

# INDIAN THEOLOGIES: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECTS

## A Socio-Political Perspective

Felix Wilfred  
University of Madras

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A map of the city in the hand gives some people supreme self-confidence. The city, for them, is literally in their hands as the American soldiers probably felt when they swept into the heart of Baghdad on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 2003. On the map, one is able to identify the arterial roads, tourist spots, various monuments, army headquarters, and what more, hiding places of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). What else does one need than a city map and a “road-map” to have the euphoric feeling of everything being under control? How delusive such a feeling could be is now a matter of history!

It would be sheer arrogance if theology were to claim overtly or covertly to have a map of God, or God’s map for our world and humanity. There is another way of knowing a city; it is the way of exploration by the side-lanes, passing by petty shops and bazaars, and it is best done by many detours from the centre and arterial roads. A person taking the side-lanes and narrow paths – probably not found in the city map – encounters abysmal poverty of the slums and pavements; she learns of cultures and ways of daily life, gains an understanding of people’s moods and motivations by conversing with them and listening to them. We have another picture of the same city with other sources of knowledge, and ultimately a different kind of experience.

The path of Indian theologies will resemble, certainly, not the knowledge of map-people who would like everything to be fitted into a theological cartography. Creative Indian theologies have been, in general, weary of any theology in terms of systems. They have developed theological insights and orientations by experiencing and exploring the unknown paths and lanes to encounter the unfathomable mystery of God and some of the deepest human experiences which open a window to the same mystery. There is then a *fragmentary* sense to all kind of Indian theologies. This fragmentary situation is also the creative moment of Indian theologies as they try to cope with ever new and overwhelming situations calling for fresh responses.

I speak of Indian *Theologies* in the plural. How else could we speak? The puzzling complexity resulting from a wide variety of social, political, cultural and religious situations calls for different kinds of theological reflections, even though the various Indian theologies have a “family-resemblance” among them. Individually and cumulatively these various theologies of India have contributed significantly, and have evoked much interest in other parts of the world. Of course, there are people for whom Indian theology is an *enfant terrible*. They are very apprehensive about it, and do not

cease to malign it. But what has Indian theology done for such divergent responses? May be a retrospective view will help clarify to ourselves where we stand.<sup>1</sup>

## **Part I: RETROSPECT**

### **National Concerns in the Formation of an Indian Theology**

If we leave behind the last twenty-five years and go down a little further on the lane of history to the first decades of twentieth century, we will note that the major preoccupation at that time was to form an Indian theology which will distinguish itself from the received mainline Western theology brought by missionaries. Efforts were made to adopt Indian concepts and categories in the place of Western ones. A more thoroughgoing approach was initiated by the Protestant thinkers known as “Rethinking Christianity in India” group consisting of Vengala Chakkarai, Chenchiah and A.J.Appasamy and others.<sup>2</sup> At first sight it may appear that this latter movement was aiming at a theology which will be pursued through Indian thought patterns and categories. An analysis of the background of this movement will show that there was much more to it. The theological orientation associated with this movement was an expression of patriotism at a time when the missionary theology continued to pursue its way blissfully ignorant of the socio-political developments in the country, and particularly the struggle for Independence which was gaining momentum. Rethinking Christianity in India needs to be viewed as a theological response to the then prevailing social and political situation.

The pursuit of such a theology functioned also as a critique within the Churches regarding the management, administration, personnel, finances, etc, controlled by foreign missionaries. On the whole, this theological movement helped Christianity to get rooted in the soil and to interact with the wider socio-political movements. As a result, we could note a progressive change that was taking place in the Christian communities regarding nationalism and nationalist concerns. As a broad general background to this movement of theology, we could refer to Indigenous Church movements which emerged in some parts of the country.

The same line of thought continued in the post-independent period under the watchword of “Nation Building” which called for reflections in the line of theology of development, and further on it gave place to a theology of liberation in India. The Indian Theological Association devoted one of its important annual meetings precisely to this question.<sup>3</sup>

For quite a long time Indian theology was thought in singular and the various issues were integrated into this one theology. When the issue of inculturation and dialogue were broached and expanded, the question was what should be the major characteristic of Indian theology – liberation orientation or ashram orientation.. There was a period of theological tension regarding the quantum of attention to be given to each one of them..

## **Transition to a Plurality of Theologies**

The founding of Indian Theological Association (ITA) coincides in a way with the transition to a plurality of theologies. Of course, in the earlier years of its existence, the tension inherited between liberational and ashramite orientation continued to influence its deliberations. Slowly but surely, the coming together of theologians in the forum year by year led to the recognition of a plurality of situations, and hence the actual need of a theological pluralism within India.<sup>4</sup> The plurality is founded, among other things, on the difference in the social location, or the difference in the nature of issue one is dealing with. In this sense, the emergence of tribal, feminist and dalit theologies are due to a deeper social and political consciousness. Without going into this plurality of theologies in any detail, let me make a few comments on some of them.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Dalit Theology and its Achievements***

As for dalit theology, I would consider it as the greatest achievement of Indian theology, seen especially from the socio-political angle. It has made a significant impact in the way theology is to be pursued in India, and has also attained international attention. While in many other areas of theology, the gulf between the statements and reality is larger, as for dalit theology is concerned, we could confidently state that things are not that wide. In the first place, dalit theology has shaken the traditional way of pursuing theology by drawing our attention to the experience of the most oppressed and marginalized groups in the Indian society. *Immediacy, concreteness and a certain urgency* characterizing the dalit theology has spared it from futile theoretical discussions and theological narcissism.

The realism of dalit theology derives from its direct contact with the earth and the experience of hard physical labour and sweat. The *experience of negativity* by the dalits has created an atmosphere conducive to the projection of alternatives than compliance with the system or following of the trodden path. For example, the depth of suffering (material deprivation, psychological wounds, dependency and social humiliation) as a positive reality has triggered the dalit imagination for new theological trajectories mirroring their experience more closely. Further, the nature of dalit experience is such that it has led also to radicalism in thought. It is counter-culture in spirit.<sup>6</sup> The millennia of suffering and oppression has created in the dalit people an anti-establishment and anti-hegemonic urge, which can be seen reflected in their theology. The radicalism of dalit theology could be seen also in the way it unmasks the traditional social constructs of purity and pollution, high and low, and its restlessness regarding the ideological justifications, be it in the society or within the Christian communities.

It is the merit of dalit theology and subaltern theological orientation is to have challenged the development of Indian theology along the traditional Sanskrit and Brahminical lines and the exclusive use of so-called classical texts.

Dalit theology has its seminal roots in the autochthonous tradition of the Dalits. The first thing we should remember about this autochthonous tradition of the dalits is that it is a living tradition surviving from ancient times though dependent and powerless. It appears in the form of myths, proverbs, songs, festivals and

rituals. They tell the story of dalit origin and their enslavement under religious symbolism. Protests and the search for justice and equality are often explicitly expressed in songs, rituals and festivals.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, Indian theology was brought to the realization about the plurality of socio-political and cultural experiences in the country. Within the Christian communities themselves, the dalit theology has led, at least, to a greater awareness of the issue. The “success” – if that term can be used in our context – of dalit theology is due in great part to its co-operation with *dalit movements*, from which it has derived a lot of inspiration, tools of analysis, and it has on its part also animated the dalit movements specially among the Christian communities. There has been also a very concrete hermeneutics on the part of dalit theology, and biblical studies are beginning to emerge which offer a lot of fresh and innovative insights. I would like to highlight the doctoral dissertation done by my student, Maria Arul Raja, a dalit himself, on the passion narrative of Mark interpreted through the experiences of dalit suffering.<sup>8</sup>

There is yet another important contribution that has come about taken place in India has come about through the dalit movement and dalit theology: It is the affirmation of the earthliness of human life and the fulfillment of material needs of life as constitutive of salvation, and salvation itself as total well-being.<sup>9</sup> Dalit theology is functioning also as an important check on theology guarding it from taking recourse to abstract and abstruse discourses.

