



# Jnanadeepa

Pune Journal of Religious Studies

ISSN 2249-1503

[www.punejournal.in](http://www.punejournal.in)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4264789

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4264789>

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## Theology in a Pluralistic Context: Migration as a Trope

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**Abstract:** *Ecclesia semper reformanda* was a principle medieval church believed in. Raimundo Panikkar changes it a little to say *Ecclesia semper nascitura*. The basic and significant insight is the same. Heraclitus understood it years ago... Change is the only permanence, he had observed. Anything that refuses to change, stagnates and soon perishes. Change is the essence of life in all senses of the word. Change becomes most visible in movement. Movement has become the defining characteristic of our age. On the roads of every continent, people are on the move by the million. The sad part of these migrations is that more and more people are forced to flee their homelands. Similarly, the rapid growth of urban centres indicates that people are migrating within a single country as well. One of the consequences of these migrations is the encounter and clash of cultures, the result of which is new experiences, new values, and new attitudes. What happens to religion and theology in such a situation?

**Keywords:** Raimundo Panikkar, *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, *Ecclesia semper nascitura*, Heraclitus, Change.

Cited as:

Andrade, Hector. (2002). Theology in a Pluralistic Context: Migration as a Trope (Version 1.0). Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, January 2002 (5/1), 45-52. <a href="http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4264789">http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4264789</a>
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2002-01-05 | Updated on Nov 10, 2020

# Theology in a Pluralistic Context

## Migration as a Trope

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### 1. Introduction

*Ecclesia semper reformanda* was a principle medieval church believed in. Raimundo Panikkar changes it a little to say *Ecclesia semper nascitura*. The basic and significant insight is the same. Heraclitus understood it years ago... Change is the only permanence, he had observed. Anything that refuses to change, stagnates and soon perishes. Change is the essence of life in all senses of the word. Change becomes most visible in movement.

Movement has become the defining characteristic of our age. On the roads of every continent, people are on the move by the million. The sad part of these migrations is that more and more people are forced to flee their homelands. Similarly, the rapid growth of urban centres indicates that people are migrating within a single country as well. One of the consequences of these migrations is the encounter and clash of cultures, the result of which is new experiences, new values, and new attitudes. What happens to religion and theology in such a situation?

Whether we like it or not we are living in a pluralistic context which influences each and every religion and each religion is forced to change, to adapt. Given this condition of constant flux this paper explores the individual and ecclesial response-ability in redefining themselves and coping with the context in which they find themselves.

### 2. The South Asian Context

Migrations have been a part of human history from the very beginning. Most of the early migrations were for food and for survival from extreme climates. The migration of birds and animals, which is instinctual, has been recorded in detail. Migration is a human experience that goes back to the dawn of history and has been a necessary ingredient in the development of civilization and the spreading of technology and ideas. The novelty of today's migrations is given by their global presence, their increasingly volatile and unpredictable appearance, the ease in intercontinental travel and the growing economic disparity between the rich and the poor.<sup>1</sup>

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When we look at the history of South Asia we see a series of migrations. We have the Aryans who moved into India about 2000 years before Christ. These large-scale migrations of powerful Central Asian tribes led to further migrations of the 'original' inhabitants of the land. We had other migrations in the name of invasions: first the Muslims and then the British, the Portuguese, the French, and the Dutch. All these migrations/invasions have given South Asia a rich and diverse culture. This diversity is best exemplified by the umpteen languages that are spoken in the region.

Our cities today and cities in general are becoming havens for migrants and people who have no roots. The texture of a city today is cosmopolitan with multiculturalism as an accepted fact, in spite of the fact that certain fundamentalist groups want to ignore it and believe in a uniform culture for all. Even the villages are not immune to this phenomenon due to television and the mass media.

Besides multiculturalism, the other pluralism that is most significant for us as thinkers in South Asia is the well-known religious diversity. So the context is a mosaic, its diversity so varied that one cannot name it and terms like India or South Asia are merely illusions which can only demarcate a geographical space and not a cultural one as it becomes impossible to say that anything is uniquely South Asian. Thus we see that the context is so different from the context of Israel, where Christianity was born and Europe, where Christianity grew and from where till this day it 'dominates' the rest of the Christian world.

### 3. Consequences of this Pluralistic Context

The environment shapes the organism that lives in it. Similarly all ideas that are born are influenced by the context in which they arise. No entity can remain unaffected by its context. If it tries to remain isolated and unaffected by its context it withers and dies a premature death. So what are some of the consequences of a pluralistic context.

a) Whenever a migrating community encounters a different culture it normally adopts an eclectic approach and tries to co-opt some of the practices, customs, ideas and even "idols" of the culture in which it finds itself. This eclecticism is essential for the growth and enrichment of the community.

b) The individuals in a migrating community experience a radical discontinuity in their life. The loss of roots is a major anxiety among most people. It is this lack of rootedness that is also responsible for the next consequence.

c) People in general begin to experience life in fragments. Postmodernism (about which we shall see more below) celebrates this fragmentary life and considers it an essential part of the contemporary condition.

