



Jnanadeepa

Pune Journal of Religious Studies

ISSN 2249-1503

www.punejournal.in

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4255198

Decolonization of Religious Life

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Abstract: After Vatican II, many religious congregations set about the task of renewing themselves to witness more powerfully to the Christ event in the world.¹ Following the Council's directive to obtain inspiration from the sources, many congregations in India began to re-study their constitutions as well as reflect on the spirit of their founders. According to Vatican II, renewal of religious life must begin with the "following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel". The founder's "spirit and aims" along with the "institute's sound traditions" must be "accepted and retained." In addition, religious must "share in the life of the Church" and "have a proper understanding of men, of the conditions of the times and of the needs of the Church." Along with these studies and reflections, a need was felt to identify and understand the people whom a congregation had chosen to serve. Here, social and cultural analysis helped to indicate more clearly the needs of people that had to be met and consequently the type of service to be rendered. Because of the studies, reflections and analyses, new forms of apostolate were indicated and more precision attended the efforts to identify the mission of congregations in the Church and the world.

Keywords: Vatican II, Church, Religious life, Renewal, Religious congregations

Cited as:

D'Lima, Errol. (1998) Decolonization of Religious Life. <i>Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies</i> , Jan 1998 Vol 1/2 117-125 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4255198

1998-07-14

Updated on Nov 10, 2020

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1. Introduction

After Vatican II, many religious congregations set about the task of renewing themselves to witness more powerfully to the Christ event in the world.¹ Following the Council's directive to obtain inspiration from the sources, many congregations in India began to re-study their constitutions as well as reflect on the spirit of their founders. According to Vatican II, renewal of religious life must begin with the "following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel". The founder's "spirit and aims" along with the "institute's sound traditions" must be "accepted and retained" (PC 2).² In addition, religious must "share in the life of the Church" and "have a proper understanding of men, of the conditions of the times and of the needs of the Church" (PC 2).

Along with these studies and reflections, a need was felt to identify and understand the people whom a congregation had chosen to serve. Here, social and cultural analysis helped to indicate more clearly the needs of people that had to be met and consequently the type of service to be rendered. Because of the studies, reflections and analyses, new forms of apostolate were indicated and more precision attended the efforts to identify the mission of congregations

in the Church and the world. Vatican II mandated that a congregation's "manner of life, of prayer and of work" should also be in harmony with the needs of the apostolate, in the measure that the nature of each institute requires, with the requirements of culture and with social and economic circumstances. This should be the case everywhere, but especially in mission territories.

The mode of government of the institutes should also be examined according to the same criteria (PC 3).

Vatican Council II was asking religious to live out their consecration or commitment by identifying with the various cultures and circumstances of peoples all over the world. In effect, the Council was asking religious individually and in community to inculturate their religious life: to adapt it to the region in which they carried out their apostolate, to make it reflect the gospel message in the customs and way of life of native populations. Decolonization can be described as inculturation where communities of religious express freely their native spirit in the living out of their consecration or profession. Our task will be to reflect on the implications of such inculturation or decolonization in India. Before doing so, it will help to understand how colo-

nization affected the people who lived through it.

2. Decolonization and the Colonial Mindset

One of the professed aims of the Portuguese colonizers who landed in India in the 15th century had been to extend the visible boundaries of the Church beyond their country. To achieve this they enlisted papal support.³ The people in India, whom the Portuguese colonized, were stripped of the right to chart their own destinies. In colonizing territories in India, the Portuguese king felt, it is his task to extend the frontiers of Christ's kingdom to include the Indies while the Portuguese merchants sensed in it an opportunity to secure the spice trade for themselves. The king carried out his task through the institution known as Padroado (royal patronage of the Church outside of Portugal),⁴ but soon enough, the Holy See realized that the responsibility of evangelizing was being made subservient to the political and economic interests of Portugal. On January 6, 1622, through the bull *Inscrutabili*, Pope Gregory XV founded the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda) to coordinate the universal missionary effort of the Church throughout the world.⁵ In the Portuguese possessions, however, the authority of Padroado continued to prevail. The manner in which the Padroado clergy nurtured Christianity and supervised the affairs of the Church in Goa suited the intentions of the colonial rulers. Moreover, even after Portugal's control over Goa ceased in 1961, the

de iure rights of Padroado over the Church in Goa continued until 1974.⁶

An authentic reinterpretation of religious life is possible when a mindset shaped in part by a colonial past has been discarded. A colonial mindset refers to a situation where a community busies itself with the concerns imposed by another – in this case the colonial authority – rather than its own. It diminishes a community's ability to make and take decisions for itself. The resulting debility hinders the living of religious life that is vibrant and relevant to the local community.

