

Christ, the Suffering God of the Sub-Continent

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Abstract: “Who” is Jesus Christ? is a deeper question. It refers to the mystery of Christ and to the mystery of the one who raises the question. Both the answers, one referring to his identification and the other referring to his identity are needed. The first one cannot but be contextual. The second one too, though universal and absolute cannot escape the limitations of historical, social, cultural and philosophical terms which are used to articulate it.

This identity of Christ as the God who suffers in the least, last and the lost as well as in those who create systems of oppression as they are dehumanizing themselves is a radically new revelation of God in the cross of Jesus. Therefore, any spiritualization of the cross without revealing a God who suffers with humans who suffer and that does not demand a radical commitment to the integral transformation of society would empty the cross of its absolute significance. It is the Christ who suffers who resurrects in those people and movements that strive for a better human life. A meaningful and transforming experience of Jesus Christ and a relevant proclamation about him and his Kingdom values in the Indian Sub-continent calls for a Christology of a suffering Christ.

Keywords: Christology, suffering, suffering Christ, Indian scenario, Kingdom of God.

The fundamental question, “who is Jesus Christ?”, can be answered in two ways. It can be answered by referring to his functions and the identification marks that separate him from others. This answer will single him out from all others. By identifying him as Jesus of Nazareth

we can speak of his uniqueness. For example, we can show how he is different from other mediators and saviours and how his claims are unique and how his life and teachings are different from those of other teachers and prophets. But Jesus' identity is different. It answers the question "who" is Jesus Christ. It is a deeper question. It refers to the mystery of Christ and to the mystery of the one who raises the question. Both the answers, one referring to his identification and the other referring to his identity are needed. The first one cannot but be contextual. The second one too, though universal and absolute cannot escape the limitations of historical, social, cultural and philosophical terms which are used to articulate it.

The problem with Christology has always been that of confusing the identification of Jesus Christ with his identity or mixing them up or separating them from each other by absolutizing one or the other. Any identification of him, however meaningful in one context for centuries, need not necessarily be meaningful in another context. Jesus Christ must be proclaimed in such a way that his identity is encountered. For Christ's sake we may have to give up some of his identifications, which are culturally conditioned, in order that people may encounter his identity and be transformed. It is a difficult task.. It is a call to encounter him in one's life-situation and identify him in the *logoi* of the context.

Nowhere does the identity of Jesus Christ become so universally felt and his *inclusive transcendence* become so real and decisive as in the struggle of the suffering millions of the sub-continent for a fuller life, for unfolding their God-given humanity. Here it is not the image of a triumphant Pantocrator, or Christ the King, or a cultic figure of Christ or any such identification that attracts many who seek liberation from their misery and misfortune to encounter him. The Hindus have much more fascinating, strong and comely images of gods and goddesses. But a God who suffers, Jesus on the cross, is something that touches the Indian mind, especially of the poor and the marginalized deeply.

The Jesus Christ of the Indian subcontinent cannot be identified with a triumphant Messiah whom nobody is expecting. He is discovered by the poor in their struggles for a fuller humanity as the poor of Jesus'



time discovered in him the compassionate love of God. Ashok Mehta, a former Union minister of India, challenged Christians to prove their commitment to Jesus Christ by their concerted action for the liberation of the poor. He says: "If it is the claim of the Christians that even to this day they feel the agony of Christ on the cross whenever humanity suffers as it were, it has to be proved in action and not by any statement."

'The real Jesus speaks up in the suffering of the poor, the oppressed dalits, tribals, the bonded-labourers, the deprived children and the discriminated women. They are not a minority. They are not just statistics. They are millions of humans with their own unique personal history. They are men and women with flesh and blood going through meaningless suffering because the system created by the oppressors will not let them be what they are and become what they are called to become. The traditional discrimination against the lower castes, the outcasts, the tribals, women, the economically poor classes, the poor and orphaned children is worsened with the advent of globalization. Globalization and the new market-forces have helped the middle class and the rich to enjoy further the benefits of modern science and technology. The poor have become dispensable. They are not needed. Their survival, let alone their unfolding of themselves by their unique participation in sustaining life in this world through their work, is not the concern of those who make economic policies and political decisions. The worst aspect of the poverty that is experienced by the poor is that it does not let them live as dignified humans. In the Indian context with class and caste discriminations the suffering is doubled for the poor people of lower castes and outcasts and still worse for women of these groups.

