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Decolonization of Theology

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Abstract: To decolonize is, (according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 9th edition, 1995), to “withdraw from (a colony) leaving it independent” . A colony, (according to the same authority), is “a group of settlers in a new country (whether or not already inhabited) fully or partially subject to the mother country.” Colony can also mean the territory thus settled. These descriptions – ‘new country’, ‘withdraw’, ‘leaving it’, ‘the mother country’ - come naturally to the colonial outlook. For the people of the ‘new country’, however, to decolonize would be to make their territory independent by ridding it of settlers who, oftener than not, have been invaders, illegal immigrants or cheats. The Oxford definition, then, of decolonization needs decolonizing. We have little or no knowledge of colonists withdrawing except when thrown out. Historically, colonialism has been a “ policy of acquiring or maintaining colonies” with a view to their exploitation, especially economic, precipitating swift corrosion of the freedom, dignity, life and culture of their original inhabitants. Under colonial domination, the exploited and marginalised people’s creativity and resourcefulness deteriorate, paving the way to deepening dependence at all levels of life and in all areas of existence, unless the people resist and keep up the struggle. «

Keywords: Mother country, new country, Theology, Decolonization

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1. The Project

1.1 To decolonize is, (according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 9th edition, 1995), to “withdraw from (a colony) leaving it independent”. A colony, (according to the same authority), is “a group of settlers in a new country (whether or not already inhabited) fully or partially subject to the mother country.” Colony can also mean the territory thus settled. These descriptions – ‘new country’, ‘withdraw’, ‘leaving it’, ‘the mother country’ – come naturally to the colonial outlook. For the people of the ‘new country’, however, to decolonize would be to make their territory independent by ridding it of settlers who, oftener than not, have been invaders, illegal immigrants or cheats. The Oxford definition, then, of decolonization needs decolonizing. We have little or no knowledge of colonists withdrawing except when thrown out. Historically, colonialism has been a “policy of acquiring or maintaining colonies” with a view to their exploitation, especially economic, precipitating swift corrosion of the freedom, dignity, life and culture of their original inhabitants. Under colonial domination, the exploited and marginalised people’s creativity and resourcefulness deteriorate, paving the way to deepening dependence at all levels of life and in all areas of existence, unless the people resist and keep up the struggle.

1.2 Does the project, then, of decolonizing theology in India presuppose the existence in the past of a theological territory which later was invaded, disturbed and destroyed by theologies from outside? A church has existed in India, at least on its West Coast, long before the arrival of Vasco da Gama (1498) and the colonial era. That church surely had a theology expressed in its structure, worship and life, if not articulated in discourse. We know that Portuguese interference did colonize this church and its theology by introducing/imposing new structures, devotions and practices like concentration of all power in the bishop, obligatory celibacy for priests, daily Eucharist, the rosary, the benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, foreign names for Christians, and the present shape of religious congregations. It also brought here a church made root and branch in Europe and given to many foreign mores and manners, and speaking an ancient foreign language, Latin. But perhaps a similar colonization of Christian life in India had occurred at some earlier point in the Church’s history. For what the Portuguese sought to replace were not exactly indigenous forms of Christian life and thought. So then the spirituality, liturgy and theology of the Indian Church have, over the years, been largely shaped by West Asian and European perceptions,

experiences, interests, questions and needs.

1.3 'Colony' and 'colonial' derive from *colonia* via *colonus* 'farmer' from *colere* 'cultivate'. Our situation is that either the theological soil of our christian existence has been used to grow foreign crops which we do not need or use; or it has been left fallow while theologies raised abroad were imported, and were borne by us as a burden, and not assimilated as nourishment nor welcomed as a force for social change. Decolonizing would therefore imply and demand (i) rejection of theological imports and imitations; (ii) reappropriation of our theological soil and its promises and possibilities; (iii) sowing of this soil with our own problems, sufferings and struggles, our own needs, hopes, experiences and tears; and (iv) careful gathering of our theological harvest with which to foster human life and humanizing visions, and to equip ourselves for action to create the new earth which would reflect Jesus' dream of God's Reign.

1.4 The project of decolonizing theology is not new, nor confined to India. It has been implicitly present and evolving within all theologies with which liberation movements everywhere are pregnant. It has been growing, for instance, within slave revolts, ancient and recent, in Rome, in Rio, in Maryland, in NeoCartegena, in Carolina, in Auschwitz, in Gulag Archipelago; and within peasant rebellions the world over against feudal lords and land mafias; within protests against oppression and within resistance to domination; and within movements of liberation from colonial and

neo-colonial exploitation. One may recall the indigenous tribes who resisted Columbus' scheme to scoop up gold and collect slaves; and others who fought Cortes and Magellan; and the freedom fighters from Simon Bolivar to Che Guevara and Fidel Castro (Latin America); A. Cabral, P. Lumumba and M. Machel (Africa); and the anti-apartheid struggles of the Children of Soweto, of Steve Biko, of Nelson Mandela, and the tribes and organisations which made them (South Africa); and, of course, our own liberation movements led by Tilak, Gandhi and Nehru, Phule, Ayyankali, Narayana Guru and Ambedkar.