### ***Indian Mission Theology***

Another achievement of Indian theology in the past few decades has been a fresh and context-related understanding of Christian mission. The missiologists in particular deserve special mention for their contribution, which found support among other theologians and biblical scholars.<sup>10</sup> The new understanding of mission has effected a significant shift from the times and attitudes which placed the Christians on the pedestal of preachers to the country. Missiological thought in India has helped us to listen to the different voices in the country and read various signs of times and places. It has created a theological orientation and mental attitude, that has put us in a positive encounter with our neighbours.<sup>11</sup> In the Christian communities themselves the new missiological thought has so percolated that it is becoming more and more difficult to find Christians who would still believe that the main task of Christians is to preach, convert and baptize non-Christians. The role the Indian missiological thought has played is very timely. For, in a communally charged atmosphere, the persistence with the traditional theology of mission would have cost a lot of serious damage in terms of relationship with fellow-citizens of the country. Conversion has been one of the most controverted issues with serious societal and political implications. Indian mission theology has approached the question in a very refreshing way, true to the Biblical tradition, but at the same time sensitive to the socio-political context.<sup>12</sup> The Christian community, thanks to the new theology of mission, has been prevented from the danger of fundamentalist and semi-fundamentalist thought and approach.

The theology of mission has widened its scope particularly through a fresh biblical hermeneutics. Biblical scholars like Soares-Prabhu, Pathrapankal and Lucien

Legrand have contributed to the development of a broader biblical perspectives on the theology of mission. Indian theology has been able to develop the understanding of mission and salvation in such a way as to make us realize how socio-political involvement is a “constitutive part” of our Christian existence. In particular the concept of salvation has been interpreted in relation to the struggles at the socio-political arena.

I would especially like to refer to the many grassroots movements with which some of the Indian theologians were associated, and which helped also support a shift from a theology of development to an Indian theology of liberation. However, what were discussed at the initial stage in terms of salvation and human development helped to give a then much needed earthly dimension. In this way, the dichotomy which characterized the traditional approach between salvation and earthly commitment has been overcome to a great extent. In evolving these perspectives, it should be admitted, that Indian theology availed the insights developed by liberation theology world-wide, especially in Latin America.

### ***Secular Connections***

Yet another important achievement in Indian theology has been its openness towards the leftist and secular forces in the country. This is not something to be taken for granted. This openness is very significant against the background of outright opposition to Marxism and socialist thought on the ground that they are atheistically inspired. The inherited theology was one which taught to view these movements and ideologies as opposed to Christian faith. It is significant that from such a position there has come about a radical transformation in theological thought. Some of the concrete struggles waged against injustice and exploitation in collaboration with leftist movements further strengthened the theological orientation.

The dialogue and collaboration with leftist and secular movements has helped theology also to respond to the *communal problem* plaguing the Indian society. As is well-known, the secular and leftist movements have been a strong force against the communal divide of the society. The dialogue of Indian theology with the secular forces has been the contribution of many theologians – both among the Roman Catholics and the protestants. In particular we may recall here the contributions of M.M. Thomas, Sebastian Kappen, Samuel Rayan and others.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Tribal Contribution***

As for tribal theology, a critical distancing from traditional theology and moving towards a theology that will incorporate the tribal culture was a welcome change. Instead of reproducing a theology that is foreign to their life and world of experience, it has contributed to make the tribals to feel a little at home in Christianity. The anthropological and cultural studies which have found a way into tribal theologizing has helped its growth. Biblical themes like “*promise (sic) land, Pentecost, exodus and the alien*”<sup>14</sup> have served as key concepts in interpreting some of the tribal experiences.

The tribal theologizing has unfolded before us extremely rich resources whose significance go far beyond the tribal areas. The strong sense of community and practice of solidarity at a time of aggressive individualism, the sense of wholeness and harmony with nature at a time of serious ecological crisis are some of the important which the tribal peoples can contribute to theologizing. The tribal situation lead us to reflect about

the indissociable relationship between ecology and social justice. In the light of all this we could say that a more appropriate question would be, what is the contribution of the tribals to theology, rather than how we could pursue tribal theology.

However, there are many thorny questions and issue which need to be responded to. One such crucial issue is that of *identity-crisis*. It is a focal point which explains the situation of Indian tribals, and the experiences and struggles they are undergoing. Tribal societies are in transition in the midst of many political convulsions, and in some parts in situations of armed struggles. There is a serious cultural crisis caused by the whirlwind of modernity and globalization that try to blow them off their feet. Many tribals are pushed into a *situation of anomie*, torn and pulled in all directions. Tribals feel that they are exploited in their own soil and are alienated from their natural habitat. Attention to the socio-political developments, and a critical approach to the society and a more dynamic understanding of culture are important issues which tribal theology has to respond.

### ***Budding Feminist Theology***

Indian feminist theology is struggling to emerge and it has to face quite a lot of problems. The call to the experience of women as starting point of feminist theology is beginning to create some ripples, though there is a long way to go. The emerging feminist theology, unfortunately, has not been able to make a dent as the dalit theology has done for example. This is not to discredit the laudable work of a few committed and pioneering Indian women doing feminist theology in an environment in general hostile to their initiatives, but to underline the complexity of the gender issue. What is happening within the Indian feminist theology only reflects what is happening in the society in which the caste issue has been much more in the centre of debate than gender issue. Feminist theology would find even greater difficulties. The predominance of clericalism tends to suppress the critical questions women raise both within the Church and outside.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of all this, I would like to highlight some of the advances feminist theology has achieved in the span of past few years.<sup>16</sup> First and foremost it has created greater awareness especially in the Christian communities and institutions about the oppression suffered by women, their struggle for survival and the urgent need to respond to their plight. This has been done among other things by attempts to re-read and interpret the Christian Scriptures. Women from the tribal background have particularly given attention to interpret their experiences in the light of a critical reading of the Christian Scriptures.<sup>17</sup> In the process, Indian feminist theologians have sharpened also their critical sense and have unmasked those symbols and institutions, attitudes and ideologies which have served to legitimize their subordination.. Their critique assumes a cultural and religious critique of women's subordination. Knowing the importance of symbols, feminist theologians have sought to draw from the Indian universe those symbols, images and myths which contribute to the cause of women's liberation.<sup>18</sup>

It has also The feminist theology has also created consciousness about *inclusive language*. Another development is the linkages the feminist theology has established with grassroots feminist movements which augurs well for the future. Finally, the feminist theologians are getting organized through various *associations and fora* to voice out and reflect theological issues. Thus we have such bodies as Women Theologians Forum, Indian Women in Theology (IWIT), an ecumenical forum, and Ecclesial Women of Asia (IWA). A sign of changing situation within the Christian communities is, for example,

the entry of women as lecturers and professors – even full-time – in seminaries and other institutes of clerical formation.

