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The Challenges to Christian Mission Today: Consolidated Report of a CCBI Consultation

Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI)

Abstract: During the past few years events have occurred in India which have disturbed the peace in the country and have had an unsettling effect on the Church and the services she offers. Fundamentalist forces have viewed the Church's services with disfavour and have embarked on a programme of acute harassment. In view of these happenings, the CCBI Commission for Proclamation organised a consultation that was held in Ishvani Kendra, Pune, during December 4-6, 1999. About 35 persons attended the consultation. Among them were bishops, theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, journalists and others. The participants decided to record the main themes and ideas that were shared in the seminar and to prepare a consolidated text of the same. The text does not claim to be a statement!

Keywords: CCBI, Religious fundamentalism, Christian mission

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Consolidated Report of a CCBI Consultation

Introduction

During the past few years events have occurred in India which have disturbed the peace in the country and have had an unsettling effect on the Church and the services she offers. Fundamentalist forces have viewed the Church's services with disfavour and have embarked on a programme of acute harassment. In view of these happenings, the CCBI Commission for Proclamation organised a consultation that was held in Ishvani Kendra, Pune, during December 4-6, 1999. About 35 persons attended the consultation. Among them were bishops, theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, journalists and others. The participants decided to record the main themes and ideas that were shared in the seminar and to prepare a consolidated text of the same. The text does not claim to be a statement!

After the inaugural session which included a prayer service, a word of welcome from the director of Ishvani Kendra and a briefing on the dynamics of the consultation, papers were presented. Workshops and general sessions followed after which the participants entrusted a group to finalise the consolidated report.

A. Papers

1) The *first* paper "The Christian Response to Harassment: A Deeper Commitment to the Gospel" considered the upheavals of the present and the particular challenges they address to the Christian Church. It cautioned against pitting Indians one against the other; instead, it invited all to engage in constant interaction, creative and critical dialogue, mutual education, and collaborative efforts. In doing so Indians would arrive at what is noblest and best in our country's heritage. This would be the ultimate flowering of our great Indian civilisation.

2) The *second* paper "Culture, Nation and Conversion: Issues in Mission Today" studied the question of national identity and the cultural foundations of modern India. Efforts have been made to distort the true course of our nation's history by claiming a monochromatic civilisation where the interests of the upper castes are cultivated. As a result, we observe today the emergence of contrasting interests and the politicisation of culture between the privileged upper castes and the lower, the former vigorously clinging to their traditional status, and the latter fighting for justice, equality and human dignity.

While treating of the question of conversion and human freedom, it was

pointed out that conversion has been going on all through the history of India. Adivasis or tribals and other indigenous people have been drawn into the orbit of a Sanskrit world-view. A deeper look into the history of India would reveal that at some point time Buddhism and Jainism were widespread, but today they have been reduced to small minority religions because of conversion movements engineered by Brahmanic Hinduism. Hence, conversion did not begin with the advent of Christianity but had already been taking place in India. Dialogue would surely help to understand the true meaning of culture, nation and conversion.

3) The *third* paper "Situating our Mission Today" emphasised the need for restructuring our Christian mission. Such restructuring was necessary so that the Church's mission could be realised among different peoples and in different areas: globalisation, where an unequal and exploitative dependency is continuing; religion, where Hindutva is made out to be a religious creed whereas in fact it is a political strategy; society as a whole, in which Dalits and women have felt empowered to ask for recognition of their human rights and dignity; and finally, the environment, where ecological concerns work towards keeping planet earth safe for the present and future generations.

4) Through the *fourth* paper the biblical significance of such basic terms as 'good news,' 'kingdom,' and conversion was explained. Good news as referred to by Jesus was not naïve optimism but a hope based on unshakeable faith in both the power and the love of

God the Father. God's kingdom was not to be seen primarily as one sociological reality contrasted with others; rather, it referred to an action of God coming with his sovereign power and saving concern. Finally, the term 'conversion' is fraught with ambiguities. Conversion should be subordinated to God the Father's coming and offering his love and hope to a distressed world; it invites us Christians along with others to join in a common pilgrimage of purification leading to a God who remains hidden.