I. The Advaita of Suffering

The way Jesus lived his life, his message and the consequence of his option for the poor during his life reveal his identification with all the oppressed and outcast people. There are many such prophets and reformers in the history of the world. Their cause may continue in history through their followers and admirers. These may be moved to follow the ideology of those great men and women and dedicate their lives to continue their ideology. But the God revealed through the Cross is a suffering God who suffers when human beings suffer because He

is absolute love and compassion. The Cross reveals that the suffering of humans and their world, whatever its causes be and whatever its forms be, affects God. It subverts the oriental affirmation about the impassibility of God. A strong resistance to acknowledging Jesus Christ as human by the Docetes and the Gnostics in the early Christian centuries was their refusal to accept the true meaning of the cross. We can see even in the New Testament the struggle of the early Christian community to come to terms with this radical revelation of God, as there is a tendency to an eventual mystification of the cross.

The God who became human in a situation that would not let God be human would not also let humans be human. It would condemn him to death for God's sake! But this god would be like the gods of the religions and systems which give more importance to anything other than humans. The Cross reveals a God who suffers. The Cross reveals a new *advaitam*, *because the suffering of humans cannot be separated from the suffering of God. They are not one but also not two. They are distinct but not separate.* So if suffering is a mode of God's being in relation to humans and the world, then should we not let it continue? No, that would be blasphemy! God's suffering is concerned with the unfolding of humans to become what they are called to become. Therefore, systems and structures that prevent this process through oppression, injustice, dehumanization and violence are to be denounced and transformed. Any authentic struggle with consequent sufferings to create a Kingdom situation is always liberative and it is a participation in God's own cause for humans. Therefore, it is a way of reaffirming the divine image of communion in humans and thus alleviating God's own suffering.

II Christie Identity in Human Suffering

The Christic identity encountered in the suffering of humans was hitherto unknown in the history of the world. He continues to live in the history of his suffering people. Hence, the Christology of the poor is not an ontological Christology as traditionally understood, asking the questions about his being, or who he is in himself; or a functional Christology discussing about his functions, what he has done for them. It is a relational Christology, which includes both ontological and functional Christologies and yet transcends them. In this relational

Christology humans see their face in him and his face in them and thus they find meaning in their suffering. In this new and radical revelation that Christ suffers with them they experience empowerment in their struggles for a fuller humanity and thus they recognize him as the ultimate meaning of their life, as he is encountered as the beginning, the middle and the end of their lives.

It is a temptation to proclaim Christ in the Indian context as a powerful dispenser of divine favours to those who take refuge in him. He is presented as if he were competing with other gods and saints of popular religions to assert his supremacy. Christ seems to help them to forget their situation of pain and thus they are able to tolerate the tyranny of their misery. He would appear to be like the 'the Gold-Crowned Jesus' in the story of the Korean writer Kim Chi Ha (1978) who seems to understand the misery of the people but does not seem to be affected by it. He is beyond the history of the people. It makes no difference whether God had once entered human history or not, if this history does not continue to be a part of his divine life. He could have been worshipped in one name or another as other religions do, even though they do not believe in his entry into history for its transformation. He is the Christ of religion. He is just another god. He is not the real suffering Christ of the poor.

Many doctrinal statements can be made about this Christ. Humans can be subjugated in his name. Structures and institutions can be built to perpetuate his name to the advantage of his protagonists. He can be manipulated to justify both totalitarianism and terrorism. But he can also be captured by artists and sculptors to give visual satisfaction to those wretched men, women and children who are despised, humiliated and treated as the scum of society because they are poor and powerless. This Christ seems to be silent in the midst of such tragic experiences of real people in their real history of life. Kim Chi Ha portrays in his play, *The Gold-Crowned Jesus*, the struggle of the real Jesus to reveal that he is in the midst of the suffering of the poor. A leper looks at a cement statue of Jesus with a gold-crown and asks him penetrating questions about the situation of pain and misery which destroys millions of humans especially in Asia. The gold-crowned statue of Jesus is silent. Though the leper wanted a dialogue it proceeds as a monologue. Finally, he makes the discovery that this is not the real Jesus. The real Jesus

cannot remain passive and silent in the midst of such intolerable suffering caused by humans' inhumanity to humans. The leper shares his discovery with a fellow beggar who refuses to believe it at first and wants to know if the gold crowned cement Jesus is not the real Jesus, who then is the real Jesus. The leper knows only that the cement Jesus is not the real Jesus. Suddenly, to his astonishment and utter confusion the cement Jesus with a gold crown breaks his silence and speaks to him:

I have been closed up in this stone for a long, long time...entombed in this dark, lonely, suffocating prison. I have longed to talk to you, the kind and poor people like yourself, and share your suffering. I can't begin to tell you how long I have waited for this day....this day when I would be freed from my prison, this day of liberation when I would live and burn again as a flame inside you, inside the very depths of your misery. But now you have finally come. And because you have come close to me I can speak now. You are my rescuer.²