## **Part II: POINTERS TO THE FUTURE**

### **Some Basic Issues**

After having taken stock of the achievements of Indian theology, quite remarkable for the brevity of the period in which all this has come about, we need to turn our attention to the future. From a socio-political perspective there are certain questions and issues to which the various emerging Indian theologies should respond. The responses will mould their future shape. It appears to me that there are *four cluster of issues* which need to be addressed.

Firstly, we are faced with a situation of globalization and new economic policies which are causing serious violence to the life of the poor and jeopardizing their survival. There is a growing amnesia of the poor, even as social and political consciousness is fast disappearing. Secondly, there is the situation of a strong right-wing and militant political orientation in the country. It is spreading far and wide and penetrating deeply in every segment of life, deploying certain religio-cultural symbols. The current political situation raises, among other things, crucial issue like the mode of governance, democracy, minority rights, and so on. Thirdly, there is the question of affirmation of various suppressed and alienated identities which are trying to give voice and expression to their selves, discovering in the process their own histories, cultural, literary and religious sources, symbols etc. Diversity and pluralism have become central issues. Finally, there are the challenges connected with creating communities in a situation of deep division and contradiction at all levels. Amidst contradictory trends and forces, what does it mean to be a people, a nation, and above all what does it mean to be truly communities of love, truth, freedom and justice? The question implies the inter-relationship among different religious traditions. The various Indian theologies will encounter in different configurations the working of these forces at the local level, and they need to be addressed.

We need to consolidate the gains of Indian theologizing, and move further on in our theological journey by responding to these and other clusters of issues. For this purpose some fundamental questions need to be addressed. Here I shall highlight five such issues.

#### **1. Christianity from Survival to Proactive Existence**

The nature of our theology will depend upon our perception of Christianity in India at large. It appears to me that the reforms that have taken place in the mainline Churches would give the impression that they try to answer implicitly the question: *How could Christianity survive in India in the changed times and conditions?* The face of Christianity in the country required a transformation. Many attempts were made in the

Churches in this regard. In the Roman Catholic Church a central concept that has characterized its life and praxis has been the concept of “*inculturation*”. I take this as the key concept responsible for the changes in various areas of life in the Church.. The Protestant Churches have been using more the concept of *contextualization*.

My proposal is that we reconsider the concept of inculturation and the exaggerated importance it has come to acquire, distracting us from tackling some vital issues. Such a reconsideration is important for the future of Christianity in India, and consequently for a change in the present theological pursuit. Inculturation basically is a process meant to keep Christianity meaningful in the Third World in the post-colonial period, after the cultural alienation that took place during the period of missionary expansion. It is interesting to note that the concept of *culture* has been very much employed when speaking of non-Western peoples, whereas the concept that is mostly used for the experiences in the West has been *society*. In this regard, it may be pointed out here, that for a long time India was not studied from *sociological perspective* but from *anthropological perspective*. What we call today sociology started as anthropology in India.

The underlying presupposition in this approach of reserving culture to the study of peoples in the South is that the societies in these geographical regions are static. The predominance of the cultural concept came to indicate that the peoples of developing world are object of study from a cultural perspective, leaving aside the social dynamism. It is interesting to note that, for totally other reasons than those underlying the Western interest in the concept of culture (and therefore tying up this concept with the new shape of Christianity in the South), the right wing militant Hindutva elements focused on culture as defining the Indian nation. Consequently the concept of inculturation adopted from the West helped the Christian community in India to show that Christianity is not alien, and that it has an indigenous cultural face.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, here again the question of culture has played the role of diverting attention from more substantial issues.

Let me now come back to the question with which I started. The question of survival of Christianity in the cultural context can and has made Christianity more inward looking, and has placed it in a centripetal movement. Inculturation would appear to be part of this general mood. But the issue of culture should not be isolated, but should be placed within the dynamics of the society. Therefore, the real question for the future of Christianity is: *What proactive role Christianity can play in the society that is undergoing fast changes with new forces and factors at work?*<sup>20</sup> With this question and starting point, we are in a position to respond to the issues raised by Dalit movements, tribal aspirations, feminist movements, and those of the many marginalized groups. A Christianity that is proactive to the dynamics of the *society* with its political, historical and economic components will be the one which will also evolve continuously and ever more into an *Indian* Christianity. It is in responding to the dynamics of the society that the self-shaping also takes place. Radical openness and other-centredness is the basis for one’s self-definition and fulfillment, as in the case of individual identity-formation. This also the case with Christianity as a collective body.

The future of theology will be directed to this proactive role of Christianity which will also be a process of finding its own identity in the concrete. And this cannot be done with the Western inculturation agenda. In short, the future of Indian theology will be determined on the basis of how it interacts and serves the transformation of the Indian

society. Such a theology will become politically very sensitive and conscious of the contradictions marking the society.

## **2. The Dialectics of Integration and Prophecy**

The future course of theology will also depend upon how Christianity in India gets rooted in the soil, and at the same time remains prophetic. I surmise that this will be a continuous source of tension and dialectics. Insertion in the socio-political dynamics of the country, which also includes its culture, could easily lead Christianity into accommodation to the status quo or compliance with the powers that be. Nationalist Churches in the past succumbed to the temptation of going along with the ruling classes and the prevailing state of affairs. Integration into the society needs to be accompanied by prophecy.

On the other hand, we just cannot think of a Christianity in our times which simply makes prophetic denunciation from a moral high-ground. As the experience during the times of missionary expansion shows, Christianity is vulnerable to be viewed and branded as alien to our societies. Still worse, Christianity risks not being taken seriously because of its failure to insert itself within the societal dynamics. Christianity is most effective when it is able to both integrate itself and at the same time is able to function as a prophetic voice. In other words, how to be rooted, and yet be prophetic; and how to be prophetic and yet be rooted. This is what I mean by dialectics of integration and prophecy. I would consider this as the most intricate question Indian Christianity, and Asian Christianity at large, is facing.

## **3. The Addressees of Indian Theology:**

The future of Indian theology will also depend upon the question, to whom it is addressed. As it is, Indian theology is addressed to the Christian community, and even here, as is well-known, it is very much restricted to a small clientele of the clerical group, since theology forms an important part in the preparation of religious personnel and ministers. This kind of theology could easily become a “*ghetto-theology*”, which is harmful to the universal implications of our faith. We want the theology in India to be *catholic* Theology – catholic understood in its original etymological sense. The addressee of theology will be *all* the people of the country cutting across religious and ideological barriers, and it is this which will make theology integrally *Indian*. This catholicity will be then the mark of Indian theology. This cannot take place as long as theology is restricted to the Christian community, much less to the clerical group.

The reflections we made above challenge us to view the whole of society as the addressee of theology. Let me immediately make a note of caution. This is not meant as any triumphalistic, integralist and Christian chauvinistic statement, as though Christianity wants to impose its theology on the society. Rather, it is meant to challenge Christianity, so that what is found in the Christian scriptures and traditions are so interpreted that their universal import emerges out concretely in relation to the situation of the society. As is clear, the proposal is not meant to dilute the Christian faith and message. What is envisaged is that the universalistic character of the Christian message becomes actual in as much as it enters into interaction with all those questions and issues affecting the people in the larger society.