5) The *fifth* paper dwelt with "The Church's Dialogue with the Asian Reality: The Orientations of the CBCI and the FABC." According to the author of this paper, they underscore the urgency and importance of the Church's dialogue with the Asian Reality where the abject poverty of the masses and the plurality of cultures and religions were highlighted. Both the CBCI and the FABC affirm that the Church can fulfil her mission of sharing in God's plan of integral liberation of humans by dialoguing with her context of mission. This would involve a total incarnation of the Church in the Asian Reality.

Even though a paradigm shift—from the emphasis on developmental activities to the promotion of social justice as a constitutive dimension of evangelisation—had taken place in 1971 with the Synod of Bishops, the Church in India is still to make a clear mission statement about her dialogue with the reality of poverty and injustice. Her dialogue with cultures and religions has suffered set-backs not only because of outside interference but also from the lack of enthusiasm to include all aspects

of Christian life, namely, organisation and administration, theological reflection, role of laymen and women, formation of the Church-leaders and fostering of liturgy. In the context of rising neo-colonialism and religious fundamentalism the Church needs to express in unambiguous terms the purpose of her dialogue with the situation of poverty and injustice, the plurality of religions and cultures and the implications of such a dialogue for her life and mission in India.

6) An important factor in our reflection was identified when the *sixth* paper showed that people did not act on the basis of “chemically” pure truths about things, but on the basis of their perception. We need to be aware of the different ways in which people understand and think about religion. This is true about our own discourses as Christians as well as of those of our neighbours. There is a difference in the understanding of religious belonging. Whereas in the Christian understanding belonging to a religion is by free choice (“contract”), for our neighbours religious belonging is perceived as a matter of birth. This has consequences for our understanding of conversion. These and other difficulties need to be taken into account in our relationship with our neighbours. In responding to the current situation and dealing with contentious issues, we should not rely entirely on the state assuming that it is always an impartial arbiter. We should rather interact actively with, and foster the creation of, a vibrant civil society. Our theological orientations often tend to be one-sided. This needs to be corrected. Finally, we have to be guided by the

conviction that mission is the work of God, as the parable of the seed which grows by itself illustrates. The Christian community in India should recognise God’s Kairos (God’s plan) for the people in our country, discern it and co-operate with it with a deep spiritual composure, free from the kind of anxiety and restlessness about mission which will only compromise the spiritual message of the Gospel.

7) The *seventh* and final paper “Mission: An Alternative Model,” showed that the old model of evangelisation was very often negatively oriented to the cultures, religions and autonomy of peoples which are the concrete expressions of the identity of India. The Church that originated from such an act of evangelisation was not fully rooted in the soil of our country. This model of mission is easily susceptible to being accused of an anti-national activity, especially in the post-colonial era when nationalism is emerging as a defining element of an authentic Indian identity. The paper also advocated the necessity of a change of model based on divine incarnation and the complementarity of the word-in-creation and word-in-history. In this model the Christian faith can be positively and intrinsically related to all the genuine concrete expressions of the various cultures, religions and aspirations of our peoples. Here, evangelisation should follow a reverse order, that is, an evangeliser should first of all be him/herself be evangelized by the cultures, religions and peoples to whom he/she is sent; he/she should be converted to them, i.e. be enriched by God’s presence and grace present in them and be-

come part of them before he/she starts evangelising others.

B. Group and General Discussions

The workshop discussions and general sessions highlighted specific areas of concern:

1) *Hindutva and Cultural Nationalism*

Regarding the Hindutva vision of the Indian nation, a distinction is to be made between Hindutva which is an ideology and a political movement to gain political power using religion, and Hinduism which is intrinsically pluriform as it has incorporated different religions and cultures.

In the perspective of Hindutva, the establishing of Christian communities through mission is viewed as efforts to destroy the cultural identity that binds together the people of India. Hence, Hindutva considers the Christian community to be inimical to its interests. It is reasonable to believe that its hidden agenda is to preserve the dominant hold of the higher castes on the others as in the Brahmanic form of traditional Hinduism.

2) *Conversion*

Conversion may be looked upon as a religious issue, a political issue and a cultural issue. As a religious issue, it is concerned with the inner freedom of a person to embrace the religion of his/her choice. As a political issue, it calls for efforts to oppose all anti-conversion laws which deny the human right to

choose one's own religion; as a cultural issue, deep respect and sensitivity should be shown to all peoples so that they may preserve their Indian cultural identity.

