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## Decolonization of Liturgy

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**Abstract:** The images of God which have been projected by various religions reflect the existential search of human-kind for security, sustenance and fullness of life. In worship these images are activated through rituals, songs and prayers. The legitimacy and relevance of these rituals do not primarily depend on the fact that they reflect a particular dogma or formulation of faith, but from the fact that they reflect an attitude of faith consisting in an existential relationship of human persons with the divinity. In other words, the rituals are not merely the embodiment of dogmas, but they are the expressions of faith-experiences. They are proclamations of the 'Mystery of Faith'. The dogmas may play a corrective role with regard to the rituals because being limited human expressions of faith-experiences, there is a possibility that the rituals may contain some deviations. While dogmatic formulations of faith can be universal, the ritual expressions of faith must always be particular and local.

**Keywords:** Proclamation, Liturgy, Decolonization, Relationship with God, Images of God

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## Decolonization of Liturgy

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The images of God which have been projected by various religions reflect the existential search of humankind for security, sustenance and fullness of life. In worship these images are activated through rituals, songs and prayers. The legitimacy and relevance of these rituals do not primarily depend on the fact that they reflect a particular dogma or formulation of faith, but from the fact that they reflect an attitude of faith consisting in an existential relationship of human persons with the divinity. In other words, the rituals are not merely the embodiment of dogmas, but they are the expressions of faith-experiences. They are proclamations of the 'Mystery of Faith'. The dogmas may play a corrective role with regard to the rituals because being limited human expressions of faith-experiences, there is a possibility that the rituals may contain some deviations. While dogmatic formulations of faith can be universal, the ritual expressions of faith must always be particular and local.

At times, faith can be identified with dogma. When this happens there is a danger that the former loses its experiential character; as a result the rituals begin to lose their power to foster the growth of relationship between God and human persons. They become something like mathematical symbols

that convey the truth, but do not communicate in truth. They do not have their root in the human, in the soil of the worshipper. They have to look for their meaning in some other sources. When this happens we may say that the liturgy is colonized. It is no more the expression of the faith-experience of the community that celebrates, but the symbolization of truth or an abstract statement that was formulated in an alien culture. This was the main ailment of our pre-Vatican II liturgy; but I would add, even after Vatican II, we have not solved this problem completely. Our liturgies in India, of all the three individual churches, are still suffering from the bad effects of colonization.

### 1. The Signs of Liturgical Colonization in India

Colonization is not merely a one way process. Both the parties, the colonizer and the colonized have a role to play. This is especially true when we deal with spiritual or ecclesiastical colonialism. In fact, the defenders of this colonial heritage today in India, are, to a great extent, the very Indians themselves. Having a hierarchy that is totally Indian and having at least one particular church that is fully *sui iuris*<sup>1</sup> which legitimately claims to be a church that was founded in the Indian soil by St. Thomas, the Apostle, in liturgical matters they still look to a cultural heritage

that is alien to them. We shall try to spell out some of the expressions of this state of colonialism that exists in the liturgical life of the Church in India.

a) All the three churches of India, with regard to their liturgical identity, attach themselves to cultures that are not their own. This is evident from the very names themselves: Roman Rite, Syro-Malabar Rite and Syro-Malankara Rite. Their symbol systems and spiritual ethos do not reflect those of India. We know that liturgy is 'tradition', that is, faith that is handed down through celebration. But the symbols that are used in all of them are taken from alien cultures. Thus we have a faith which very much lacks the experiential dimension, which in its turn leads to a mediocre life of witnessing. In fact, I think that I would not be wrong in saying that our Christian communities lack that spiritual clout which can be achieved adequately only through a deep experience of faith, celebrated in symbols that are taken from our cultures and capable of evoking emotions that lead to radical action.

b) The introduction of the vernacular into the liturgy was certainly a great step towards the fostering of the experiential aspect of liturgy. It was an act of decolonization of the liturgy which was celebrated in Latin and Syriac in the pre-Vatican II period. But from a juridical point of view, at least, there is still a colonial remnant in this area. The translations of the liturgical texts into vernacular need the approval of the Roman authorities. This was very strongly criticized by the Fathers of the recent Asian Synod in many of their interventions.

c) One of the best expressions of a local church that celebrates its Eucharist is its Eucharistic Prayer. In this liturgical text, the faith-experience of the community, living in a particular cultural context, is expressed by the head of that community. But today it is very difficult to get a Eucharistic Prayer composed by a local church. On the one hand, our particular churches do not seem to be ready and prepared for such original compositions; and on the other hand, there is always a long delay and hesitation on the part of the central authorities to approve such compositions. If the Church in a particular place is truly a local church, it should have the competence to compose such prayers. Evidently, the central authority will have the right and duty to make sure that communion in our common faith in the Eucharist is maintained and safeguarded, while at the same time respecting the autonomy of the various local churches in this very vital area of their faith expression.