More explicit efforts were made and significant steps taken in decolonizing thought, theology and life in the theologies of liberation which have been articulated since the late 1960s. In America the first harvest was gathered in James Cone's, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1970; and in South America in Gustavo Gutierrez', *A Theology of Liberation*, 1971.

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians announced (Dar-es-Salaam, 1976) a radical decolonization of theology through a Copernican revolution in theology's method as well as in its concept, content and goal. Theology is not merely 'Faith seeking understanding' through harmony with reason and science, while leaving traditions of injustice and structures of oppression intact, and colonial domination unchallenged. Theology is not an attempt to explain away suffering. Rather, it is critical reflection on life-transforming faith-practice with a view to more liberative and socially

transformative theo-praxis which would tackle the ground of poverty and suffering.¹ In doing theology the primacy of praxis over theory is affirmed, and the primacy of social analysis and involvement over detached philosophical speculation. In an atmosphere of widespread search for political, economic, social, cultural and religious identity by once dominated peoples, there emerged progressively decolonized and decolonizing theologies in the Americas, in the Caribbean, in Africa, and in Asia-Oceania. Black and liberation theologies continued to develop in the Americas and provoke native-American theology into being: *God is Red*. Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing* belongs perhaps with native American creation theology/spirituality. Africa grew theologies of Black Liberation and Black Humanity.

In Asia there emerged Minjung Theology (Korea), Theology of Struggle (Philippines), Theology of Religions, and of Inter- or Intra-religious Dialogue, and of Enslaving/Liberating Poverty, and Dalit and Feminist theologies (South Asia).

Liberating and decolonizing books like the following also belong with our project and its processes though theology is not their immediate concern: Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968); Felix Greene, *The Enemy* (1968); Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*; Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973); and Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1974).

2. Theology: Colonial and Colonized

2.1 European colonialism began with a voyage of Christobal Colon, aka

Columbus. Catherine Keller recalls how this man equated his 'discovery' of the 'new world' with the apocalypse of the 'new creation' mentioned in the book of Revelation. In 1500 Colon wrote: the Lord "made me the messenger thereof (of the New Heaven and Earth) and showed me where to go." Comments Keller: "Such subliminal messianism seems to have sanctified the colonizing efforts of Europe and then the United States, however divergent the theologies the missionaries who accompanied the conquerors and traders were preaching. It justified a biblical scale of genocide and ecocide against the indigenous populations."² There followed the horrors of conquest and plunder, of slave trade and slave labour, and an astounding exhibition of Christian greed and Mammon worship and sea piracy and bloody conflicts, escalating no less in numbers than in barbarity.

2.2 The Western Church saw in Europe's colonial expansion a God-given chance for the salvation of souls and its own growth. It ignored the fact that meanwhile the cause of the Kingdom of God was suffering a major set-back, and Jesus' heart was breaking. The substance of colonialism and the root of colonial/colonized theologies may be found in the staggering arrogance and immorality with which in 1494 Alexander VI unblushingly handed over for ever to Portugal and Spain all the lands to the East and to the West respectively of an imaginary line in the Atlantic, together with all their natural and cultural wealth and peoples to be disposed of (converted, enslaved, abolished) as they should judge fit. In that act Constantinian Christianity came of age.

2.3 The error and poison of the teaching implied in that act has, directly or indirectly, infected most colonial missions and their theologies. Missionaries who went hand in hand with colonizers, traders and soldiers “could not but be at least partially tainted by the designs of searchers for gold, spices, land, slaves and colonies.... They tended to think that the commercial and military expansion of Western powers was a providential opportunity for the spread of the Gospel....”³ The working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*, 23), prepared for the Synod for Asia, 1998, admits that “taking advantage of the European colonial movement, the Church sent missionaries to spread the message of the Gospel.” In fact, “in the early phases of Western expansion the churches were allies in the colonizing process, and benefitted from the expansion of the empire.” And in return they legitimized imperialism, and accustomed their new adherents “to accept compensatory expectations of an eternal reward for terrestrial misfortunes including colonial exploitation.” And they used the Gospel to soften national resistance to plunder by foreigners. They played a part in domesticating the minds and cultures of converts.⁴ No wonder, colonial theology failed to call in question, to critique and resist the colonial plot as contradicting the Gospel and basic Christian and human decencies. Colonial theology failed to see that the subjugation and exploitation of peoples effectively annulled the Gospel of freedom and divine filiation.

2.4 The churches formed under colonial auspices were replicas of Western churches. Ready-made churches,

potted plants, were transported to our lands instead of letting the Word fall in the soil of our life, religion and culture, and take root there and sprout and grow to be our vision, nurture and shelter. Christians were often segregated from fellow human beings, alienated from their religious and cultural heritage and communitarian way of life. Liturgies were transported and conducted in a foreign language. Transported also were Church structures, religious art, theologies, pietistic and legalistic spiritualities common in Europe, as well as educational systems and training methods. And everything has been regulated and controlled, every detail prescribed, and all standards set for a world church by a single centre, an ancient imperial capital in the West, Rome.⁵

2.5 The result is that in traditional theologies, liturgies and devotions, God has been appearing as a foreigner, a stranger in our land. For centuries God understood only Latin (or Syriac) which the worshipping people could not follow. In *Mediator Dei* (1947), Pius XII justified the use of Latin by presenting it as a sign of unity in a World Church while in truth it represented an effective schism in every local congregation between the people and the clergy. Paul pointed long ago to the ridiculousness of speech which did not communicate:

What use shall I be if all my talking reveals nothing new, tells you nothing, and neither inspires you nor instructs you?... if your tongue does not produce intelligible speech, how can anyone know what you are saying? You will be talking to the air. There are any number of different languages in the world..., but if I am ignorant of what the sounds mean, I am a savage

to the man who is speaking, and he is a savage to me (1 Cor 14: 5-12).