Some may choose to see in the decision of the illiterate poor to convert to Christianity the fruit of allurements. At times, conversion to another religion—as in the case of Ambedkar—is a sign of social protest. On the part of the Church there should always be scrupulous honesty and respect in dealing with such people so that they truly decide for themselves.

3) *Indian Christian Identity*

Taking into account the multi-faceted aspect of the Indian Civilisation, our Indian Christian identity will have to assume pluriformity because there are different groups and communities that make up the Indian polity. To define a typical pattern of Indian Christian identity is difficult. This is more so because the Church bears the burden of its colonial past and experiences difficulty in disentangling herself fully from it. She must exercise a fair measure of autonomy and learn to cope with the tension that will arise between the vision of Christ and the evolving structures of the Church.

4) *The Church*

We envisage a Church that is an authentic and credible witness to the Kingdom. It should manifest a living interaction between universality and particularity and an organic unity in which all social barriers that dehumanise people are demolished. Pluri-cultural di-

versities are to be seen as challenging opportunities for enrichment. Respect for pluralism, gender equality, the principle of subsidiarity, participatory leadership, especially greater laity involvement, and a leadership that distances itself from images of power and identifies itself with those of service will enable the Church to fulfil her God-given role. Official interventions in the form of statements should not give conflicting signals to the Church in general and become a source for confusion to those who attempt true dialogue with other religions.

5) *Mission*

The Church understands her mission as offering the Good News to others. This mission is articulated in terms of an inner house discourse but unfortunately enough care has not been taken to bring to the public the changes that have been taking place within the Church especially with regard to the understanding of evangelisation and other religious traditions. From the Christian point of view change of religion suggests a choice expressed in a free option whereas for a large part of the Indian people religion is a matter of birth.

The mission mandate of the risen Lord is not restricted to a few words abstracted from their context in Matt. 28 or Mk 16. It should be understood in the context of the creative and saving purpose of the God of the poor as unfolded in the entire Bible. It should take into account the images of salt, light, leaven, and the concepts of life and witness. This puts the mission in the perspective of a continuing dialogue and

interaction with the poor, the cultures and religious traditions of Asia and the ecological concerns of the world. The Church at all levels has to be convinced that social justice is an essential part of evangelisation. This will have an impact on our mind-set and our life style.

C. *Recommendations*

1. A practical response to the harassment of Christians should be multi-pronged:
 - a) Encourage the laity and set aside funds for their training to participate in public life.
 - b) Foster inculturation.
 - c) Renew ourselves spiritually.
 - d) Make use of mass media, contact journalists for dissemination of genuine information and avoid false propaganda.
 - e) Set up P.R. offices at CBCI and diocesan levels.
 - f) Encourage a Christian presence at public celebrations and national festivities.
 - g) Cultivate good relations with neighbours.
 - h) Encourage dialogue with neo-Pentecostals and unattached evangelists regarding methods of evangelisation.
 - i) Collaborate with other minorities and secular movements and associations on common issues.
2. The rapid advances made in the field of technology call the Church to keep abreast of the times. We need to make use of technology especially information technology. There is a felt need to develop a Centre for Policy Research.

3. The promotion of a sustainable Church demands more serious commitment to faith formation of the laity, investment for integral education of the Catholic youth and an attitudinal change on the part of everyone with respect to the role of lay people in the Church.
4. To be constantly aware of the need to be in solidarity with the Dalits and tribal people and other oppressed sections of society. Then our discourse will be on their wavelength. We should stress the equality of all peoples vis-à-vis the caste hierarchy advocated by Hinduism. Calling ourselves Indian Catholics and not Roman Catholics will help us to be more rooted in the cultures where we are placed. Further, the missionaries working in areas other than their own native places should be aware of the danger of their colonising the people they serve.
5. Since *Ecclesia in Asia* is meant for the whole of Asia, it seems necessary for the official Churches to do the needful to interpret the document for believers in India. The CBCI is requested to put together guidelines to help understand the correct relationship between the imperatives of Christianity and the legitimate claims of Indian nationalism. Christian fundamentalism must be given no opportunity to define authentic Christian identity.
6. To be creative we need more freedom and hence we request our Bishops to encourage and empower theologians, liturgists and others in their sincere efforts to be responsible and innovative and to defend them against undue Roman interference. Episcopal conferences should exercise their responsibilities and wean themselves away from unnecessary dependence on the Vatican.
7. To be credible, the Church should respect pluralism, gender equality, the principle of subsidiarity, participatory leadership especially greater laity involvement. Further, the official Church must create structures through which the leaders will be accountable to people. This may necessitate changes in the existing canon law. The Church must be a true family of equals.
8. We should continue to accept and promote the positive values in Hinduism, foster collaboration with secular movements and associations that will bring together Dalits and tribal people into the larger community. Faith formation programmes to deepen the faith of those who practise the faith should be vigorously pursued. The laity should be trained to appreciate other religions and cultures.
9. The gap between the Christian community and its leaders can be bridged by the following: participation in the decision-making at various levels of the Church administration; building up small Christian communities, creating or recognising ministries for the laity in the Church.
10. We should foster a broad-based spirituality in the Church that respects other religions and cultures. Given the diversity of cultures and religions in our country, we should

