



Jnanadeepa

Pune Journal of Religious Studies

ISSN 2249-1503

www.punejournal.in

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4264125

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4264125>

The Church and Peace

Kurien, Kunnumpuram SJ

Abstract: As a historical reality, the Church has to search for a new identity as it enters a new century, a new millennium. The shape of the Church to come is determined by its mission, and the mission receives its specification from the actual context in which it is exercised. It is my contention here that in the conflictual situation of our country today the Church in India is called to be an agent of peace and reconciliation. I do not deny that the Church in India may have many other tasks to perform. Nor do I claim the Church is the only agency that has to work for peace, for a large number of people and organisations in India in fact seek to promote peace. But I do maintain that, if she wishes to be relevant to the concrete situation of our country today, the Church has to work for peace and reconciliation. And working for peace and reconciliation is an essential dimension of her God-given mission.

.

Christ. Keywords: Church, Church and peace, God-given mission, Agent of peace

Cited as:

Kunnumpuram, Kurien. (2001). The Church and Peace (Version 1.0). Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies, January 2001 (4/1), 111-122. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4264125
--

2001-01-02 | Updated on Nov 10, 2020

The Church and Peace

Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ

Dept of Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune

As a historical reality, the Church has to search for a new identity as it enters a new century, a new millennium. The shape of the Church to come is determined by its mission, and the mission receives its specification from the actual context in which it is exercised. It is my contention here that in the conflictual situation of our country today the Church in India is called to be an agent of peace and reconciliation.

I do not deny that the Church in India may have many other tasks to perform. Nor do I claim the Church is the only agency that has to work for peace, for a large number of people and organisations in India in fact seek to promote peace. But I do maintain that, if she wishes to be relevant to the concrete situation of our country today, the Church has to work for peace and reconciliation. And working for peace and reconciliation is an essential dimension of her God-given mission.

Obviously, peace is not something that we can “make”. That is why the Bible looks upon peace as a gift of God and the fruit of Christ’s redemptive work (2 Cor 5:18-21; Eph 2:14-16). All that the Church can do is to create conditions in which humans can experience

genuine peace. What are the conditions conducive to peace? And how are they to be created? These are some of the questions that I shall deal with in this paper.

I shall begin by a brief description of the conflictual situation of our country today. I shall then go on to develop some theological perspectives on the Church’s mission of peace and reconciliation. Finally, I shall point out some concrete steps to foster peace and reconciliation.

1. The Situation

For centuries India had the reputation of being a land of peace and harmony. This is no more true. Today our country is faced with conflicts of various kinds. Let me now highlight some of these conflicts.

1.1. First of all there is a religious conflict. India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and many tribal religions. And from ancient times she has welcomed to her shores Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By and large, the followers of these different religions lived together in peace and harmony. But the situation has now radi-

* The author may be contacted at: Papal Seminary, Ramwadi, Nagar Road, Pune-411014, India <papal@vsnl.com>.

cally changed. As a Research Seminar held at Ishvani Kendra, Pune, in March, 2000, pointed out:

Today what we are up against is a situation of 'religions in conflict'. These conflicts are not arising out of merely theological factors but also socio-psychological ones, and have four important roots: (a) religion as a source of identity is closely linked to culture and may be further strengthened by ethnic identity, (b) defensive fundamentalism in every faith tradition that leads to exclusivistic tendencies, (c) communalism that uses religion as a political tool raises its ugly head in most religious groups, which in turn leads to the branding of the other as enemy, and (d) hurting memories of the unsavoury past associated with domination and even persecution, etc., that continue to burn within the hearts of religious groups. The combined might of these factors frequently lead people to set up 'institutionalized riot systems' as evidenced in Gujarat, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and other places (Conclusions 2000: 111).

1.2. Then there is a class conflict – the conflict between the rich and the poor. During the past decade the Indian economy has grown significantly, and yet this has not led to any alleviation of poverty. Nay, there is reason to believe that the process of economic liberalisation and globalization which was initiated in 1991 has actually led to an increase of poverty in our country. As Jayati Ghosh has observed:

Thus the major conclusion for the past two decades is that the period between 1973-74 and 1989-90 was characterised by a sustained decline in poverty ratios in both rural and urban India (indeed, this trend of declin-

ing poverty in India can really be dated from that period) and also that this process is no longer clearly evident for the subsequent period of the 1990s. A recent study using the 'small samples' of the NSS actually indicates an increase in the incidence of poverty in both rural and urban areas over the period of 1993-94 to 1997. The percentage of people living below the poverty line in rural areas is estimated to have increased from 37.3 to 38.5 per cent, while in urban areas the rise has been from 32.4 to 34.0 per cent. This implies that the number of people living in absolute poverty in India went up from 276 million in 1989-90 to 349 million by 1997 (1999:119).

