial world is, therefore, a world wherein the sacrificial action is the center, not the ordinary world where the human being wants to be the center. The sacrificer's personal purposes are imbedded in a larger, cosmic purpose, which is expressed by the totality of the sacrifice.

In the technical language of the school, the core of revelation is the "injunction" (*codana*), whereby one is led to the concrete activity of the sacrifice. *Codana* is the word that sets action into motion. It is a *should* or *must*, the core of the revealed truth. The sacrifice is thus the fullness of *dharma*: when the sacrifice is known, *dharma* is known. Furthermore, all sacrifices have results. We are in a metaphysics of a world *to be built up*.

The Vedanta on the other hand, i.e., the Upanishads and Uttara (or second) Mimamsa, studies the Vedas as the revelation of *Brahman*, which is the object of human desire and the self-existing reality. The importance here is to know, for knowledge is transformative. The formal object of the Vedas is an *existing* reality. The role of knowledge is primarily to remove false consciousness regarding the world.

#### 4.2.4.4 Nyaya

The Nyaya theological tradition goes another way. It centers on a careful analysis of right logic and on the possibility of arguing to the existence of God, who is even known as Father. The center of the argument is not so much the strength of the probatory syllogisms as a fine analysis of the act of reasoning and the possibility of its being able to speak about a Being who in principle lies beyond the scope of human perception. The problems Nyaya studies have many parallels in modern thought, but the Nyaya worked mostly against the Buddhist tradition by an analysis of the nature of inherent concomitance, which is involved in any form of syllogism. Ultimately, this analysis touches on the theological question of the relation of a transcendent God to the world of experience. Thus, Nyaya is not merely an apologetic or a rational theology. It includes also a religious perception of how God enters into the human reality, and it ends in adoration.

#### 4.2.4.5 Jijnasa or Theology?

To complete these reflections one may ask if the very definition of theology is the same in the two traditions, Hindu and Christian. Is one speaking of the same activity? A Christian working definition of theology is the famous "faith seeking understanding." One may indeed elaborate and complete the Anselmian definition: not only faith, but faith, hope and love are the starting point—the Christian experience. What one seeks is not merely an understanding of faith but also a praxis: not just to understand, but to transform.

The definition starts from what one might call the enlightened experience, the conversion experience of a living faith. It supposes one has basically arrived, but wants to study the practical implications of this faith. In Hinduism, if one is doing theology one has not arrived. The transforming experience is in the future. The starting point is a sense of alienation or, rather, nescience (*avidya*), joined to a desire for knowing, for liberation, for the fullness of life. The liberated person, who lives by vision, does not need theology any longer; and his or her praxis will be guided by the new consciousness where reason will have, if any, a minor role.

The process in both traditions is the study of the revealed scriptures which are received as a theological *a priori*. In both cases there will be an attempt to harmonize the various formulations of the inspired text. Both traditions give a role to reasoning—probably in the Hindu tradition a diminished role, in which reason can in no way set itself up as an arbiter of the revealed wisdom. Greek intellectualism has biased the process in the Western tradition more in favor of the role of reason.

The goal in the West is “understanding,” and eventually praxis. In Hinduism it is a new form of consciousness, a cognitive leap into a new form of knowing, which will be comprehensive, illuminative, transformative, almost “angelic.” This is not produced, but somehow aided, by theology in its rational function. This new consciousness erases the dualism with which we are born, and gives a perception of the Oneness of reality, of the totality of the Divine Being in the world, within which we live and move and have our being.

#### 4.2.5 A Note on *Dhvani*

The *dhvani* theology has been developed in India as an attempt at an Asian hermeneutics. The teaching develops out of mediaeval Indian reflections on poetics by analyzing the powers of the word. Three main varieties of predication are distinguished. 1. In direct predication (*abhidha*) the words have their normal meaning which is understood by the reader or hearer and makes sense. 2. In indirect predication the meaning is “aimed at” (*laks*) by the words articulated: their direct meaning makes no sense, but they can be stretched out to offer an indirect meaning beyond their normal significance (called *laksana*). This corresponds closely to analogy in the Western philosophy of language. 3. In the third mode of predication, (*vyanjana*), subsequently developed as the *dhvani* theory, the meaning is not predicated by the words as such, either directly or indirectly, but is suggested or evoked through them and the poetic devices imbedded in the text: similes, comparisons, metaphors, allegories, parables, etc., but also by the formation of words, the sound, the alliteration, the many figures of speech, which Indian authors have minutely analysed. In theatrical representations these means include also the presentation of the *dramatis personae*, the stage props, the allusions to the seasons of the year, the music, the dance, etc. The point of poetry is not so much what the words say but the various emotions awakened in the listener or hearer that bring out poetic taste (*rasa*).

*Dhvani* means “resonance” and is the word used already by the grammarian and theologian of language Bhartrihari (ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), and developed by Anadavardhana in the 9<sup>th</sup>, and Abhinavagupta in the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. It implies that when used by a competent person with poetic power and perceived by a competent listener who has a heart attuned to the message (*sahridaya*), the artistic composition can take one to a dimension of reality which is not accessible to the language of sense-perception.

Although the ancient context of this analysis is the realm of poetry, it is easy to see that one can use it in the realm of the theology of Scripture. The traditional theology of inspiration may have stressed too exclusively the problem of the relation between the human author and the Divine Source.



The levels of meaning of the text itself need to be understood. After all, Scriptures are evocative of faith. As Vatican Council II says, the Bible “communicates the word of God himself ... and makes the voice of the Holy Spirit sound through the words of the prophets and the apostles.” (DV 21) This “sounding through” of the divine call to faith in the narratives and other literary genres of the Scriptures is what the *dhvani* theology of inspiration is trying to point out.

Consequently, biblical hermeneutics must also be attuned to the nature of the biblical record. It is not enough to search for the meaning of the author; it must develop such methods, including the literary analysis as developed in ancient India, to enable the believer to perceive the actual call of the Spirit in the modern world. This requires a particular disposition, not so much of the mind as of the heart (*sahridaya*), which starts with faith, since the Scriptures are faith testimonies; and ends in the faith commitment of the reader or the community that listens to the word. Scripture is a word “from faith to faith.”

#### 4.2.6 A Note on Dalit Theology

One of the more important movements in India at this time is the Dalit movement which has resulted in the beginnings of a Dalit theology. This was originally a movement within Hinduism, of conscientization, wherein the outcastes of the country were awakening to their dignity and to their political power. The movement has its roots in the Dalit Panthers who became very vocal among the Hindus, specially in Maharashtra, but also in other areas of the country. They were inspired by the Black Panthers of North America in the late Sixties.

This gave rise to a Dalit movement and a Dalit theology within the Church. The Dalit movement has been strong, especially in Tamilnadu where a large number of the Christians are from the “fifth caste,” i.e., those considered to be outside the structure of the four traditional caste categories, but who in effect form the lowest stratum of the pyramid of ritual purity, which represents the traditional Hindu way of structuring society. The Dalits, (formerly called untouchables, scheduled castes, or harijans), have given themselves the name *dalit*, which means oppressed or crushed.

Dalit Christians have complaints against both the Church and the society at large. Certain sectors of the Church have compromised with the caste system and allowed it to survive in the community on the argument that it is a cultural, social structure and not a belief system, and that the Church must respect all forms of indigenous cultural or social organization. This compromise and continued discrimination against Dalit Christians by upper-caste Christians is the saddest negative fact of the Church, especially in

South India.

Dalit theology protests vehemently against this injustice and proclaims the equal dignity of all believers as an essential characteristic of the community of Jesus. Much writing has been produced in the last ten years or so on the theme, often by way of commentary on various pericopes of the Gospels. The approach is clearly that of liberation theology, which seeks to interpret the actual situation of oppression experienced by the masses in the light of the faith in Jesus.

It would be a mistake however, to see in Dalit theology a mere carbon copy of the South American liberation theology, or of the Minjung theology of Korea. Although it belongs to the same genus, it has its own special quality. One could say, perhaps, that liberation theology in Latin America concentrates on the problem of bread for the poor. The economic situation of human beings is indeed fundamental. The alleviation of poverty is seen as a primary duty. Liberation theology in Korea concentrates mostly on the empowerment of the Minjung. What role do the little ones have in society? How can they be made masters of their lives? What are their attitudes to the powerful of the earth?

Dalit theology in India focuses on the issue of dignity, which the caste mentality denies to millions of Indians. Dalit theology considers the experience of being untouchable and the pathos and agony of untouchability as a *locus theologicus*. Moreover, the culture of Dalit people, their "little traditions," their religiosity and spirituality, are resources of theology. As in other forms of liberation theology, the economic and the power dimensions are obviously involved. But the focus of attention is the restoration of dignity, the sense of self-worth, the exorcising of the psychological and social demon of an inherited pollution. The Dalits, in their situation, read the Gospel as a message of salvation. They see Jesus, in emptying himself, as one who restores innate dignity to all believers. One specific point of Dalit theology is that Dalits consider their liberation only in terms of their own humanity expressed in their cultures, religiosity and ethnicity, not in terms of upward mobility in the caste hierarchy, or in terms of progressing towards the status of a Brahman. With a new experience of dignity, they can hope to contribute to the building of a new society and the liberation of all Indian Dalits.

### 4.3 Buddhism

Norms for the interpretation of texts, or hermeneutics, is something the Buddhists have grappled with for centuries. And the problem is vast. First of all, texts were not written down for several centuries after the *parinirvana* (i.e. death or final passing into *nirvana*) of the Buddha; they

were passed on by a system of memorizing, as the Vedic texts had been handed on for centuries before this. Secondly, the corpus is vast; the Chinese Buddhist canon translated into English would require more than 500,000 pages. Furthermore, according to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha did not teach the same thing to everyone. He is said to have taught different things to different people depending on their interests, capacities, levels of intelligence and spiritual development. Yet the importance of the received texts is paramount. The Buddha is said to have remarked before passing on:

Then the Bhagavan addressed the venerable Ananda: "It may be, Ananda, that some of you will think, 'The word of the Teacher is a thing of the past; we have now no Teacher.' But that, Ananda, is not the correct view. The Doctrine (*dharma*) and the Discipline (*vinaya*), Ananda, which I have taught and enjoined upon you is to be your teacher when I am gone." (*Mahaparinibbannasutta* 60)

The texts are paramount, but as time went on, various schools grew up among the Buddhists, each having a somewhat different interpretation of the texts. As Buddhism developed, the major schools set forth their opinions as to the nature of the Buddha's final teaching, but they were still faced with the difficulty of accounting for statements which seemed to contradict what they understood to be the Buddha's position. This problem led the ancient writers to develop what, today, we might call a Buddhist hermeneutics. Rules for the interpretation of texts were evolved, and we find one such set of rules in the Sutra of the Four Refuges (*Catuhpratisaranasutra*). Several versions of this text exist both in Sanskrit and Chinese. This sutra is not found in the Pali Canon, but was certainly known and used by the Sarvastivada-Vaibhasika school and is found in their *Abhidharmakosa*. It was known and used by both the Madhyamika school and the Yogacara school.

### 4.3.1 Refuge

The concept of "refuge" is fundamental to Buddhism. The Buddhist expresses his or her faith in the teaching of the Buddha, and his or her commitment to the way of the Buddha by "Taking Refuge" in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma (his teaching), and the Sangha (the Buddhist community). This text adapts the term "refuge" to its own purposes. Under the name of "refuges" (*pratisarana*) the text gives four rules for textual interpretation.

4.3.1.1 "The doctrine (*dharma*) is the refuge and not the person." The point of this rule is that, in order for a text to be accepted as authentic, it is not sufficient simply to call upon the authority of the Buddha himself, or



upon a particular religious community which has been established, or upon one or several learned elders. The texts in question must also be found among the universally accepted sutras or in the *vinaya*. Furthermore, it must not contradict the nature of things. That is to say, adherence to the doctrine cannot be dependent on mere human authority, since experience shows that the human is often contradictory and changeable. Adherence must be based on personal reasoning, on what one has oneself known, seen and grasped. However, for the beginner faith in the master's word is a provisional necessity, to be eventually replaced by what he has known, seen and grasped. For those incapable of going beyond this beginning, this faith remains for "by adhering to the holy *dharma*, one does not perish".

4.3.1.2 "The meaning (*artha*) is the refuge and not the letter." The meaning is single and invariable, while the letter is multiple and variable. Often one and the same truth can be concealed under different terms. Thus, the four noble truths have only one acceptable meaning, but they can be explained in an infinity of ways. So also the fact of universal suffering (*dukkha*) is true, but many are the subtleties and terms; many are the means of explaining this truth. Though the spirit takes precedence, the good doctrine is perfect in its spirit and its letter. Throughout the canonical writings runs the refrain "the *dharma* good in the beginning, in the middle and at the end: the meaning is good and the letter is good." The *Sutralamkara* explains that the meaning is good because it applies to conventional truth and absolute truth; and that its letter is good because the phrases and syllables are intelligible (*Digha* III.129). The texts praise the monk who correctly grasps the meaning and correctly applies its terms. His colleagues consider it a boon to have a fellow monk who is so expert in the meaning and the formula. The monk who has grasped the meaning but has expressed it badly, or the monk who has expressed it well but has obviously missed the meaning of the formula, should be corrected by his fellow monks.

