

Hindu Perspective on Religious Plurality and Missiological Imperatives: A study in Indian Context

In the recent past, the Western Church and missionary organizations had taken keen interest in India, especially on the subjects that deal with the challenges of religious plurality/pluralism for Christian faith and Church in the context of Hinduism. In our enthusiasm, we often tend to overlook the fact that other great religious traditions too are in the same boat, experiencing and facing the same challenges as we do. I, being a long time student of religious traditions, am, therefore, taking liberty to highlight the challenges faced by a majority religious community, Hinduism, in a situation of plurality of religions. It feels threatened and in turn, poses the same to the very existence of the followers of other religions, a process we are now experiencing in India. It may be a classic case of 'majoritism' and inferiority complex of a so called ancient and superior civilization.

A word of caution may not be out of place. It will be an exaggeration if we tend to understand, and conclude, that whole of Hindu society has been challenged with this phenomenon of religious pluralism, and is reacting the way discussed here. Most of the Hindus, by nature, are pluralistic, tolerant and accommodative. They are dismayed and disturbed, but are confused too. This silent majority takes its own time to react, though the minority among it reacts very fast along the way discussed here. This over-reactive minority should not be taken to be the majority.

A study in religious phenomena requires unattached objectivity as well as participatory understanding. Any attempt to employ a purely objective methodology will be counter-productive, as it will not provide much of the clues that are required to understand the inner dynamics of a living and vibrant religious tradition. Participatory understanding does not mean that one has to be an adherent of a particular religious tradition; one just needs to have an empathetic, perceptive and appreciative mind to grasp the fears and anxieties of the other. My background in philosophical Hinduism and rich inheritance I received from my father, who came out of the Hindu religious-fold but did not abandon Indian spirituality and culture, bestows upon me an authenticity, and legitimacy, to present a Hindu perspective on a situation of religious pluralism. I have earnestly tried here to understand the trauma the faithful Hindus have gone through, ordeals they have encountered with and hostilities they have faced in an era of religiously plural world of not far a distant past in our history.

I am a student of religious traditions and religious phenomena, and not a missiologist, like Theo. As a Christian, and a minister of the Church, I cannot ignore the issues that affect my faith-commitment to my personal Savior, Jesus Christ. There is always a temptation to insert them into our intellectual expressions, which I am sure, you will not mind, but feel free to take them up for critical scrutiny.

Indian situation and context in global perspective

India is considered, obviously from Christian perspective, to be a non-Christian country. The fact that this country is known for its religiosity, spirituality and adherents of almost all major religions of the world¹, is often overlooked. One may often wonder at the reticent and resilient nature of the Indian culture that has not yet lost the sense of Divine in spite of the onslaught of consumerist values of the television culture. God-men, god-experienced persons and charismatic leaders and movements are abound and still most popular in all the religions, even among the educated and upper echelons of the society.²

Yet India is facing a time of change and transition. The impact of technology, frequent political changes, population growth, unemployment, globalization of culture and economy are some factors that mark the change. They have forced the nation and its people to see the world, nature, people and religions from new perspectives that are provided by the process of globalization. Even the psyche of the people is changing.

India, from the perspective of religions, is predominantly a Hindu country; Christianity and other religions are in minority. This local context should not be overlooked in a study of challenges a majority religious community poses to minority religious communities. In the global context, Christianity may be the major religion of the world, having much political influence through its adherents living in majority of countries of the world. World of so called Christian countries, you may agree, is also in the process of transformation and change as migration of people from different regions of the world with different cultures and religious affiliations is constantly taking place in their part of the world. This situation was aptly summarized by the planners of a consultation at Fuller Theological Seminary in America: “Among the important characteristics of the world today is the large-scale movement of peoples from their ancestral homelands to other parts of the world. Millions of people from Africa, Asia, and Latin America have migrated to Europe and North America over the past fifty years. These people bring with them their traditions, religious commitments, and cultural values. At the same time they seek citizenship and the rights and privileges that the modern democratic system of government offers. Thus, in less than two generations the West has undergone a rapid pluralization of culture and society. This pluralization has coincided with the erosion of the authority of religion in society and the marginalization of the Christian church in public life.” The situation is not different in Britain or continent Europe.

We, as Christians in India, are perhaps in the same situation as our counter-part in the West. The difference is that they are a majority in their situation, while we are a minority. It is in this context, we are called to discuss, deliberate and resolve to face the challenges in our contexts in Christ’s way, so that His kingdom may come, His will be done on earth.

¹ Census 2001 is not yet available. As per 1991 census, Hindus 82.64%; Muslim 11.35%; Christians 2.43%; Sikhs 1.96%; Buddhists 0.71%; Jains 0.48%

² One can mentioned a few like, Sai Baba, Mahesh Yogi, Krishnamurthy, Rajneesh, Rams Krishna Mission, ISCON etc.

