

## Dharma of Jesus - A Feminist Perspective

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4282241  
Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4282241>

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**Abstract:** Beginning with the polyvalent meaning of the word *dharma*, the author connects it to the Trinitarian relations on the one hand and the statistically demonstrable dehumanization of women on the other. She make her case for siding with women on the basis Jesus' own approach and the teachings of the Church. She advocates the capability approach as appropriate for empowering women in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** Trinitarian roots of dharma; women's marginalization; Jesus and women; women in the Church, capability approach.

### Introduction

The inexorableness of addressing theological themes from a perspective, especially from the perspective of those on the underside of history is increasingly evident. This is because the category of the disadvantaged is generally human-made: the underprivileged emerge due to the fact of having been divested of their dignity and shoved into an abject state. The section comprises a large number and the globalized world causes its swift engorgement. Theological reflection on such issues is hoped to generate optimism towards restoring the divested dignity and attaining life in its fullness.

Dignity is understood as not an acquired quality of human being which could be won and lost. Rather, dignity is innate, i.e., human beings are born with dignity. It also means that one is not discriminated against or humiliated on the grounds of wealth, caste, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, or sex. Dignity is further linked to the concept of autonomy, defined in terms of the freedom an individual seeks from multiple structures of domination.

Given the reality of discrimination in our world at various levels and spheres, this paper delves into the theological category of the '*Dharma* of Jesus', linking it to the reality of sexual inequality. In line with the significance of the *Rg-Vedic* concept of *dharma*, we investigate Jesus' way of life or his *dharma* in the context of women's marginalization and even exclusion. We conclude with some proposals to reclaim the dignity of women as the children of God, as God's own image and likeness.

## 1. *Dharma* – Significance

The concept '*dharma*' has been one of the most powerful and influential terms in the Indian thought and society for several millennia, dating from the Vedic times. It is a basic principle around which different religious, social, and political institutions are developed; precisely because of this the concept has been perceived and employed diversely in history of the Indian and the Hindu society. In accordance with our theme, we adhere to and employ the etymological, ethical, and religious sense of the word.

Etymologically, the term *Dharma* derives from the Sanskrit *dhr* meaning 'to uphold', 'to support', 'to carry', 'to sustain', and 'to protect'.<sup>1</sup> The sense supplied by the term '*dhr*' can be understood as providing the ethical significance of the concept of *dharma*. Various sources support this claim. They define *dharma* as ordinance, usage, duty, responsibility, right justice, moral obligation, righteousness, virtue, good works, and function.<sup>2</sup> W. K. Mahony puts it succinctly by stating that the characteristic essence of *dharma* is 'correctness' both in a descriptive (the way things are) and in a prescriptive (the way things should be) sense<sup>3</sup>. This can be taken as a reference to ones' 'being' and 'doing'. As such, *dharma* as a principle upholds and sustains an individual/community/universe in its wholeness, i.e., in cosmic and transcendental dimensions.

The two dimensions, the transcendental dimension in particular, further signifies the religious aspect of the concept of *dharma*. As a matter of fact, the Indic languages translate the term 'religion' as *dharma*. The word 'religion' derives from the Latin *religare*, meaning 'to bind'<sup>4</sup> or to bond. The idea may reflect a concept prominent in biblical literature. Israel was said to be in a 'covenant' relationship with its God (Yahweh). In a sense, the nation was 'covenanted' or 'bonded' to the deity<sup>5</sup>. The binding is two-fold: God bonding or binding Godself to us<sup>6</sup> and we binding ourselves to God.

The bonding emerging by way of our analysis of the religious dimension of *dharma* unfolds several significant facets. Complying with the theme of the paper and attempting to realize its significance, we investigate two aspects, namely, the nucleus of the binding and the object of the binding.

The nucleus of the binding is God. The God to whom we bond ourselves is the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. According to T. J. Scirghi, the Triune name is an expression of the intimate unity and relationship of the Three.<sup>7</sup> The notion of *perichoresis*, a word roughly translated as 'interpenetration' or 'permeation without confusion', describes the relationship of the three Persons as 'the dynamic activity of exchange in which Persons are who they are because of their relation to each other'. Between the Father and the Son there exists such a dynamic activity of exchange, a love which opens up through the Holy Spirit towards the whole of creation.<sup>8</sup> In other words, God is never in solitude and never static but engages in an eternal communion. Leonardo Boff explains this divine communion in terms of a mystery of 'inclusion' – the three opening the divine community to the outside and inviting human beings to share in their community and life<sup>9</sup> This concerns God's life with

human beings and human beings' life with each other. In sum, in the mutual relationship of the three persons of the Godhead, we find both the model for a human community and the task to build community.