This larger addressees of theology while making the theological enterprise very enriching make it also a very challenging one. Having to address all the people means new responsibility. Theology needs to be transparent, and therefore every part of it, and every interpretation needs to be checked as to what extent it contributes to the society. It is also a check to find whether there are aspects of theology which foster fundamentalism or semi-fundamentalism which could be detrimental to the society. More importantly, theology has the responsibility to rethink every aspect of Christian belief in relation to the concrete socio-political experiences we are going through and bring out the universal character of every one of those beliefs.

This thoroughgoing approach will bring to light the most significant and universal aspects of the Christian faith, without triumphalism, but in service of truth and the transformation of society. The interaction with the society will also lead to the realization of the so-called “hierarchy of truths”. Not all Christians believe will have the same value when re-thought from the interactive perspective. A non-triumphalistic and interactive approach to Christian mystery and belief will find partners who will help to bring out theological richness from the Scriptures and the heritage of Christian tradition.<sup>21</sup> The call for a theology that will be addressed to all has as its fundamental presupposition that faith, love and hope are inherent in any authentic human experience – whether religious or secular. And a theology that is built on this presupposition and addressed to all will not go unheeded or go without response.

By having the larger society as the addressee, theology will also fulfil its social responsibility and public accountability. Because, every belief, idea and praxis performed in the public realm has its repercussions in the society. Either it helps the society to transform itself, or creates disorientation. Therefore, theology will be conscious of its public accountability.

The addressees of theology will cut across religious and ideological barriers. But that does not mean that we are going to have one single theological development. Here too there will be delimitations based not on confessional difference, but on the basis of the collective geographical region, group, issue, etc. And this will pave way for a plurality of Indian theologies.

#### **4. Theology is Answerable**

Much of the professional theology, because of the present-day setting in which it is done, has taken seriously its responsibility to the Church. And this commitment is to be appreciated. But there is a question less asked and not sufficiently answered: How about the responsibility of theology to the larger Indian society? What about its responsibility towards other religious tradition, other experiences? There are many areas in which Indian theologies are answerable. Does the present content of theological teaching and learning contribute to the creation of communal harmony and understanding?

Theology is answerable to the poor. If Jesus proclaims that the poor are blessed, and the kingdom of God is promised to them, it is important that we scrutinize every form of theology whether this central piece of the Gospel is translated into theological practice. The purity of theology and its orthodoxy needs to be measured not only with reference to theology’s responsibility towards the Church community, but as well with its responsibility towards the society and the poor. An orthodox and authentic form of Indian theology emerges when it shows itself to be responsible to the society around, and

especially to the plight of the poorest of the poor. In this way, the concept of “purity” does not become something connected with the elites ( about which Dalit theology is very conscious) and their concerns, but becomes truly a matter of sincerity and fidelity to truth in all its manifold expressions and demands.

### **5. Pluralism as the Defence of the Poor – A Theological Agenda**

A fifth important dimension of the future of Indian theology will be the extent it is able to affirm pluralism in praxis and theory. In this contribution I am concerned about pluralism from a socio-political perspective, and not so much from religio-cultural perspective which will a treatment all by itself. . Pluralism, I think, ultimately is a question of *justice*. Justice demands that we respect the other (individual and collective) in his/her/their “otherness” – which includes also religion. This is the foundation for any theory and praxis of justice. Denial of pluralism kills justice before destroying unity. It is by affirming their difference that the poor have a chance to reclaim their very selves. Pluralism is a defence of the poor and hope of the poor in a homogenizing world.

We need to stress this when we are speaking of pluralism. For often pluralism is reduced to the question of truth and relativity. That would be a reduction to an epistemological issue what is in fact an issue of daily life. To opt for pluralism in our Indian society is to opt for the poor. For, amidst the many homogenising tendencies and practice of various forms of hegemonies, the liberation of the people at the margins of the society rests on how we are able to uphold the ideal of pluralism. If so, for theology and theological education in India, and Asia at large, pluralism has as much consequences as the option for the poor in the Biblical understanding. In every day life we witness that the opposition to pluralism coincides with the agenda of the powerful – socially, politically, culturally and religiously. The ideal of pluralism as understood and lived in India, then, should become a matter of *the defence of the poor*. In this sense, pluralism is part and parcel of the liberation agenda. , Whereas, the upper castes and classes tend to do away with diversity as a threat, the future of the marginal people depends very much on achieving their right to be different with all its consequences. Unity is certainly an important value. But we cannot forget that it could become a cloak to cover the vested interests of the upper castes and classes. True unity is the result of dialogue, negotiation, mutuality, and not a matter of fitting everything into a ready-made system.

## **PART III: SOME METHODOLOGICAL TRAJECTORIES**

Given the radical pluralism characterizing human existence and the socio-political and religio-cultural conditions, theologies will be plural and they will call for a plurality of methods. What follows are some tentative reflections and suggestions for one of the possible theological methodologies. I thought that it is high-time that we stop repeating the need for a different methodology, and enter into tentative attempts to delineate methodologies, even at the risk of being incomplete.

On the other hand, what I have been trying to say under part II, would be incomplete if I do not add also some thoughts on the method. In fact, the question of method is a sequel to the five issues we took up for reflection in part II. If theology for

example is addressed to all the people, certainly we will need a corresponding change in methodological orientation. The methodologies of today cannot be the same when metaphysical categories dominated theology. At the global level we could notice a shift in methodology when theology moved from metaphysical categories to more historical ones. Today, the need of the hour is contextual categories – deriving both from socio-political experiences and from the religio-cultural realm.

### **An Epistemological Premise**

The question of methodology is a common issue the various discipline of humanities and sciences face. Theology could comfort itself with the thought that the methodological flux is not peculiar to it; it has become a common problem of disciplines. The parting of ways among the practitioners of the same science, is characterized by the difference in methodology. In particular, I would like to point out that theology has in the past strong metaphysical moorings, at least since the middle ages. This is especially true of Roman Catholic tradition. No wonder then, that the dissolution of metaphysics is today seen as coinciding with the “dissolution” of Christianity in the West – be it through the interpretation of secularisation or through the advent of postmodernity. Be that as it may, the point I wish to underline is that theology may take a dangerous and fundamentalist turn if it wants to still be confined to the metaphysical realm. In other words, there should be an “epistemological vigilance” over the realm of theology. The truths of its assertions needs to be sensitive to the epistemological question and process of acquiring, critically developing and organizing knowledge. If so, theology will be able to share with other sciences similar epistemological concerns.

Crucial to the question for all sciences in grappling with methodology is the epistemological issue of objectivity. *Objectivity* is a question which has been common to any form of knowledge, and the question is posed much more sharply with regard to humanities. Theology also shares with other organized forms of knowledge, the traditional question of the validity of its knowledge which is commonly supposed to be to the extent that it is objective. Today we realize that this classical picture is changing as the self-perception of the disciplines are undergoing a profound mutation.<sup>22</sup> The developments in epistemology and sociology of knowledge have also contributed to a change in this situation. Part of the ongoing change is the progressive recognition of a role of the subject (individual and collective) which, however, varies. The consideration of subjective and objective in any discipline is something specific to every discipline. There is no common understanding of objective and subjective which could be generalized and applied equally to all the disciplines. In natural sciences the choices of themes for study, the individuals and institutions which do or support research, etc. would be the subjective conditioning in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Naturally, the role of the subject in humanities and social sciences is even greater.