Religious plurality in India: A Historical perspective

India is proud of its history and civilization. It has a long, uninterrupted and continuous flow of religious and spiritual tradition. A brief recollection of its religious culture here may not be out of place and context.

The Adivasi (aboriginal, earliest occupants, indigenous or native) Indian culture (pre-historic) is the oldest religious culture. It is the culture of the indigenous people, often classed as Scheduled Castes/Tribes³. There are, apart from these, a large number of populace who follow primal and primeval religions.⁴ The Dravidian religious culture (2k BCE) is believed to have flourished in western India before forced to move down towards south due to an entry of a new culture from the further west- the Aryan (1.5k BCE). The evolution of Hinduism as a league of religions thereafter is a fact of history that baffles many. Jainism, though pre-historic, made its presence felt from 6th century BCE onwards, through the teachings of great reformers, Swami Parshvanath (c872-772 BCE) and Mahavir Swami (c540-468 BCE). Then appeared Gautam Buddha (c623-544 BCE) with his Noble Middle Path, followed by Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539 CE) and his Way to Disciple- Sikhism. There is a tendency in the resurgent Hinduism to include these religions of Indic origin into its larger umbrella to the utter dismay, and protest, of these religions.

It is difficult to say when Zoroastrianism came to India; its presence in the subcontinent may go back to the Aryan invasion itself. There are similarities between its scripture, Avesta, and Rig-Veda, which suggest common source of these great religions. It is during the period of trade-relationship between India and Persia, and later period of persecution by the Islamic zealots, the followers of Zoroaster took refuge in India. Their Persian association, and with it their separate identity as religious community, is recognized by the common term 'Parsee' as distinct from Hindus. A few Jewish communities too settled in western coast of India for the same reasons and accepted in the Hindu society, as they, like the Parsees, kept their separate identity as a religious community without causing any disturbance in the social and religious structures of the Hindus. Early Christian community, associated with their Syrian origin, too kept the same distance with the Hindu society and gained a separate status in the society in the southern state of Kerala.. This Christian community in Kerala needs to be differentiated from the later Christian communities in other part of India subcontinent that came into existence due to the evangelical expansion of western Christianity. The marked difference lies in their continuation with socio-cultural traits of great Indian tradition.

Islam was introduced to Indians by the traders and Sufi missionaries in its early formative years, but gained much of its adherents through political power over the years once the Muslim dynasties established their rule in India. Though Christianity became part of Indian religious tradition soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (52 CE), its rapid growth is generally associated with the expansion of western colonial rules from the seventeenth century

³ A bureaucratic, constitutional and legal term for one section of aboriginal people.

⁴ Scheduled Tribe is the technical term used.

onwards, represented by Portuguese, Dutch, Danes, French, and British. Conversion through 'sword' and noble persuasions by the missionaries of these faiths is considered to be the cause of their growth, and discontent with hostility, in the Indian subcontinent.

Complexities of pluralism in Indian situation need sympathetic understanding and consideration. Hinduism is a pluralistic religion by its own nature and had to cope up with tensions and problems of its own diversified religious cultures. Left to themselves, out of the protective and cementing umbrella of Hinduism, the constitutive parts of Hinduism- Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, modern religion movements, sects and cults within it – they can not live in peace and harmony. It is due to this compulsion, Hinduism would prefer to admit Christianity and Islam in its scheme of uniformity-in-plurality, and principle of unity-in-diversity. The refusal of non-Indic religions to fall in line with this scheme is disturbing the equilibrium that is achieved by Hinduism after a long strife and struggle in history.

Theology of Religious pluralism : The Hindu perspective

Plurality is a condition or situation, depicting the presence of many, with preference of choices. Pluralism, on the other hand, is an ideology that accepts the independent and autonomous existence of many, as in the Indian case, independence and autonomous existence of many religions. In such a situation, autonomous religions adjust themselves within the spaces available in a society and form their own criteria for interaction and relationship with others. Here comes into play the theology of religion. It may help us to understand the present Indian Hindu psyche if we take a brief note of its theology of religious pluralism.

It is from the studies of Vedas and Vedic literature, along with Puranas (quasi-mythological, quasi-historical as well historical religious books) and great epics- Ramayana and Mahabharata, that we come to know about social and religious situations of pre-historic India. Vedas mention wars against a number of hostile tribes and principalities in which early 'Aryan' settlers were engaged under the leadership of Indra, their king, later deified. Their religious, social and territorial subjugation slowly settled down into an emergence of what is later known as the great Indian (Aryan) civilization, which can also be forked into Hinduism as a religion and Hindu cultural nationalism. Plurality and diversity is the distinctive characteristic of this great Indian civilization from time immemorial. Indian culture has never been uni-/mono-culture; it has always been engaged in producing a composite of cultures and sub-cultures, classical and non-classical traditions, high and folk cultures.