Today the number would be more than 400 million.

The poor are becoming increasingly aware of the injustice of the system that condemns them to a life of indigence and misery. And they are opposing the system couragesly, sometimes even violently. This leads to a situation of conflict.

1.3. Further, there is the upsurge of the subaltern groups which creates a conflictual situation. Movements of the Dalits, the tribal people, women and the other backward castes are meant to liberate them from injustice and oppression, which has robbed them of their human dignity and condemned them to a life of poverty and powerlessness. As has been remarked:

The specific problem of Indian subaltern groups is that their rank in society is determined by birth which makes any improvement in their social, educational, cultural, religious, psychological, political and economic status well nigh impossible (Conclusions 2000: 110).

1.4. Finally, there is growing violence in the country. The land of the Mahatma is fast becoming a slaughterhouse where innocent people are mercilessly butchered every day. The causes of violence are many and varied. The criminalisation of politics and the political involvement of criminals have led to the growth of violence. Religious fanaticism and ethno-cultural diversity too give rise to violence. Besides, secessionist movements as well as trans-border terrorism are also factors that explain the growth of violence in India today.

It is in such a conflictual situation that the Church is called to be an agent of peace and reconciliation.

2. Theological Perspectives

2.1. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *shālôm*, which is usually translated by “peace”, is very rich in meaning. It “may be said to signify in general completeness, perfection – perhaps most precisely, a condition in which nothing is lacking” (McKenzie, 1968: 651). According to G. Von Rad:

Its basic sense is not the narrower one of “peace” but the wider one of “well-being.” It may be used for the good fortune of the wicked, for health, and for national prosperity, which implies stability. In many passages it denotes friendly relationships, whether between states (1 Kgs 5:26) or individuals (Zech 6:13). It is thus linked with covenant; a covenant initiates or seals it (Josh 9:15; Ezek 34:25). In Ezekiel it is God who makes the covenant that results in peace, so that the term can finally express the relationship between God and his people (cf. Is 54:10) (1988: 207).

Shālôm is always a religious term since all the elements involved in peace are looked upon as God’s gifts (see Judg 6:24; Job 25:2; Pss 35:27; 122:6). There is a pregnant passage that sums up the blessings associated with peace which God bestows on the righteous (see Lev 26:1-13). Roland J. Faley explains the text thus:

The blessings centre chiefly around fertility of the soil (3-5 and 10), with the abundant yield of the harvest presented in vivid, if exaggerated, imagery (cf. Am 9:13). The people’s future is described as a life of peace and accord with the forces of nature and easy victory over their foes (6-8), abundant offspring (9), and crowned with the inestimable blessings of the Lord’s presence (12). Such favour is viewed wholly in terms of the Sinai alliance (9b), the outcome of their deliverance from Egyptian bondage (13) (1990: 78).

It is quite significant that *shālôm* is an element in Israel’s eschatological expectation (see Is 2:2ff; Zech 9:9-10). In fact, “prince of peace” is one of the messianic titles precisely because the Messiah is the one who grants and guarantees enduring peace (see Is 9:6-7; Mic 5:5).

It is worth noting that the Old Testament does not refer to inner peace. As G. Von Rad has said:

An interesting point is that for all its wealth of meaning in the OT *shālôm* nowhere denotes specifically an attitude of inward peace. *Shālôm* always finds external manifestation, and in its most common use it is a social rather than an individual term (1988: 208).

2.2. In the New Testament *eirēnē* is the term for peace. It is at first used in greetings (see Mk 5:34; Js 3:16; Jn

“development is the new name for peace”. He explains:

Excessive economic, social and cultural inequalities among peoples arouse tensions and conflicts, and are a danger to peace. As We said to the Fathers of the Council when We returned from Our journey of peace to the United Nations: “The condition of the peoples in process of development ought to be the object of our consideration; or better: our charity for the poor in the world – and there are multitudes of them – must become more considerate, more active, more generous”. To wage war on misery and to struggle against injustice is to promote, along with improved conditions, the human and spiritual progress of all men, and therefore the common good of humanity. Peace cannot be limited to a mere absence of war, the result of an ever precarious balance of forces. No, peace is something that is built up day after day, in the pursuit of an order intended by God, which implies a more perfect form of justice among men.