These are some of the consequences of a pluralistic context that have a bearing on all theologizing as they directly affect the religious experiences and expression of people. We will have to delve deeper into these points and explore their subsequent consequences for theology.

#### *Consequences for Theology*

1. Eclecticism in theology is not something that is new. Christianity was

born in Jerusalem and during its period of consolidation in Rome it absorbed a lot of the Roman culture in its rituals and the Greek philosophy in its doctrines and theology, which held sway in even until recently under the name of Scholasticism. However this eclecticism is on the wane, if not completely suppressed, in our times. By eclecticism I mean a basic openness to the 'cultures' that form a part of our cultures. It is an openness and humility to accept that one does have the "complete" truth but that there are other ways of encountering the same reality. This 'perestroika' is necessary if one is to remain relevant in our day and time.

2. The discontinuity of life has special bearings for pastoral theology. The people that today's pastors have to cater to are not those who have a tradition to fall back on but people who have experienced life in a pluralistic context and who have been influenced by the diverse people with whom they grew up. The responsibility of the pastors is also to help such people in defining their own identity and mapping out their values in the new environments in which they regularly find themselves.

3. The third consequence is perhaps the most crucial for theology. Christian faith cannot remain unaffected by the processes of fragmentation in the world in which we live. The result of this fragmentation is a birth of the individual who is over and above the community. This process started with the enlightenment. Its final outcome is found in the postmodernist thinking which suspects and 'deconstructs' any authoritative 'overarching', 'totalising'

explanations of things - like Christianity, Marxism or the myth of scientific progress. These 'metanarratives', which purport to explain and reassure are considered to be illusions, fostered upon people in order to smother differences, opposition and plurality. So the result is a belief in mininarratives which are "provisional, contingent, temporary and relative and which provide for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances" (Barry 1995: 87).

This situation and its outcome are well stated by Johann Reikerstorfer:

The postmodern consciousness and the postmodern sense of life move unpretentiously within narrow perspectives; unmoved and without feeling much of a loss, the postmodern consciousness has left global solutions, total claims and answers behind in favour of the multiplicity, differentiatedness and the plurality of possible experiences and standpoints. Standpoints are adopted until they are proved untenable. Decisions are no longer made in the long term, but to some degree with a built-in option to change them; commitments are much more scattered than before, and lifestyle is becoming episodic (Reikerstorfer 1990: 17).

The sad story of Christianity is that it reacts very slowly to the changing situations. Church history teaches us that a lot of serious problems could have been averted if only the church had reacted in time and with proper understanding of the situation. Perhaps even the Eastern Schism and the Lutheran Revolt could have been averted. What is needed today is both an understanding of the situation and timely action.

What we need today, in the context of the pluralism, multiculturalism and the above mentioned experience of fragmentation, is a movement of Christian theologians toward the modern world in order to be present where today's people live and suffer. Regressive measures like the famous Oath denouncing Modernism in 1907 are not only harmful but show Ostrich-type behaviour.

Today more than ever the church must be open to dialogue with other religions and given the attacks on the Christians in some parts of the country we should also give serious thought to the Ecumenical Movement through dialogue with other Christian denominations.

We shall now consider how some of ancestors coped with this problem of pluralism. In the first example we shall consider the Exodus experience as the most significant cipher of the Old Testament and secondly we shall consider how the early church dealt with the problem of Pluralism.

### *The Exodus Experience*

The Exodus experience holds the central place in the Jewish consciousness. In the Old Testament all the books seem to be written with reference to this one experience. The Experience of the passover, the journey from bondage to freedom, was always remembered in the collective unconscious of the people of Israel.

In Exodus it is Yahweh, with Moses the prophet, who leads the people's movement. The liberator God was also experienced as a God who was

with them, on their side or going ahead of them (Ex.33:1-23). This is one reason why many struggles for injustice are finding their inspiration in the Christian faith. There is a striking insight in Ex. 20:4-6, where Yahweh bans the use of idols. There are no images for Yahweh as an image is mute. The Yahweh the people experienced was 'Emmanuel', a living voice, which continually addresses the people (Pixle 1983: 132). He is a challenging presence, an ongoing demand for justice. A far cry from the Jesus we keep locked up in the tabernacle. Thus making an image of Yahweh would serve to efface this demanding challenge.