Religion, as we now understand, is a part, and may be an essential component, of culture. In the secular culture of modern era, religion does not enjoy that position; it is side-lined, removed or bracketed into a private/personal realm, with no consequence to the culture as a whole. This is not the case with religion in the Indian context. Religion is the part and parcel of Indian culture, irrespective of its identification with any particular religion- Indic or non-Indic. This diversity in religious culture is very striking and remarkable.

It is from this perspective we are supposed to understand Hinduism as a religion. It is not a religion but a league of all the Indic religions- their spiritualities, traditions and practices. Hinduism perhaps took a leaf out of Mahayana Buddhism and opened its arms to welcome, integrate, absorb, transform, and borrow every kind of religiosity that found acceptance to its adherents. In the process it became an umbrella for every possible permutation and combination for syncretism without, at the same time, annihilating any. Buddhism was absorbed into it by accepting Buddha as one of the incarnations of Vishnu, and turning their places of worship into Hindu temples. The ethical teachings of Jainism- *Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (Non-violence), *Brahmacarya* (Self-control), *Asteya* (Non-stealing) and *Aparigraha* (Non-possession), incorporated into Hindu ethics and spirituality.

From the point of view of multiplicity of religious experience, spirituality, philosophy and theology, personal experience and expression of ultimate reality in abstract and anthropomorphic forms, the Vedic seers were soon to discover that '*Ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti*'- 'Truth/Reality is One, though the wise say many'⁵. It is the earliest perception of plurality by the Indian seers. Non-dualist interpretation of the Reality by philosopher theologians, like Adi Shankaracharya in eighth century and Mahatma Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo, in the last century, presented all multiplicity as relative and un-real; and advocated transcendence of multiplicity into unity. It is this realization of existent reality in their context that slowly crystallized in the principle of 'unity-in-diversity' of Indian civilization that provided continuity, harmony and coexistence of people with different cultures, races, languages and creeds. To an Indian, this country owes a lot to Hindu culture, and Hinduism is considered to be the most tolerant spirituality in the world, recognizing the fact that God is One, though he manifests himself in many ways, under different forms, at different times.

The corollary of this idea is the principle of *Sarva dharma sadbhava*, goodwill towards all religions. The madness and experience of sectarian wars in the middle ages would not have come to an end in absence of this principle. This principle is the source of Indian secularism which the Hindu right is trying to project over and against 'Nehruvian secularism' which they termed as 'pseudo secularism'. Pseudo-secularism, as the policy of the state, followed the appeasement of the minority religious community at the expense of the majority. The true policy, according to the Rightist, should, in principle, have preference to none. We are also reminded that the concept of secularism is a western concept focusing at the separation of state and religion in the context of Christendom. The debate over this issue is still alive in the academic and political forums, causing much anxiety among the minority religious communities.

Challenges to Hinduism in the context of religious pluralism: The Hindu perspective

In the line of discussion that preceded in the previous section, I wish to highlight only a few of the vital challenges and threats that the Hindu religion is confronting in contemporary India.

⁵ Rig Veda I.164,46

These are the very challenges and threats that are being posed, in return, to other religious communities by a minuscule but influential Hindu community. Plurality of religions in the context of Hinduism has to be understood as the presence of Islam and Christianity. Prior to the introduction of Christianity and Islam, plurality of religions and their inter-relations were settled through the application of the principles enunciated earlier. Buddhism and Jainism were a threat to Hindu religion of the time for centuries, but were forced to accept this principle through the philosophical, religious and political leaders, such as Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, and southern empires of Chola, Chera, Pandyan and Vijayanagara. This was not to be the case with Christianity and Islam. They are still considered to be a threat and challenge to Hinduism as a religious force, because they are non-Indic in origin, having extra-territorial allegiance, with scant respect for Indian culture and religious traditions, sheep-stealers, conversion-oriented religions and despots. To this, they add secularist, Communists, western-oriented populace and liberal Hindus. It is interesting to note that religions of Indic origins, Zoroastrianism, Syrian Christianity and Judaism are not considered to be a threat to Hindu religion; threats and challenges come only from Christianity (minus Syrians) and Islam, and they are, therefore, threatened and challenged. The challenge and threat of plurality, some may propose, can, at best, be met with a denial of plurality as such. This is one of the courses some Hindus in India would like to take.

The fact of plurality of religion, in which Hinduism is merely one among many, has been very uncomfortable to the propounders of neo-Hindu ideologues. Contemporary Hindu perspective is held by a Hindu minority which proposes a doctrine of Hindu Rashtra, Hindu Nation, that is comprised of, and for, Hindus only. Minorities have a few options in such a nation: they must either merge themselves in the national ('Hindu') race, or live at its mercy, or quit the country at the sweet will of the national race. This is Hindutva⁶ doctrine, proposed by Veer Savarkar⁷ and developed by M.S.Golwalkar⁸. It is now taken up by religio-politico-cultural organizations, such as Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) Bajarang Dal (BD), Shiva Sena (SS), Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) to which many Indians, irrespective of religious affiliation, have now begun to subscribe and follow.