Hence, the monk who limits himself to memorizing the texts without attempting to understand them is failing in his duty. He who memorizes the *dharma* like a parrot has the merit of being able to transmit it materially in an impeccable form; such a one conduces to the confusion and destruction of the true *dharma*. On the other hand, when the form is faulty, all hope of discovering the correct meaning is lost. Thus, it is clear that the norms do not deny the importance of the letter, but only subordinate it to the spirit. Hence, cases can occur when it is necessary to sacrifice the letter for the sake of the spirit, since the purpose of the letter is to indicate the meaning, but it can never express it adequately. The letter indicates the spirit just as a finger points to an object, but the spirit is alien to syllables, and the letter is unable to express it in full. Purely literal exegesis is therefore bound to fail. Scholars continually counselled a search for the spirit, because the meaning of the texts often lacks clarity and needs to be interpreted. This

leads to the third rule.

4.3.1.3 "The sutra of precise meaning (*nitārtha*) is the refuge, not the sutra the meaning of which requires interpretation (*neyārtha*)." This distinction is not accepted by some earlier schools, like the Mahasamghika, but was elaborated precisely because of the vastness of the corpus of Buddhist scriptures and the seeming contradictions one finds. The *nitārtha sutra* is one whose meaning is clear and explicit. It can and should be taken literally. The *neyārtha sutra* is one the meaning of which needs to be deduced because it is intentional, and derives from a motivation. The *neyārtha sutras* constitute the intentional teaching of the Buddha. Some would claim that the *neyārtha sutras* should not be accepted as the word of the Buddha, but this was generally denied. In regard to the question of how one distinguishes between the two types of *sutras*, the authors have little to say, and one has to examine their method of procedure to deduce the method. The Mahayana attached the greatest importance to *sutras* of indeterminate and provisional meaning which constitute the intentional teaching of the Buddha. Elaborate rules were formulated for interpreting these, but they can be summarized under the general norm that *sutras* of provisional meaning, which constitute the intentional teaching, should be understood in the light of the *sutras* the meaning of which is precise. In this way the interpreter will be determined to discover the point of view which the Buddha was taking, as well as the motivation with which he was inspired.

4.3.1.4 "The final refuge is: Direct knowledge (*jñāna*) is the refuge and not discursive consciousness (*viññāna*)." This principle, which summarizes the other three, shows that sound interpretation is based not on a literal though theoretical understanding of the noble truths, but on direct knowledge. The idea is well described in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*:

The bodhisattva attaches great importance to the knowledge of the direct comprehension [of the truths], and not to mere discursive consciousness of the letter of the meaning, which [consciousness] arises from listening and reflecting. Understanding that what should be known through knowledge arising from meditation cannot be recognized only through discursive consciousness arising from listening and reflecting, he abstains from rejecting or denying the teachings given by the Tathagata, profound as they are. (*Bodhisattvabhūmi*, 108)

The truths which the Buddhist seeks to penetrate can be the object of a threefold wisdom (*prajña*) arising from listening, reflecting, or meditation. The first two are worldly (*laukika*) and defiled (*sasrava*) discursive consciousness (*viññāna*) since in their empiricism they remain defiled by craving, hatred and delusion. The wisdom which comes from listening or oral

tradition accepts the truths on faith and is founded on confidence in the words of the Buddha. The object of this wisdom is the word (*naman*) or the letter, such as it was expounded by the Buddha. The wisdom which comes from reflecting (*cintamayi*) is a personal and reasoned understanding of the truths the meaning (*artha*) of which it grasps and not just the letter.

The first two of these types of wisdom (*prajna*), which are dialectical in nature, remain blemished by delusion; they are practiced as a preparatory exercise by worldlings who are not yet committed to the path of *nirvana*. They are only provisional and meant to be rejected after use. The wisdom which comes from meditation (*bhavanamayi*) is no longer discursive consciousness (*vijnaya*) but authentic knowledge (*jnana*), a direct comprehension of the truths. It is free from any hint of delusion; it is transcendental (*lokottara*) and undefiled (*anasrava*). Its sudden acquisition marks the entry into the path of *nirvana* and confers on the Buddhist the quality of the holy one (*arya*). The holy one, during the stage of training which continues throughout the path of meditation (*bhavanamarga*), successively eliminates all the categories of passions which can still coexist with undefiled *prajna*. However, it will finally lead him to *arhat*-ship, where the holy one, having nothing more in which to train, enjoys *nirvana* on earth, because he knows that his impurities have been destroyed and that they will not arise again.

In modern hermeneutics it is often claimed that to understand the text one must experience the mental processes of the author. This would well accord with the tradition of Buddhism, which would hold that the interpreters were compelled to become enlightened. This indeed was their ultimate goal. Hence, it follows that the experience of the Buddha's enlightenment provides final validity in interpretation.

#### 4.3.2 Buddhism and Social Concerns

It is often claimed that Buddhism is a world-denying religion with little or no concern for what happens in this world, and hence little concern for such issues as social justice, economics and politics. Theoretically, this is incorrect, for the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge (*jnana* or *prajnaya*) always leads to compassion, a concern for all the living beings of this world who suffer. At the practical level, there may be some substance to the accusation, as lived Buddhism seems often to have neglected the practical implications of compassion beyond the giving of alms. This is no longer true. Buddhists in many countries of Asia are deeply concerned about the social implications of the teachings of the Buddha, and their concern has resulted in the formation of organizations such as the International Society of Engaged Buddhists. One can mention three individuals who have attempted to apply Buddhist teachings to modern problems.



#### 4.3.2.1 A. T. Ariyaratna and the Sarvodaya Sramadana Movement

This movement was begun in 1958 by A. T. Ariyaratna in Sri Lanka. It began as development programs that were local self-help projects in which the villagers themselves could be collectively involved. In the process the villagers not only discovered their power and creativity, but also built themselves up as a community. There is a special program to train Buddhist monks as animators of the Sarvodaya movement. The monks act as instructors to raise awareness, and for this purpose use the background of the teachings of the Buddha. Though the movement drew inspiration from similar movements that were not specifically Buddhist, it has its roots in the Buddhist tradition.

The goal of the programs is *sarvodaya*, understood as “awakening,” which clearly refers to the awakening experience of the Buddha. It relates not just to a mystical experience but also to the lived reality of the modern world. The awakening can take place not just on the personal level but also at the village, the national and the international levels. As one works with people in their development, one begins to experience the interconnectedness of all reality, an experience which is, after all, one of the basic doctrines of Buddhism, i.e., “dependent co-arising.”

The movement has resulted in the transformation of the religious institution. The monk becomes an animator of a social movement, as well as a ritual specialist. The village temple is not merely a place of worship, but becomes a base for community activity. The basic teaching of the Four Noble Truths is applied to the reality of daily life. Even the doctrine of *karma* is reinterpreted as a call to responsible action.

#### 4.3.2.2 Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (1906-1993)

Bhikkhu Buddhadasa was a Thai monk who became critical of Thai tradition and began to reinterpret it for modern times. In 1932 he founded his Suan Mokh monastery (The Garden of Liberation). He began to present Buddhist truths in a new, readable way which was relevant to modern times, and his life and work had a profound effect on Thai Buddhists, as well as Buddhists around the world. He may well have been one of the most seminal Theravada thinkers of modern times, and has often been compared to such revered teachers as Buddhagosha and Nagarjuna.

He began to speak of “Dhammic Socialism,” i.e., that Nature itself, as understood by the Buddhist tradition, is essentially socialist. His vision is based on a number of traditional Buddhist doctrines. First, the idea of non-self. There is no permanent, immortal (and, therefore, uncreated) self as the center of personality. The ego is simply a network of relationships.

Hence, the self is empty, which means that it is empty of attachment to “me” and “mine.” In its natural state, mind is free of attachment and ignorance because it sees the emptiness of all things. Emptiness here does not mean nothingness, but rather the basic impermanence of all reality in this world. If one denies the ego in this way, one affirms the totality of the network and oneself as related to it.

Secondly, reality is interdependent. As mentioned above, this is related to the basic Buddhist doctrine of “dependent co-arising.” In fact, because of ignorance, people behave as if they are self sufficient individuals. The Four Noble Truths show that suffering results from the feeling of “me” and “mine”; the cause of suffering is hence “me” and “mine”; the cessation of suffering is the cessation of “me” and “mine”; the Eightfold Path is the method for eliminating “me” and “mine.” When they are eliminated, one is aware of one’s social nature.

The Path is summarized in three practices: wisdom (*prajna*), moral behaviour (*sila*) and insight or mindfulness (*samadhi*). This path can be followed in the course of ordinary life in the world. Buddhism is not for those who abandon the world. The Buddhist then does not run away from the world; he is present in it but acts in a different way. Even the Buddhist monk is not a hermit, but a wanderer, one who wanders throughout the world to preach the Dharma. He is involved with people who live in the world. His teaching leads people to an understanding of the true nature of this world in order to help them overcome suffering. Buddhism, therefore, involves not a flight from the world but living well in a world that is experienced as socialist or interdependent. This is the ideal of compassion.

Buddhadas’s theory of Buddhist socialism is not a mixture of Buddhist doctrine and modern socialist ideology, but emerges specifically from Buddhist categories. Throughout his life he remained close to earthly reality and tried to provoke a right understanding which could transform people’s lives and inspire them to build a better world. He has inspired many social activists, like Sulak Sivaraksa, a well known Thai journalist, who is also the inspiration behind the International Society for Engaged Buddhism.

#### 4.3.2.3 Thich Nhat Han

Thich Nhat Han is a Buddhist monk from Vietnam who has been involved in the peace movement since the time of the Vietnam war, and is now living and working in Plum Village in France. Unlike the two above, he is from the Mahayana tradition which speaks of the role of the bodhisattva, who is a realized person moved by compassion, who continues to live and work in the world for the liberation of all sentient beings. The mindfulness of which he speaks is not a flight from the world but an effort to live con-

sciously in the present. The practice of mindfulness helps one to see the world and people as they are, and to live and work among them with understanding and commitment without being distracted by prejudice, emotion and attachments. The correct practice of mindfulness leads one to bring peace, joy and release not only to oneself but to one's friends and family as well.

Experiencing the world as it is means realizing that everything in this universe is interdependent and relative. When one realizes this, one is able to avoid dividing people into good and bad and thus setting up enemies that one has to fight. One realizes that each of us is responsible for what happens in our world, and to other men and women, and that we can do something to change it from right where we are. One tries to acquire peace that one can radiate it to others. In Han's teachings one gets a sense of the deep solidarity of the bodhisattva with the world as it is, animated by compassion and anxious to bring peace, without judgement, but based on truth. One also begins to experience the interdependence of the universe. We are mutually involved with and responsible for each other.

In 1966 Thich Nhat Han founded the Order of Interbeing. Membership is open to monks, nuns and lay people. The term "interbeing" spells out the goals of the order. It involves being in touch with reality, with everything that is, with which we are interconnected. This is a continuation of the task of the Buddha and of the bodhisattvas promoting enlightenment, an enlightenment which does not get caught up in ideas, but transforms life in ourselves and in others. This brings liberation in the here and now, for, as the Mahayana teaches, there is no difference between this world and the world beyond (*samsara* and *nirvana* are identical). One does not attain Nirvana by getting out of this world, but by realizing that nirvana is the true meaning of this world.

## 4.4 Islam

### 4.4.1 Introduction

The Muslim believes Islam to be the final and definitive religion. The Qur'an declares that *Allah* has sent his messages to all peoples throughout history and has left none without guidance. However, all messages originate from a single source, the "Mother of all Books." Islam recognizes Abraham, Moses, and particularly Jesus, as prophets, and provides an Islamic account of these figures whose messages attain final form in the revelation received through Muhammad. Therefore, he is seen as the greatest and the seal of the prophets.

For Muslims *Allah* is too far beyond the grasp of human minds and



imaginings for him to be known by human process. He reveals himself through the Qur'an received by Muhammad. The appropriate response of man is to obey *Allah*.

The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in the month of Ramadan by an angel, directly from a book kept in heaven, and thus it is regarded as the infallible word of *Allah*. The belief in the divine revelation involves *Tanzil* (a divine sending down), the truth, which expresses the idea that the Qur'an is given by *Allah*. Consequently, man does not play any role in it. Hence, the Qur'an is the written revelation, and the *Sunna* represents the oral revelation transmitted through the channel of traditions.