In the words of the cement Jesus the author re-captures the Jesus of the poor revealed in the New Testament. The real Jesus Christ is the one whose identity cannot be separated from the sufferings of the poor. He empowers them through his Spirit to insurrection and finally to the resurrection of their dignity as humans. This is the real Jesus Christ who suffers with all those who are denied the opportunities to unfold themselves as humans. In this real Jesus Christ one discovers the suffering and compassionate God. Reflecting on the dialogue between the leper and Jesus C. S. Song says: "The real Jesus and the people in suffering. The real Jesus and men and women striving for freedom and justice. The real Jesus and human persons longing for life, for eternal life. Jesus cannot be Jesus apart from such people. Jesus is not real unless he is with them in their daily struggle."³ According to Song the meaning of the real Jesus is revealed in what Jesus said to the leper. "Here is, then, a clue to the question of the real Jesus. Here is the secret of the historical Jesus. And here is an entry into the mystery of the 'messiah' who enables people to have faith in the God of love and compassion in the world of greed and selfishness."⁴

Only the real Jesus of the poor can identify himself with the suffering humanity of the sub-continent in their struggles and tragic

experience of failures in the face of repressive social, political and economic systems and powers. So the suffering people reveal the real Jesus and Jesus the human can reveal the fullness of God as compassionate (suffering with) love as he did when he lived among the poor and the outcasts of his time in Palestine and died on the cross revealing who God is.

The poor who reveal the real Jesus include all those who are deprived of the basic necessities of life, namely, food, shelter, clothing and at least a minimum recognition of them as human persons with dignity. These poor, the hungry and thirsty, the naked, the sick, the homeless and the unjustly imprisoned are the vicars of Jesus (Mt 25: 34-40). To encounter them is to encounter the One whose identity cannot be separated from the suffering poor and the persons who reach out to them.

Does not such a suffering Jesus of the poor inspire them to accept oppression and injustice with passivity and resignation? The history of the rapid spread of Christianity in the Roman Mediterranean world, it is argued, was the result of a revolt of the oppressed, both slaves and women who claimed equality as the members of the Body of Christ. Julie. M. Hopkins says:

It would appear, then, that the earliest Christian proclamation of a suffering prophet of God and the scandal of the cross, prompted social and even revolutionary impulses. The identification through analogy of persecuted early Christians with their suffering Jesus did not lead to masochism, dependency or powerlessness....meditation upon a suffering Jesus-messiah prompted solidarity in the face of suffering, resistance to unnecessary suffering and strategies to survive through hope in a new liberated future.⁵

If commitment to and identification with the suffering prophetic image of Christ can inspire such an unleashing of the liberative potential of the people, how much more will the revelation that God in Christ suffers with the poor, the down-trodden, the marginalized and the discriminated ones? A one-sided projection of Jesus Christ as a revolutionary prophet or social reformer on the one hand or to proclaim him as a God who is different from other gods but yet needs to be approached with cult and worship as is done to other

gods and goddess on the other hand, is to destroy 'the power and the wisdom' of the Cross.

The Christ of the Sub-continent continues to suffer as he would anywhere in the world when humans are prevented from unfolding their vocation to become truly humans. His blood continues to 'mingle with the blood of the Sudras, Dalits, tribals,' bonded-labourers, women who are exploited and raped, discriminated and discarded and paraded naked, victims of religious bigotry and fanaticism, children who are forced to work in match-factories, stone quarries and tea stalls and many such oppressed and marginalized.

Conclusion

This identity of Christ as the God who suffers in the least, last and the lost as well as in those who create systems of oppression as they are dehumanizing themselves is a radically new revelation of God in the cross of Jesus. Therefore, any spiritualization of the cross without revealing a God who suffers with humans who suffer and that does not demand a radical commitment to the integral transformation of society would empty the cross of its absolute significance. It is the Christ who suffers who resurrects in those people and movements that strive for a better human life. A meaningful and transforming experience of Jesus Christ and a relevant proclamation about him and his Kingdom values in the Indian Sub-continent calls for a Christology of a suffering Christ.

Notes

- 1 K. Dockhorn, "Christ in Hinduism as Seen in the Recent Indian Theology," *Religion and Society* 21 (December, 1974): 40.
- 2 Kim Chi Ha, *The Gold-Crowned Jesus and Other Writings* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978) : 121- 122; C. S. Song, *Jesus the Crucified People* (Minneapolis, 1996) p. 11.

- 3 C. S. Song, p.11.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 5 Hopkins, J.M., Towards a *Feminist Christology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publ.Co., 1994), p. 53.

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