Assertion of Hindu identity is another. The decline of Hindu political power in the Middle Ages and the long experience of colonial period- first Muslim then Christian British, wiped out the trace of Hindu identity and nation-hood, if there was any, from the memory of Hindu mind. The 'appeasement' and 'divide and rule' policy of the British administrators, the incisive-ignoble-erroneous hate-literature of the religious zealots, conversion-oriented activities of missionaries, social-religious-political resurgence in Indian society, introduction of two-nation theory based on

⁶ Literally means Hindu-ness. It is an assertion of Hindu identity over against other religious, specially Christian and Muslim. It is also a political ideology which proposes India to be a Hindu nation, and Hinduism, a state religion. It is associated with the fundamentalist aspect of Hinduism.

⁷ V.D. Savarkar; *Hindutva, Who is a Hindu*, Mumbai: Swatantraveer Savarkar rashtriya Smarak, 1999.

⁸ M.S. Gowalkar.; *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939

religious identity, partition and massacre of millions of people, rise of secular India, - are not all but a few factors that gave rise to a sense of Hindu identity⁹, *Hindutva*, in present-day India.

The doctrine of Hindu Nation and Hindu Identity does not seem to succeed in solving the problem of plurality as it does not find favour even among the followers of Indic religions. These do not wish to be in identity with either Hindu nation or Hindu religion. Buddhism and Sikhism have been protest and reforming movements, and have protested vehemently any proposal to take them into Hindu fold. Buddhists and Sikhs want personal laws of their own, and would not like to be governed by Hindu personal laws. There were violent protests when it was suggested to place Sikh scripture, *Guru Grantha Saheb*, in Hindu temples and be worshipped. Buddhists too complain of desecration and taking over their places of worship by the Hindus in the middle ages. Some Jains have laid claim upon the site of Ayodhya as they consider it their place of worship. It is interesting to note that not a single Hindu temple is dedicated to Lord Buddha even though he is regarded as an incarnation of God Vishnu. Buddhism of Ambedkar is termed as Neo-Buddhism of Dalit¹⁰ origin and is looked down upon by the caste Hindus. It is an attempt towards a merger of nascent Buddhism with Hinduism, if there is any possibility, and placing its adherents to their old Hindu category under caste system. Dalits have accepted the term, but refuse to oblige the Hindus.

Hindu nation and identity is also a problematic and controversial issue. Sikhs had rejected it in the past and demanded a nation/state of their own. Tribals of the north-east are often charged of treason on this account, as they fight for their own identity. This notion is also not acceptable to southern states, especially Dravidian parties, who would resist any northern/brahmanical hegemony. Dalits, as a group, are the new entrants into this rejection. Anything Hindu reminds them of exploitation, discrimination, deprivation, marginalization and dispossession; it stands for the force that has robbed them of their identity, humanity, and person-hood; it represents a yoke of slavery. Restitution of their identity and person-hood, dismantling of exploitative power structures and restoration of their rightful place is the agenda of the struggle of the Dalits.

Hindu religious and cultural Nationalism (*Hindutva*) is the answer to such a refusal from so-called members of larger Hindu-fold. It is an ideology that accepts India-born religious and cultural traditions, but demands an allegiance to Indian nation, religions and religious sentiments, gods and goddesses, myths, histories, heroes, social orders and pilgrim centers. Introduction of singing in adoration to Saraswati, a Vedic goddess of learning, in schools was a test case some time ago, which caused protest from Christian, Muslim, and 'secularist' state governments. Safronization of education and introduction of obscure subjects, such as Vedic Mathematics, Astrology, call for Indian Church, Common Personal Codes, etc are the manifestation of such a notion.

⁹ One of the popular slogan is "Say with pride that we are Hindus'. But note that it is collective Hindu identity that is emphasized, and not the personal/individual.

¹⁰ Dalit refers to the lowest among the caste structure of Hindu/Indian society. They constitute about 138.2 million people(17% of Indian population in 1991)

Fundamentalism is a way to encounter hostile religions and alien cultures. Hindu fundamentalism beckons Hindus to go back to their golden age of the past, found in the Scriptures and be a part of the utopian nation, Hindu Rashtra, based upon religious concept of a nation. It is also an endeavor to meet the challenges posed by Christianity and Islam, and modernity as well. Hindu fundamentalism is on rise ever-since Hindu rightist has obtained political power through election verdicts in state legislatures and national parliament. The way the destruction of a Muslim place of worship was handled by successive governments, coupled with election victories thereafter, is seen as an indication of popular support and approval of majority community, and a license for a host of fundamentalist' agenda. Cow protection, Ayodhya-Kashi-Mathura project, Kashmiri pandit issue, anti-conversion laws, uniform civil code, abolition of minority rights, are more than enough to supply fire, in the years to come, to the political ambition of fundamentalists. These will surely unite Hindus under their umbrella and do what they will say, as they did it in Ayodhya, Mumbai and Gujarat.