#### 4.4.2 Sources in Islam

The sources in Islam are said to be four: the *Qur'an*, the *Sunna*, *Ijma*, and *Quiyas*. *Sunna* means "custom." A *Sunna* is testified to by a number of trustworthy reporters who have transmitted the respective Tradition, or *Hadith*, from the time of the prophet. A *Hadith* consists of a chain of witnesses which must be without gaps. *Hadith* seeks to provide guidance for circumstances not described in the Qur'an. *Ijma* is unanimous agreement or consensus of opinion as to Islamic faith or practice. It is assured that such consensus should not contradict the Qur'an. *Qiyas* means "reasoning, decision by analogy." This consists in referring back to a rule which was formulated for a similar case, in order to decide a current case. The *Hadith*—a collection of the sayings and practices of the Prophet—is used for the explanation of the Qur'an, whereas *ijma* and *qiyas* are based on the Qur'an. Therefore, the Qur'an actually is the real foundation of Islam and is the sole source from which all the teaching, theology and practices of Islam are drawn. For this reason, to uphold the Qur'an is to uphold Islam.

Qur'anic interpretation in the widest sense, is as old as the revelations to Muhammad. Every listener had to understand the revealed text for himself. As long as the Prophet was living, one could turn to him, and he would give a clarification elaborating revelation. Thus, the statements by the Prophet and testimonies of his companions stand at the center of the exegesis.

The exegesis of the Qur'an (*tafsir ul-Qur'an*) is a grouping of traditions (*hadith*) around the words and events of the Qur'an, together with a complex display of grammatical and lexicographical considerations about the various possible meanings of key words. The right interpretation of the Qur'an requires a close study of the text and of the circumstances under which it was sent down.

The rule for the interpretation of the Qur'an is said to have been stated in the Qur'an itself:

He it is Who has revealed the Book to thee; some of its verses are decisive. They are the basis of the Book, and others are allegorical. As for those in whose hearts there is perversity, they follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead and seeking to give it their own interpretation; but none knows its interpretation except Allah. And those well-grounded in knowledge say, we believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those having understanding (*Sura 3: 6*).

This verse indicates that there are two kinds of verses in the Qur'an, the *decisive* and the *allegorical*. The decisive verses are taken as the basis of the Qur'an, and they contain the fundamental principles, whereas, the allegorical verses are capable of different interpretations. Serious errors arise only when a wrong interpretation is given to words, which tend to have two meanings.

Therefore, important principles to be borne in mind in the interpretation of the Qur'an, are:

- i. that the meaning should be sought from within the Qur'an, and never should a passage be interpreted in such a manner that it may be at discrepancy with any other passage;
- ii. no attempt should be made to establish a principle on the strength of allegorical passages, or of words liable to different meanings;
- iii. when a law or principle is laid down in clear words, any statement carrying a doubtful significance, or a statement apparently opposed to the law so laid down, must be interpreted subject to the principle articulated. Similarly, that which is particular must be read in connection with and subject to more general statements.

In spite of these guidelines, in Islamic history *tafsir* reflects the various opinions of writers, theologians and different religious groups. Each theological system tries to justify itself by an appeal to the Qur'an. The scholarly exegesis which developed on the basis of the religious tradition is designated by the term *tafsir* (explanation, interpretation). Originally, the word *tawil* (inner, allegorical interpretation) was associated with this term; then an additional *inner* meaning, to be grasped through intuition, came to be accepted by the mystics and others, alongside the *external* meaning of the Qur'an as represented by the tradition-bound exegesis.

### 4.4.3 Some Trends in Islamic Interpretation

#### 4.4.3.1 Initial Attempts

The early interpretation consisted in the composition of the text. In the beginning there was no uniform text. The Uthmanic text had variant readings mainly because of the defects of Arabic script (no vowel signs and accent marks); there were interpretative insertions made especially by Ubayy ibn Kab (d. ca. C.E. 639) and Abd Allah ibn Masud (d. ca. 653). Again other variants are explained by saying that the received text in these parts suffered from the neglect of the copyists. The variants allegedly restored the original text which had been corrupted. This is especially the case where the text showed a grammatical error, which was then attributed to a slip of the pen of the copyist.

#### 4.4.3.2 Inherited Mode

This mode of interpretation stresses that correct exegesis is done with knowledge exclusively based on tradition, which goes back to the Prophet and his companions. It is believed that the Prophet, when he was asked for explanation, gave one which he received from Gabriel, who delivered it in the name of *Allah*, and that was passed on to the companions. Innumerable are the companions whose authority was invoked. Therefore, there is no uniformity in traditional exegesis of the Qur'an. On the one hand, the traditions of various Companions deviate from one another, and are even contradictory. On the other hand, to one and the same Companion different interpretations are attributed. Of course, this diversity of opinions is considered by Muslim theologians as a sign of the excellence of the Qur'an, a proof of its richness.

Thus, in the beginning the work of exegesis was restricted to showing the circumstances and reasons of the revelation. As time went on it became necessary to extend the scope of exegesis. The need was felt to have explanations of verses and phrases, which were no longer clear. It also became necessary to determine the precise meaning of words, the correct understanding of grammatical constructions, or the reference of a pronoun.

#### 4.4.3.3 Discontinuity with the Traditional Way

The Mutazilite exegetes attempted to bring about a break with traditional interpretation. They showed strong rationalistic features and gave due place to the intellect in determining faith. They opposed the anthropomorphic concept of *Allah* and the doctrine of predestination. They affirmed human freedom of will. In their argumentation they drew from Greek logic and introduced a speculative dialectic into interpretation. This is said to be



the beginning of meta-phorical and allegorical exegesis.

The al-Ashari school, under the guidance of al-Ashari, who originally came from the Mutazila school but then moved towards orthodoxy, resisted this position with its methods of dialectic reasoning. According to this school, human beings do not possess, freedom of will in the strict sense. They have merely the potential to attain through an act of acceptance the actions that have been created for them. The concept of *Allah* must be not be made completely ineffectual, as most Mutazilites have done in practice. Yet one must be wary of imagined conceptions, which encroach upon the dignity of God.

#### 4.4.3.4 Sunnite Interpretation

*Sunnite* interpretation supports the Traditional Qur'anic exegesis through *hadith*. In the famous Tradition Collection of al-Bukhari (d. C.E. 870), and in that of al-Tirmidhi (d. 892) there are separate chapters on Qur'anic interpretation, which of course do not cover all of the material. This way of *tafsir* confines itself to a strictly traditional interpretation, as had been transmitted and laid down by Muhammad, his first Companions and the leaders of Muslim Community (*jamaa*). The object of *tafsir* is not to show the meaning and relevance of the revelation today but give interpretations of orthodoxy.

#### 4.4.3.5 Shiite Interpretation

The tendency in the *Shiite* circles is to read their own concepts of belief into the Qur'an. Among the *Shiite* there are, however, groups who in fact recognize in common the major part of the religious Tradition, but support and supplement it by means of the doctrinal authority of the *imams*, who are supposed to have inherited the *genuine* Qur'an edited by Ali. Thus, when exegetical traditions arose which tended towards momentary concerns, *Shiite* exegesis bore a much stronger and more direct relationship, than did *Sunnite* exegesis, to post-Qur'anic events, because of the historical ties of the *imams*. Their interpretation is more tendentious than that of the Sunnites. They try to interpret the Qur'an in order to find there the characteristic elements of their beliefs, for example, rejection of the first three Caliphs and of the Umayyads, the cult of Ali and the *imams*, their divine vocation and superhuman gifts, the return of the hidden *Imam* as *Mahdi* (the "rightly guided one") at the end of the world. The Shiites have a special form of Qur'anic exegesis called "allegorical interpretation" (*tawil*). Wherever positive statements in the Qur'an are indefinite or general enough, they are interpreted as referring to Ali, the *imams*, and their community; and negative statements are interpreted as referring to their opponents, as well as to the first three Caliphs.

#### 4.4.3.6 Mystical Interpretation

This approach is as old as the Prophet and his Companions. The Sufis tried to find mystical elements in the Qur'an as a basis for their doctrines, preaching and practices. Therefore, they resorted to allegorical interpretation (*tawil*). They are of the opinion that the words of the Qur'an do not mean what the literal sense seems to express. Behind those words a more profound meaning is hidden, and that hidden meaning is the true one. According to the mystics, the legitimacy for their kind of Qur'anic exegesis is based on the statements of the Prophet or his Companions, although the religious Tradition offers on the whole only a few points of departure in this direction.

Sufis advocate also a kind of parallel exegesis. They maintain the character of reality of the external meaning; yet at the same time they see "allusions" (*isharat*), which are important to understand. Since the external meaning is generally treated thoroughly in traditional exegesis, not much of an effort is made towards an interpretation in this direction. In uncovering the inner meaning, a distinction is made between actual allegorical interpretation (*tawil*) and the "uncovering of parallels" (*tatbiq*).

#### 4.4.3.7 Al-Ghazzali

Mention should be made of Al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) who has influenced Islam to a great extent and has a very significant place in Islam as a thinker, theologian and mystic. He thoroughly studied the philosophical tradition of Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037), and he refuted its important theses bearing on religion in the famous work *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-falasifah*). Yet, he was influenced by it in important ways as well. He then adopted Sufism as his "way to God," and composed his *Revivification of the Sciences of the Faith* (*Ihya ulum al-din*). After an intense study of traditional Greek philosophy, he arrived at the point of complete scepticism concerning the human intellect and then came to believe that the intuition of faith alone could convey truth. The law must be fulfilled, but it must be fulfilled with the right intentions. He employed dialectical methods in presenting exegesis, and claimed for himself the right of independent investigation (*ijtihad*), which had been curtailed by the orthodox. His main accomplishment lies in the fact that he tried to infuse a new spiritual life into law and theology. Muslim dogma reached its high point in the Middle Ages and did not change for a long time to come.

#### 4.4.4 Contemporary Approaches

Islam is faced with a crisis caused by its encounter with a technological and secularized culture. A few legal adjustments attempted by the con-

servative religious scholars (*ulama*) do not seem to provide a satisfactory solution. New and different views with regard to the interpretation of the Qur'an have been heard for some time. There are thinkers and intellectuals who do not hesitate to confront new major problems. One of these is Shah Wali Allah (1703 — 1763), a reformer from Delhi and a Sufi of a high spiritual level. In his writings he appears to be responding positively to the changed situation. He is regarded as a pioneer of modern Qur'anic interpretation. In the last century some modern movements were started in various parts of the Muslim world, for example in Egypt, India and Pakistan. The Indo-Pak Movement of Sir Sayyad Ahmad Khan (1817 — 1898) and Ameer Ali (d. 1928) was mainly a cultural and political movement, though theological aspects were never absent. The Egyptian movement of Muhammad Abduh (1845 — 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935) was predominantly a theological movement. Though the origin of these movements was different, the aim was the same, that is, to answer the challenges of modern times. Both movements denied that Islam as such is an obstacle to the development of culture and social life. This line of reasoning is also applied to their interpretation of the Qur'an, which is apologetic in nature, that is to say, a defence against the charges of backwardness from outside and against Muslim attacks from inside.

There are some commentaries which reflect the modern tendencies in Islam. Among these the notable are *Tafsir ul-Manar*, the work of a group of scholars from Egypt; *Tarjuman ul-Qur'an* of Mawlana Abu l-Kalam Azad (1888 — 1958) of India, and *Tafhim ul-Qur'an* by Sayyid Abul ala Mawlana Mawdudi (1903 — 1979), and *Maarif al Qur'an* and *Loghat ul-Qur'an* by Ghulam Ahmad Parvez (b. 1903) of Pakistan.

Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf Allah from Egypt defended in 1947 a thesis on *Narrative Art in the Qur'an (Al-fann al-Qasasi fi al Qur'an al-Karim)*, where he tended to distinguish between the historical truths and literary genre of Qur'anic accounts. He treated them as literary works and judged them according to the rules of literary genres which are determined by psychological and sociological laws and circumstances. His thesis, presented at Cairo University, was rejected as contrary to orthodox doctrine. These accusations of the conservatives subdued any further progress in this direction.

In 1962 Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi from Lebanon proposed a new methodology for finding out which precept of the Qur'an has to be followed in ceremonial law in case there are different enunciations. He contended that this depends on the values one is now pursuing in fulfilling a given precept. He distinguished between different levels of values and made an appeal that a hierarchy of values should be maintained. The bone of contention for the conservative Muslim is precisely this hierarchy of values. Human rea-



son will have to play a considerable role in establishing it, because the Qur'an itself does not speak of different levels. As a result, the methodology was found wanting.

In our day Professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd of Egypt tries to reread Islamic sources with regard to their relation to literary studies in general. He holds that the Qur'anic text deserves respect and veneration, but not the Tradition of the Prophet through which the Qur'an is transmitted. Tradition, he says, should be considered critically, because it does not always enable one to bring to light the real meaning of the Qur'an. According to him Tradition has obscured the Qur'an for centuries by advocating immobility and repetition. Such sclerosis is due mainly to the cutting off of the text from its living context, society, which has changed since the inception of Islam, at a time when dialogue and a dialectic relation between text and reality were being initiated. Nothing is more damaging than isolating sacred texts from the rest of literature because, from the point of view of Abu Zayd and so many others, that is tantamount to taking Scripture out of context. A comparative study must take into account the contribution of human sciences, mainly that of language and communication.