d) Even when the Roman documents permit and encourage creativity in liturgy, many of our local churches are reluctant and sometimes even incapable of taking the necessary steps to use their autonomy in this regard. Many of them have been so accustomed to a stereotyped manner of celebrating that they find it difficult to leave the beaten track. They show no creativity and initiative. They prefer to continue to be in this state of inertia into which they had fallen during the period of colonization.

e) For many people the celebration of liturgy is not an experience of their faith, but the fulfilment of an obligation which the Church to which they

belong has imposed upon them. They are still under domination. They have not yet experienced the freedom of the children of God.

f) Both Vatican II and the Church in India after the Council had initiated a very strong movement towards the inculturation of the liturgy. This was intended to give the liturgy a local character with symbolism taken from the culture of the land. But this process lost its momentum after the initial enthusiasm, probably because the Church in India was not ready and willing to accept the responsibility of being a genuine local church.

## 2. A Renewed Thrust towards a Decolonized Liturgy

When we look at the changes that took place in the decolonization process in the political field, we notice that it did not always result in giving the people the desired freedom. This is evident from the state in which our own country is finding herself after 50 years of Independence. What we propose here does not consist merely in removing the control exercised by the central authority; there is need of a deeper sense of autonomy in the local church itself. This is the gift of the Spirit. If the Indian Church does not respond to the Spirit that dwells within her, the mere removal of an external control can only result in the creation of utter chaos. Here it may be relevant to recall the words of Swami Abhishiktananda on the dynamism of renewal for the Church in India:

The Spirit leads her from within; he recalls to her memory the words of Christ and makes her realize their truth in an ever new way. Through his shining presence he enables her to

deal with all problems put to her on all planes by the new circumstances of times. That does not mean that the Church in India or in the world at large had to retire from the world, either in the social or intellectual sphere; but however deeply the Church may be involved in the world and even in temporal activities, she must always remain totally free because 'Where the Spirit is, there is liberty'.<sup>2</sup>

The primary source of the autonomy of the Church is the Spirit. Her liturgy has its origin in the Spirit who reminds her of the Lord and his Paschal Mystery. When the Church in India celebrates her liturgy, the Spirit within her enables her to express the Mystery of Christ in a manner that responds to the salvific needs of this land. Together with this experience of the Spirit she also needs the legitimate juridical autonomy in order that she can fulfill her mission of proclaiming the Mystery of Christ in a manner that is relevant. We shall try to describe some of the steps that can lead the Church in India to this state of decolonization and authentic freedom.

### a) *Creation of Need-Based Liturgies*

Need is the mother of invention. It is need that makes things acceptable and appreciated. That is why in the field of commerce, one of the most important tasks of the seller is to create in his buyers a need for the product that he or she intends to sell. Commercial colonialism of today does this through the technique of advertising. The source of a genuine need should be situated in the very fabric of the organism itself; then creativity will naturally flow from within; what is produced to satisfy this need will flow from the very exigency

of the organism; it will not be the result of an artificially created need.

One of the very serious problems of our Christian liturgy is that it is not apparently flowing from the need of the worshipper. It is a response to the legal obligations of an organization to which he belongs. It is the fulfilment of an official act. The need for worship is not coming from the exigency of an organism, but from the bye-laws and prescriptions of an organization. As a result, there can be very little creativity or spontaneity in the acts of worship; the experiential aspect is very much absent in it. The worshipper is satisfied by rituals that get over as quickly as possible. He goes to worship almost with the same sentiment as those who look for ready made fast-food. There is no felt-need for a community gathering, fellowship, togetherness which would be the characteristics of a genuine experience in a celebration.

In order to have liturgy that is native (decolonized), we need to situate our celebrations in the life-situation of the people. Instead of having worshipping sessions created to meet the need of an organization, we need to animate the organism, the community, to arrive at an awareness of its saving need and therefore to look for a Saviour who would meet them in their existential situation. Such liturgies will undoubtedly be creative. They will not be merely borrowed imitations coming from another society. Our process of decolonization should begin with the creation of this basic awareness of the need for worship.