Paul VI has a comprehensive understanding of development. He articulates the Christian vision of development:

In the design of God, every man is called upon to develop and fulfil himself, for every life is a vocation. At birth, everyone is granted, in germ, a set of aptitudes and qualities for him to bring to fruition. Their coming to maturity, which will be the result of education received from the environment and personal efforts, will allow each man to direct himself toward the destiny intended for him by his Creator. Endowed with intelligence and freedom, he is responsible for his fulfilment as he is for his salvation (*PP* 15).

What the pope advocates is the total development of each person and all persons.

2.5. Pope John Paul II is a tireless champion of peace who has dealt with the theme of peace often and at some length. Like his predecessors, John Paul II sees a close connection between justice and peace. In his Message for the World Day of Peace, issued in December 1997, the Pope states:

Justice goes hand in hand with peace and is permanently and actively linked to peace. Justice and peace seek the good of one and all, and for this reason they demand order and truth. When one is threatened, both falter; when justice is offended, peace is also placed in jeopardy. . . Justice and peace are not abstract concepts or remote ideals. They are values which dwell, as a common patrimony, in the heart of every individual. Individuals, families, communities and nations all are called to live in justice and to work for peace. No one can claim exemption from this responsibility (1997: 467).

John Paul II believes that justice is rooted in love and “finds its most significant expression in mercy”. Hence, justice, “if separated from merciful love, becomes cold and cutting” (1997: 467). On the other hand,

Justice is an active and life-giving virtue: It defends and promotes the inestimable dignity of every human person and is concerned for the common good insofar as it is the guardian of relations between individuals and peoples. No one, in fact, ever lives in isolation. From the first moment of life, each human being exists in relationship to others in such a way that the good of the individual and the good of society go hand in hand. Between the two there exists a delicate balance (1997: 467).

The pope quotes with approval the following passage from United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (1997: 467).

John Paul II lays stress on the universality and indivisibility of human rights and calls in question the use of the argument of cultural specificity to justify the violations of human rights:

These distinctive features must be strongly reaffirmed in order to reject the criticisms of those who would use the argument of cultural specificity to mask violations of human rights and the criticisms of those who weaken the concept of human dignity by denying juridical weight to social, economic and cultural rights. Universality and indivisibility are two guiding principles which at the same time demand that human rights be rooted in each culture and that their juridical profile be strengthened so as to ensure that they are fully observed (1997: 468).

The pope pleads for justice in a world on the way to globalization. International efforts are necessary to promote a sense of responsibility for the welfare of all. As he points out:

The challenge, in short, is to ensure a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalisation. This is a clear duty in justice, with serious moral implications in the organisation of the economic, social, cultural and political life of nations. . . If the aim is globalization without marginalisation, we can no longer tolerate a world in which there live side

by side the immensely rich and the miserably poor (1997: 468).

2.6. In his Message for the World Day of Peace, issued in December 1996, John Paul II underlines the importance of forgiveness in our pursuit of peace. He realizes that "there are many factors which can help restore peace while safeguarding the demands of justice and human dignity". But he is convinced that forgiveness is the most basic factor:

But no process of peace can ever begin unless an attitude of sincere forgiveness takes root in human hearts. When such forgiveness is lacking, wounds continue to fester, fueling in the younger generation endless resentment, producing a desire for revenge and causing fresh destruction. Offering and accepting forgiveness is the essential condition for making the journey towards authentic and lasting peace (1996: 169).

The pope knows that many individuals, groups and nations find it difficult to forgive because of the situation of injustice and oppression in which they are forced to live. Besides, there is the burden of history:

History carries with it a heavy burden of violence and conflict which cannot easily be shed. Abuses of power, oppression and wars have brought suffering to countless human beings and, even if the causes of these sad events are lost in the distant past, their destructive effects live on, fueling fear, suspicion, hatred and division among families, ethnic groups and whole peoples (1996: 170-171).

That is why individuals and peoples need a "healing of memories".

This does not mean that they have to forget past events. Rather, they have to learn to look at them in a new way. Instead of remaining prisoners of the past, they have to recover their freedom to forgive. As the pope says: "The deadly cycle of revenge must be replaced by the new-found liberty of forgiveness" (1996: 171).

John Paul II believes that truth and justice are prerequisites for forgiveness. As he points out:

The evil which has been done must be acknowledged and as far as possible corrected. It is precisely this requirement which has led to the establishment in various parts of the world of appropriate procedures for ascertaining the truth regarding crimes between ethnic groups or nations, as a first step towards reconciliation (1996: 173).