Communalism and communal divide is the direct result of religious fundamentalism. It expresses itself in two forms- formation of localized homogenous religious communities, and, hatred and hostilities towards the other. It is now observed that Muslim and Christian households are specially being marked by the rightist state government and their homes and places of worship are targeted at the time of communal tensions. Sikhs too were targeted after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. The boundaries of many localities and villages have been re-drawn in several areas after recent riots in many parts of the country. There are charges of ethnic cleansing in many parts of our country. Majority communalism is fast growing in our society to the peril of minority religious communities.

Religious terrorism is a new phenomenon of fundamentalism in world religion; Hindu society is not an exception to it. It is perhaps a reflection of what is going on in our society. Sporadic violence, in the past, against other religious communities, especially Muslims, was an expression of communal divide in Indian society. But the sudden and well-planned explosion of violence against other minority communities, during the last few years, has exposed the terrorist tactic, and design, of Hindu fundamentalists. In this period, Churches were destroyed, huts of village-Christians were burnt, Christian institutions were attacked, nuns and priests were assaulted, and missionaries were murdered.¹¹ Vandalism on Valentine day, disco clubs, dress code of Hindu women, physical attack on Dalits etc., are some of the terror tactics used by Hindu fundamentalist forces to curb the freedom within Hindu society. Distribution of three-forked spears, *Trishuls*¹², is another way to instil fear in minority communities. It is not surprising that some of the BJP ruled states have started identifying missionary organizations and missionaries, and taking a mini census, even though they are Indians. The memory of Gujarat riots and attacks

¹¹ Vishal Mangalwadi provides a catalogue of crimes against Christian during 1997-99 in Mangalwadi, Vishal etc.; *Burnt Alive*, Mumbai: GLS Publishers, 1999, pp 211-219.

¹² It is one of the armaments of Shiva. As it is ceremoniously given, it is a call to take part in a religious war against the opposing forces.

on Christians not long ago, is still fresh and there is an apprehension in the minds of Christians that they will soon be systematically targeted by the fundamentalist groups.¹³

Conversion is becoming a debatable issue in India now. Theory and practice of conversion, though, is not limited to Christianity and Islam, they are the only ones charged for an offence if it takes place anywhere in India. It is a myth that Hinduism is not a missionary religion. It came into existence due to persistent, even violent, efforts of Hindu missionaries all through ages and continues to be so because of numerous missionaries of the faith- *alwars* (poet-saints) , *bhakti* (devotee) poets, *sadhus* (medicants), *sants* Holy-men), *gurus* (teachers), *acharyas* (scholars) *bhagwans* (god-men), *swamis* (lords), mahants (rectors), and god-men/women. In the modern era, the reform movements, such as Brahma Samaj, Theosophical Society, Ramakrishna Mission, International society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) and numerous gurus, used merging option for preventing Hindus to move out of its fold, and, at the same time, attracting followers from other religions and nationalities into it. In an era of Globalization, and in light of the opportunities it provides, Hinduism, with all shades and colours, is in the global market. We are witnessing a new phase of Hinduism; internationalization of Hinduism is taking place.

Hindus, however, are afraid that Muslims and Christians will soon swallow most of their fellow believers through this method, especially converting Dalits and Tribals who are numerically very large. This fear is being met by the Hindu rightist at religious as well as legislative levels. At religious level, they find it prudent, and pragmatic, to pursue the same course as that of their distracters- conversion for conversion. The followers of Hindutva ideology have an answer to this situation in the form of conversion, (they hate to use this word in their context, and reserve it for Christian and Islamic context) termed as 'Shuddhi'¹⁴, 'home coming' and 'returning'. Another way is to prevent conversion from within. For this, merging option is covertly made available to the religions of Indic origin by offering special privileges to the Dalits if they remain within the fold of Indic religions, while withdrawing the same to others. There is a fear in the minds of Hindu policy makers that a way of throwing away the stigma of caste will be available to Dalits once the same privilege is extended to Christian and Muslim Dalits. A passing reference can be made to the Tribals in India who also enjoy special privileges under the same Government policy of reservation, but cannot be prevented to follow the religions of their choice.

Missionary movements and missionary religions are an anathema to Hindu psyche. It was the Buddhist monks and missionaries who almost wiped out Hinduism of that era, and they do not wish to face the same fate once again. It feels itself threatened by missionary religions like Christianity and Islam. Like Buddhism, the message of Christianity and Islam touched the hearts of the Dalit and the down-trodden who were groping in the dark for the liberating power, which can offer them a new community founded upon justice, human dignity, freedom and *oikoumene*.