Use of foreign languages was a calculated act of contempt for the people and their culture. It evinced, besides, a total lack of pastoral concern for the congregation's growth in faith and love, and in creative reflection or theological activity. It amounted to a rejection of 'worship in spirit and truth' in favor of ritual mechanics and of power. A deeply regrettable case of ecclesiastical imperialism that imposed itself for centuries at the people's expense. It is a comfort that since 1965 God seems to have picked up a few more languages than Latin and Syriac. But He still needs for his sacraments food and drink and oil unrelated to our fields, work, homes, hospitality, health and life. And communion given into the mouth insults every culture. The working paper (*Instrumentum Laboris*), prepared for the recently held 'Synod for Asia', has taken note of responses that relate the fact that Asians often do not see the Church as totally Asian, not simply because much financial support comes from western countries, but also because of her Western character in theology, architecture, art ..." (no.13).

2.6 Theologies were imported. These had been made in Western academies, "in royal palaces, castles and abbeys by the ruling class and for the ruling class. Naturally the perspectives, interests, ideas and designs of the ruling class and the rich became crystalized in those theologies. (They) legitimized the socio-economic, cultural and political order of the time.... (They) often functioned as tools and ideologies to maintain the *status quo* to the advan-

tage of the rich and the dominant classes. Some of their philosophical and theological principles were totally wrong. Implicit in them was a theory of 'human hierarchy'. Some are born masters and others slaves. Some ... colonialists ... taught that an Indian (American Indian) is by nature a slave, inferior to the European who is by nature his master."⁶

These theologies, made by dominant classes and found convenient by colonial missionaries and carried by them, stressed hierarchy, power, submission, resignation and other-worldly salvation, rather than community, friendship, obedience to truth, pursuit of justice and the Reign of God on earth. Its outlook was individualistic; it focused on the salvation of each soul; it neglected the neighbour's physical needs, and overlooked the problem of the health of society and the wholeness of history. That prevented it from contributing to united action for changing social structures and building the Kingdom on earth. It was blind to the web of life and the inter-relatedness of things. Colonial theology could not, cannot, address our situation: the threats to our life and freedom; our struggles for food and dignity. It cannot speak for us; cannot speak from within our encounter with God, from within our cries and tears, nor from within the sufferings colonialism has inflicted on us. It can only reflect the colonizers' interests, and use the Gospel to justify oppression, and to call for submission and resignation. It cannot nurse us into freedom fighters, cannot suckle a spirituality for combat. It easily

becomes a tool in the hands of ruling classes and colonialists to keep their victims in bondage.⁷

2.7 Colonial theology was unable, in particular, to take note of and speak to our roots in the spiritual culture of this land. It did not know how to relate to the history of India's quest for the Ultimate Mystery: to India's experience of the Divine; to the symbols of that encounter in its sacred texts and worship forms; to the profundity and beauty of these symbols; and to the saints and seers of this land. Operating from within the West's mercantile framework, the churches (from West Asia and Europe) saw themselves as bringing God and Christ in their ships to these godless shores. They failed to honour the biblical truth that it is always God that leads peoples, brings them together and gives them to each other. Colonial mission and theology committed the *a priori* error of taking for granted that God had never been here, that Christ had not preceded them, that they have never been savingly active in its history, that the Spirit has never been in liberating and life-giving dialogue and communion with the hearts and dreams of the men and women of this land. They did not look first for God's presence and action here, to acknowledge it and give thanks. Their eyes failed to discern in the suffering people, including the victims of colonialism, the Crucified of Calvary. And they did not know what to do with people's struggles for freedom from colonial domination and oppression; they did not know that these struggles were big with a theology of justice and dignity, a theology of the Reign of God.