Abu Zayd focuses his research on speech and text and the interpretation of these. He uses a more neutral or objective starting point, that is, the principle that one must examine the Qur'anic text as a fact of language or, as it were, a linguistic product, which is the only way of highlighting the meaning without falling into ideology. With this method, therefore, he is required to return to the text and to the time of its production, before looking at any commentary, without considering any prior opinion and even maintaining a conflicting point of view.

Professor Zayd recommends a return to the "personal reflection" (*ijtihad*) for the creative individual interpretation of the Qur'an, even though the Islamic jurists (*ulama*) say that the door of *ijtihad* is closed. If one follows these personal reflections, the teachings of the Qur'an may become a living guide for Muslim societies and individuals in the changed conditions of modern life. By this, the Muslim scholars could also apply the spirit of the law to new situations. His thinking and contribution are judged unorthodox, and have stirred up considerable controversy. For having introduced a rational methodology into the analysis of the Qur'an, he was denied the post of professor in the Faculty of Language and Literature at the University of Cairo. For holding these views he has been declared to be a non-Muslim.

A growing tendency among the modern Islamic scholars is to locate the source of conflict, which they do not find in revelation *per se*, but rather in the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an that has been given prece-

dence by the *ulama*. Freeing Qur'anic truths from traditional interpretations has amounted to challenging the authority of the traditional *ulama*. As a result, interpretation and political use of the Qur'an and the *Sunna*, are no longer under the complete control of the *ulama*.

#### 4.4.5 Islamic Theology

Islamic theology (*kalam*, *ilm al-kalam* = "science of the word") is based on the divine attribute of speech expressed in the Qur'an, thus becoming "discourse" concerning *Allah*. Since most Muslims recognize the Qur'an as "the only source of faith," interpretation does affect doing theology. From the very beginning, interpretation was used to respond to internal and external threats to justify orthodox dogmas. Thus there developed a defensive and apologetic attitude. The aim of *kalam* is to preserve the faith by systematic discourses, using rational arguments drawn from the revealed Qur'an and *hadith*, in order to defend the orthodox faith against its opponents, whether external or internal, and to clarify the doubts of believers.

Thus, *kalam* does not try, as does Christian theology, to provide a clear understanding of faith (*intellectus fidei*; *fides quaerens intellectum*), where philosophical reasoning is taken up into the light of faith and of revelation, and together with it, forms a single movement to explore the revealed mysteries. The scholars say that it remains external to Islamic dogma, which it seeks to defend against its enemies, even though the developments of later *kalam* helped indirectly to bring about progress within these dogmas (divine essence and attributes, divine omnipotence and human freedom). One cannot speak of "doctrinal progress" in Islam, apart from answering the objections of a later age. Thus, *kalam* is not a theology, or a theodicy, or purely apologetic. It contains elements of all three and recasts them in a synthesis proper to itself.

Although the modern trends are not easily accepted, attempts are made by different individuals. Some modern exegetes consider divine guidance as the most specific feature of the Qur'an, so that society must ever be in progress. Hence, they try to offer interpretations of the Qur'an to uphold human dignity, to improve the status of women, to abolish purdah and polygamy, to promote interest in modern education, development, economy, trade and industry. These could all be achieved through the efforts of the Muslim community, especially by the experts in law and theology, by developing correct interpretations of the Qur'an in different ages and situations.

To sum up, the Qur'an is the sole source which guides the life, teaching and theolog-ical thought process in Islam. Since some guidelines for its interpretation are found in the Qur'an itself, it seems rather difficult to go

beyond these rules, to depart from the traditional way of doing interpretation. Therefore, to a large extent the critical study of the Qur'an always meets with objections. The Islamic exegesis of the Qur'an was and remains more application than interpretation.

#### **4.5 A Christian Hermeneutical Approach to the Texts of Confucianism**

The Confucian tradition is not considered to be a religion. It is rather a philosophy of life; and hence, it is much more easily appropriated by people of different religious persuasions, much as Plato and Aristotle were appropriated by Western Christianity. If one understands hermeneutics as an intelligent reading of a text out of which some meanings can be derived, there are two important factors: the text to be read and the reader of it. This section will concentrate more on how readers, with both Christian and Confucian mentalities, approach the Chinese Classics to draw meanings in consonance with the Bible.

##### **4.5.1 Text and Reader**

A text never stands alone in black and white without a context. In the case of the Bible, the context refers to a complex of living realities that point to a community of faith with its history and culture. Anyone today who wants to do an intelligent reading of a biblical text has to take into account, for example, the Western Asian cultures in which the Old Testament was born, and the Mediterranean cultures in which the New Testament came into existence.

Furthermore, one cannot read any text intelligently without bearing in mind his or her own existential situation arising out of history and culture. An intelligent reading is a fusion of two horizons: the text with its context, and the reader with his or her existential situation.

In this context one may distinguish two types of Christian Confucian readers. The first is the one who reads the Bible against the background of the Chinese classics that throughout history have shaped a more or less homogeneous Confucian way of thinking. The second is the one who delves into the Confucian text, with the Christian mentality, so as to find those values and meanings in harmony with the life-truths taught by the Bible. It is the second type that will be further explored here.

##### **4.5.2 The Bible and the Confucian Classics**

With regard to the relationship of the Bible and the Confucian Classics, there are four parallels or similarities that are worth focusing on.



1. The process of canonization of the books. While the Christian community felt a need to officially determine which books are in fact inspired and belong to the Christian canon, Confucian scholars did not feel this need. However, over the years they have come to unanimously regard the *Four Books* and *Five Scriptures* as their constant points of reference.
2. The way of reasoning. In the Chinese classics it is often found that the understanding of self requires some presuppositions coming from an understanding of the “others” or “the Other,” be this God or Heaven. In turn, the understanding of Heaven also requires an understanding of the self and others. In this regard, there is a certain similarity between the biblical world and that of Confucius.
3. Application of meanings to life. This is essential to Chinese wisdom. Any search for truth which does not end up with an application to daily life has not yet reached the stage of wisdom. This aspect has much in common with the Biblical approach, especially, in the Wisdom literature.
4. The “surplus” meanings of a text. In regard to Sacred Scripture one uses the term *sensus plenior* or “spiritual meaning.” As one studies a biblical text, it is possible to draw meanings that are beyond, but without contradicting, the intention of the writer, or the understanding of the believing community of a certain time and space. This is the so-called “surplus” meaning which, however, is not intended to distort the “literal” meaning but rather to complement it in a “fuller sense” (*sensus plenior*). The same is true for the study of the Confucian text. Therefore, a Christian (whose background is the biblical world) can draw “surplus” meanings from a Confucian text, which a Confucian may never have thought of, without usurping the Confucian text for purposes foreign to the text. The same would be true for a non-Christian reader (from the Confucian world) who reads the Bible.

#### 4.5.3 Interplay between Grace and Nature

Similar ways of searching for the “surplus” meanings have already long been practised in the Church. We recall that the Greek Gnostic reading of the Bible by way of allegory was adopted by the Alexandrians in the early Patristic period. The Benedictine tradition of *lectio divina* did the same thing in the Middle Ages. The monks in general had little access to the biblical text in the original languages, nor did they have any historical-critical tools for understanding the context. They did have the Greek — Latin training of the seven liberal arts and classical authors. In a marvelous way they drew spiritual meanings enriching the life of the Church. St. Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs* is an example of this.

In the Scholastic tradition scholars did the same thing reading the texts with the eyes of philosophers (such as Aristotle) so as to draw new meanings from the Bible. This common practice found a good expression in St. Thomas Aquinas: "Grace does not take away nature, but rather perfects it" (*"cum gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit eam"*).

Vatican II focused on historicity. The Christ-event is historical and has been understood, preached and written down in a historical process. Since the event in question is grace-filled and can never be imprisoned in a particular version (be it inspired), any sincere reader, by reading the inspired text about the grace-filled event, can always grasp new meanings that have never been expressed deeply enough.

Hence, Vatican II was aware that "new avenues to truth are opened up," and "it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures" (GS 44). It is along this line that we believe that the fusion of the Confucian and biblical worlds through a proper approach to texts of both kinds can give rise to a new and fruitful understanding of the life-truths.

#### 4.5.4 Confucian Sensibilities

Before turning to the fruitfulness of the fusion mentioned above, it is good to describe, without being exhaustive, some major sensibilities common to Confucians who find themselves facing a text. Through these sensibilities the literal meaning of the text may be more securely approached and distortions avoided. These sensibilities should not be taken as single and isolated approaches, for they are so interwoven that one leads into another.

##### 4.5.4.1 A Sense of Morality

Putting oneself in the proper relationship to others (king, parents, children, friends), and doing what is right, are essential to Confucian morality. The norms are in some way pre-established by Heavenly Truth (*tien li*), which, though innate in everyone, is not easily understood or articulated by the ordinary people. However, through the daily practice of what is dictated by one's conscience, one can realize these norms in a more explicit way. Moral experience is a human way of travelling by which one can reach the Heavenly Way (*tien tao*). Truths, especially those of the Transcendent, can be attained from moral experiences. The direction of coming to know is from below upwards. If a text is worth serious reading at all, it is because it has to do with the Way. "If I learn the Way in the morning, then I am ready to die in the evening."

#### 4.5.4.2 The Sense of Knowing and Doing

To separate knowing from doing, or vice-versa, is inconceivable for an authentic Confucian. Acquisition of knowledge aims at realizing something important in one's life. Knowing gives the guideline for doing; whereas doing confirms the truth of what comes to be known. To pronounce principles for life, without putting them into practice first, is to miss the entire sense of the search for truth. A strong interconnectedness between knowing and doing is often found in Chinese literature.

#### 4.5.4.3 Sense of the Concrete

Ordinary people do not like building up systems of truths into a philosophical structure, or spending time on abstract speculation. If a Confucian has to accept certain truths at all, it is primarily because those truths touch concrete life. Images, stories, parables, dialogues are often used to convey principles of life.

#### 4.5.4.4 Sense of the Whole

"Systems of truths or values" are not easily assumed. One tries to accommodate every type of truth. Hence, boundaries become vague and flexible. Often no exclusivist position is found. Ambiguity of words is almost intended. As a matter of fact, the Chinese classics leave much room and liberty for various interpretations, because truth cannot be imprisoned in abstract, stagnant concepts and words. Words are meant to accommodate different values of life, so that life may find Wholeness by embracing whatever is said to be true of life. Truths are in need of words for transmission, but the same truths must be freed from words for the sake of understanding the whole. It is taken for granted that the Whole should contain what is negative (*Yin*) and positive (*Yang*). Only in the fusion and complementarity of the contrasting poles can one find the safe path, or the "middle way," to the Whole.

#### 4.5.4.5 Sense of Integrating One's Subjective Feeling

Aware that ambiguity could lead to mere personal feeling and complete subjectivity or relativism, a Confucian has certain devices to keep oneself from falling into harmful subjectivism. The first and foremost is to measure the understanding of a text against one's own moral conscience. This measure is to safeguard the validity and universality of the doing, for example, "Don't do unto others what you don't want others do unto you." It naturally follows that one should avoid drawing any meaning from a text which could be harmful to the self and others. The common good and personal wholeness must be taken into account.



#### 4.5.4.6 Sense of Awaiting and Instantaneous Enlightenment

Conscious of the fact that human learning needs time and patience, a Confucian should not rush to a hasty conclusion. As for the truths of Heaven, or the Transcendent, one may not easily find sure ground. It would be better for one to keep silence and wait, rather than to make wild statements which are of no avail. This does not mean that one should abandon the search for the Transcendent, rather one should start from what is more basic, and sure within the reach of one's experience. The desire for the Whole does not allow one to miss the truth of Heaven.

As for the truths of daily life, one should make strenuous effort, since they are within one's reach. The hardships and sufferings of the world are such that one may be tempted to think that less freedom would be a worthwhile sacrifice to avoid pain. Yet, this is not the case for an authentic Confucian. The search for truth is such that one has a cost to pay. Truth is no "free lunch." The very worth of the human consists, according to the Confucian sensibility, in gaining something true, beautiful and good for oneself through one's freedom and effort. A Confucian can never tolerate being given anything without one's consent, or by putting one's dignity in jeopardy. Patience and perseverance, among other factors, are the indispensable cost: "If you don't get through the cold of the snow and the chill of the wind, you won't get the fragrance of the plum blossom."

It is a common belief that in one's sincere and hard search "understanding" (fragrance) will come all of a sudden, with great surprise and reward. This is what the Japanese Zen tradition calls *satori*, the instantaneous enlightenment by shock. Truth, especially that of the Transcendent, is not to be obtained according to one's own plan and programs. Truth, as it were, has its own pace and its own time to reveal itself to the searcher. All this implies that, despite all the human effort and cost, truth still comes as a free gift.

#### 4.5.5 Some Examples

The examples given below exemplify how a Christian, who has developed Confucian sensibilities, might delve into the Chinese classical texts and find surplus meanings in harmony with the Bible. The texts are chosen from the Four Books. These examples are clear enough to serve the purpose, though no in-depth reading is attempted.