**b) *Appreciation of Popular Devotions***

One of the noteworthy character-

istics of the religious behaviour of the people today is the growth in the number of those who frequent the pilgrim centres and places of popular piety. This is found in all religions. In the case of Christians we see that popular devotions attract many more people than the organized liturgies. This is verified especially in the village settings, where the worship takes on the indigenous forms such as *burrakathas*<sup>3</sup> and *kathakalakshepam*.<sup>4</sup> These can go on for long hours without the people getting tired. These celebrations give the people an experience that touches their emotions and enables them to give an adequate response that affects their whole persons. The worship-forms are not imposed upon them. They are totally native. "The adaptations spontaneously conceived by village Christians are not so much the indigenizing of Western Christian forms as the Christianizing – even if sometimes only to a very limited degree – of traditional ceremonies used in village festivals or in family rituals at various stages of the life cycle ... The Church needs to consider how village Christians can come to see and themselves work out in due response the lordship of Christ over the 'times' and 'spaces' of their village experience".<sup>5</sup> A liturgy that has popular religiosity as the basis for its symbolic expressions will surely not be a colonized liturgy. Instead, a liturgy that merely adopts the native symbols in the process of inculturation will remain a colonized liturgy even after it is inculturated. Hence the provision given in the Liturgical Constitution for the cultural adaptation of liturgy, that the renewed Liturgy remains still the Roman liturgy<sup>6</sup> even after it is

inculturated, can perpetuate the colonial character of the liturgy. A genuine indigenous liturgy cannot do away with the elements of popular religiosity as has been the case also of the Roman liturgy in its period of evolution and growth. Many elements of the official Roman Liturgy of today were taken from the popular devotions of the people.

**c) *Liurgical Celebrations in Cultural Settings***

Liturgy is the celebration of our faith. In liturgy faith is expressed in emotional categories. In order to create an emotional experience it is not enough to have the reality that is experienced and the symbols that express it; it is also necessary to have a setting, an atmosphere in which it becomes operative. Real inculturation takes place only when the liturgy is celebrated in a cultural setting that creates an atmosphere conducive to experience the Mystery by the whole person. When this happens there is a genuine re-expression of the Mystery and not a mere translation of the concepts into indigenous categories. The 'tradition', that which is transmitted, must not only be translated and communicated but also re-created in a new context. It must be reconstituted in such a way that it has the power to communicate the same Mystery in a new and creative way to the succeeding generations. In other words, the Mystery of Christ which has been transmitted through a set of particular cultural expressions must be re-expressed in new cultural expressions in such a way that for those who belong to the new cultural group the Mystery will be handed down in expressions that are

proper to their particular culture. In this way the Christian tradition of India will be the Mystery of Christ experienced by a particular group in India within their cultural setting, and not merely the patristic tradition of the West. When they transmit it to the succeeding generations they will do it in such a way that those who receive it will be initiated into the Mystery expressed and celebrated within an Indian ethos. Thus we will have a genuine Indian Christian tradition. Only when this happens can we say that we have a fully decolonized liturgy. Inculturation of liturgy will not be a dramatization of the tradition but re-creation of the tradition. "There is a creative period when the ritual takes shape together with other cultural institutions... In this way it is one of the constituent structural elements of the group celebrating it. But once constituted it acquires a certain autonomy, an objective reality. Succeeding generations seek to participate in it, assume it, re-live it, interiorize it."<sup>7</sup>

**d) *The Creation of a New Symbolic Language***

With the freedom from colonial rule India became very acutely aware of the need to develop the indigenous languages of the country. Even though English still remains a language that serves as a link between India and the world and among the various linguistic groups of the nation, there is a great revival in the vitality of vernaculars. The development of one's own native language is one of the most important expressions of one's own autonomy and individuality. We need a similar change in our liturgy. The language of liturgy is symbolic. We need to develop an

Indian symbolic language for our liturgy.

We know that liturgy is a celebration, a communication and sharing of our faith. Symbol is the basic language of every human communication. This is in the ultimate analysis due to the fact that we have been created by a God who is love. "The basic need which certainly is obvious only in man is the need of *symbolization*. This symbol-making function is one of man's primary activities like eating, looking or moving about. It is the fundamental process of his mind and goes on all the time."<sup>8</sup> In our liturgical celebrations the full involvement of the human person is required; there God reveals himself personally to his people and the people respond to him personally. The language in which this takes place is symbolic. Now symbolic language, unlike the languages used for communicating concepts, is specific to every people. If the communication has to be effective, it is necessary that it takes place through the medium of the cultural symbols of each people. We shall have a fully autonomous and personalized liturgy only when such a language is developed.

#### ***e) The New of an Authentic Local Church***

Liturgy is the celebration of the local church. According to the Liturgical Constitution "the principal manifestation of the Church consists in the full active participation of all God's holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer at one altar at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers".<sup>9</sup> If an authentic liturgy is to

be developed it is necessary that there be two important conditions: in the first place, the local churches must have a very deep ecclesial consciousness. As the same the Liturgical Constitution says, they must realize that "in some way they represent the visible Church constituted throughout the world".<sup>10</sup> They should be aware of the fact when the liturgy is celebrated the Mystery of Christ is made present in their midst; hence it is necessary that they do all that is possible to express it in symbols that are taken from their culture. They should get rid of slavish mentality of undue dependence on the central authority for every detail of the celebration. They should take care that they do not use the rituals of celebration as if they were mathematical symbols valid in all places. They need to have a genuine pastoral concern in the celebration of the liturgy which will prompt them to make use of signs that are relevant for the community. Secondly, it is necessary that the central authority leave sufficient room for the initiative of the local church in liturgical matters. Gradually the role of the former should become more and more that of maintaining communion in faith rather than that of standardization of rituals through prescriptions that tend to create uniformity. In fact, one of the directive principles of the liturgical renewal of Vatican II is not to impose uniformity: "Even in the Liturgy the Church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community. Rather does she respect and foster the qualities and talents of the various races and nations."<sup>11</sup> However, in the actual implementation of the Vatican II