2.8 Thus the colonial Church and its theology failed to be prophetic, failed to develop a prophetic vision and voice. They had no Gospel for the poor, no Gospel of liberation of the oppressed as Jesus had; and no Gospel of challenge to exploiters, plunderers and worshippers of wealth, weapon and war. That is why the Church missed the meaning of the Asian Revolution. Tissa Balasuriya suggests that "high among the causes must be placed our theology which is imported from the West, individualistic in morality, socially uncritical and heavily weighed on the side of preservation of the status quo... a theology of essences, of a certain immobility in which the highest value is the preservation of the Church itself."⁸

2.9 The main traits, then, of this imperial-colonial-colonized theology may be summed up here, following Balasundaram who follows Balasuriya, with some slight modifications and additions of our own.⁹ This classical, traditional theology:

2.9.1 - is ethnocentric and culture-bound, and not universalist as it has been claiming to be. It has been a handmaid of Western expansionism, and an ally, however unwilling, of the exploitation of other continents by Europe and America;

2.9.2 - is Church-centred, and tends to equate, wrongly, the Reign of God and common human good with the expansion of the Church. It presents the Church as the indispensable vehicle of salvation, and advocates the questionable scheme: God-Church-World, as if God works in the world only through the Church, instead of the scheme: God-World-Church, for God works in

the world, and therefore also in the Church which he makes a qualified witness of some of his significant deeds.¹⁰

2.9.3 - is work-oriented and possessive in its attitude to nature to the neglect of respect for God's creation and contemplation of its beauty and wonder;

2.9.4 - is dominated by male clergy who in the Catholic Church are celibate, who easily find in the Scriptures texts that reinforce their power, importance and indispensability. Rights of women have been successfully marginalised, and do not figure in this theology.

2.9.5 - is precapitalist and unfamiliar with the conditions of life, concerns and problems of the working class and of the rural and urban poor. It has little relation to the life and struggle of the masses.

2.9.6 - is anti-communist with a negative evaluation of socialist regimes, and a positive appreciation of capitalism and colonialism. Since 1950 it has turned a blind eye towards half of Asia which is China and to a most significant revolution in human history. It has also been unnecessarily involved in ideological battles with Marxism.

2.9.7 - is non-revolutionary, and supportive of the western technological model as the normal pattern of national development. It does not see the naked greed and insatiable thirst for profit, central to this model, as contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. It is utterly inadequate to transform a system in which 80 per cent of the world's people have access only to 20 per cent of the world's resources.

2.9.8 - is bereft of social analysis, is individualistic in orientation, and un-

mindful of the social aspects of the Reign of God and of salvation, sin and conversion; and that, despite its almost exclusive derivation from the Bible.

2.9.9 - is overly theoretical and not oriented to action. It fails to take into account the exigencies of real situations and of efforts required to change them. "When action is precluded from reflection, thought tends to be sterile, oriented to the status quo, and conservative Traditional theology neglected the dynamic nature of the Kingdom of God and its impact on human history."

2.9.10 - is of low credibility in the vast ex-colonies because of its collusion with colonialism and its inability to critique and disown such an anti-Christ enormity.

2.9.11 - is fond of a Western version of Jesus, a one-sided picture of him that suited Christian institutions which had become a handmaid of the Roman empire and of medieval feudal lords. Jesus saves us from original sin rather than from actual oppression and exploitation by colonialist and capitalist greed. He is a-political and interested above all in each individual's interior purity. He is often presented as sweet and domesticated, an enemy of science and modernity, of democracy and socialism, and of the struggles of workers and victims for liberation and Justice. "At least he has not been seen as on their side."¹² When Christ reentered the continent of his birth, it was "as the white colonizer's tribal god seeking ascendancy in the Asian pantheon."¹² Indeed, with regard to faiths other than Christian, Jesus Christ was a veritable Julius Caesar out to conquer and destroy and level up. In Pieris' phrase, it was a theology of

Christ-against-religions and Christ-against-cultures.

2.9.12 - is somewhat uneasy with Jesus' simplicity and powerlessness. The Church, assimilated to imperial systems, has come to love a little show of pomp and power. A great deal of traditional clerical theology is about hierarchical power and about minutiae of rituals, titles, procedure and precedence, and not about You-are-my-friends, or You-are-the-branches, or You-are-all brothers/sisters type of relationship within the community! Is it not remarkable that so many official prayers are addressed to 'Almighty and everlasting-God'? One could wish that the New Testament figure of God as the gentle Father, as Compassion, as Love came to the fore oftener.

2.9.13 - is not able "to make connection between God and human freedom". It cannot "discern God's liberating work in the world of human bondage. It fails to see that God's Kingdom is the Kingdom of free humanity, and that "historical freedom is the centre of the Christian faith".¹³

It is due to features such as these, due to so many deficiencies, disservices and failures that classical, traditional, colonial, imported theology is to us irrelevant. Theology has to be radically rethought and built afresh on the foundations of our own collective encounter with God and the world, using materials from our religious, cultural, secular, human heritage and the dynamism of our people's history.

3. Theology: liberated and liberating

3.1 "Therefore we may not look

to the West for prophetic theology which does justice to God's self-revelation both in Jesus and in the world today." That is Sebastian Kappen speaking in the mid-seventies.¹⁴ In a talk given in USA around the same time, T.K Thomas said: "the credibility of Western Christianity is at a low ebb."¹⁵ Charles W. Format admits that "Christianity has been breaking with the idea that it depends on a Western base, and has been asserting its Eastern identity... Non-Western Christianity has come of age."¹⁶ A negative but a necessary aspect of our starting point is a critique of Western theology which has comfortably cohabited with imperialism, slave trade, genocide, plunder, mammon worship and avarice which is idolatry (Col 3:5; Eph 5:5). Of evil practice error is born. The West's centuries-old organized oppression of people on all the continents is the mother of modern Western systematic atheism.