##### 4.5.5.1 The Great Learning

In the first few sentences of the Great Learning one finds "the way of great learning consists in brightening up our luminous nature, in being kind

to people, in not ceasing to do so until one arrives at the supreme good.”

“In brightening up the luminous nature” indicates that our nature is good, right at the outset, but we need to remove all the possible dirt that could darken it. It could also be understood that we should make an effort to let our virtues shine before others. The two readings are not mutually exclusiv, though their focus varies. They both refer to the fact that every one has to take care of his or her own moral growth.

“In being kind to people” refers to the attitude that we need to assume in our dealings with others. There is also another reading, which says “in renewing people.” The renewal starts from the self but does not cease at the self. In the epigraph on a bathing basin of the Emperor Tang dynasty it is written: “Renew yourself, doing it everyday, again and again.” The renewal should go from self to others. These two senses can be put together to mean that one should be kind to people out of one’s heart, and only by doing this is one in a position to renew others. This, by way of resonance, recalls the Lord’s saying, “I give you a *new* commandment: love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:34).

“In not ceasing to do so until one arrives at the Supreme Good.” The Supreme Good bestows a sense of the Transcendent, towards which every-one is to strive. The emphasis, however, is not only centered on the Transcendent, but also on the journey of Great Learning, which is intended to be an unceasing effort on our part.

#### 4.5.5.2 The Middle Way

Here again, one finds a synthesis of life-principles right from the first sentences. “Nature is given to humans as mission by Heaven. To live in full what nature commands as mission is the Way. The construction of this Way is teaching.”

The Chinese expression *tien ming* could mean the life or mission from Heaven. It coincides with the biblical teaching that human life is a gift, and at the same time a calling to a certain mission. The mission is nothing other than to live up to the standard of human nature. This is the Way. Again, by way of resonance, we recall the saying of John Paul II who summarizes the biblical teachings on the mission of the Church, saying: “The human is the way of the Church” (*Redemptor Hominis*).

The typical reasoning of the Confucian mentality is verified here. When one tries to ascertain the way of self-realization, one needs to derive it from “Heaven” and “others.” The same is true for talking about Heaven. One needs to derive truths by starting from the self and others. They are interrelated.

#### 4.5.5.3 The Confucian *Analectics*

The very first three sentences point out the strict connection between self, others and Heaven:

“What a delight while learning and revising!” This is obviously concerned with self-realization.

“What a joy when friends come from afar!” Here friends indicate the relationship with other people.

“I won’t be frustrated if I am not known by people. Such is the behavior of a just man”. Here one finds a remedy for frustration. If this is read with another sentence: “Who knows me is Heaven.” One comes to the realization that the impressions of other people about oneself carry no weight at all. What counts is the acknowledgement from Heaven.

#### 4.5.5.4 Mentius

At the outset this text records a dialogue. The chief of state asks, “Master, you come from thousands of miles away. What profit are you going to bring to us?” The Master replies, “Why should Your Majesty talk about profit? There is also the virtue of being kind (*jen*) and just (*yi*).”

More often than not it happens to us that in life we give preference to profit, while forgetting the virtue of being kind and just. It is only this double virtue, not the profit, that gives rise to human worth. It is not easy to find an exact translation of *jen* and *yi*. They are, according to some scholars, not far from the senses of Hebrew *hesed* (compassionate) and *‘emet* (upright).

The ideal of a just man is well expressed in the saying: “I prefer being killed to losing *jen*. I will sacrifice my life for *yi*.” Again, by way of resonance one can recall the wonderful words of St John: “The Word is made flesh; he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace (Gk *charis*, Hb *hesed*) and truth (Gk *aletheia*, Hb *‘emet*).” In the ultimate analysis the Gospel affirms also that Jesus is the one who fulfils the ideal of a just man, on the cross, for he prefers being killed to losing *jen* and sacrifices his life for *yi*.

#### 4.5.6 Conclusion: Openness and Balance

The search for the “surplus” meanings of a text in any intelligent reading is justified, provided that these meanings are harmonized with each



other. Neither a Christian nor a Confucian would have any difficulty in admitting this. This creative openness allows the fusion of two horizons: the Confucian and the Christian, in such a way that the "surplus" meanings found in texts, Confucian or Christian, may be mutually enriching and enlightening. Of course, it is tacitly assumed that the same God speaks in both texts, though in different manners.

This kind of openness is not without its weaknesses and limitations. It readily lends itself to fanciful and forced interpretations. A balance must be kept in this kind of hermeneutics. To achieve this, both the Confucian sensibilities and the Christian traditions should be taken into account. One can ask: Do these surplus meanings accord with Confucian sensibilities and the Christian tradition?

Were Confucius alive today with his eagerness to learn all the time, he would be most open-minded to all kinds of theologies, East and West. At the same time, with his sound judgment, he would also know how to keep the necessary balance.

## **4.6 A Christian Hermeneutical Approach to the Texts of Taoism**

### **4.6.1 Basic Text of Taoism**

Both philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism take their inspiration from the same basic text and author *Tao-te-ching*, written during the Spring-Autumn Period in Chinese history (722-431 B.C.E.) by Lao Tzu, an older contemporary of Confucius. In addition to the text of Lao Tzu, Taoist philosophy also relied heavily on the writings of Chuang Tzu, that are normally assigned to the Warring States Period (403-221 B.C.E.)

### **4.6.2 Taoistic Sensibilities**

The way of presenting the Transcendent in Taoism has a great similarity to the apophatic mode of thinking. The best way of expressing the Transcendent is just to let the Transcendent be entirely free from any possible imprisonment in a word. Hence, a term for the Transcendent makes sense only if it indicates how ineffable the Transcendent is.

One should not forget that Taoist philosophy is very much in consonance with the thought of Chuang Tzu, who projects the "aspiration for freedom" in an esoteric but attractive way. There lives a spirit-man in the mountains of a remote island who "does not eat the five grains but sucks in the wind and drinks the dew. He rides the vapor of the clouds, yokes flying dragons to his chariot, and roams beyond the four seas" (Chuang Tzu: Chapter I, *The Inner Chapters*). It is in this freedom that one takes great delight.

It becomes dreams that attract many who want to shed the burden of life.

Not unrelated to life, the attempt of approaching the Ineffable is to struggle with the way of expressing the Transcendent-Immanent. The fact that Tao-te-ching insistently presents Tao (principle) as nameless, incomprehensible and unspeakable, reveals a certain spirituality of life. It is advisable for one to adopt a life of silence, simplicity, non-violence, self-emptying and non-action. It is only in submitting oneself to whatever comes from Nature that one can experience the Ineffable, which, paradoxically, is so near to life in its non-active receptivity, and yet so far in the active attempt of grasping It. This is the way Lao Tzu presents it: "Reach emptiness to its ultimate, abide in genuine tranquillity. Ten thousand things rise together; I am to contemplate (*kuan*) their return. Now things flourish; each returns to its root. To return to the root is tranquillity; it means to recover life. To recover life is constancy; to know constancy is enlightenment" (chap 16).

One might be easily tempted to think that all the apophatic thinking, dreaming of an esoteric freedom and adopting a life of non-action, has very little space for positive thinking. It is not the case. There is also another sensibility common both to Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, namely, to search for wisdom from the foolish, to obtain the noble from the lowly, to take notice of the unnoticed, to find usefulness from uselessness. It indeed requires a lot of intelligence and thinking to get the positive from the negative.

#### 4.6.3 Examples

Having assimilated the sensibilities of Taoism, the Christian can apply them in fruitful ways. In the following case, for example, a Christian who has developed these sensibilities is able to first grasp more precisely the meaning of the *Tao-Te-Ching* then to compare its concepts of transcendence and wisdom with the biblical concept of God and of Wisdom, and thus draw surplus meanings for both.

##### 4.6.3.1 The concepts of *Tao*, *Wu*, *Yu*, and *Te*

The Chinese character for *tao* consists of two elements: one means "head" and the other "to run." It means "that on which someone goes": a path or road, then extended to mean method, norm and principle. While in Confucianism *tao* is employed to signify the way of heaven or of humans, in Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu *tao* acquires a metaphysical meaning. Tao is the ultimate reality, as well as the first principle underlying form, substance, being and change. The assumption is made that for the universe to have come into being, there must exist an all-embracing first principle that is called *tao* (see chap. 25 of *Tao-Te-Ching*).

Paradoxically, the nameless *tao* is designated as *wu* (non-being) as well as *yu* (being). The concepts of *wu* and *yu* are basic in Lao Tzu's thought. As the origin of heaven and earth, *wu* is not nothingness or emptiness in a purely negative sense. Being the first principle of all things, *tao* cannot be a "thing" in the way that heaven and earth and the "ten thousand things" are things. Inasmuch as it is devoid of form and limitation and is not an object or thing, *tao* is *wu*. Inasmuch as it is what has brought the universe into being, *tao* is *yu*. *Wu* and *yu*, non-being and being, are the two sides of the same coin: *yu* is the manifestation of *tao* viewed as *wu*.

*Tao* is called "mystery" or "mystery upon mystery" (Chap. 1), which is at once transcendent and immanent. The transcendent character of *tao* can be seen in the description given in chapter 25 of *Tao-te-ching*:

There was a thing, formless yet complete in itself, born prior to heaven and earth. Silent! Empty! Existing by itself, it remains unchanging. Pervading everywhere, it is inexhaustible. One may think of it as the mother of all beneath heaven. We do not know its name, but we term it *tao*.

To express the immanent aspect of *tao*, Lao Tzu employs the term *te* (virtue or power) which is presented in the second half of *Tao-te-ching*. *Te* is *tao* "dwelling" in objects, that is, *te* is what individual objects obtain from *tao*, and thereby become what they are. *Te* is described as a mother nurturing all things: "It is *tao* that gives them life. It is *te* that nurses them, grows them, fosters them, shelters them, comforts them, and covers them under her wings" (Chap. 51). Thus *te* manifests the immanent, "feminine" aspect of *tao*.

#### 4.6.3.2 From *Tao* to the Christian God

This way of presenting *tao* as "nameless" or *wu* helps us to appreciate the apophatic tradition in Christian theology, which describes God as silent, hidden, incomprehensible. Inasmuch as God is beyond all knowledge, God is nameless; inasmuch as God is beyond all being, God is *wu*. As an heir to this tradition, Thomas Aquinas came to the conclusion that the highest human knowledge of God is the recognition that we do not know God (*De Pot.* Q.7, a. 5).

Like *Tao*, the Christian God is immanent as well as transcendent. God who dwells "in unapproachable light" (1 Tim 6:16) is also, in the words of St. Augustine, "nearer to me than myself." While all three divine persons are transcendent-immanent to the world, each one bears this character in a distinct manner. The Father remains the hidden source and transcendent ground of the Godhead, even in immanence. The Son, while remaining in



the hidden ground of the Father, is God's self-communication in creation and in the history of salvation. The Holy Spirit is the inner bond of love uniting the Father and the Son, as well as their Breath that permeates and animates all things. The Spirit is like the maternal care (*te*) of God, that shelters, nurtures, and transforms all human beings and the entire creation, though in Taoism the personal nature of God is not clear, nor is the concept of creation.

#### 4.6.4 Wisdom in Taoistic Books and Bible

##### 4.6.4.1 Taoistic Enlightenment and its Ways

Although Lao Tzu explores the meaning of *tao*, his chief concern is for humans and their way of life, both as individuals and in society. He designates an ideal person a sage or true person. While Lao Tzu teaches that everyone can and should strive to become a sage, he presents the sage especially as the ideal ruler of a state.

Since one and the same *tao* is inherent in all things, permeating heaven, earth and humans, Lao Tzu perceives unity between human beings and nature, and even envisages an exact correspondence between the microcosm of a human being and the macrocosm of the outer world. Moreover, Lao Tzu describes certain general principles of *tao* running through the phenomenal changes of the universe, which may be called "invariables." The ability to know these constant laws is called "enlightenment": "to know constancy is enlightenment" (Chap. 16). The true sage is one who is able to perceive the invariable way of *tao* as manifested in nature and to follow accordingly.

- a) "Non-action" (*wu-wei*) is the first invariable way or law of *tao*: "*Tao* invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone" (Chap. 37). Non-action means that *tao* does not actively intervene but allows things to follow their natural courses. Spontaneity is the hallmark of *tao*: "humans follow earth; earth follows heaven; heaven follows *tao*; *tao* follows its nature (*tzu-jan*)" (Chap. 25). Consequently, the sage must follow *tao* in cultivating non-action as a way of life. Non-action should not be taken to mean doing nothing. It actually means a quiet surrender to the ways of *tao* by respecting the natural course inherent in things, without making violent or unnecessary interferences. Non-action is characterized by the sage's having no thought of self, that is, being unconcerned with personal interest (Chap. 7). Non-action also implies taciturnity and detachment from one's own achievement. Lao Tzu recommends non-action above all as the essential quality of an ideal ruler who must conduct a rule of *wu-wei*, interfering with the people as little as possible, and allowing them ample scope for self-development.