renewal of liturgy there are still controls and cautions which at times prevent the creativity of the local churches. It is necessary to find a method by which creativity can be fully fostered while at the same time taking care that aberrations in faith are avoided. This will go a long way towards the full decolonization of the liturgy.

### *f) The Need for Universal Communion*

There is no such thing as total independence in any area of human existence just as there is no total dependence. Our human life is lived in continuous inter-dependence. In the process of decolonization we cannot avoid this state of inter-dependence. However, here is a difference in the understanding of decolonization in the political and economic fields and in the liturgy of which we are speaking in this article. While the political decolonization effects autonomy in inter-dependence in our case we should maintain autonomy with communion. The Church is a communion of communities, and not a mere commonwealth of nations. In the affirmation of our liturgical autonomy we should always keep in mind this aspect of communion. "Christianity is a historical religion with a historical tradition. This means not only that the terrestrial Jesus is the foundation for the Christ of faith but that with the events he and his disciples bequeathed a trajectory of meaning within which subsequent interpretation by the Christian community was to take place and which would be augmented in succeeding generations and cultures".<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in our process of building up an autonomous Indian liturgy we should take into

account all that the rich heritage of the past has bequeathed to us through the traditions of the particular churches of our country. At the same time, we should not understand respect for tradition in terms of a mere return to the past with a view to its restoration, but as rootedness in the past with a capability of being relevant and creative in the present. The universal communion will be very much fostered also by a changed attitude on the part of the Western churches towards the Third World churches. "These so-called 'young churches' would prefer to be called 'sister churches'. They would prefer a footing of equality with the other churches even with those on which they are dependent for human and material resources. Only equality can ensure genuine mutual respect and the mutual enrichment of the particular churches, which is the principal outcome of inculturation."<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The core of the messianic mission of Christ is the Paschal Mystery of His death and resurrection. It is this Mystery that we celebrate in the liturgy. Christ has defined the goal of his mission as communion of all humankind. This cannot be achieved unless two evils are eradicated from human society: alienation and domination; the former goes against communion while the latter destroys the uniqueness. In our liturgy we celebrate the redemptive work of Christ by which he restores the uniqueness of every individual as the child of God and builds up a community based on the communion of persons. Every people have their right to express the Mystery of Christ in a



unique way that is proper to them; every people also have the duty to maintain the communion of all in the same Mystery. The Church has been conscious of it as can be seen from the instruction of the first secretary of *Propaganda Fide* to the Vicars Apostolic under it:

Do not regard it as your task and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples to change their manners and customs unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What would be more absurd than to transport France, Spain, Italy or some other European country to China? Do not introduce all to them but only the faith which does not despise or destroy the manners and customs of any people always supposing that they are not

evil but rather wishes to see them preserved unharmed.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of such instructions we know that the colonial mentality persisted in the missionary approaches in the past. Fortunately once again the Church has become aware of her duty to respect the individuality and uniqueness of the peoples as she fulfills her mission of evangelization aimed at the transformation of peoples and communion among them. Our idea of decolonization should maintain the affirmation of personality together with unity in diversity. Then the Church will be truly Catholic and the liturgy that we celebrate will be a manifestation of this catholicity. It will be capable of expressing the same Mystery of Christ in a variety of ways, and thus unfold its riches in the midst of the nations.

## Notes

1. The Syro-Malabar Church has been constituted a *sui iuris* Church with a Major Archbishop.
2. Abhishiktananda, *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church*, Cochin 1970, pp. 13-14.
3. *Burrakathas* are stories (*kathas*) narrated in lyrical form by a leader playing an instrument called *burra*, with the help of two assistants who stand on either side of him.
4. Here the leader sings for a little while, accompanied by a drum and one or two other instruments, and then explains in a dramatic form, with the help of a few assistants, the story he has sung.
5. P.Y. Luke and John B. Carman, *Village Christians and Hindu Culture*, London, 1968, p. 88.
6. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 38
7. M. Amalados SJ, *Becoming Indian: The Process of Inculturation*, Rome, 1992, p. 86.
8. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, New York, 1948, p. 45.
9. SC no. 41.
10. SC no. 40
11. SC no. 37.
12. Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, London, 1988, p. 64.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 257
14. Quoted by Sephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1965, p. 179.