And justice is the other essential requisite for forgiveness: "Forgiveness neither eliminates nor lessens the need for the reparation which justice requires, but seeks to reintegrate individuals and groups into society, and states into the community of nations" (1996: 173).

According to John Paul II, it is through their experience of God's forgiveness that humans are enabled to forgive: "God's forgiveness becomes in our hearts an inexhaustible source of forgiveness in our relationships with one another, helping us to live together in true brotherhood" (1996: 170).

In his efforts to promote peace in the world, the pope makes two other significant points. The first one is the need for the preservation ecological balance. He calls attention to the growing aware-

ness among people today "that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustice among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of *due respect for nature*" (1989: 200). Hence, he feels that there is an urgent need for solidarity and co-operation among the nations of the world in order to preserve the integrity of creation (1989: 204).

The second point is the importance of intercultural dialogue as a step towards the establishment of peace and harmony among the peoples of the world. John Paul II is convinced that dialogue between cultures is "an intrinsic demand of human nature itself as well as of culture". Hence, he declares:

Dialogue leads to a recognition of diversity and opens the mind to the mutual acceptance and genuine collaboration demanded by the human family's basic vocation to unity. As such, dialogue is a privileged means for building the civilisation of love and peace that my revered predecessor Pope Paul VI indicated as the ideal to inspire cultural, social, political and economic life in our time. At the beginning of the Third Millennium, it is urgent that the path of dialogue be proposed once again to a world marked by excessive conflict and violence, a world at times discouraged and incapable of seeing signs of hope and peace (2000).

2.7. From what has been said so far it is clear that to work for peace and reconciliation is central to the mission of the Church. For the Church exists in order to carry on the saving work of Jesus under the guidance of the Spirit. And his saving work is interpreted in

the New Testament as reconciliation and peace-making. According to Paul, God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to himself (see 2 Cor 5: 18-21). The Letter to the Ephesians points out that Jesus Christ brought about peace and reconciliation not only between God and humans, but also among humans. For he broke down the wall of hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles (see Eph 2: 13-16). And the letter to the Colossians tells us that the work of reconciliation extends to the whole of creation since “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). Hence, it is an essential part of the Church’s mission to work for peace and reconciliation.

There is another way of looking at this. It is generally held today that the Kingdom of God was central to the life and ministry of Jesus (see Soares-Prabhu. 1981: 584). According to Vatican II, the Church has received the mission to proclaim and establish among all peoples the Kingdom of God (LG 5). Peace is one of the parameters of the Kingdom (see Rom 14:17). It is also one of the fruits of the Spirit. When a person is touched and transformed by the saving God, he/she will be at peace. The Church led by the Spirit has to endeavour to establish peace within and among humans. As John Paul II has stated:

Jesus not only taught his disciples the duty to forgive, but He also intended His Church to be the sign and instrument of His plan of reconciliation, making her the sacrament “of intimate union with God, and of the unity of

all humanity.” In the light of this responsibility, St. Paul described the apostolic ministry as the “ministry of reconciliation” (cf. 2 Cor 5: 18-20). But in a certain sense every baptized person must consider himself a “minister of reconciliation” since, having been reconciled with God and the brethren, he is called to build peace with the power of truth and justice (1996: 174).

3. Practical Implications

I shall now briefly discuss some of the steps the Church in India should take in order to promote peace and harmony in our country.

3.1. The Church in India needs to take more seriously the option for the poor and take concrete steps to alleviate poverty and misery in India. Sad to say, during the last decade there has been both in the Church and in the country a noticeable slackening of the efforts to remove poverty. This needs to be rectified. As it is quite clear that the process of globalization tends to increase poverty we need to join hands with those who take a stand against its harmful effects. What we should advocate is globalization without exclusion, without injustice. Let us be realistic. As long as more than 400 million of our people are deprived of their basic needs, there will be tensions and conflicts in our country. We shall not experience real peace.

3.2. We need to foster interreligious dialogue and collaboration as a means to promote peace. More than 35 years ago, Vatican II declared:

Since God the Father is the origin and purpose of all men, we are all called to be brothers. Therefore, if we have

been summoned to the same destiny, which is both human and divine, we can and we should work together without violence and deceit in order to build up the world in genuine peace (GS 92).

This is particularly relevant to us in India today, where vested interests are using religion to foment discord, ill feeling and hatred. Every religious tradition has rich resources to foster peace among people. If the followers of different religions were to pool together these resources, they can become an immense force for peace in our country.