¹³ CWM News (20.3.03) at <http://www.cwmission.org.uk>

¹⁴ It is a very old Vedic ritual, used as a purification rite for taking back the ostracized member of the society, obviously Aryan, later Hindu. It is used by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj, to reconvert Christian and Muslims. The same is being used by the forces of Hindutva now for the same purpose.

They are counter-culture movements, posing a threat to the very existence of Hindu religion and culture. In many parts of India, Dalits and deprived masses are protesting against their social, economic and political exploitation, and threatening to convert themselves to other religions for the sake of a better social deal. This politics of conversion was first enacted in Meenakshipuram, Tamilnadu in 1981 when a number of Hindus decided to convert to Islam as a remedy for liberating themselves from upper-caste exploitation. This still continues, in some parts of India, a political weapon and is an additional rationale for introduction of a bill in Tamilnadu.

Conversions can be restricted, and totally proscribed by legislation in a more democratic way. I am living in a state which recently passed an act against conversion.¹⁵ There are three other states who have done so two decades ago and have it defended its legality in the Supreme Court of India.¹⁶ Now many other states, controlled by BJP, are planning to enact anti-conversion laws; and there is a suggestion to introduce the same in the Parliament too. Though the bill is called freedom of religion bill, its freedom is granted only to Hindus and Indic religions, and restricted to others. Christianity and Islam are obviously targeted for any act of conversion.

Christianity and Religious plurality

Plurality is a gift of God to humankind, as it is explicitly revealed in His gracious act of creation (Gen. 1), including the gender-differentiated creation of human kind (Gen.1:27-30; 2:4-24). It is worthwhile to take note of the fact that God beheld His creation, expressed in plurality of forms and expressions, to be 'very good' (Gen.1:31). We are told by the scholars that the Hebrew 'TÔB'¹⁷ refers not only to something that is ethically and aesthetically good, but also pragmatically good. It may help us to appreciate the plurality and diversity in the world which we inhabit. Perhaps nothing speaks so clearly of this divine plan of pluralism as the recognition of the Trinitarian principle active in the Christian understanding of the personhood of God. Plurality is a God-given phenomenon to the creation. In developing any theology of pluralism in relation to religions in our glocal (Global + Local) context, we should not lose sight of Creation theology.

Facing the Challenges: Christian Mission in Indian context

It is the mono-cultural missiology that Church in India inherited from the preachers of the Gospel. Most of them came during the heyday of colonial power, and were easily identified with colonial culture, aimed at expansion and growth. One can discern a geographical understanding of mission; mission only meant 'foreign mission', going out to preach to the heathens. Other facets of missions enshrined in the Bible, such as liberation, humanization, incarnation,

¹⁵ Now, after the defeat in parliamentary election-2004, the Government of Tamilnadu has withdrawn the bill.

¹⁶ Freedom of Religion Act 1967 of Orissa, 1968 of Madhya Pradesh, 1978 of Arunachal Pradesh, of Tamilnadu 2002. State of Gujarat passed its own bill on March 26, 2003

¹⁷ F Brown., S. Driver and C.A. Briggs., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament – Genesis*. Oxford: 1962. My senior colleague and professor of Old Testament, Bishop P.Victor Premasagar drew my attention to this aspect of the word.

sanctification, transformation, communion, *oikoumene*, reign of God etc., were, and are, often overlooked. Time, context and situation have changed in India, but the theology of mission of the church in India refuses to change. It requires a paradigm shift in understanding of mission and missiology in religiously plural world.

The ground reality in India, you may agree, is pluralistic. This calls for a diversity of approaches and goals in theory and practice of Christian mission. Just because most of the Indians have not heard about Jesus Christ does not mean a uniform proclamation of the Gospel aimed at planting the churches. Mission to Hindus is radically different in content and method than mission to Muslims. Same is the case with the other religious communities on the Indian soil. The most urgent need in the Indian context, as Fr. Jacob Kuvunkal rightly perceives, is for ‘...an existential presentation of Jesus Christ through the living discipleship of the community, rather than an arrogant verbal proclamation, insensitive to the feelings of the people’¹⁸. This urgent need, however, does not rule out the need for direct and explicit proclamation in a situation where people are willing to listen to the word of God.

Christianity is a minority religion in India, over-shadowed by Islam and overwhelmed by Hinduism. It is culturally and socially closer to Hinduism than to Islam. These facts are the cause of most of the problems Christian community is facing today. The fact of minority is one that can be taken care of, but it is the minority complex that is traumatic for the community. The community has to overcome this complex and be a leaven, a light to the nation, and a liberating community.