3.2 Theology has to do with faith; it is critical reflection on faith and life in the light of faith. The first step, then, in decolonizing theology and in building an authentic Indian theology, is to re-examine the colonially obtained/imposed definition of theology and to re-understand it if need be, and re-describe it.

3.2.1 Theology is bound up with faith, and faith with revelation. *Revelation* is not a set of propositions or a string of truths; it is not even a credal formula handed to us by God. Revelation is God's free, loving self-communication to us in and through what God does for us and gives to us. Creation is revelation: so are the seasonal rains, the crops that grow, the food that gives us strength; they are God's self-witness. In and through them

God says, 'I am here, and I care' (Rom 1:19-20; Act 14:17). We ourselves are God's love-gift to us, and are a disclosure of God's mind and heart. And God's law is inscribed in every heart (Rom, 2:14-1a). The human heart's endless yearnings born of its radical God-ward orientation, is also revelation. So are all meaningful events and history's unfolding. They are ways of God's self-giving. The poets, the makers of just laws, the seers and saints of all ages everywhere are a word from God about us and about God's own self, God's love for us and plans for the world. The Word of God is not only disclosure but invitation to respond by collaborating with God in the ongoing work of creating and recreating us and the universe. And we know that Jesus of Nazareth is a very special self-communication of God, of divine Love and Compassion, of solidarity with us human beings, with the poor in particular, in their humiliation and suffering and struggles for justice.

3.2.2 Hearing the revelation is *faith*. Traditionally, in the patristic and Scholastic West, faith has been understood as an intellectual conviction. Hence the concern with dogmas and their elaboration, and the killing of people whose terminology differed from that of the people in power. Faith was reduced to correct words and creeds, to neat orthodoxy. But the truth is that saving faith consists in orthopraxis, in right living, in doing God's will. Jesus said, "It is not anyone who calls me, 'Lord, Lord,' who will enter in the Kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father". Merely to listen to Jesus's words

won't help; one has to act on them. To listen and not to act is to build one's house on sand and to have to watch it collapse when the floods and the gales come (Mt 7:21-27). Jesus asks, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" (Lk 6:46-49). James' outlook is similar: "How does it help when someone who has never done a good act claims to have faith" (Jas 2:14-17). Did not the good Samaritan, whom Jesus points to as a model, have finer faith than the priest who hurried by to pray in the temple for the man on the road side? (Lk 10:29-37). Or, what saving faith did those have whom, according to Mt 25:31-46, Jesus invites to come, inherit the Kingdom? Perhaps they had never seen Jesus nor heard of him. Perhaps when they fed the hungry and clothed the naked they had no religious thoughts or intentions. Still they are blessed with the reward of faith. Saving faith is the concrete love they showed to needy persons, regardless of colour, creed or caste. In such acts of justice-love there is a real encounter with God, a true hearing and heeding of the Word -made-Flesh in the reality of the hungry and the broken, the cast-away and the unwanted. The simplest deeds of justice and love have dimensions and depths unknown to us, but known to the Spirit and disclosed by Her.

Jesus too points to deeds as the decisive revelation grounding faith: "If I am not doing my Father's will there is no need to believe me; but if I am doing it at least believe in the works I do" (Jn 10:37-38). Similarly it is by our love for one another, and not by our buildings, rites quarrels or canon laws, that

the world will know we are Christ's disciples (Jn 13:35). Hence the sending of us to bear witness with the beauty, the newness and the surprise of our lives, by 'being light and salt and yeast and the fragrance of Christ (Mt 5:13-16; 13:33; 2Cor 2:14-16). Faith is caring for God in the needy neighbour, in the crucified Son of Man.

Faith is yessing ourselves to God who comes offering Self in the rejected Son of Man. Faith then is "the full act of human existence in freedom".¹⁷ That is a completely decolonized description of the saving relationship we call faith.

3.2.3 Where faith was mainly a matter of words rather than of life, it was in style to hunt for heresies and kill people in the name of 'truth,' while conniving at and using profoundly criminal and heretical systems like slavery, conquest, land-grab, exploitation of the poor and oppression of women. A decolonized Church and its theology, understanding faith as ortho-/theo-praxis, will avoid such pitfalls and strive to become Good News of liberation and life for the people of the land.

3.3 *Theology* is a way of orienting this praxis towards social transformation in the direction of the Reign of God with its justice, equality, freedom and peace. It is a process of making faith, understood as commitment and obedience to God's purposes for history, interact critically with our situation: negatively with the situations of oppression and structures of injustice, and positively with people's struggles for dignity, freedom and food. Theology is done by bringing faith-experience with its interpretations and symbols face to face with real life with its problems and

sufferings; by letting them meet., clash, question and challenge each other, illumine and interpret each other, and encounter God as judgement or as grace in each other's depths. The sparks born of the contact and the flame leaping from it will be the seeds and the buds of a theology making for social transformation. Faith-experience will interact with situations of oppression and death till it becomes a call and a stimulus to fresh liberating and life-enhancing action.