Decolonization of religious life supposes a new mindset from the one that prevailed in colonial times. It presumes a new self-understanding, a striving after Christian goals that have been rediscovered and a willingness to dispense with pat answers from the past when responding to the challenges of the present. The process of decolonization began when, after the Second World War, colonies obtained political independence and the freedom to plot their own futures. Similarly, Vatican II signalled a new self-understanding of the Church as the People of God who are called to sacramentalize the divine in today's world. This self-understanding would also apply to religious communities in the living out their charism.⁷

Self-understanding refers to the awareness that persons or communities have of themselves, their way of functioning, their real strengths, weaknesses, and their capacity for self-realization. Such an awareness comes about not only by engaging in self-introspection

but also by accepting that relating to others is constitutive of oneself. In a period of decolonization, the local community becomes important for a correct understanding of the local Church. In fact, providing the local Church with its native clergy had been one of the notable aims of the universal Church's evangelizing activity. She was aware that the successful functioning of local Churches would depend, in great part, on native priests who would minister to them.

During the time of Pope Alexander VII (1655-1667), in an Instruction (1659) to the vicars apostolic of Tonkin and Cochinchina, Propaganda stressed the need for a local clergy in mission lands, and Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922) said the following in his apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* (1919):

For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the faith. Far better than anyone else he knows the kind of argument they will listen to, and as a result, he often has easy access to places where a foreign priest would not be tolerated (Neuner-Dupuis 1107 & 1112).⁸

Today, with the consciousness that the Christian presence in India resides mostly in a transplanted Church, the notion of decolonization would suggest creative modes of functioning by the churches in India and new-sprung forms of religious life. In an India that has completed 50 years of independence, it is appropriate that the spirit of a free people with their particular culture and worldview, their patterns of thought and ways of worship finds concrete expres-

sion in the life of the Church and in religious consecration. Such expression takes place when religious life becomes contextualized in India.

3. Religious Life in Context

Religious in the Church are committed to living out the gospel message as a way of life, to build up God's kingdom and to bring about a humane and just society in the world at large. Religious life is God's gift not merely to the Church but to the world for the building up of a Kingdom community (i.e. a humane society).

Religious life has always been viewed as the blossoming of particular charisms in the Church.⁹ Further, the charismatic aspect of religious life is meant to respond to new challenges in the world where Kingdom values must be fostered and witnessed to. In performing its true function, religious life assists the Church and the world in realizing God's plan for them:

The consecrated life has the prophetic task of *recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity*, as it is announced in Scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God's providential action in history.¹⁰

Contextualized religious life calls attention to the signs of God in history as they manifest themselves in the midst of a particular people or country. Such a manifestation follows from the Christian experience of God being incarnational. Just as in the humanity (humanness) of Jesus the reality of God is revealed as meaningful, so too in religious life that is lived contextually the

true nature of the Church shines forth. Contextualized living of religious life means that a congregation's charism will be lived out differently in India and in Europe (where many congregations have their origins). In India, the first fully native congregation of the Latin Rite was that of the Oratorians which was begun by Fr. Pascoal da Costa Jeremias and counted among its ranks Fr. Joseph Vas of Sancoate (1651-1711).¹¹

Living in context means relating to those among whom one is placed, acknowledging their way of life as significant and actively entering into dialogue with them at all levels. Religious life lived in context is a continual reminder that Christianity is not primarily a set of doctrinal norms by which persons live, but a way of life in which the spirit of Jesus becomes alive in the values, culture and way of life of a particular people.