This same insight will recur in the New Testament in the Jesus event. Emmanuel will have a tangible presence. Life is a journey and the encounter of the divine happens on this journey. It can take several forms as the disciples of Emmaus experienced. It needs humility and openness to receive the revelation.

### *The Early Church and Pluralism*

There is an increased interest in the Early Church in the present time. Their problems and issues seem to be quite akin to ours. I would agree even with regard to the problematic of this paper. We should bear in mind also that much of the doctrine we practise, profess and propagate today was fixed by the 5th century. There are several lessons we can learn from the early church.

First of all pluriformity was the hallmark of the early church. The most tangible marker of this pluriformity is the scripture of the New Testament. The

early church accepted a pluriform gospel. Each of these was written in a contextual way. Similarly the early church had no difficulty in coping with two schools of theology - the Antiochian and the Alexandrian. Obviously there were minor differences and bickerings but these often were more due to prestige and power rather than due to the fact that one group felt threatened by the other. The diversity and richness of the early church was because it made allowances for pluralism to thrive. What was central was the faith in Jesus Christ. Current New Testament studies reduce the gospel to its formulas and the formulas to the ensemble of their backgrounds, sources and parallels. From this it follows that early Christianity was never "one" but always "many"(Meyer 1986:160).

The other lesson one can draw is the participation of lay persons in the early church. The members of the Society of Jesus feel that they have achieved something great because of their decree on 'Lay Participation'(GC 34). However, lay people played an active role in the early church. Both the male and female monastic movements trace their origins to lay persons who felt the need to lead a pious and ascetic life. The contribution of women in the early church was significant and has to be seriously researched and documented given today's just demand to give them their rightful place in the church.

Thirdly, Justin the Martyr can teach us a thing or two about dialogue (another hot cake today). Justin (died 165 CE) looked favourably on other religions. In his concept of Logos

Spermatikos we have an ideal principle for all dialogue among religions. He believed that God is already present in other religions in the Logos form. Hence the need to take off one's shoes in a dialogue!

Finally, the early church had the not so easy task of self-definition. The question whether the identity of the primitive apostolic community is the same as the identity of the historic Catholic church cannot be easily answered. The separation of Christianity from Judaism resulted in the emergence of a new identity. However, it soon had the face the problem of the influx of gentile Christians, its world mission. The world mission effected changes of vantage point and horizon, a changed consciousness and changed ambitions. If the earliest Jerusalem community had looked on itself in awe as messianic Israel, the world mission produced a nascent communion of Jew and Greek, the beginning of a fellowship to be fully realized in history (Meyer 1986: 18). Here we see an attitude of openness, a readiness to change according to the signs of the times. This was necessitated by the migration of Christianity from one world to another. It entailed not only the task of bringing the gospel into the Greek field of vision but also generated a change in Christianity itself from its original self understanding as the elect of Israel to a world religion.

### *Christian Theology and the Pluralism of Religions*

Most of the South Asian Christianity, some historical exceptions notwithstanding, is a western institution trans-

planted into the East when it was practically sixteen centuries old and already had a strongly developed constitution. In spite of nearly 200 million Asian Christians, theology is still very much a western concern. The attitude of the South Asian Church towards other religions can be visualised in two simple concepts; 'Exclusivism' and 'Inclusivism'. The former distances and depotentiates the historical religions in the name of divine revelation. It distinguishes between faith and religion and suggests the notion of a pure Christianity, which immunizes itself from all religion.

In contrast to this, the concept of 'Inclusivism' recognises the significance of other religions for salvation. It interprets them as 'implicit' or 'anonymous' Christianity.<sup>2</sup> However, with this interpretation it undermines the historical self-understanding of the non-Christian religions and makes itself incapable of receiving their prophecy

Vatican II was an important and pathbreaking council with regard to the church's views on other religions and the formation of a local church. In this direction two decrees were of paramount importance; *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. The former was perhaps the greatest document of the Council. It indicates the fact that the church understood to a large extent the situation in the world. It presents the church primarily as the "people of God" on a pilgrimage. The latter is important because it flows from the former as it shows the attitudes of a pilgrim. In this constitution the Council shows that the church has rediscovered the significance of the world. Similarly it awakened a

fresh exploration of the church's relationship to other religions and its mission vis-a-vis their presence. These two documents created a lot of enthusiasm among the South Asian theologians both in terms of visualizing a local church and for going ahead with inter-religious dialogue.

One significant insight to be found in *Lumen Gentium* is the Council's assertion that the church is a mystery. This implies that the reality of the church can never be adequately conceptualized. No single model of the church has an absolute value. This insight moves away from the image of the church as a monolithic institution. The stress on the mystery aspect, which actually stresses the importance of an experiential approach to religion, can more easily resonate with the people in our country who follow other religions. However one must admit that precious little has been achieved and the church still retains a 'superiority' and 'teacher' complex.