We need to go even a step further and view the attempts to see the problems involved in the representation of reality as one of a dialectics between the subjective and the objective. Every form of knowledge bears the stamp of this dialectics, and it is important to be conscious of it when we consider theology and theological discourse. We need to particularly highlight that the subjective is not something which we need to guard ourselves against, as it may tamper with objectivity. Rather, very often the subjective is very much necessary as a means to a more complete understanding and

approximation to truth. As the psychologist Eric Fromm noted way back in 1950, “objectivity does not mean detachment; it means respect; that is the ability not to distort and to falsify things, persons and oneself”.<sup>23</sup>

The emotional content as an expression of the subjective, need not be an element in theology, which takes us away from truth; rather the emotionally charged thought can lead us closer to truth. How else are we to understand the important truths the dalits, the tribals and women, for example, are telling us? Similarly, the collective agency of the subject (whether dalits, tribals, women, or a particular group of people experiencing the same form of suffering and oppression, etc.) is indispensable in the process of theologising and reaching theological knowledge. Time and space are inherent in any self-constitution of the individual and collective self, and consequently in any form of relationship and creation of knowledge. To use a terminology from social sciences we may say that time and space are *variables* inherent in the subject and not merely external circumstances under which knowledge is produced and constituted. Consequently any theological theme treated in two different socio-political *contexts* (time and space) of the subject will not be the same.

### **The Components of a Possible Method**

Having made the epistemological premise, let me now propose a possible theological method in its various components. Today, a good theological pursuit will be one in which there will be three important methodological components: a) Empirical Data b) Critical Interpretation c) Liberative Process of Knowledge. Let me briefly present these three components.

#### **A) Empirical Data:**

Theology needs to become more and more empirical. This should not be interpreted in a positivistic sense with its assumptions, like for example truth is only when it is shown experimentally through hard facts (as once the natural sciences were thought to be), something that subsequently became also the methodological bedrock for anything to be scientific.<sup>24</sup> I am distancing myself from such an assumption ; nor do I intend to enter into the long-debated question of whether theology is a science. These discussions flourished when the focus of discussion was centered on relationship between reason and faith. Further, the proposal of the study of empirical data is different from what was known as positivist theology, meaning thereby the attempt to cull out passages and texts from Scripture and tradition with reference to any particular theme.

What I mean by *empirical* theology is the theological investigation and pursuit that begins from socio-political facts and data. This is something very important because in this way every single issue we are treating will have *a concrete social location*. For , , in India, the dalits and the tribals have taught us about the earthliness of our existence, and the importance to pay attention to concrete realities related to survival. We just cannot build a theological castle without taking into account the facts and figures about poverty, oppression, and the experience of negations the various segments of people undergo. A vague description or rhetoric on the same cannot furnish adequate and reasonable basis for the beginning of theology.

If theology is being done in a particular community or group, the empirical data will be the ones pertaining to them and their condition, which however needs to be studied and recorded in detail. If I were to join others in theologising, my approach would be one of participant observation.

This first-stage of methodology involves that while dealing with any theological treatise or theme, we ask, what is the corresponding empirical data to that treatise or issue. The data need to be collected and studied in depth and thoroughly. This is also part and parcel of the theological process. It is a fact that most often theological discourses make too general and sweeping statements about empirical realities to be able to quickly ascent to an a-historical plane. And if there is effort to relate to these realities, theological discourses often content themselves with making impressionistic and anecdotal statements.

## **B) Critical Interpretation:**

The collection of empirical data will be followed by critical interpretation. This could happen in three stages. These three stages could be also viewed as three different streams of interpretation which meet and merge:

### *i) Interpretation through the help of critical sciences:*

Depending on the theological question or the issue, one or other sciences in humanities need to be drawn into the picture. In so doing, the tools and methods specific to that particular discipline need to be followed. Often, the help of more than one science may be required to interpret the data. I want to underline that enlisting the collaboration of sciences is part and parcel of the *theologising process itself*. We could look at the process analytically from two angles:

*In relation to sciences:* Since the production, organization and distribution of various knowledge fields are themselves very much linked to external factors and motivations, it is important to be *critical* as well in employing the sciences for the interpretation of data. Often an uncritical approach goes with sciences becoming supporters of the status quo. Since within the same discipline there could be very different orientations, we need to choose the kind of orientation that is geared to change and transformation. That would tally with one of the basic presupposition of any genuine theology, namely that all theology is directed towards change – personal, collective, societal, etc. The theological enterprise needs to guard itself against the danger of sciences becoming new absolutes, a temptation to which theology itself has been exposed.

*In relation to theology:* Theology itself needs to be counterchecked by social sciences and humanities, lest there be triumphalism – something which is not a matter of the past, but characterizing also attitudes today. One needs to only study the views of an influential thinker like John Milbank in regard to theology, which for him is so overarching that it can, not only do away with other sciences, but even replace them.<sup>25</sup> But in fact, the consciousness of the socio-economic conditions in which theological discourses are produced call for a critique of the ideological and idolatrous elements, and the very language of these discourses themselves.

*ii) Interpretation through the help of the Bible and Christian Traditions:*

Religious scriptures have a unique place since they are the *pramana* or documents of faith. The process of knowledge does not end with the operation of reason, which in any case, cannot give us the truth but only function as a regulatory and ordering principle. The scripture acquires a character of certitude for believers because the knowledge of faith it gives is self-validating and not requiring further validation, which if pursued could lead to infinite regression. All this is true of Christian approach as much as Hindu approach.

The function of reason is not to judge the truth of the Vedic statements, but to determine their true import, free from inconsistencies and in conformity with established facts. They are not to be accepted dogmatically, but through intelligent interpretation compatible with perceptual and inferential knowledge. *Sruti* awaits rational analysis to yield its true import.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, in interpreting the Christian Scriptures, all the tools will be employed which have been developed to study and understand the Bible, its background and its universal message. Similarly, the Christian traditions will also be explored to study how a particular issue or theme has been treated in different contexts of history. I need not go into these issues in detail.

My presupposition here is that the Bible and Christian traditions are meant to serve life and its flourishing in all its expressions. Also presupposed is that these resources are oriented to effect change and transformation at all levels. Specially with reference to tradition, it should be pointed out, that regrettably, many of the theological themes are in practice identified with the tracing of its history. No wonder then that we are witnessing how, for example, the kind of theology that sticks to traditional formulations is more and more being sidelined as irrelevant even within the Church, not to speak of the general public. That is why the interpretation of tradition needs to be directed towards the enlightenment of data collected and interpreted at the first stage.

Not all informations from the past may have relevance, or may serve to illumine the question at hand. Therefore, there will take place a judicious selection from the traditions. This need not trouble us, since tradition itself is not a unified seamless garment (which we often tend to believe it to be) but is made up of different streams originating from widely different social and cultural contexts and backgrounds. Further, since theology has to have constant reference to the empirical data and its analysis, it will be helpful in studying the particular traditions, also to note how particular believes and doctrines affected the society and with what consequences. In other words, the social effects of Christian doctrines are important to relate them to the particular theological question or issue we may be dealing today in our contexts. For example, it would appear that some of the heresies in the early Christianity were more expressions of nationalism and identity-affirmation than matters of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

*iii) Interpretation through Religio-Cultural Resources*

This third stage or layer of interpretation will take into account the religio-cultural resources of a people or group. Since the empirical data are derived from a field with particular religio-cultural environment, these resources will be able to throw more light on the particular theme or issue. For example, the dalit, tribal or feminist theology will go into the critical analysis of the resources regarding their genesis and their social effects. In studying these resources, it is important also to *classify* the sources in different ways. Some of them may be deriving from the so-called classical, and others from sources of the marginalized peoples and groups. The analysis will go into the sources in relation to particular forms of society, ideas and institutions they helped to sustain or the changes and transformations they were able to effect. These resources may furnish also the concrete modality or self-expression of theology. For example, the “*Tribals sing their theology*” which is an indication of the deep affinity of the musical resources to theology.