In the past too, the official Church understood the need for suitable types of religious life that would express the genius of local (native-born) peoples. Popes like Pius XI (1922-1939) spoke about the need to found indigenous religious congregations for both men and women:

(However), you should seriously and impartially consider whether it might not be more useful to establish new congregations more in keeping with the local character and temperament, and therefore better suited to the particular needs of your region (ND 1117).¹²

Even Pius XII (1939-1958) in an address (1944) given to the directors of

pontifical mission works had the following to say:

The specific character, the traditions, the customs of each nation must be preserved intact, so long as they are not in contradiction with the divine law. Missionaries are apostles of Jesus Christ. Their task is not to propagate European civilization in mission lands, like a tree which is transposed to foreign soil... Granted that Catholic inhabitants of a country are primarily members of God's noble family and citizens of his Kingdom, they do not on that account cease to be citizens of their earthly homeland also (ND 1122).

One may legitimately conclude that the official Church supports efforts of religious congregations to become contextualized in the areas where they carry on their apostolates.

4. A Contextualized Understanding of Religious Life

Vita Consecrata no. 62 explicitly recognizes new forms of religious life taking shape in the context of modern society:

These [new] communities are sometimes inspired by one or other traditional form adapted to the needs of modern society. Their commitment to the evangelical life also takes on different forms, while, as a general rule, they are all characterized by an intense aspiration to community life, poverty and prayer.

In the same number, the apostolic exhortation makes it a point to declare that new forms of religious life are a gift of the spirit:

(Nonetheless), the new forms are also a gift of the Spirit, enabling the

Church to follow her Lord in a constant outpouring of generosity, attentive to God's invitations revealed through the signs of the times. Thus the Church appears before the world with many forms of holiness and service, as "a kind of instrument or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of mankind. (LG 1)

At this point, some areas are indicated where new understandings of religious life can be envisaged:

(a) *Consecration*

The consecrated life that a religious leads marks him/her as one who lives according to a particular and structured life approved by the Church. Such consecration was usually linked with the notion of separation and being set apart from the rest of one's family and society at large. Further, assuming that God experience was to be found in solitude and silence, monasticism fashioned a way of life that accentuated such separation. An ashram spirituality, as one discovers it in India, recognizes the value of silence and solitude but situates it in the context of the ashram community where men and women can congregate, where different forms of prayer are practised and where the members of the ashram community are united with the local people in a bond of mutual service.

Consecration must be seen less as a receiving of grace and therefore becoming "acceptable" to God and more as a recognizing of, and being intimately in touch with, the sacredness of the secular that encompasses all human beings. Hence, solidarity with others rather than separation from them will

be the defining aspect of a consecrated life. Such solidarity suggests that residences of religious should be situated among people and accessible to them. Religious will gradually begin sharing the common life-styles of the people among whom they live and work.

The prophetic dimension of religious life will be particularly visible and even conspicuous when table fellowship is shared with all castes and classes. Through this action, the equality of all persons as well as human dignity are affirmed and enhanced. In the choice of apostolic works, should there not be an emphasis on building up human communities in collaboration with like-minded persons from other faiths and persuasions? In addition, the support that congregations extend to their members should embolden them to choose those apostolates that few prefer but which serve the greatest number of persons.

(b) *Dialogue with other Religions*

In India, pluralism is a fact of life. One wishes it away only at the cost of mounting frustration. It exists at the social, economic, political and religious level.¹³ In the heyday of colonialism, the Christian experience of faith usually expressed itself in a Christendom system of living. Religious life, especially among women, evoked images of cloistered existence sheltered from the perceived dangers and risks of the world at large. In the light of Vatican II, and especially *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on non-Christian Religions), the Christian (and ipso facto the religious) is invited to dialogue with those of other faiths. Not only must

there be a positive attitude to the pluralism of religions that exist in the country as a whole, but there must also be a sustained attempt to profit by the spirit of religiosity that is shared by Indians irrespective of their religious affiliation. The passage below taken from *The Indian Express* editorial (Monday, June 29, 1998, p. 8) highlights the ecumenical spirit of religion that is shared by the Indian people:

In India, religion has always been defined by usage. It has rarely been organized in the sense that the faiths of Middle Eastern origin have been. Despite the very visible authority of great temples, mosques and churches, it is the little tradition of worship at home and in the local community that has moulded religious practice... lakhs of Hindus who go to Sabarimala see no evil in the ancient practice of starting the pilgrimage by praying at the mosque of Vavar. And in north India, Ajmer Sharif draws at least as many Hindu devotees as Muslims.