### *The Road Ahead*

To most Christians the church still appears to be a monolithic institution. A good number of people does not easily find it difficult to find their identity as well spiritual satisfaction in such a structure. This statement will be well borne out by the large number of Christians that are joining the numerous sects that are mushrooming all over South Asia. Increasingly, religion is ceasing to mean formal church religion and is being replaced by other agencies like a more private religious commitment as also such systems of belief as psychiatry and communism. Christianity as the 'Sacred Canopy', i.e., the symbolic universe that helped people to

cope with their life experiences now seems to be inadequate. Many individuals cannot relate their experiences with what the church has to offer.

Likewise one has to bear in mind the fact that Christianity was born as a marginal religion. Jesus himself lived a marginal life. However, as it began to get state sponsorship (post-Edict of Milan) it slowly began to settle down as the religion of the majority and this is where perhaps it lost a bit of its vitality. In a world that is dominated by identity politics the natural question that arises is whether the church today can continue being a highly centralised institution that legislates for all cultures and peoples. Will such a church keep making sense to people as diverse as the universe itself? Perhaps the answer lies in the insights provided by postmodernism. Christians need to take seriously the insight that the church is a mystery and hence there can be varied approaches in articulating one's religious experience. Christianity will thus be able to accept a wide spectrum of practices and beliefs. 'Any Christian theology that claims its basic continuity with its biblical roots may find what it needs in the full spectrum of forms in the Bible itself' (*Theology Today* April 1994: 112). The most important form which the church needs today may be the prophetic one. The prophet speaks not because he or she wishes but because God demands it. The prophet speaks on behalf of the other - the neighbour - especially the poor, the oppressed, the marginal other.

Not only the Liberation and Evangelical but all serious Christian theolo-

gies must maintain that prophetic form or admit that its transformation into some other reality has become something rich and strange but no longer Christian, that is, prophetic. In this pluralistic context, 'road', 'journey', 'pilgrimage' and 'migration' become tropes for all theologizing. One notices here that the aspect of migration that I began this paper with is not only a fact that necessitates a pluralistic understanding of theology but also acts as a metaphor for the attitude one needs to adopt while theologizing.

### *The Third Millenium*

As the church enters the third millennium, the mass of Christians will not be in Europe, but rather in the two Americas, Asia and Africa. The 'centres' of Christianity, however, are still in Europe. Perhaps Christianity is moving towards its third millennium with the heavy liability of its messianic Eurocentrism and of its being the dominating religion of the first world. Wherever Christianity spread it carried with it its culture and its divisions. This is one reason while Christianity is still considered a foreign religion in most places. Similarly, it is perhaps also responsible for Christians staying a little aloof from the main currents of the cultural and political life of their respective countries. I mentioned the divisions because all over the world, one finds the divisions of European Christianity reflected in the many different denominations.

So what is the proposal for the future that is already here. Latin American, African and the Asian Christians need to free themselves from this inher-



ited and encumbering baggage. In order to do this we must “inculturate” ourselves and thus come to be at home in our own cultures. We must build our churches in our own architectural styles and name them after our own martyrs and saints. We must sing our own hymns and write our own catechisms. We must develop our own moral teachings and write our own contingent dogmatics. Eventually we must organise and administer ourselves at the local, regional and continental levels and no longer look to Europe. We will perhaps no longer cling to the denominations of our missionaries but overcome the divisions in European denominations. Then the church will be truly the one ecumenical church of Christ.

## Conclusion

The age of excommunications, cautions, bans, etc., must come to an end

if we are to truly make the church relevant in today’s pluralistic context. The church must be ready to accept a wide spectrum of forms of understanding and expressions of religious experiences, Scripture and Tradition. Christianity must become pluriform if it has reach out to all the people among whom it has spread and grown. I have used the metaphor of movement to indicate the attitude one ought to have and show that most of our beliefs and interpretations have only a limited value and not a universal claim. The charge of relativism will be hurled at this line of thought. What happens to the church as we know it? It will obviously not be in fragments. This church may appear to the western mind as ‘fragments’ of a church of Christ torn apart but to the South Asian mind it will appear rather as ‘parts’, portions of a whole whose cohesion and unity lies elsewhere, beyond any institution.

## Notes

- 1 For a more detailed discussion on migration in our age and time see ‘The Worldwide Context of Migration: The example of Asia,’ Migrants and Refugees, “The Worldwide Context of Migration: The Example of Asia,” Migrants and Refugees, *Concilium* p 3. See also the whole issue of *Theology Today* (April 1994).
- 2 This idea has its strongest proponent in Karl Rahner

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