3.3.1 In the classical tradition in which faith was a matter of the intellect, – an intellectual conviction or assent, – theology was an attempt to understand the faith by exploring and establishing its harmony with reason and secular sciences through the mediation of some philosophical system currently popular such as Neo-platonism (the Fathers), Aristotle's system (the Scholastics) or existentialism (moderns). Colonial theology was speculation on dogmas: a matter of logos or the reasoned speech, not liberation praxis. It could not afford to present faith as God's call and challenge to freedom and justice; it could not direct faith-commitment towards questioning of imperial systems and colonial interests with a view to meaningful humanizing and gosselling transformation in Church and society. In that tradition theology is not done but taught and learned; for it is supposed to be perennial and universal, valid for all places and times, regardless of natural variations, cultural diversities and historical evolutions.

3.3.2 Jesus is Revelation; but in a real sense he is also theology. He is

God's Word about God and us; the truth about all God-world encounter; the liberating and life-giving divine call and challenge; and a complete theology enfleshed and situated among us in a new Humanity, whole and beautiful and full of promise. The Saving Truth done, lived, realized in a person and a ministry unto death; but also interpreted and re-expressed in that same life of service and its deep involvement with the masses of the people. Its further interpretative articulations are had in the lives, reflections and meditations of Paul and John and the early Christian communities. The Scriptures, like Jesus, are both revelation and theology. So are the saints and all authentic churches. Shall we say that a finer and profounder and more telling and engaging interpretation of the faith is had in the martyrs and the saints and in all loving, sharing communities than in writers and their books? And that Francis of Assisi is a richer theology than Aquinas' *Summa*? The need and usefulness of spelling out the meaning Francis and his life embodied is not to be denied. The truth emphasized here is that theology has first to be a person/community and a life before it is articulated in speech or other symbols. Every good man and woman, every genuinely human life is a theology.

3.3.3 Divine revelation is received and grasped in faith. Both revelation and faith need to be 'reflected upon, explained, communicated and confronted with other truths'.¹⁸ Of these truths the most basic and vital is the historical human condition of freedom or slavery, of hope or despair, of life or death. Depending on the nature of the situation,

the confrontation will be celebratory (thanksgiving) or conflictual (transforming). For, the revealed Word is freedom, hope and life, and demands the abolition of slavery, despair and death. That is why Jesus' own life was both celebratory and conflictual.

3.3.4 Jesus made it a point to decolonize the religion and the theology of the people, which had been occupied by royal, priestly and wealthy settlers from the time of Solomon. Power centres moulded religion for the socio-religious periphery. Worship was centralized to suit monarchical politics. Religion became priest-ridden and expensive, legalistic and burdensome. It had its outcasts and untouchables. It also had its ways of fleecing the poor and 'devouring the houses of widows'. Jesus marginalized the temple and all priestly pretensions. The temple is destined to disappear. Worship shall be in spirit and truth. Mercy, not sacrifice. People, not Sabbath. Relationships have priority over offerings to God. God offers life to sinners, not death. Rules of purity and pollution are not decisive at the level of the heart. Amassed wealth is no sign of divine favour. God's favourites are the poor. Finer faith is found among 'the gentiles' than in Israel. With such teaching and corresponding practice Jesus stood much of traditional religion and theology on its head. His work of decolonizing and revising religion was so far-reaching that, while the liberated people rejoiced, the powers that be decided to rid society of the radical prophet. But before the cross rose on Calvary, many a mind and heart had been transformed, new ways of relating to God and one another put in place,

a new image of God disclosed, and a fresh experience of the Divine communicated.

3.3.5 Theology will no longer be an attempt to explain away suffering, including those caused by colonialism; nor to promote resignation to oppression in view of the notorious 'pie in the sky'. Theology will be a praxis to overcome all the minions of death including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The perspective or horizon of theology in our context will be God as freedom and life, God as call to life and freedom. Theology will therefore press for historical freedom so that the Kingdom may come. Eschatological freedom demands that we work to change things now.¹⁹ Theology will connect hope and freedom in history; connect eschatology and struggle for justice now; connect the Reign of God and social change. It will also clarify the relationship between God and freedom, and freedom and life. God is indeed the basis of the rights and freedom of the oppressed. "God's freedom is for people". "To be Christian is to be free; and to be free for the Kingdom is to be Christian". "To be Christian is to be human because the locus of freedom is the Kingdom of God. In fact, "historical freedom is the center of Christian faith".²⁰ According to the Gospel, "the human response to God's freedom is to take responsibility for the ordering of the world... Freedom must mean action in history that will lead to the creation of a more just and humane society."²¹ There is a dialectic of authority and freedom both in the Church and in the larger society. "Authority is com-

petence to communicate freedom.. Those who lack competence use power...(Jesus') authority was his freedom available to all who touched him... It is a concern for humanity testifying to a God-experience; the two prongs of a liberation struggle".²²

3.3.6 The project then is to decolonize theology and build authentic Indian theologies:

3.3.6.1 - by helping theology spring from the underside of history (as EATWOT has been saying for 20 years and more). That is, from where the victims of our systems are: where Savitri, the woodcutter's wife, prays and weeps and defeats death by love; where lie the chopped thumbs of Ekalavya and the Bengali weavers of East India Company days; and where broken people join hands to struggle for their rights.