Speaking of cultural resources, I think it is very important today to take into account the developments in the literary field. In India we have an immense wealth of literary production in our different languages. Unfortunately, theology remains aloof from these literary productions reflecting various facets of life. Our data and experiences could be illumined and interpreted through the literary works in rich and variegated Indian languages.

#### iv) *Inter-textual Interpretation*

More specifically in interpreting Christian Scriptures and tradition, we could do more than draw from other religio-cultural resources. We need to enter into some kind of inter-textual interpretation. The practice of interpreting one text that originated in a particular socio-cultural context in relation to another text from another context, can throw much light in our attempt to understand both of them in a very refreshing and creative way. Intertextuality is not a matter of stating the fact that what is found in the text of one tradition is *also* found in another tradition. Nor is it simply *using* of one text for interpreting another text. Intertextuality, as Aloysius Pieris has rightly pointed out is a matter of a *symbiotic encounter*, and the result is something very creative. As Pieris notes,

Cross-scriptural exegesis of the symbiotic type is quite an innovative exercise in inter-religious dialogue. For here a seminal teaching in the scriptures of one religion, sown and buried in the text, when exposed to the warm light that comes from the teachings of another religion’s Sacred Writ, sprouts forth and grows into a fruitful source of new insights. In this “symbiotic” approach, no room is left for diluting or distorting the basic teachings of either religion; and no effort made to indulge in easy equations or odious comparisons.<sup>27</sup>

Further, sacred texts are not simply carriers of meaning, or reservoir of semantic potential. There is an intimate connection between the sacred texts and religious identity, in as much as the sacred texts are those in front of which the founding and interpretation of the self (individual and collective) takes place. In regard to sacred texts, it is not a

matter of interpreting them, but also a question of being interpreted. This also opens up new possibilities and avenues for the self and for the community.<sup>28</sup>

Hence an encounter at that level between the scriptures of two religious groups has the power to draw to each other much more effectively than other means. We see how Pandita Ramabai<sup>29</sup> who constantly negotiated the borders of Christianity and Hinduism could draw from the scriptures of both traditions and arrive at very refreshing interpretations for her own spiritual journey, and provide an innovative appropriation of both the traditions. Her explorations should not be an isolated instance, but should become more and more a general practice in a theology which is inspired by the spirit of genuine unity and catholicity.

In the inter-textual interpretation, we need to be attentive so that it is not reduced to only classical texts of other religious traditions. There is any number of local texts – which unfortunately is not widely known – which have been produced by the subalterns like the dalits. These texts provided them an interpretation of their identity and life-orientation. Often orally transmitted, the various forms of stories and narratives have acquired a “sacred” character and have functioned as points of reference in the lives of the subalterns. Inter-textuality applies as well to these subaltern texts, and the practice of intertextuality will be part of the methodology of various subaltern theologies.

In sum, inter-textuality of sacred texts is important particularly in two respects: To develop a methodology of Indian theology which will be capable of addressing itself to our neighbours of other faiths., and to promote a genuine inter-religious dialogue which will be the matrix for the generation of a theology of religion that is sensitive to the self-interpretation of our neighbours.

### **c) Liberating Process of Knowledge: Three Interlocking Purificatory Stages**

It may sound odd to speak of “purification” – catharsis - when speaking of scientific knowledge. But that is what is precisely required today if we observe the way the system of knowledge, its production and dissemination function. Such a liberating purificatory process will be all the more necessary for theology because of the greater danger of distortion to which it is exposed. The various stages are part of the movement from *adhyasa* – illusion (which is a very important concept in the Indic epistemology) to ever greater approximation to truth.<sup>30</sup> Like in human organism, the continuous purification of the system of knowledge is essential for the truth to be alive and flourish.

The first stage is the one of senses, its perception and the processing of data derived from them. As I noted earlier, this maintains the empirical character of theology and ensures its rootedness in every-day life and practice. Things would be fine if only our senses were to mediate the correct knowledge of things. Experience shows that senses can easily delude us. Hence the necessity of using instruments which can free us from such illusions. But how reliable are the instruments themselves to bring us closer to reality? In this connection it is very instructive to recall the ecstasy and the despair the use of telescope brought to Galileo. While he hoped to demonstrate the actual state of how heavens are, transcending the limits of naked eye, what actually happened was different people saw different things through the same telescope! They could not agree upon what they saw, some seeing stars double and others seeing several moons..<sup>31</sup>

The first telescopic observations of the sky are indistinct, indeterminate, contradictory and in conflict with what everyone can see with his unaided eyes. And the only theory that could have helped to separate telescopic illusions from veridical phenomena was refuted by simple tests... Today we understand a little better why the direct appeal to telescopic vision was bound to lead to disappointment, especially in the initial stages. The main reason, one already foreseen by Aristotle, was that the senses applied under abnormal conditions are liable to give abnormal response.<sup>32</sup>

It is precisely here that the data of the senses whether through their naked powers or through instruments need to be checked, purified and to be explained. Here is precisely the need for theory of light and refraction which would explain and help overcome the illusion of senses and instruments. We are in the *second stage* of the process. The process in social sciences and humanities could be a parallel one.

Similar could also be the process of rationalizing in the process of theologising. But the process of theologising includes as well the organization of the interpreted data through theorizing. For example, if grace is explained a priori and if claims are made on that basis without relation to empirical realities, it would be in contradiction to the experience of everyday in which the reality of grace seems to be present and operative in the struggles of the dalits, the tribals and of women for dignity and freedom. In this case, it is a theorizing which sees *grace itself as a historical reality* lived and experienced in the lives of individuals and groups, and the inappropriateness of an approach to grace which does not take into account the empirical and historical realities of life.

Rationalizing (*vichara*) implies also the process of the sifting of data and placing them within an ordered, sequential and logical whole. It has also a place in the construction of theology. However, it would be a gross mistake to equate logical order and system with objectivity and truth. This is what many Western forms of theologies would seem to think and presuppose. Here we need to remember that the epistemological order or the logical consistency has but a meiotic function; they are like the scaffolding or pedestal for the truth to make its manifestation, but not themselves the truth.<sup>33</sup>

The logical need not be so formal if it is seen constantly in relation to actual realities. In fact, it may be interesting to note that the logic of cause and effect has not been in the Indic tradition a formal abstraction. The genesis of the formal logic of interconnection between cause and effect seem to derive from the practice of *ayurvedic* medicine and medical diagnosis. The study of symptoms of illness leads to the cause through a process of exclusions. I think this is very helpful to theology lest the rational and formal do not lose their generative matrix of empirical realities and their observations.