Speaking of the need for a firm determination to remove every obstacle to achieving peace, pope John Paul II says:

Here, the various religions can make an important contribution, as they have often done in the past, by speaking out against war and bravely facing the consequent risks. But are not all of us called to do still more, by drawing upon the genuine patrimony of our religious traditions? (1996: 171-172).

3.3. The Church in India has to join hands with all subaltern groups – the Dalits, the tribal people and women – in their struggle for liberation and justice. For centuries, the Dalits have been victims of oppression. In recent years violence against them has grown. The tribal people, too, are subjected to various forms of injustice. In his Republic Day eve address on 25 January, 2001, President K R. Narayanan said that ‘large river valley projects’ and mining projects were causing ‘untold misery’ to the tribal people. He also suggested that male prejudices were holding the

Women’s Reservation Bill (2000:1). It is necessary for the Church to collaborate with all movements and associations working for the liberation and empowerment of the subaltern groups if she wishes to make a contribution to peace in our land.

3.4. The Church in India should take up the ministry of reconciliation in a big way. Recently John Paul II asked the bishops and priests of the Church to be instruments of peace and reconciliation “not only in the ecclesial community, but also in civil society where nationalistic and ethnic conflicts are raging” (1996: 175). He also appealed to all “the members of the Church to devote themselves in an active and practical way to the work of reconciliation” (1996: 173). In the conflictual situation of India today, the appeal of the pope has great urgency. It is well known that Christian churches have played a crucial role in the establishment of peace in Mizoram. With our network of parishes and other institutions spread all over the country, the churches can make a significant contribution to peace in the Northeast, in Kashmir and other troubled parts of our country. So, too, we can be agents of reconciliation among the different religious communities in India. Renouncing all suspicion and hatred, the followers of various religious can open a new chapter in their relationship to one another. Will the Church take initiative in fostering this new relationship.

In order to do so credibly the Church needs to adopt a new approach

to its mission. Instead of concentrating on its numerical expansion, the Church should devote all her energies to the establishment of God's Kingdom of love, justice and peace. Only then will it be able to respond to its vocation to be an agent of reconciliation and peace in our country.

References

Conclusions:

- 2000 "Conclusions of the Research Seminar: 'A Vision of Mission for the New Millenium'" in *Ishvani Documentation and Mission Digest*, 18 (Jan-April 2000)1, pp. 109-119.

Faley, R.J.:

- 1990 "Commentary on the Book of Leviticus" in R.E. Brown and Others, eds. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Eaglewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Inc..

Foerster, W.:

- 1985 "Eirēnē in the NT" in Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp. 209-210.

Gosh, J.:

- 1999 "Perceptions of Difference: The Economic Underpinnings, in K.N. Panikkar, ed., *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, New Delhi: Viking.

Paul II, Pope John :

- 1989 "Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace" in *The Pope Speaks*, 35(1990), pp. 200-206.
 1996 "Message for the 1997 World Day of Peace" in *the Pope Speaks*, 42 (1997) pp. 169-176.
 1997 "Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace" in *Origens*, 27(1997)25, pp. 467-470.
 2000 "Message for 2001 World Day of Peace" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 20-27 December, 2000, pp. 10-12.

John XXIII, Pope:

- 1963 *Pacem in Terris*.

Leon-Dufour, X, ed.:

- 1967 *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, London: Geoffrey Chapmans.

McKenzie, J.:

- 1968 *Dictionary of the Bible*, London: Geoffrey Chaptman.

Paul IV, Pope:

- 1967 *Popularum Prograssio*.

Soares-Prabhu, G.

- 1981 "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society", in D.S. Amalorpavadass ed., *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore: NBCLC, pp. 576-608.

The Indian Express, Pune Edition, 2000 January 26, p. 1.

Von Rad, G.:

- 1985 "*Shālôm* in the OT" in G. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp. 207-208.

jnaanam

Science and Religion in Interaction

Gone are the days when science and religion were considered antagonistic to each other! Today more and more scientists are in dialouge with religion. Theologians and scientists search together to discover the answers to the perennial issues of humanity.

***Jnaanam* is a free, moderated, web-based discussion group which fosters such creative interaction between science and religion from an Indian perspective. You will get about one mail per week in your mailbox which deals with issues relating science to religion. You are welcome to join the discussion group. Send a plain email to: *religion@scientist.com*. No spam at all!**

URL: [Http://jnaanam.homepage.com](http://jnaanam.homepage.com)