3.3.6.2 - by letting our faith-articulations and interpretations arise out of the pain and suffering of the people, out of the faith and reflection of the poor, and from the search of the marginalized for relevance.

3.3.6.3 - by making sure that our theology has its feet on this earth, on Indian soil; and that its heart is in the trials and travails of our people, in their tears, hopes and dreams. Theology is to sense and do things as these are revealed in "people's struggles for spirituality and social emancipation, and expressed in the idioms and languages of the cultures such struggles have created".²³

3.3.6.4 - by being faithful to our theological method of primacy of praxis over theory. The source of our theology will be our spirituality, and this will

consist in radical involvement with the poor. "We know Jesus the Truth by following Jesus the Way ... and that is the way of the cross, the basis of all knowledge. Growth of the world into the Kingdom... is a process punctuated with contradictions, violent transformations, and death-resurrection experiences".²⁴

3.3.6.5 - by making sure that all theology is people's theology created by the people themselves out of their sufferings and their faith-experience of being called by God to put an end to oppression and misery. Theology will be carried and brought to birth by the people themselves in prayer and travail, the experts giving but midwifery assistance.

3.3.6.6 - by taking seriously the feminine contribution to faith and life and community, and recognizing their right to build into theology their perspectives, intuitions and experiences so that theology ceases to be colonized by patriarchy as it has been for far too long.

3.3.6.7 - by stepping together with Jesus into the people's religion and culture, and identifying ourselves with the righteous poor of the land. Baptism of the Jordan leads to the baptism of Calvary. It will be theology's task "to show that there can be no authentic religion without a painful participation in the conflicts of poverty, and no Abba experience without a struggle against mammon."

3.3.6.8 - by engaging in a deep-cutting critique of the feudal-capitalist system, without which no effective decolonization is possible. It is essential to unmask the anti-God, its greed for wealth and war, its

anti-human ideology and history. It uses people for profit and then discards them. Re-evaluate the system from the perspective of its victims down the centuries: the victims of feudalism, colonialism, capitalism and neo-colonial liberalism. It is essential for an honest decolonization of theology to reevaluate the frenzied anti-communism fervently fomented in the Church for over a century. That has been a signal service for mammon-worshippers. We should come to an honest decision as to the nature of socialism/communism, its association with atheism, its relationship to the Kingdom-dream of Jesus and of the early Church and to the deeper meaning of the Eucharist, of the Our Father, and the historical meaning of our faith in God as Trinity/community. We must decide, for instance, how true is what Michael Manely of Jamaica said in 1975 in his keynote address to the fifth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi: "If capitalism is the engine that lifted man to new levels of economic and technological progress, it was equally the burial ground of his moral integrity."²⁵ Earlier that year Manley had summed up as follows his social vision for Jamaica: "... Socialism is love ... Socialism is Christianity in action ... Socialism is the Christian way of life in action. It is the philosophy that best gives expression to the Christian ideal of the equality of all God's children. It has as its foundation the Christian belief that all men and women must love their neighbours as themselves."²⁶

3.3.6.9 -by realizing the significance of the fact that the majority of God's poor are non-Christians. They

“perceive their ultimate concern and symbolize their struggle for liberation in the idiom of non-Christian religions and cultures”. Theology therefore has to speak to and speak through this non-Christian peoplehood. “We need a theology of religions that will expand the existing boundaries of orthodoxy as we enter into the liberative streams of other religions and cultures.”²⁷ This has further consequences for theology and makes fresh demands.

3.3.6.10 - by listening to God’s Word spoken outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition and recognizing God’s saving work there and giving thanks. We should pay greater attention than we have paid hitherto to the lesson of Jonah, Job, Second Isaiah and the Melchizedek story concerning the universality of God’s revelation and grace and of the offer of salvation. And so we must learn to bury for ever the old adage, ‘No salvation outside the Church’, which is a reflection on God’s character if not on God’s existence. Theology’s task is to equip us not so much to plant the Church in more places as to participate in the mission of God. The texts and symbols of this God-world encounter and this larger history of salvation must be acknowledged and embraced.

3.3.6.11 - by welcoming theological pluralism and rejecting imposition of dead uniformity. India has a certain unity of outlook and historical experience. But this unity has been woven out of diverse ethnic groups, cultures, languages, religions, myths and sacred texts and symbols. Since revelation and faith, too, are filtered through human

experiences and symbol systems, they “become varied according to personal and communitarian experience. Theological pluralism, therefore, based on the diversity of human experience, and cultural, political and psychological contexts”, is inevitable.²⁸ Pluralism is a grace. No one person, race, culture, language or religion can grasp and express exhaustively the riches of God’s self-communication. The nuances that one misses, some others experience and articulate to the benefit of all.