In dialogue with other religions, the starting point is one in which there is a mutual recognition of God experience. Only then can mutual enrichment take place and true respect be shown to each partner in the dialogue. During the time of religious formation and after, religious communities that are contextualized can offer their members the opportunity of praying together with those of other faiths and sharing in the riches of their scriptures. When opportunities are offered to learn about other religions not only in theory but also in practice, appreciation for religious experiences other than Christian will grow.

(c) *The Practice of Poverty*

The need for religious communities in India constantly to confront themselves with the problem of poverty is real. The dehumanizing poverty that is the lot of millions in India can be tackled by a commitment to stand on the side of, and for, the poor. The figure of Christ who is poor and from whom religious draw their inspiration obliges religious communities to remain in modest dwellings, dress simply and seek ways to identify ever more closely with India's deprived. Would this not be a reason to separate our place of residence from our place of work so that our residences remain simple?

5. **Protecting the New Understandings of Religious Life**

A new understanding of religious life will come about by a sustained effort. Often it will seem much easier to follow the beaten path, to merely continue ministries, apostolates and ways of living that religious practised in former times. But then, religious will be relapsing into a colonial mindset and rejecting the challenge of the present: inculturation, decolonization. The new understanding argues a new mindset, a willingness to identify with the genius of the Indian people and, irrespective of past practices and ways of life, to decide anew how best to project the identity of a religious congregation, its cherished apostolates and its programme of formation. To preserve the new understandings of religious life, a religious community/congregation could keep before it the four following characteristics:¹⁴

(a) *Internal Democracy*

Democracy does not begin with a simple game of a majority in numbers. It begins with the fundamental respect that is due to each person in a community. In the Church, it means that the action of the Spirit is to be looked for not merely among those in the hierarchy but in each and every member of the believing community. Such activity does not preclude the need for a superior to articulate what an individual or community should pursue in obedience. However, it presupposes a lack of fear in community members speaking out their mind freely, a willingness to critique and constructively assess opinions even when they derive from hallowed traditions of the past. Finally, the community as well as its individual members must feel confident that they are well informed about both secular and religious realities in India especially when far-reaching decisions are to be taken.

Retaining internal democracy in a community builds up fellow feeling and fraternal bonds that are based less on mere personal likes, dislikes and loyalties. The notion of a 'praying parliament' should find place in a religious congregation. The holding of elections, following a specific procedure in the voting, and of appointing councillors to help superiors carry out their prescribed function, contribute to a democratic functioning within a congregation. It also ensures that a religious congregation carries out its Church-given mission and not the private wishes or selfish ambitions of an individual superior or a pressure group.¹⁵

A religious congregation is meant to project strikingly and concretely the prophetic mission of the Church as a whole. Its members must represent Vatican II's basic intuition describing the Church as a sacrament and "people of God". Internal democracy is a potent means of preserving Vatican II's basic intuition of the Church, and preventing ill-advised apostolates being foisted on a community or congregation.

(b) *Transparency in Dealings*

As an institution, a religious congregation includes structures that knit its members into a whole. These structures help the congregation to govern itself ably, choose its apostolates intelligently and legislate for its programme of formation. When the members of a congregation see that these structures matter in the life of their congregation, a sense of trust is built between the superior and the subjects, as well as among the subjects themselves. When difficult or sensitive decisions are taken with regard to persons or policies, transparency in dealings ensures that correct and fair procedures have been followed and that biases have not vitiated authority's intention in acting. Trust in superiors is built more easily when transparency in dealings is the normal and constant practice in a congregation.

(c) *Accountability*

Only God is accountable to himself alone. Created beings are accountable to each other—in varying degrees—and finally to God. Accountability means being responsible to another when performing a human action. Being accountable implies that one is

aware of the justifying reasons for one's decisions and doings. Most important of all, being responsible is a species of care for the other that implies exercising charity towards the other. Accountability means that irrespective of the position or place one occupies in a congregation's line of command, an individual religious has duties towards others in his/her congregation. Accountability to God may be easy, but accountability must also be shown to the various constituencies that make up one's context concretely: the official Church, the congregation's authorities and, not least of all, the people who are served. Accepting that one is accountable to the people whom they serve, religious will act in the best interests of those people. On occasion, a superior's bidding may need clarification or even further questioning before it is followed.