The rationalizing and theorizing stage needs to be also purified by moving into the third stage of *prajna* or wisdom. At this level, there takes place a purification of the rationalizing process. For this latter process could be seriously conditioned by interests, passions and desire. The formal aspect of rational procedure, as I noted earlier, does not necessarily lead us to truth. It could be so oriented as to serve particular interests, ideologies, etc. The purification and corrective takes the form of attending to those dimensions of the real which get excluded at the level of rationalizing process. For

example the second stage of rationalizing and theorizing could conveniently leave out such crucial issues as gender, race, caste, etc. It is the stage of wisdom which will draw attention to all those neglect elements in the theologising process. It is a stage in which intellect and will, reason and passion, desire and restraint are reconciled and not polarized. The stage of *prajna* is able to do that precisely because it is a stage of wholeness in which various layers and dimensions of the real are held together.

In a world of knowledge that is becoming progressively specialized in every sector, the difficulty with religion and theology is that it seems to be related to everything without any one thing in particular. This is of course, a weakness, but also its strength and specific vocation. Theology has to function as the nodal point where different layers of reality meet and merge. It is difficult to find appropriate analogies.

Maybe the function of theology at this stage can be compared to that of a family. A family is an institution which has to be concerned about everything – from the most lofty experiences and ideals to the most mundane. The management of the house (economy), education, human relationships, the place of women, and many other things are all treated under one roof and in a unique way. The issue of communication, truth, sincerity, love, freedom all converge into one. When theology brings together the wide variety of experiences and layers of reality, it surpasses the realm of thought (*vichara*) and moves towards that of *wisdom (prajna)*. It has always been said that theology is wisdom. Today we understand it better when confronted with the fragmentation of knowledge and experience which we share with everybody else. All human persons are in need of help to be able to learn the art of continuous and dynamic integration. And that is why a theology that helps to integrate the wide varieties of experiences could be addressed to all.

Now, the stage of wisdom itself needs to be purified and corrected. For wisdom could mean a *stasis* – a quietist state of contemplation of the whole. If as we said, all theology is oriented towards change and transformation, it is at this stage that wisdom needs to be oriented towards that goal. In one sense, more than the end result, the very theological procedure will turn out to be transformative. There will be transformation of the self (individual and collective), the other and the world at large. In terms of the concrete question or issue, theology will tend to effect transformation and change and will also provide reasons for the same.

A second corrective which this stage needs is to guard against the danger of a wisdom centered only on the *present*. The transformative role should lead on to the projection of utopias and alternatives. The various scientific disciplines not only analyse and interpret a specific reality, but also project something for the future. What is projected is often based on the deduction from the analysis and interpretation made. This is true not only of natural sciences but humanities and social sciences as well. For example, a study of evolution, could project something on the future shape of a particular species, or the study of present demographic situation will lead to future projections.

The projection will depend on the nature of the particular discipline. As for theology, projection towards the future is a very central issue. Because, the role of theology is not simply to state *what is* and to interpret what they mean (presence). It is the important task of theology to diagnose what is not (the absence) and to project *what ought to be* on the basis of faith. We are in the realm of *utopias*. Utopias are not illusions. They are imaginative and creative, but realistic possibilities for the future.

They can contribute to a critique of the present and shaping of a future which may escape present calculations. In this sense, the Kingdom of God is a powerful symbol in theology.

Finally the stage of wisdom which could give the impression of general and universal, needs to constantly refer back to the empirical, the concrete, the particular. It is this type of wisdom which theology needs to be. Wisdom and the particular are not opposed to each other. On the contrary, it is in relationship to the concrete that wisdom expresses itself.

It is important that these three stages I have tried to develop are not to be viewed as an ascent from the lower to the higher level, or to be placed in a chronologically sequential order. They all should be in operation at the same time and continuously in interaction. Like the various organs of the body need to be active and inter-active with other organs, so also the various levels and their components need to be in communication for a healthy theology.

The methodological indication I have made is meant only to make ourselves aware of, in an analytical way, about the various threads and strands involved in the theological methodology. Besides, not all these procedures and stages may be applied equally to all themes and issues. Further, all the steps and procedures indicated (including the study of empirical data) are to be considered as part of the theological process. Theologising happens all through the process; theology is not, so to say, the cream we churn out. Theology is deeply embedded in the warp and woof of the reality and experience we analyse, study, interpret and relate to praxis. This does not mean that we are imposing a theological format on reality. Rather we move from the discovery of an unthematized theological stage to ever more thematized theological articulation and application with the help of a methodology.

## CONCLUSION

The future trajectory I have tried to envisage and a corresponding development of method pose great many challenges. I do not want to go into all of them. But by way of conclusion let me highlight the *challenge of language* that is being posed by the kind of theological trajectory and method enunciated.

Various theologies emerging in India with new methodologies will also bring about *new theological languages*. Already we see these languages in formation. But we need to become more conscious of this fact. Each one of these languages will be addressed to all, thus opening up the possibility of intense conversation and dialogue among various theologies within India. All the theologies may not speak the same way to all people; but it is important to listen to their different voices.

The plurality of languages is to be understood also in a different but related sense. Theology may not find always expression through literary and textual language, which generally enjoy a privileged status. Theology will express itself starting from the orality,<sup>34</sup> which is very much embedded in the culture and tradition of marginal groups and peoples like the dalits and the tribals. Further, the theological genre itself will have to be plural, giving scope for different kinds of experiences to come to expression. The

uni-dimensional conceptual language generally used in theology needs to be replaced by a multi-dimensional language to be able to do justice to the richness offered by emerging new theologies. If all languages have a metaphoric dimension, this is true much more of the new theologies emerging in India.

The methodology proposed and the challenge of language calls for a *re-organization of the theological discipline*. From our foregoing reflections it is clear that the traditional treatise approach presupposes a different kind of methodology. It may not square with the concerns expressed in calling for a different methodology and language. The future scenario of Indian theology will be one in which there will be varieties of theologies (dalit, tribal, feminist, etc.), and since each one of them will have its own accent, and specificity with regard to various themes (Christ, human person, understanding of the world and cosmos, ultimate fulfilment, etc.), learning each of these theologies will add depth and new dimensions to any particular theme that will be studied. All authentic theologies will be open to other experiences and insights. This should be true also about Indian theologies which will interact with theologies being pursued in other parts of the world, especially in other Asian countries, in Africa, Latin America and the Pacific.

Theologising in India is an exciting pursuit. It is a journey. There is so much of richness of human resources, religious and cultural heritage on the one hand and all imaginable and complex societal and political situation on the other, that at every step we meet with endless possibilities of understanding ever more closely the mystery of God, the human realities and the entire cosmos. Let me cite the words of Tagore to conclude how exciting the journey of Indian theologies could be:

When old words die out on the tongue  
New melodies break forth from the heart  
And where the old tracks are lost  
New country is revealed with its wonders<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The retrospect is made from a socio-political point of view, and does not enter into the religio-cultural aspect which requires a treatment all by itself. For a more comprehensive analysis covering the region of South Asia highlighting the contribution of Aloysius Pieris, see Felix Wilfred, "An Interpretative Overview of South Asian Theology in the Twentieth Century", in *Modern Theologians* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition shortly to appear) edited by David Ford, Cambridge, U.K.

<sup>2</sup> The movement derives its name from a book published under the same title just before the International Missionary World Council's Conference in Tambaram (1938).