Misiological Implications

a. Cultural transformation is an important expression of the mission in India. There are many cultural traits that are sustained in Indian social structures on the strength of their sanctions in Hindu scriptures and law codes. Caste is one among them. There is no basis of caste in the message of Christ; its foundation and sustenance is found only in Indian culture and Hindu religion. Its continuance in the Indian church, therefore, is shocking and startling. Christianity, sadly enough, continues to perpetuate this stigma in its community even now, so much so that a majority of Christians now prefer prefix ‘Dalit’ before their Christian identity. Dalit Christians are now demanding the same status as that of their Dalit bothers/sisters in Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, so that they will be entitled to receive benefit from the reservation policy of the government. Unless and until Dalits in the church are not fully accepted, their human-hood is not fully restored, and are not given their due place in the ministry of the Church and the society, the mission of Christ for transformation of culture and society will remain incomplete; so also his prayer, ‘...that they may be one’¹⁹. One of the priorities in the mission in India, therefore, is the abolition of the culture of caste in the Christian society with its power to stigmatize, exploit

¹⁸ Jacob Kavunkal, *Pluriforming Mission*, in Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, vol. 60, no.12, Dec. 1996, pp852-868

¹⁹ Jn. 17:11

and degrade the image of God in humankind. Only then, Christians can talk about the transformation of society in Christ

Transformation of society needs to be taken seriously as the mission of Church in Indian context, and the number games has to take the back seat. This is nothing but going back to the fundamentals of goal that is associated with mission, and this is what we have to offer to the people in a religiously plural world: New Creation in Christ, Membership into the Kingdom of God, Call to become a Child of God, New Community, Rebirth, New Earth.. This calls for a critical evaluation of our age-old, out-dated and dehumanizing customs, traditions, sacred codes and religious laws. We may, then, have to initiate new customs, traditions and social laws which are suitable to our generation, based upon the egalitarian principles of equality, justice and self-identity.

b. Caste, as it is noted earlier, is a stigma to the otherwise hallowed Indian civilization and culture. It is all-pervasive and is present in every Indian community irrespective of its religious affiliation. A social system, based upon an inequality created for the perpetuation of privileges for minority sections of the society at the expense of the majority and forcing them to live a life, devoid of human dignity, equality, self-identity and self-respect, is a fact of Indian reality. In order to fulfill the mission of Christ, in our context, is to involve oneself, at whatever cost, for the liberation of those who are victims of such a system irrespective of caste, color and creed. At the recently concluded international consultation, the Churches in India accepted Dalit liberation as a new agenda for action. It called upon Churches to place Dalit issues in the context of mission of the church for Liberation.

c. Other areas of social transformation that requires our serious attention is women's issues-dowry, infanticide of girl-child, child marriages, education and employment, equal wages, representations in democratic set-up etc., in our society. Church has to take steps to strengthen the ministry of women, their ordination, and their induction into its power-structures of the Church. Cultural inhibitions and hindrances needs to be over-come, and if need be, abandoned.

d. The mission of the Church in India is formation of new communities of disciples. It requires a thorough change in structures that perpetuate injustice in religious, political and economic spheres of human society. It means emergence of a community, founded upon the kingdom-values of Christ-like-love, service, integrity, forgiveness and reconciliation. In this mission of social and cultural transformation, in the context of multi-religious society such as ours, the Church must seek the support and cooperation of all people of good-will. It has to become a community of counter-culture, voice of the voiceless, and transform itself into an instrument, and expression, of Divine care and concern for all created beings. This will provide an opportunity to every member to develop him/herself to the optimum potentiality of God-given talents.

e. Poor-oriented mission is the burden of Jesus' message (Mt. 11:4-5; Lk 7:22-23) which can not be abandoned in this era of globalization and market economy. India needs Christ not because the bulk of the Indian masses are non-Christians, but because they are poor²⁰. The Hindu theory of Karma makes people apathetic and fatalist to their own condition of poverty, and others to overlook their condition of poverty and helplessness with stoic silence and blindness. Poor-oriented mission has the perspective of the victims, the sinned against, the poor, the exploited and the oppressed. They are found every where, in every religion, in every society. Solidarity and participation with them in their search for justice and dignity is an important expression of the mission in India.

f. Conversion is a contentious issue in the contemporary India. We need to understand the difficulty, and objections, others have with our understanding of Christ-given obligatory commandment. It is alleged that the religious conversion into Christianity is taking place through force. The Tamilnadu Act expresses this sentiment as it entitled the bill as Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion.²¹ It assumes that conversion is being brought about through allurement in the form of gift or gratification in cash or kind, and grant of material benefit; by force which includes a show of force, a threat of injury of divine displeasure or social ex-communication; through fraudulent means which includes misrepresentation or any other contrivance. Provisions for punishment are harsh if the converts are women, children and Dalits. Onus is upon us to satisfy the law and answer to the questions therein. We have to reformulate our understanding of conversion in the light of Biblical understanding that is relevant in our context. My personal preference is for *Metnoia*, though others may have their own. Indian theologians do consider it a process which leads to liberation, humanization, sanctification, transformation, communion with Christ. It has reference to an individual as well as to culture and society. Traditional understanding with emphasis on baptism and taking the membership of the Church has to be reevaluated, in the light of different meaning of the commission of Christ and the laws of the land.