He is convinced that "acting by non-action, nothing will not be governed well" (Chap. 3).

- b) Closely related to the idea of non-action is the pair "reversal" and "weakness." Weakness is the function of *tao*. The movement of *tao* is not linear but circular. There are things that, apparently opposite, are in reality relative and complementary to one another, e.g., difficult and easy, long and short, high and low, front and back (Chap. 2). Paradoxically, great things often resemble their opposites (cf. Chap. 41). Moreover, the reversal in the movement of *tao* is reflected in the changing phenomena of the world: "Bad fortune is what good fortune depends on; good fortune is what bad fortune hides in" (Chap. 58). *Tao's* law of reversal tends to balance uneven situations: "Is not the way of heaven like the stretching of a bow? What is high is brought down, and what is low is raised up. So, too, from those who have too much, *tao* takes away, and those who are deficient, it augments" (Chap. 77).

Since phenomenal change is governed by the law of reversal, the sage, enlightened by this law, must act in a manner opposite to what he wishes to achieve, for "he who grudges expense pays dearest in the end; he who has hoarded most will suffer the heaviest loss" (Chap. 44). "The sage, putting himself in the background, is always to the fore. Remaining outside, he is always there. Is it not just because he does not strive for any personal end that all his personal ends are fulfilled?" (Chap. 7). Likewise, "just because he never at any time makes a show of greatness, he, in fact, achieves greatness" (Chap. 34). Knowing that anything that goes to one extreme must swing to its opposite, "the sage discards the excessive, the extravagant, the extreme" (Chap. 29). The sage knows when to stop, and when to withdraw: "holding (a cup) until it overflows is not as good as stopping in time... When your work is done, then withdraw. That is the way of heaven" (Chap. 9).

- c) "Weakness" is closely linked to the previous two: non-action and reversal. The opposite of the weak is the strong. In the world everyone wants to be strong. Few people understand that strength and power are perilous: "hardness and rigidity are associated with death. Softness and weakness are associated with life. Powerful weapons will not win; massive trees will be cut down" (Chap. 76). The weakness recommended by Lao Tzu is not an end in itself, but a means that leads to real strength. What is at issue here is a weakness that overcomes strength: "The soft and the weak win over the hard and the strong" (Chap. 36). Lao Tzu evokes the image of water: "Nothing under heaven is softer or more yielding than water, but when it attacks things hard and resistant, there is nothing superior to it" (Chap. 78). Real strength means inner strength, which is achieved through practising the weakness recommended by Lao Tzu. "One who overcomes himself is strong" (Chap. 33).

- d) Weakness is related to the fourth invariable of Tao: “simplicity.” Lao Tzu contemplates an original state of innocence in which Tao is simply embraced. He considers the setting up of moral codes and human institutions as an artifice that follows upon our falling away from the original state (Chap. 18). Hence, Lao Tzu advocates a return to primal simplicity by discarding knowledge and reducing desires (Chap. 19). On account of our present perversion, this return to simplicity requires cultivation. Lao Tzu employs the images of an infant and an uncarved block to describe simplicity. Since the child’s knowledge and desires are very simple, Lao Tzu often compares a person who has cultivated himself to a little child (cf. Chap. 20, 28, 55). Similarly, Lao Tzu used the word *p’u* (uncarved block) to indicate the state of simplicity in which desires are restrained.

#### 4.6.4.2 In Consonance with the Biblical Wisdom

Non-action, reversal, weakness and simplicity find ample parallels in the Biblical teachings. The following instances or figures in the Old Testament illustrate these parallels:

- a) Job is a biblical figure revealing wisdom as “non-action.” Job was unable to reconcile his suffering with his sense of his own innocence. Later, he realized that God is beyond every understanding, and what man can do is simply to let God be God. “I know that you are all powerful: what you conceive, you can perform. I am the man who obscured your designs with my empty-headed words. I have been holding forth on matters I cannot understand, on marvels beyond me and my knowledge. I knew you only by hearsay; but now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract all I have said, and in dust and ashes I repent” (Job 42:2-3, 5-6). In suffering Job was enlightened by God to grasp that non-action is the best way to let God accomplish in us his great designs.
- b) Jeremiah provides an example of wisdom as “reversal.” In his prophetic role he fell into despair and started to make complaints against God, “Why is my suffering continual, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Do you (Lord) mean to be for me a deceptive stream with inconstant waters?” Then the Lord replied, “If you come back, I will take you back into my service” (Jer 15:18-19). There is a play on the Hebrew word *shub* (turn and return): “If you turn to me, then I’ll let you return.” In carrying out the service given by God, the prophet Jeremiah is constantly hesitating between his own will and God’s will. The solution for the prophet is to will what God wills.
- c) Judith illustrates the wisdom of “weakness.” As a Jewish woman, Judith is fragile and weak before men. In an unexpected way, however, she



became the instrument of God, and succeeded in killing the powerful General Holofernes. God used the weak to defeat the strong. The Jews were thus delivered from the Assyrians. In the prayer of Judith there lies a deep conviction: "Your (the Lord's) strength does not lie in numbers, nor your might in violent men; since you are the God of the humble, the help of the oppressed, the support of the weak ..." (Judges 9:11). Thus, God not only upholds the weak, but, like the *tao*, has chosen weakness and apparent foolishness as the way of saving the world.

- d) David is an example of the wisdom of "simplicity." In his battle with the Philistine Goliath the Bible describes David as "a young boy of fresh complexion and pleasant bearing." He prefers five stones, a sling and a staff to the heavy helmet, breastplate and the big sword of Saul. He comes out all alone to face and kill the giant Goliath. The appearance and the weapons of this young boy symbolize the power of simplicity. At a deeper level, there is the simplicity of the young David's faith in God: "Yahweh, who rescued me from the claws of lion and bear, will rescue me from the power of this Philistine" (1 Sam 17:37).

#### 4.6.4.3 The Paradox Of The Cross

In many ways Chinese wisdom is in consonance with biblical wisdom. However, any Christian reading of a non-Christian text has among its aims, whether explicit or implicit, to answer more deeply the question: What kind of wisdom is, then, found in the historical event of Christ? The early Christians, through their living encounter with the Risen Christ, began to answer this question. They realized that the entire Old Testament is pointing to Christ. There are OT instances and figures whose full meaning can only be grasped in Christ and his Body (the Church), a reading which Jews then would not recognize. Today, when we Christians read a classical Chinese text, we pose the same queries: Why Christ? Of what value are other types of wisdom? Especially, how do these types of wisdom relate to the wisdom of the Cross?

"The true key-point," as John Paul II puts it, "which challenges every philosophy, is Jesus Christ's death on the Cross. . . . The wisdom of the wise is no longer enough for what God wants to accomplish. What is required is a decisive step towards welcoming something radically new: 'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise...; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are' (1 Cor 1:27-28)." Again, he notes: "The preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. Here we see not only the border between reason and faith, but also the space where the two may meet" (*Fides*

*et Ratio*, 23).

The meeting of Taoistic and Christian teachings is not for the sake of finding a “winner,” but to link whatever is enlightening and fertile in the search for truth. The insight of Taoism, that one achieves wisdom through embracing certain kinds of foolishness, may help Asian Christians to grasp more deeply the mystery and challenge of the Cross of Christ.

#### 4.6.5 Summing Up

As in the case of Confucianism, the proposed Christian hermeneutic may be fruitfully applied to Taoism. Again, as with Confucianism, a sense of balance is required: a balance that seeks to be true to the literal meaning of the texts, while remaining open to surplus meanings, which a Christian may discern in the light of faith.

### CHAPTER FIVE

## **An Asian Approach To The Sacred Via Symbolic Theology**

### **5.1 Theology And Language**

#### 5.1.1 The Problem of Speaking about God

God is not an object among other objects but the absolute subject. God as the infinite transcends all that we can say about God’s being. God remains always a mystery. How then can we speak about the transcendence and immanence of God in itself? How can one adequately express one’s experience of God in a way that can be communicated to others?

Positivistic linguistic studies have shown that language is not as objective or literal as many have thought. Often the meaning varies according to the context, culture, epoch and historical consciousness. Thus, a literalist understanding of language and mere repetition of words bring about a distortion of the meaning implied. It is indispensable that one understand the hermeneutics of theological language if one is to speak about or understand what is said about the being of God.

#### 5.1.2 Theological Language As a Personal Language

Language is the means by which a person expresses himself or herself. If the expression is concerned with things that are extraneous to us, we use an impersonal language, as in the language of science. But if something engages our whole being, then personal language is used. However, personal language must not be misconstrued as a subjective language, since

the latter deals with mere emotions, whereas the former involves the cognitive, affective, co-native and relational dimensions of the human person. Theological language, as a faith language, necessarily implies the engagement of the whole person in response to an encounter. It is, therefore, neither purely objective, subjective, nor utilitarian, but personal, since it not only expresses a reality but a personal experience of this multifaceted reality.

Furthermore, the reality to which theological language refers is God, or the Transcendent—Immanent. God, however, is always spoken of in relation to us. Since we are finite, there is no direct way to speak about God, who as the Transcendent is the wholly other. On the other hand, since the latter is also present to us as immanent in creation, we can use categories that are familiar to us to speak of the Transcendent. Such a discourse necessarily employs an anthropological language which is expressed in diverse ways, using metaphysical, ontological, existential, historical, dialectical and symbolic categories.

### 5.1.3 The Analogical Nature Of Theological Language

In spite of the limitations inherent in human language, it is the only way we have to make theological assertions; and without language, it would be difficult to share our religious experiences with others. Aware of the inadequacy of religious language to express God who is Transcendent, theologians recognize that the nature of religious language is metaphorical and analogical. Neither the assertions made about God, nor the concepts behind the expressions, are univocal. That is why literal and univocal statements about God have been rejected. On the other hand, extreme apophatic language, which denies any way of speaking about God and advocates total silence, is theologically useless and irrelevant. Analogical language steers between univocal and equivocal terms, as it includes sameness but with a greater difference. Traditional scholastic theology considers the language of analogy as the way to respond to the dilemma of speaking about God.

The use of analogy in theology can be traced to Plato and Aristotle. Analogy serves to mediate between two things, creating a coherence and unity between them. It is a kind of intermediate, where each thing is spoken of in respect to another in specific ways. Such language proceeds in three phases: the way of affirmation, of negation and of eminence. By following these three steps, we come to know more what God is not than what he is. Further, we come to know that we do not know, a knowledge appropriately termed “a learned ignorance” of God. The theological doctrine of analogy, therefore, opens up to us the mystery of God which is always greater than we. The need to rely on analogy is affirmed by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), when it declares: “Between the Creator and creature there is to be



noted a greater dissimilitude than a similitude.”

This approach to God, however, has many limitations. It has been challenged by logical positivistic philosophy. Linguistic analysis has challenged the meaningfulness of this kind of God-talk, as being too rational and restricted. Logical empiricists deny that there is any way to verify the meaningfulness of theological assertions, because they cannot be verified objectively. The functional analysts salvage the meaningfulness of religious language by replacing the verification principle with the principle of use. This means that language is a sign pointing to a reality which, when detached from the context, becomes incomprehensible. The living context, the life and experiences of the people who use that language, determine the meaning.

By synthesizing the analogous, empirical and functional linguistic positions, we arrive at a convergence where religious language is not only meaningful within an existential context of experience, but it also refers to some objective reality as well, which, although it cannot be verified empirically, is truly expressive of a cognitive experience. This conclusion paves the way for an experiential rather than a rational and logical approach to theology.

#### 5.1.4 An Experiential Approach To Theological Language

Experiential theological language takes the form of stories, allegories and parables. Such modes of discourse are not new. In fact, they are found in Scripture, where diverse literary genres, such as myths, poetry, narrative, parables, aesthetics, art and history, are used to communicate the experience of the people of God. In the Gospels too, Jesus preached the message of God's kingdom through images, similes, metaphors and parables. If Jesus never defined the Kingdom of God in clear concepts, it is perhaps because he knew that any formulation would detract from the fullness of its meaning. Such an all-encompassing reality is better communicated through experiential language. Hence, an appeal to a narrative discourse could be a key to communicating the mystery of God. Such language not only points beyond logical and empirical evidence, but it also evokes participation and identification, leading one to a personal experience of the mystery of God. In this way, one avoids understanding religious language simply as an expression of an objective reality (which is not denied), or simply a subjective experience (which would be fideistic). This hermeneutical approach is especially appropriate to an Asian way of doing theology as it has a greater affinity with Asian cultures. Whereas occidental philosophy tends to over-emphasize a duality of the intellect and the will, transcendence and immanence, an Eastern approach tends to see everything in a non-dualistic way. Whereas Western philosophy tends to be rationalistic, Eastern philosophy

has a holistic approach to the Ultimate Reality. The worldview of Asians, therefore, is the way of holistic experience, the way of being, rather than that of thinking and rationalizing.