In the 1974 Synod of Bishops, the African delegates stressed the need of theological pluralism. In the concluding address to the Synod, Paul VI stressed the need of theological unity. He said, “It would be dangerous to speak of diversified theologies according to continents and cultures ... Peter and Paul did not transform (the faith) to adapt it to Jewish, Greek or Roman world.”²⁹ In reply to this Aylward Shorter makes three observations: (i) African Bishops themselves repudiated a theology of adaptation and called for a theology of incarnation. (ii) A distinction must be made between pluralism and diversity. Pluralism is diversity in unity. Unity presupposes pluralism. (iii) Ten years earlier, in 1964, in Jerusalem Paul VI spoke beautifully of this diversity in unity. He said, “Each nation received the Apostles’ preaching according to its own mentality and culture. Each local church grew according to its own personality, customs ... without harming the unity of faith ...”³⁰

3.3.6.12 - by recognizing afresh the identity of the Risen Christ with the Jesus of history, and by restoring to the

world community the figure of the quiet critic, the creative thinker, faithful friend and the imaginative innovator and revolutionary that was Jesus of Nazareth. Re-emphasize his overarching interest in people, and his readiness to act and risk his life for their health, honour and happiness. Rekindle faith in his challenging and transforming warm presence wherever people are: in the farm and the factory, the home and the street, the slum and the prison. He is not only, nor primarily, in Church and Sacrament but where people care for one another, struggle for justice, build solidarity and friendship, and toil to earn their daily rice. Jesus is there with them, participating in their liturgy of life, in their Bethlehems, Gethsemanes and Calvaries. Refashion the theology of his real presence in and among the people with all its socio-economic implications and imperatives. Restore the people to him and him to the people, whom to feed is to feed him.

3.3.6.13 Theology, in its beginnings, processes and conclusions, must be open to challenge. It should be willing to be judged, evaluated, corrected not by secret agents and invisible hands, but by the public, by the victims with whom and for whom theology is done, by the thinkers and critics in the Christian community, as well as in the wider community with whom the Church too works to change structures and fight injustices. What is required is a public socio-historical evaluation in the context of the changes to be effected, and not a criticism in the abstract.

3.4 Theology will grow and develop and renew itself along with our

Indian and Christian faith experience. A three-fold source of this experience has been indicated: (i) the social, cultural and religious traditions of this land in which we are historically rooted; (ii) The Judaeo-Christian tradition which we accept, and in which we meet Jesus of Nazareth; and (iii) The life-experience of today in a culture of science and technology, irrationality and wars, poverty amid plenty.³¹ Our theology will be a continuous creative interaction with and among these three sources. It will be an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation leading to new critical insights and to new praxis. A never-ending search for the meaning of life, and an ever deepening commitment to the creation of a new society of equality and gentleness and shared responsibility.

Theology is thus always on its way. It never arrives. There is no definitive and normative theology. Theology is ever in making. It is always to be remade and refined as struggles develop, as experience deepens, change pursues change, and history keeps unfolding. It is ever on the move in the direction of the Truth symbolized by faith and mysteriously known in love. Theology is a pilgrim of truth.

In brief, our theology does not aim at being a perfect system but at being nourishment for life and a plan of action. It will not be tied up with philosophical speculations but with people and their quest for meaning and their will to freedom. It originates in Jesus' passion in his people, and makes for ever fuller liberation-resurrections.

Notes

1. A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York, 1988, pp. 81-83.
2. C. Keller, "The Attraction of Apocalypse and the Evil of the End", *Concilium* (1998/1), p. 67.
3. F.J.B. Balasundaram, *Contemporary Asian Christian Theology*, Delhi, ISPCK, 1995, p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.
5. *Ibid.*, 5-6; K. Pathil, *Indian Churches at the Crossroads*, Bangalore, 1994, pp. 129-132.
6. K. Pathil, *op. cit.*, p. 41; T. Witvliet, *A Place in the Sun*, New York, 1985, pp. 10-11.
7. N. L. Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective*, New York, 1981, pp. 6-9, 116-117.
8. T. Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology*, New York, Orbis, 1984, p. 4.
9. Balasundaram, *Contemporary Asian*, pp. 32-34; T. Balasuriya, *Jesus Christ and Human Liberation*, Colombo, 1984, pp. 328-330.
10. Cf. Y. Kumazawa, "Where Theology Seeks to Integrate Text and Context", in: G.H. Anderson (ed.), *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, 1976, pp. 204-205.
11. Balasuriya, *Jesus Christ*, p. 14.
12. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York, 1988, p. 59.
13. Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology*, pp. 120-21.
14. S. Kappen, "Orientations for an Asian Theology", in: D.J. Elwood (ed.), *Asian Christian Theology*, Westminster, 1976, p. 313.
15. Elwood, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
16. C.W. Forman, *Christianity in the Non-Western World*, Prentice Hall, 1967, pp. 140f.
17. K. Rahner, "Theology" in: *Encyclopedia of Theology*, London, 1975.
18. *Ibid.*
19. N. L. Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology*, pp. 120-21.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 124.
22. Pieris, *An Asian Theology*, p. 85.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.
25. M. Manley, "From the Shackles of Domination and Oppression", in Erskine, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
27. Pieris, 1988, p. 87.
28. Pathil, *Indian Churches*, p. 46.
29. Ossen. Rom, 9.
30. *Petit Echo, Bulletin of White Fathers*, 1964:2; A. Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, New York, 1977, pp. 150-152.
31. Cf. Pathil, *Indian Churches*, pp. 136 ff.