strive to build Basic Human Communities.

11. We need to have a ministry to those who wish to be identified merely as disciples of Jesus without being affiliated to the Church.

Conclusion

The consultation was an occasion both for affirming our solidarity with each other and for exercising our common responsibility for the Church so that she may continue her mission of service to the Indian nation. A better realisation of the threats from the rightist forces—the followers of the Hindutva ideology—came to all the participants

through the papers, workshops and discussions. A mature response would be in the nature of stressing our unity with all peoples and religions in India and at the same time engaging in self-inspection. Above all, we became more deeply aware of the implications of God manifesting himself in Jesus Christ and of the Church carrying out her mission today in the power of the Spirit.

The proponents of Hindutva are driven by the destructive myth of a strong Hindu Rashtra. Obviously, a myth cannot be countered by rational arguments, hence we must search for an authentic myth which will unite and enoble all the peoples of India.

December, 1999

Bibliodrama: A Modern Body-Mind Hermeneutics

Peter Erlenwein

There is a growing understanding today among many Church Communities in the West that a merely intellectual approach to past texts/traditions is inadequate. Hence, holistic approaches are being developed. Bibliodrama is one such approach, which creatively uses body and emotions in order to understand a text/tradition. It is based on an awareness that reaches out from the transparency of all senses over to the one great sense, that, erratic and unlocalizable, submerges the world and its appearance into an ever new light.

A consciousness which is closed to alternating views and perceptions must nowadays be considered a dead consciousness. It works, without being creative. This means being vulnerable to the pain that comes through opening up, regarding openness higher than security. A flowing perception leaves me in contact, without any final results. It is like a dancer who finds his balance again and again without actually ever 'having' it. Consciousness as a fixed concept on the other hand tends towards greed, towards that which is ideological, blending out reality as a *process*. This means, it fears the pain of transformation, correspondingly also the joy of liberation. This paper is a modest attempt to describe the theory and practice of bibliodrama, as such in unfolding 'spiritual' movement.

1. What is Bibliodrama?

"Bibliodrama is a flexible programme of an interactive process between the biblical tradition and a group of 12 to 18 members guided by one or many bibliodramatists. It is experience and text oriented: individual experiences come into contact with the experiences recorded in stories, situations and persons as well as prayer, meditation on biblical texts which have either come to life or in some cases have been distorted or submerged. The process seeks equally to make one conscious of irritations, projections, blocks in and against biblical texts as well as discovering that they can be potentially enriching and rewarding.

The content of the processes consists of historically probable as well as still to be acquired experiences, memories and expectations, and how they have found expression in biblical texts. The object of the process is that the members of the group work their way through positive and negative religious clichés to an understanding of situations and persons of the Bible, and imbuing them with new life. The aim is to promote and confront experiences either personally or vicariously to develop interchangeable exegeses of situations and tradition (resymbolising).

The entire process of a bibliodrama covers several work units and goes on for several days. The emphasis is on creating a “whole” of which physical, aesthetic and theologically reflecting work are indispensable elements. Bibliodrama works on the basis of body exercises and meditation. Depending on the qualification and the interest of the leader of the group, the emphasis could be on playful interaction, deep psychological work or theological and religious-pedagogical work. The chief difference between this and therapeutical work in a narrow sense is that the entire process is always steered back towards the biblical material. Individual work in the group is always the exception.