To advocate such a mode of theological discourse is in no way discounting the value of the rational approach to God. A conceptual formulation of the experience of God is still necessary, if we are to maintain some form of unity and objectivity. Nevertheless, it must be supplemented by a narrative theology in the various literary genres, so that listeners can be drawn to similar experiences. It is also the primary way to enter into the religious experience of other religions, since narrative theology finds a natural home in most Asian religions, especially Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and the tribal religions which also employ stories, myths, paradoxes and parables to speak about the Ultimate Reality. This common hermeneutic in theological discourse promotes a more effective interreligious dialogue.

## **5.2 Symbolic Religious Language**

### **5.2.1 Theology of Symbols**

The case for narrative discourse is strengthened by the fact that the different literary genres of narrative theology share a common way of functioning in the use of symbols. Sign is commonly used to refer to anything that represents something else. But symbols are not merely signs. True symbols are irreducible to signs. Unlike signs, symbols are real bearers of the reality which they symbolize. Of course, symbols also conceal as much as they reveal. Through symbols the person comes to participate in the reality symbolized. This observation has a fundamental bearing on the nature of theological assertion and the discipline of theology itself.

Symbolic language provides us with a framework within which to speak about the nature of beliefs and the structure of revelation and faith, since religion by its very nature is symbolic. The basis for a symbolic theology is the structure of the human person, which could be described as essentially symbolic, a being that is both material and spiritual. Human beings reveal and express themselves through symbolic acts. Divine self-communication follows a similar pattern of disclosure. God not only reveals himself through natural phenomena, like clouds and fire, and through the prophets in the Old Testament but, most of all, he reveals himself in the person of Jesus, divine and human.

Thus, one can claim that Jesus is the paradigm of the symbol of God. In Jesus, the divinity is manifested in and through his humanity; or, rather, it is through his humanity that his divinity is recognized. Thus the Fathers, especially St. Irenaeus, often taught that humanization is the way to deifi-

cation, and that "the glory of God is found in a man fully alive." On this basis, too, rest the symbols of the Church: the sacraments and sacramentals. By extension, the symbols expressed in the rituals, sacred objects and images of non-Christian religions have sacramental value.

If symbolic language can mediate reality, it is because of the inherent mediative characteristics of symbols. Symbols always point beyond themselves. The symbol as a finite reality of this world points to the Transcendent. Symbols truly mediate and make present and effective the reality which they represent. This is what we mean when we define sacrament as a sign and a reality. Sacraments are not simply signs. If they were signs only, then they would bear no internal connection with the reality signified. However, because they are in fact symbols, there is an intrinsic relation between the reality and the symbol. Through shared symbols, invisible realities are represented and mediated through symbolic persons, like the priest; or through concrete inanimate symbols, such as statues.

The purpose of symbols is to draw us to participate in reality, by opening up our inner world which remains latent, giving us a participatory knowledge of reality. This reality is but the presence of God in us, which is not yet specified clearly and thematically. It is a kind of pre-apprehension of the divine in us, without our being conscious of it. Symbols, therefore, make us conscious of God's presence in us. They uncover the different levels of Reality, which cannot be perceived by mere empirical observation. At the same time, symbols also help us to get in touch with different levels of human consciousness. As such, symbols are multi-vocal in meaning, evoking multiple experiences, which are transformative.

This transformative power of symbols can be seen both in ordinary and religious life. For example, the national flag can evoke strong sentiments of loyalty and patriotism; the cross, our sinfulness and God's love; the Buddha image, a sense of tranquillity and peace. Because of the revelatory power of symbols, they can effect conversion and influence one's action and behavior. Symbols, therefore, motivate and empower action, and influence people, as they evoke imagination and feelings. Furthermore, symbols which objectify the collective consciousness of the believers unite them.

In the symbolic analysis of faith, we must bear in mind that we are dealing with a different kind of knowledge. Religious knowledge is not a matter of acquiring some objective facts about the Transcendent. Symbols do not provide us information about God, as though God is part of the finite reality. Rather, they attempt to mediate an experience of the Transcendent. However, this theological knowledge can only be expressed in ordinary human language drawn from ordinary human life. In the final analysis,



God remains God. He is beyond us. He remains a mystery which cannot be grasped, but only revered and pondered in awe and gratitude.

Symbolic language must not be misconstrued as less than truth. On the contrary, symbolic language mediates more truth, since it engages the whole person. An encounter with the Transcendent is truly an existential and a personal involvement. Symbolic language seeks to mediate the meaning and existential truth of reality, rather than the conceptual truth. Real truth is not a notional or philosophical concept, but an existential-personal reality. In the Christian understanding, truth is not simply a word but an event, a reality incarnated in a person whom we call Jesus the Christ. Of course, if truth is existential, it is also ontological and objective as well.

Thus, this kind of theology could be considered a symbolic discipline. It is a systematic undertaking to comprehend and explain reality, the world, existence and God, through the symbols imparted to us in history. Theological statements are expressions of religious encounter in a symbolic way. Such statements evoke our experience of the Transcendent universally present in us. In this sense, religious symbols have a priority over religious experience, in that they enable us to participate in that experience. Such an experience of the Transcendent makes mystery acceptable, even if it is not comprehensible.

By approaching theology via symbols, we are able to understand Asian cultures, languages, philosophy and religions better. The single thread that runs through the various aspects of Asian life is that Asians tend to value symbols as communication. The Chinese language and its characters, for instance, are graphic representations of phenomenal objects. Such pictorial characters point towards the reality, and thus they are indicative symbols. Such symbolic orientation extends even to religions, as well. Asian religions, especially tribal, primal and native religions abound in rituals and religious arts. These rites have often been condemned as superstitious, or even as occult; and religious art has been labelled idolatrous. In reality, these are simply anthropological means of expressing the experience of the Sacred and the communication with the Sacred. They are efficacious sacramental means of encounter with God. They must not be denigrated as mere superstition. To do so shows an ignorance of Asian cultures and symbols, and a presumptuous judgement that is narrow-minded and triumphalistic towards people who are different.

A study of these symbols will help us to appreciate the value of the sacred arts of the Asian religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and the Chinese Ancestry cult. Asian religious art and rituals are rich in meaning and eternal truths. Contemplating them can lead one to an immense experience, of the beauty and greatness of the Ultimate Mystery.

Asians know very well that God is better mediated through symbols which evoke in them a direct and personal experience, rather than through an intellectual discourse, since the Mystery is beyond words. Asians prefer to be engaged in contemplation, prayer and ritual rather than busying themselves with mere discussion about prayer and the Sacred.

### 5.2.2 Parabolic Religious Language

In a certain sense, parables can be considered metaphoric and symbolic. Whereas a metaphor is a verbal symbol, a parable is an extended poetic metaphor. In a broad sense, the other figurative modes of speech, such as similes and stories, are also included. The basis for a parable theology is Jesus himself. Parables remain Jesus' unique way of helping his listeners, not so much to understand the Kingdom Reality with their intellect, but to experience the Kingdom in their lives. Perception is gained through an experiential encounter.

The purpose of parables is not to provide a theoretical understanding of the Kingdom. Hence, the interpretation of parables should not be done in a rationalistic way. Rather, one must realize that the meaning of the parable is found in the parable itself. There is no precise point at which the parable gives its meaning. The whole parable itself conveys a lesson, and not simply a point. The right question to ask is not the "what," i.e., the meaning of the parable, but the "how" of experiencing the parable. What the parable intends is not information but participation. Jesus did not intend to give a theological treatise on God and his Kingdom; but he wanted his listeners to encounter that Kingdom in their own lives through identification with the parable.

Jesus was not the only one to use parables. Eastern religions also abound in parables. Buddhists, Hindus and Sufi Muslims often preach by using parables to illustrate the truth of what they want to convey. Zen Buddhism, in particular, uses *koans* to lead one beyond the thinking process to the heart of the experience itself. The paradoxes are deliberately invented to help the meditator go beyond the thinking mind and to perceive the reality from the inside. Like parables, *koans* are not meant to be explained. They are illogical logical truths, understood by those who have identified themselves with that experience, and thus have been enlightened.

This way of seeing what is beyond logic is what Zen calls "seeing with the third eye." *Koans* raise one to a new level of consciousness, a way of seeing what is already there, but which has until now been masked by our ignorance. It is to see our original face, the face before we were born. In the words of Jesus, "the Kingdom of God is within you." This reality can only be perceived from the inside, not from the outside. For those who are

outside, "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand." (Mk 4:12) Once one realizes that the Kingdom of God is already within, one experiences new-found freedom, joy and love. Because one has experienced the Kingdom that is within, one can now see the Kingdom that is outside as well.

### 5.2.3 Narrative Religious Language

The category of parable is only a small section of the larger category of narrative theology. Those modes of speech that fall within the purview of this category would include allegory, myth, anecdote, novel, drama, history, autobiography and biography. Narrative theology is, therefore, a more inclusive concept than the parable. All these forms of narrative can be found in the Bible, and must be understood according to their literary genres. Such diverse modes of communicating the experience of the Sacred establish the Bible as a book that speaks to all peoples of all ages, races, customs and epochs. In the same way, Christian liturgy employs different literary genres to assist people in engaging in an encounter with God. The language of liturgy is, therefore, often poetical, paradoxical and analogical.

Like parables, narratives invite us to experience the reality by recognizing ourselves in them. By evoking identification through participation, narratives effect transformation. Indeed, narratives say more than what propositions can. Stories are open-ended and they invite the listeners to find different meanings for themselves. Narratives always reveal more than just the bare facts or the intention of the author. These stories can be interpreted in many ways, confirming that truth is multifaceted.

This manner of expressing a religious experience through narrative is akin to the experiential and cognitive process of the human person. Few people are touched by an intellectual understanding of truth, compared with an experiential identification with a truth. An intellectual perception of truth or love will not change a person radically. Even if changes are effected, there is always the possibility that such intellectual convictions can easily be exchanged for other views, if they are found to be more persuasive. An inner conviction, however, functions very differently. Once the core of the person is touched, no amount of ideological indoctrination can manipulate a person. For how can one dispute with a personal experience? A real experience engages the whole person, including intellect and will. It involves a personal relationship and a personal commitment. An experience is something that one knows from the heart, even if one cannot verbalize it. One cannot doubt an experience in the same way as one can doubt a rational truth.

This is not to say that theological propositions and doctrines do not



have a place in our understanding of the Transcendent. Rather, they are not the primary way to express truth or the mystery of God, because they cannot capture the fullness of truth. They are necessary insofar as we need to give precise definitions to what we believe. But these definitions of faith are not meant to close the door to fuller expressions of the truth. Rather, they are meant to ward off views that are objectionable and heretical, excluding certain views rather than claiming to be exhaustive. Doctrines delimit and exclude what is false rather than show what is true and what God really is. In this way, doctrines serve to protect faith from subjectivism and emotionalism. Symbolic theology is, therefore, complementary to a discursive and rational theology.

The implications of employing narratives in theology call for a review of religious folklore. A quick perusal of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Buddhist Sutras, Jataka and Avadana Stories, and Chinese literature shows how extensively narratives have been used to convey timeless wisdom and truth. Whether the stories are historical, biographical or mere allegories, they present the readers with a vivid and personal experience of the Sacred. Hence, they must not be so easily dismissed as “mere tales.” Today, stories continue to be an effective means of experiencing the Truth as event. Listeners can only retain a minimal amount of knowledge imparted in a discourse, but they can easily grasp and remember the gist of the story in their own ways.

### **5.3 Imaginative Theology: Theopoetic Myths And Rituals**

#### **5.3.1 Poetry and Art**

Scholastic theology employs a predominantly rational approach to God. This is a departure from patristic theology, which employed rather a mystical language. We must recover the use of mystical language, so that we can go beyond conceptual propositions about God. One way to do this is through the theopoetic, or what is sometimes called the theology of religious imagination. Imagination implies creativity and dynamism. This creative power resides in a person’s intellectual and affective faculties. One’s imagination comes into play when one attempts to crystallize one’s experience of God. Imaginative theology is a form of non-discursive logic. It is a conscious projection of what is in our unconscious. But the latter is truly a source of knowledge, a kind of pre-apprehension of reality that is still as yet unthematized. Such unconscious knowledge is often translated into poetry, dreams, visions, or into myths and rituals. Our imaginative power truly mediates reality to us even though it is not reality itself.

Hence, poetry, as well as other forms of literature, art and sculpture, can provide effective ways to communicate the presence of God. The poet

who experiences the ineffable God can only express his sentiments in images. He does not actually create poetry; rather he becomes the channel through which poetry flows. Indeed, great poetic literature, such as the Upanishads, the Vedas, the biblical Wisdom books, and Tao Te Ching are written by anonymous writers. These books have inspired countless people in their communication with the Sacred. The Church has made the praying of the Psalms the essence of the official worship.

What is true of the poets and musicians is also true of those who portray their feelings in other images. Artists and sculptors concretize their religious experience in paintings and sculpture. The arts invite the admirers to share in the artist's experience, and to evoke new, different and more profound meanings in them. A case in point is the contemplation of the icons of the Eastern Churches. Thus, theopoesis opens up to us the mystery of God. Truth is received not in propositions but as event, an experience of revelation, an experience of grace. This explains why in all religions the use of poems, songs, music and the arts play an important role in awakening the Mystery within and without.