It is unfortunate that conversion in India often understood in its narrower and western socio-religio-cultural sense, the change of religion. It is due to this misunderstanding that most of the objections against conversion are voiced that often leads to charged emotive outburst in the

²⁰ Felix Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil*, Madras: University of Madras, 1995, p.163

²¹ In its explanatory note, the Tamilnadu ordinance says: Reports have been received by the Government that conversions from one religion to another are made by use of force or allurement or by fraudulent means. Bringing in a legislation to prohibit such conversions will act as a deterrent against the anti-social and vested interest groups exploiting the innocent people belonging to depressed classes. It may also be useful to nip in the bud the attempts by certain religious fundamentalists and subversive forces to create communal tension under the garb of religious conversion. The Government have, therefore, decided to enact a law to prevent conversion by use of force or allurement or by fraudulent means.

traditional Hindu families and society. '*Reigio*' which is a very personal and phenomenal term and concept, is translated, and equated, with an ontological term in Sanskrit, Dharma, in the Indian context; and this has led to many a misconception attached to the term, 'conversion'. Our theology should clarify that the Christian conversion is not a change of religion (Dhrama Parivartana), but it is '*metanoia*', change of heart, change of old life-style, and establishing oneself in the Ground of Being. This '*metanoia*' takes place in response to the call of Christ Jesus, hence we prefer be known as 'Christians'

g. Legal and constitutional way is not always the best way available, and applied, in a religious plural context as they are often open to change and interpretation. We often quote Articles 14 (Equality before Law), 15 (Prohibition of discrimination) and 25-1 (Freedom of conscience, free profession, practice and propagation of religion) in support of our rights in secular democratic India. We are reminded by the Supreme Court that right to propagation does not presuppose the right to convert.²² As good citizens, we need to respect the laws of the country while fulfilling our obligation as witnessing followers of Christ, engaged in the transformation of human society.

h. We have yet to learn a responsible way of communicating the Gospel of Christ in a religiously plural world. Minding our language, and using it in a responsible way, is something we have to learn. It is often complained that we Christians still use derogative and abusive language with reference to the people of other faiths, gods, places of worship, heroes, leaders and theologies. Hate literature and aggressive proclamation cannot win us friends and souls for Christ; this can only be done with humility, service and self-giving. It is not becoming of follower of Christ to call his/her neighbour, heathen, ignorant, idol-worshipper, tyrant, devil, fascist etc., whatever may be the compulsion.

i. Dialogue is the best way of approaching neighbours and forming relationships through mutual respect and acceptance. It opens up a way of understanding and mutual education. I do not wish to pass judgment upon the many faithful preachers of the Gospel who left their countries for the concern of us in India, but I may say that many did not try to understand the psyche of Hindus. The same may be said of now of the national missionaries. We are not outsiders, but we fail to understand and acknowledge the humiliation and hurt our Hindu brothers and sisters have gone through for a thousand year. There is a tendency among the fundamentalist forces to open the wounds of the past and highlight the injustices, raise the emotive issues and call for violent reaction. People often forget that historical injustices and injuries do not have one direction; every nation and community had inflicted them on others and had in turn suffered the same. V. S. Naipaul is not far from truth in describing Indian civilization

²² AIR 1977-SC-908 'We find no justification for the view that Article 25 granted a fundamental right to convert any person to one's own religion.'

as *wounded civilization*. A situation in dialogue gives us an opportunity to express our sympathy and understanding our hurt, humiliation and angst, as well as a way for catharsis. It provides us an opportunity to share our experience of liberation-in-Christ with our brother/sisters of different spirituality.

j. Religiously plural world tends to introduce a distinct class of people who can be termed as 'proselytes', 'sympathizers', 'un/non-baptized Christians', 'non-baptized believers', 'anonymous Christians', 'Hindu/Muslim/--- Christians'²³, 'Jesu bhakta' (devotees of Jesus) etc.; they are, I am told, fast growing in India. Herbert Hofer prefers to class them together as 'Churchless Christianity'²⁴. With the Christianization of Indian religions and culture, some of the Christian and Christ's values are being absorbed into them, thus offering their followers an alternative within their own spirituality. Social, family and other compulsions too keep them away from the Church and becoming a part of Christian community. Church in India is called upon to provide support and encouragement to this new community-in-making.

The love of God is universal and is available to every individual, irrespective of his/her nationality and culture. The way to make this universal love of God which communicates to the people of different religions and cultures cannot be uniform and homogenous; but plural in form and content. We are called upon to work out a new theology and methodology for mission in a religiously plural world.

²³ I was pleasantly surprised when Dr. John Hick used the phrase 'Hindu Christian' in reference to my father.

²⁴ Herbert E. Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1991