(d) *Evaluation*

A constant assessment as to whether a congregation is truly living out its charism ensures that its consecrated life retains meaning. If the aim of Christian living is to identify with the person of Jesus and par-

take of his mission in the world, a religious must ask him/herself if his/her way of living actually incarnates the values in the gospel. Further, he/she may find that though the goals set by the congregation are estimable, the practical lifestyle of the congregation constitutes a hindrance in their attainment. This would be the occasion to prayerfully reflect on the future course of the congregation.

The aspects of internal democracy, transparency in dealings, accountability and evaluation are relevant to religious life and to others as well. An indigenous community that wishes to live out of a new self-understanding will recognize the importance of these characteristics.

Decolonization of religious life has less to do with tilting at the windmills of a colonial past; it is more concerned with bringing a new understanding to life. It encourages inculturated religious life in today's India. Internal democracy, transparency in dealings with others, accountability on the part of subjects and superiors, and constantly evaluating the progress made will protect the newness that enters religious life. They will ensure the emergence of a spirituality for religious that is truly Christian and authentically Indian.

Notes

1. The term 'congregation' refers also to religious orders.
2. *Perfectae caritatis* (Decree on the up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life) in *The Documents of Vatican II* edited by Austin P. Flannery, O.P., Pillar Books, New York, 1975.
3. Refer the bull *Romanus Pontifex* of Pope Nicholas V granting the territories discovered in Africa to Portugal in 1455 as found in *Church and State through the Centuries*, A Collection of historic documents with commentaries, translated and edited by Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall, published by Burns & Oates, London, 1954, pp. 144-153.
4. Padroado can be "defined as a combination of rights, privileges and duties granted by the Papacy to the Crown of Portugal as patron of the Roman Catholic missions and

- ecclesiastical establishments in the vast regions of Africa, of Asia, and in Brazil” in C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire 1415-1825*, A Pelican Book, 1973, p. 230.
5. Refer *The Oxford Dictionary of the Popes* by J. N. D. Kelly, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, p. 279.
 6. Refer T. R. de Souza’s “The Portuguese in Asia and their Church patronage,” in *Western Colonialism in Asia and Christianity* edited by M. D. David, Himalaya Publishing House, Bombay (Mumbai), 1988, p. 11.
 7. Refer George Soares-Prabhu, *Inculturation Liberation Dialogue*, Challenges to Christian theology in Asia today, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, 1984, pp. 23-25.
 8. Refer *The Christian Faith* in the Doctrinal documents of the Catholic Church, edited by Jacques Dupuis, sixth revised and enlarged edition, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 1996.
 9. 1. “The birth, the development, the existence and the work of religious communities is nothing else than a particular manifestation of the life of the Church. A religious community, independently from the Church, has no life...
 2. “A religious community may have many goals, all of them good and right. But there is a built-in purpose in every community that seeks and obtains approval from the Church. They publicly proclaim that the words of life are with the visible Church. They want to be publicly recognized by the Church, they want to have their way of life authenticated as good enough to follow Christ....
 3. “Yet, the mandate from the Church does not make all the communities the same. Each retains its own particular character and personality. Each is called to serve both the universal and local church (sic!) in different ways,” “A theology of the Local Church and Religious Life” by Ladislaus Orsy in David L Fleming (edit.), *Paths of Renewal for Religious*, St. Louis, MO, pp. 273-274.
 10. *Vita Consecrata*, (Apostolic exhortation following the 9th session of the Synod of Bishops, October 2- 29, 1994), Rome, 1996, no. 73.
 11. *Life and Achievements of Blessed Joseph Vas* (Apostle of Canara and Sri Lanka) by Cosme Jose Costa, Pilar Publications, Goa, 1996, p. 26.
 12. Refer encyclical letter *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926).
 13. Refer Michael Amaladoss A.J.: “The Church and Pluralism in the Asia of the 1990s,” Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC Papers No. 57e), 1990, pp. 1-2.
 14. For these four characteristics I am indebted to Fr. Francis Gorosiata SJ from Nicaragua who spoke of them in a lecture given in De Nobili College, Pune, on January 24, 1998.
 15. Refer David L. Fleming, “Religious in Service of the Church” in *Paths of Renewal for Religious*, pp. 321-325.