However, theopoesis must be interpreted. Access to the experience or reality is only possible to those who understand the literary genres and meaning of the symbols. For example, a person without a Mahayana Buddhist background would find the statue of Avalokitesvara with a thousand hands frightening. But a Mahayana Buddhist devotee immediately perceives an expression of the universal compassion of the Buddha. Similarly, while Catholics find those images portraying the hearts of Mary and Jesus, or even the crucifix, inspiring, non-Christians might consider them disgusting. Hence, only believers can understand the real significance of such imaginative art and are able to recognize the presence of the Sacred in it.

### 5.3.2 Myths

Myth is another mode of religious imagination, and can serve as a powerful form of religious language. Myth is related to symbol, in that in myth itself the symbol is not yet distinguished from that which it symbolizes. Myth does not yet distinguish between literal and figurative language. Once myths are recognized as symbols, we can transcend the mythical interpretation. Mythology expresses the content of faith, and the meaning of human existence and the Transcendent, in a verbal and descriptive way, in the form of a narrative that is often dramatic, tangible and vivid. The events and characters narrated in a myth are miraculous, supernatural and mysterious. Yet they are connected with earthly events and real people. Thus, the myth becomes a bridge between the transcendent and the immanent.

The advantage of using myths is that they provide meaning for our

human existence, always understood in relation to the Transcendent. By its concreteness, the myth evokes participation and identification. It is, therefore, revelatory, even though it might not be concerned with "facts," since it is not scientific language. Mythic expressions convey real beliefs and desires, which are still not crystallized into propositions. Myths, like parables, do not seek to be interpreted. The myth itself is an interpretation of the world and existence in a non-scientific way through the use of a series of symbols. They are, therefore, expansive and inexhaustible; indeed reflective of the nature of the Mystery itself. In interpreting myths, one seeks the interior meaning through participation, rather than through conceptual knowledge. This, however, does not mean that there is no intrinsic relationship between myths and the more formal propositions expressed in dogma.

If in reading the Bible one applies literally Bultmann's programs of demythologization, the result is an impoverishment of the message of the text. To give a merely literal meaning to the biblical texts is to impoverish the text. It is to reduce the Bible to a text to be studied, rather than a book to live by. This clearly contradicts the Church's recognition of the diverse ways of reading the Bible, namely, the literal, spiritual, i.e., allegorical, moral, analogical, thus arriving at fuller meaning of the text.

Myths are found in most religious writings. Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese texts and primal religions abound in myths. The readers have no problems about the historicity of the stories recounted in their scriptures. Whether the characters or the events are historical or not is not important. What is important is that these stories transmit lasting truths and values, which continue to remain relevant in their lives. For example, all Mahayana Buddhists know that Avalokitesvara incarnated as Kuan Yin, or the Goddess of Mercy, is not an historical person. This does not prevent devotees from worshipping Kuan Yin, because he/she personifies the compassion of the Buddha who hears the cries of those in need. For the Chinese, the different deities they worship and festivals they celebrate are simply a reminder of certain aspects of life on earth and beyond.

Such use of myth is even more evident in primal religions which do not possess any sacred writings, creeds or doctrines. Adherents rather express and perpetuate their faith and beliefs through ritual celebrations, stories, myths and arts. Shamanism practised in various ways in Asia is a good example of how believers participate in the God/Spirit experience. Hence, myths as religious imagination can effectively mediate the Transcendent, and are congenial to Asian cultures.

### 5.3.3 Rituals and the Use of the Body

Ritual is another fundamental form of religious imagination. Ritual



involves the use of words, bodily gestures and symbols. Dancing, singing, chanting to musical instruments, accompanied by the performance of some act, such as sacrifice or worship, bring the worshippers into contact with the Sacred. Such actions are not meaningless or irrelevant. They are not mere emotionalism that lacks cognitive dimension. The capacity of ritual to mediate the experience of the Ultimate must not be underestimated. For this reason, liturgical renewal should not only focus on the Word, which is itself symbolic. One must be careful not to strip the liturgy of its ritual and sacramental character. In order to recover the sense of the Sacred, one must use ritual, art and the sacraments in the Church in a creative way.

The word *sacrament* is a Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion*. This might help one understand why the sacraments are so important in the life of the Church. Sacraments have their basis in Jesus who is the Sacrament of God. However, the meaning is enriched by the mystery religions of the Greeks. It is believed that sacraments are efficacious means to effect what they symbolize. What truly mediates the sacred is not merely words, but deeds as well. Vatican Council II, in *Dei Verbum*, says: "This economy of Revelation is realised by deeds and words, which are intrinsically bound up with each other" (DV 2). Indeed, there is a vast difference between explaining the meaning of the Eucharist, even when it is done eloquently, and participating in a well-organized and lively Eucharistic celebration. The former might bring about an intellectual appreciation and understanding; the latter brings about a conversion of the whole being.

Perhaps, we should learn from the liturgy of the Eastern Churches. Although their liturgy is elaborate and long, it is appreciated, because it mediates a strong presence of the Sacred. Furthermore, theology has always spoken of God as the Fascinating and the Awesome, who evokes in us both an attraction and yet a deep respect for the Mystery. Even non-believers feel the awesomeness and presence of God when they enter churches of the mediaeval period which are rich in the arts.

This quest to experience God with one's whole being, and, therefore, also sacramentally, is also manifested in modern charismatic prayer meetings which involve much bodily and vocal participation. Worshippers enthusiastically sing praise and hymns, accompanied by clapping, raising the hands, and dancing. Most are unabashed in demonstrating their feelings and emotions, whether in tears of sorrow or joy. They pray in tongues, and rest in the Spirit, shouting praises to the Lord. The general feed-back from these worshippers is that they feel the personal presence of the Spirit very intensely. In the process, many are healed, and strengthened emotionally and spiritually.

In similar ways, a study concluded that young Catholics enjoy a carni-

val-style worship more than the traditional form of worship. Many do not go to Church on Sundays but they enjoy large, occasional festivals of faith worship. When the Pope went to Paris for the World Youth Day Celebration (1997), the youth came alive as they prayed and worshipped in the manner of a rock concert. They were chanting like football fans when the Pope arrived. There was much vibrant singing, and even entertaining dance. This desire to worship in a sacramental way also explains the strong and mass influence of the El Shaddai Movement in the Philippines. People used to pray with their whole being. They need to feel, hear, speak, sing and worship in solidarity with other believers. This way of praying has received special commendation during the Asian Synod, as the Synod Fathers recognized the importance of the charismatic movement in spiritual and religious revival.

The attempt to experience the Sacred sacramentally through rituals is manifested in other religions as well. Mahayana Buddhism has very elaborate and complicated rituals in its worship. Participation in the rites, especially in chanting, offers peace, tranquillity and enlightenment. This is also true of Hinduism, the Chinese veneration of ancestors, and the primal religions. The transmission of an experience of the Sacred is hardly done verbally or through scriptures. For instance, Chinese devotees are encouraged to participate in the various rites performed during festivals such as the Chinese New Year, the Hungry Ghosts, the Autumn Festival and Qing Ming Jie (All Souls' Day). Through their participation, they experience the protection of the deities, and are strengthened in their communion with their departed loved ones. Sacramental worship is particularly emphasized in primal religious worship. The use of natural objects, music, dance and animal sacrifices are ways of venerating the Sacred, who people believe controls their lives and the cosmos.

Consequently, we must reexamine the place of a sacramental spirituality in the area of theology today. Rituals constitute a religious language, even though they cannot be reduced to words and propositions. They are no less an effective means of communicating the Sacred than is a conceptual knowledge of God. No one would claim that a theologian knows more about God than a mystic. Neither can we claim that people who are well informed in their faith necessarily have a stronger personal faith than those who have a simple faith founded on rituals.

An increasing understanding of the rituals of other religious traditions is also a major step towards both interreligious dialogue and inculturation. Some of these cultural symbols can be incorporated into the Christian liturgy. This has already been done for the Chinese New Year Festival and All Souls Day. Much more can be done. For example, Chinese Christians can also celebrate the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, insofar as they are

helped to remember those departed souls who are not yet at peace with God, and have no one to pray for them. The offering of food, the burning of joss-sticks and ritual papers, have symbolic meanings, if seen as expressions of one's prayer, love and communion with the dead, whom we believe are still alive.

On the other hand, the fact that some of these rituals have been reduced to mere superstitious practices or empty rituals, whether due to routine or loss of meaning, and consequently discarded by later generations, underscores the importance of nurturing one's cultural symbols. Cultures and symbols do die, and are replaced by new ones. In itself, such a process is normal and natural. However, in such a situation we need to preserve the values underlying our rituals and cultures, not in a static but in a creative way. Such a need is strongly felt as traditional values are eroded by secular values as a result of globalization and technological advancement. Cultures can be perpetuated through education and celebration. When symbols no longer convey the meaning they once did, they should be modified or replaced with other relevant and acceptable symbols. But symbols there must be. Unless faith is incarnated and expressed accordingly in our cultures (as they exist today), it will remain alien to our people. Cultures, symbols and language, however, must be evolved gradually and not artificially imposed.

Finally, sacramental worship must also be complemented by reason and prudent discernment. If not, there is a danger that such worship can be reduced to emotional outbursts, or transformed into mass hypnotism and psychological manipulation. Such disorderly, carnal and self-centered worship does not reflect the beauty and harmony of the Sacred. This is certainly a danger for those religious movements in which there is a dominant use of body in worship. A true religious expression of faith which employs all the five senses of the human person, giving rise to emotions and feelings, will be balanced by the use of reason as well. After all, the body is not only a sign of the expression of the Spirit, but also the window of access to the Spirit.

## **5.4 In Summary**

Insofar as they are concerned with the Transcendent all statements are symbolic. They are not empirical statements which can be proved in a scientific way. Nevertheless, they do mediate the Transcendent because they open up consciousness to the Absolute Mystery. Symbolic language, whether in the mode of words, gestures or symbols, is, therefore, concerned with genuine experience. It mediates reality in a real way, even if it cannot be identified with reality. It is a transcription of reality,



Since symbolic language provides meaning to the individual and the community, the trivialization of symbols leads to the destruction of a community. The emptying of symbols in religious celebrations deprives worshippers of a mystical experience of the divine. Where symbols are used, their richness of meaning allows for a plurality which binds the community together. Because religious symbols have multifaceted meanings, a community can be united in spite of diversity in expression. Perhaps effective interreligious understanding grows out of an understanding of each others' religious symbols, so that one can have at least a glimpse of another's religious experience. If this is so, then symbolic language in its various forms should be the dominant theological hermeneutics in the communication of religious experience in Asia today.

In the final analysis, silence is the highest form of religious language for Asians. Silence, as the way to experience God, is present in almost all religions. In the Christian liturgy, moments of silence are recommended. In Eastern religions, this silence is nurtured by sitting in the lotus posture, or in similar meditative positions. The body and the mind are at rest, and emptied of thought and of self, which disposes one to union with God and the universe. In that union, one cannot but be filled with the Presence of the Sacred, an experience which, however, can only be understood and recognized by those who have shared the experience. For the majority, perhaps, the way to union with the Sacred remains the way of the symbolic. Through the symbolic, whether expressed verbally, ritually or sacramentally, people are led to silence where God is known in the unknowing.

### CONCLUSION

We have reflected on the rich and multiple resources of cultures, religions, movements, struggles and life-experiences of the Asian peoples as the context and locus of God's presence and action, and of the work of the Spirit. We have examined some of the significant resources offering creative and fruitful guideposts and pointers to an Asian method of theological reflection, enriching the inherited tradition of Christian faith. We begin to see with clarity that the great variety of situations and contexts calls for a pluralism of theological methods, which is responsive, creative and promising for the Church in Asia in its mission of love and service of God's Kingdom.

We realize that the theological and spiritual traditions of the Eastern Churches and those of the West, and their complementary insights and lessons they offer, further our own work of theology in an Asian context.

The Asian way of doing theology is historically rooted and concrete, a method in which we learn to face conflicts and brokenness, a method we

value as one of liberative integration, interrelatedness and wholeness, a method that emphasizes symbolic approaches and expressions, and is marked by a preference for those on the periphery and "outside the Gate" (Heb 13: 3).

It is a theological method marked and nourished by a spirituality of resistance to mammon, and commitment to humble and loving service of our brothers and sisters, a test of truly inculturated faith and theology.

This paper is not the final word on the subject nor is it an exhaustive study. It is only a summary indication of the ways theology is done and can be done in the differing situations of Asia. We hope that this paper will be complemented and enriched by dialogue and interaction with theologies done in the Churches of other continents, especially Latin America and Africa. In a world of growing communication and solidarity, such interaction is already taking place, and needs to be strengthened. It is our hope that the developing theologies of Asia will pass the test and lead the people of Asia to "become more committed to their Christian faith, because they perceive it more clearly with the eyes of their own culture." (*Church in Asia*, #22)

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