Bibliodramatical work has 3 stages. Body exercises come first. This is followed by a creative phase, very often as a game on the outer or inner stage (imagination). A part of this is conversations dealing with both the understanding of the text underlying the bibliodrama process as well as the group process and personal experiences. The concluding very often extensive, conversation is as exegetical as it is spiritual (therapeutic, soul-searching).

To give an initial idea/view of the proceedings, I am presenting some basic arrangements and some scenes typical of the bibliodramatical work.

- the story of creation puts forward the following philosophical as well as existential questions – how does something originate? With God, in the world or in us?
- Cain kills Abel and lives out his destiny not only in biblical texts but everyday, in every murderous intention

and deed and in a repetitive play with interchanging roles of God, Abel and Cain. What happens here must at least be conscious.

Ezekiel 37 (the death field and the Spirit of God) asks: How does a man become a prophet? Can the dead be brought to life? And who are the dead?

Meditation on Psalm 139 can make traumas as clear through religious upbringing (God as a cosmic policeman) as the possibilities of the feeling of an all encompassing security and stateliness by faith in God.”¹ For all these examples, the following rules apply.

a) *The Rule of the Inner Core*

“If we want to interpret or understand (grasp) archetypical images, then the method to be preferred is the conscious identification of the subject with appearing religious images.

In the same way we come close to the *religious* meaning of Logia or Parables, if we understand the relations, the things, persons, facts and tasks mentioned (in the Bible) as images of an Interior reality.

If for example in Mark 10: 7 the disengagement of oneself from father and mother is a precondition for marriage, or in Mark 10:29-30 even a precondition for the understanding of the message of Christ, then one should not see in this a sociological but a *psychological* step in the process of an *interior* maturation.

In the expression of the mountain moving faith (Mk 11:23) we have to see the mountain as a picture for *interior*

obstacles, etc. It is only in *interiorising psychologically* the words of an individual logion, that one touches the feelings and attitudes of fear, of enslavement and of a conversion, in whose context alone the *religious* meaning reveals itself to us.

b) *The Rule of Individuality*

From the above it follows that one's own personhood, one's own existence is the decisive proto-horizon of *religious* Speech. In religious speech there is never a question of what this speech may mean *for others*; the meaning is always for me, what does the word concerned here and now mean *for me*. It is only if I myself experience a religious word as spoken immediately into my presence, it is only then that I understand it as a religious statement. Therefore, I must experience the topic under discussion (the problem) against the background of the religious speech immediately as my own question, and equally spontaneously the religious speech must reveal itself as the sole evident answer.

Only in this way I find myself as hearer in the same moment of time, in the horizon of the some actuality, out of which the religious teacher speaks.

c) *The Rule of Paradoxical Reflection of Consciousness and Unconsciousness*

If religious speech questions the very foundation of the egocentric viewpoint, the "*cogito ergo sum*", then this religious speech must necessarily appear to our human reason *paradoxical*, religious speech throws the ... ego.. back

into a fear, which the rationalizing mind in its one-sidedness just wanted to avoid. If such is the case each religious speech passes through a movement which is always carried out in analytical psychotherapy and described in depth psychology! The Ego is exposed to the fear which it desperately tries to avoid; but just by doing this it (the ego) is liberated out of the narrowness of its self-imprisonment that which it (the ego) thought its duty to do by itself in order to be able to find to some extent its selfjustification, that itself is assured to it as something freely given, and in the collapse of its own moral, social and political efforts it learns to return to the unmerited grace of the experience of a simple "permission" to be.

With this that which appeared as something feasible "becomes the unattainable", and that which appeared up to now as the "unattainable" becomes that which is simply given. The total existence perverted in itself and suffering in the chains of fear is turned around, the judgement of the reason proves to be superficial, useless and erroneous, but the language of desire (homesickness), the images of the dreams, the lasting memories of one's own truth, awaken to life and prove themselves to be justified, valid and true.

d) *The Rule of the Living Centre of All Words*

If therefore, one tries to demonstrate of a "religious word" its meaning by studying its historical context this leads nowhere. There is only one single real criterion of its truth, its content, and its meanings. *The inner oneness* which