<sup>3</sup> For the proceedings of the meeting, see Paul Puthenangady (ed.), *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation*, NBCLC, Bangalore, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> The Indian Theological Association has done a very useful service to scholars, by bringing out a volume containing all its statements during its existence of past 25 years. See Jacob Parappally (ed.), *Theologizing in Context. Statements of Indian Theological Association*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> For some of the major issues in Indian theologizing, see Felix Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges. Doing Contextual Theology*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> For a very useful volume giving a comprehensive picture of dalit theology discussing a wide range of issues, cf. James Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1998; Arvind Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Gurukul Lutheran College and Research

Institute, Madras, n.d; V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Gurukul Theological College and Research Institute, Madras, 1997. See also Samuel Rayan, “The Challenge of the Dalit Issue: Some Theological Perspectives”, in V. Devashayam (ed.), *Dalits and Women. Quest for Humanity*, Lutheran Theological College and Institute, Madras, 1992, pp. 117 – 137. .

<sup>7</sup> A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, “Dalit Theology: A Movement of Counter-Culture”, in James Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalits... Op.cit.* p. 260.

<sup>8</sup> A. Maria Arul Raja, *Dalit Encounter with their Sufferings: An Emancipatory Interpretation of Mark 15: 1-47 from a Dalit Perspective* (an unpublished doctoral dissertation written under the guidance of Felix Wilfred and presented at the University of Madras), Chennai, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, “What is Wrong with Rice-Christians? Well-being as Salvation. A Subaltern Perspective, in *Third Millennium IV* (2001), pp.6 – 18.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. George Soares-Prabhu, “Two Mission Commands: An Interpretation of Mathew 28: 16-20 in the Light of a Buddhist Text” in *Biblical Interpretation 2* (1994), pp.264 – 282. For his other important contributions in the understanding of mission, see *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today* (Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu vol. I, edited by Isaac Padinajarekuttu), Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, 1999, pp. 3 – 47; M. Amaladoss, *Making All Things New. Mission in Dialogue*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1990. .

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jacob Kavunkal – F. Kranghkuma (eds), *Bible and Mission in India Today*, St Paul’s Bombay, 1993; Joseph Mattam – Sebastian Kim (eds), *Dimensions of Mission in India*, St Paul’s, Bombay, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> A most recent work, excellently researched, goes into the details of the debates on conversion: Cf. Sebastian C.H.Kim, *In Search of Identity. Debates on Religious Conversion in India*, Oxford University Press. Oxford, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> For detailed treatment of the thought of some of these authors, see Felix Wilfred – M.M. Thomas, *Theologiegeschichte der Dritten Welt. Indien*, Chr.Kaiser, Muenchen, 1992; see also Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations. The Journey of Indian Theology*, Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, Madras, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community. Tribal Theology in the Making*, Mizo Theological Conference, Aizawal, Mizoram, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Margaret Shanti, Women Towards a New Ecclesiogenesis, in Margaret Shanti – Corona Mary (eds), *We Dare to Speak*, Word Publications, Tiruchirapalli, 1994, pp. 36 – 61.

<sup>16</sup> Though there does not seem to be any single work giving a comprehensive and up-to-date survey of Indian feminist theology, however, its general orientation could be inferred from some of the contributions: Prasanna Kumari, *A Reader in Feminist Theology*, Gurukul Publication, 1993; Ursula King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, SPCK, London, 1994; Gabriele Dietrich, *On Doing Feminist Theology in South Asia*, in *Kristujyoti* 6 (1990), pp. 26 – 55; ID., *South Asian Feminist Theory and its Significance for Feminist Theology*, in *Concilium* 30 (1996), pp. 101-115; Stella Faria et al., (eds), *The Emerging Christian Woman. Church and Society Perspective*, WINA, Bangalore, 1984..

<sup>17</sup> For a study by Naga feminist theologians from North-East India, see the recent work by Limatula Longkumer – Talijungla Longkumer (eds), *Side By Side. Naga Women Doing Theology in Search of Justice and Partnership*, Jorhat 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Pieris has made a very significant contribution to feminist theology in the first part of his work *Fire and Water. Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity*, Orbis Books, New York, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Roger Heduland (ed.), *Christianity is Indian. The Emergence of an Indigenous Community*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2003 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

<sup>21</sup> On what that could mean when we speak of Jesus Christ, cf. Felix Wilfred, Jesus-Interpretation in Asia, in *Vaiharai*. Vol. 7 (2002), no. 4, pp.3-19.

<sup>22</sup> As for the social sciences, a good overview of the question with points under debate could be found in: Immanuel Wallerstein et al., *Open the Social Sciences., Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences*, Vistaar Publications, Delhi, 1996; cf. also Richard Whitley, *The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000 (second edition).

<sup>23</sup> Eric Fromm, *Man for Himself*, Routledge, London, 1950, p. 105. In the same work the author notes that “objective” is not identical with “absolute”., p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> In this regard, it should be pointed out that in the history of Christianity, the opportunity for theology to develop itself in close collaboration with empirical sciences was lost when the line of orientation followed by Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, William of Occam, Duns Scotus and others (represented in the Oxford approach of fourteenth century) lost the intellectual battle to an abstract kind of theology least sensitive to empirical realities. In this connection, Norman F. Cantor in his scholarly study on plague notes how the development in experimental sciences were prevented, for example, through the prohibition of vivisection by adducing abstract theological motives. See Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague. The Black Death and the World It Made*, Perennial, New York, 2002, pp. 112 ff.

<sup>25</sup> See the excellent thesis presented by a Filipino at the University of Leuven, Belgium: Daniel Franklin Pilario, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis. Exploring Theological Method with Bourdieu. Beyond Liberation Theology and Radical Orthodoxy*, Leuven, 2002. Pilario subjects to critical scrutiny the position of Milbank representing radical orthodoxy on the one hand, and questions Clodovis Boff's theory of praxis, on the other.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Sivanandam Panneerselvam, "A Hindu Response to the Pope's Encyclical Letter 'Fides et Ratio'", in *Concilium* 2003/4, pp. 79 – 89, p. 85.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Aloysius Pieris, in Philip Wickeri (ed.), *Scripture, Community, and Mission* (Essays in honour of D. Preman Niles), CCA-CWM, Hong Kong – London, 2003, pp.234 – 253, p. 253.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred. Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, pp. 35 – 47.

<sup>29</sup> Pandita Ramabai (1858 – 1922) defied the religious conventions of the time (which prohibited women from studying sacred texts) to study Sanskrit and the Hindu Scriptures. Converted to Christianity, she did not fall in line with the conventions of this tradition either. Through a practical hermeneutics of the scriptures of both traditions, she could fuse together the riches for the cause of the emancipation of Indian women. In the process, she made a creative and controversial appropriation of Christianity. For a perceptive interpretation of her life and commitment, see Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History. The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women, Delhi, 2000 (second impression of the work of 1998). On the controversies surrounding her interpretation of scriptures and appropriation of Christianity, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. The classical Indic epistemological tradition identified many sources of illusion, including *pramana dosha* (defect in the subject) and *premeya dosha* (defect in the object). See the important recent contribution by Srinivasa Rao, *Perceptual Error. The Indian Theories*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1998; see also Swami Satprashananda, *Methods of Knowledge According to Advaita Vedanta, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1995.*

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, Verso, London-New York, 2002 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. pp. 86 & 89.

<sup>33</sup> *Katha Upanishad* I, ii, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Orality and Literacy: Contrast, Convergence and Dialectics", in *South Indian Folklorist*, vol. 2 (1999), no. 2, pp. 7-16.

<sup>35</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, Macmillan, Delhi – New York, 1918, song 37.