Binding oneself to God entails an objective, a mission. More specifically, it is a binding in view of those who suffer.<sup>10</sup> Ignacio Ellacuria, a liberation theologian unfolds a related and profound component of the binding, namely, the link between the suffering Christ and the suffering/poor people:

The reality of the historically crucified people remains constant although the historical forms of the crucifixion are different. That people are the historical continuation of the servant of Yahweh, whose humanity is still being disfigured by the sin of the world, whom the powers of this world are still stripping of everything, taking away everything including his life.<sup>11</sup>

The inflicted suffering did not cow down Jesus, rather he emerged victorious. This is the reality of the Paschal Mystery. Just as Jesus has come out triumphant from his death, so too the suffering people (women) would triumph; their history of suffering provides them great authority. This is because God's own authority is acquired precisely in God's suffering [because of and in fighting against evil powers], in God's crucifixion, in God's sharing the burden and fate of the suffering people and in God's resurrection in and through Jesus Christ. This refers to a more powerful participation in Christ's Paschal mystery, his passion, death, and saving Resurrection.

The analysis of *dharma* from the ethical and religious perspective expounds the fact that *dharma* bonds and sustains an individual and community at the cosmic and transcendental

level, not just physically, but also on the level of ‘meaning’, which generates a sense of identity. The sense of identity comes into view as one relates to every being in a ‘specific manner’ and enjoins a ‘specific behaviour towards every being’. In other words, one’s identity is manifested through the principle of ‘being’ and ‘doing’.<sup>12</sup> The two elucidations – ‘being’ and ‘action’ – that emerged from the analysis of *dharma* endorse assuming the responsibility for creating a community of equals by paying attention to the excluded of our society. The Trinitarian analysis of the concept of *dharma* has endorsed and insisted on the necessity of including the excluded. The second person of the Trinity, Jesus, has embodied in himself the task of establishing equality by restoring the dignity of human beings. In other words, he has translated his ‘being’ into ‘action’. Soares-Prabhu – whose reflection on the theological category of the ‘*dharma* of Jesus’ is under consideration – validates this claim by the notion of the ‘*Dharma* of Jesus’. An analysis of this thought follows.

## 2. The *Dharma* of Jesus

Soares-Prabhu maintains the *dharma* Jesus as “that complex blend of worldviews and values, of beliefs and prescriptions ... [which] binds and holds together the followers of Jesus, and integrates them into recognizable community”.<sup>13</sup> This description enunciates clearly the above analysis – the religious and ethical dimensions of the concept *dharma* or the ‘being’ and ‘doing’ of Jesus, the need to heed to the cry of the suffering people, and build community with them. Jesus’ life (being) is grounded on and determined by his experience of God’s unconditional love. An experience of God as loving father, *Abba* constitutes his foundational experience.<sup>14</sup> His ministry (doing) is a sustained attempt to evoke this experience in his disciples and in the crowd through word and deed.<sup>15</sup> This is because he had realized that the experience of God as Father has as its inseparable

obverse in the experience of human beings as brothers/sisters, as *Nostra Aetate* states it, “The relation of man and woman to God the Father, and their relation to their fellow human beings, are linked” (NA, 5).<sup>16</sup> A profound experience of God as Love, guides Jesus to realize his responsibility towards his brothers and sisters. In the light of our analysis on the Trinitarian dimension of *dharma*, we call it the responsibility of ‘inclusion’. In point of fact, the subject of *dharma* comes to the fore in a context of decadence caused by *adharma*. *Bhagavad Gîtâ* asserts that Lord *Srî Krishna* himself takes initiative to re-establish *dharma* by coming to this world.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Women as the ‘Marginalized’ of History

*Adharma*, decadence, exclusion is an undeniable reality of our world. People are excluded and discriminated on account of wealth, caste, creed, culture, language, and sex. As victims of inequality, they demand building a community of equals. Corresponding to the theme of this paper, we delve briefly on women, a substantial category of the excluded in general and the victims of sexual inequality in particular. A few figures on the reality validate the claim.

The current population of India is 1.27 billion. According to the United Nations Development Report (UNDP) 2014, India ranks 135 in a list of 187 countries. This is because almost half of the total number of her populace is in a catastrophic state, or rather has been shoved into that state.<sup>18</sup> The position of India in Gender Development Index (GDI) is 135 out of 148 countries.<sup>19</sup> In ‘State of the World’s Mothers (SOWM) 2014’, India ranks 137 out of 178 countries.<sup>20</sup> Few more alarming figures further substantiate the claim. The total per capita of India is ₹ 3,708.00; woman’s per capita income is 29.1 per cent.<sup>21</sup> Seventy eight per cent of rural women are engaged in agriculture, compared to 63

per cent men. However, the wage gap is dismal: men are paid 103.00 per day, while women are paid 55.00. The male literacy rate in India is 82.14 and the female literacy rate is 65.46.<sup>22</sup> According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), every day 93 women are being raped in India.<sup>23</sup> Presently (2014), only 66/543 of the *Lok Sabha* (Lower House of Parliament) seats are held by women.

The Indian scenario regarding the situation of women can be best expressed by the axiom, 'wasted lives'. Zigmunt Bauman coined it to describe the situation of the marginalized in our world. "The 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay on in the mainstream"<sup>24</sup> Feminism as the 'advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of sexes', which entails organized activity in support of women's rights and interests, claims rectification of the situation. It means obtaining full humanity for women and their equality with men. Having blended perfectly well the love of God and neighbour, the excluded in particular, Jesus not only strove towards restoring the dignity of women, he also celebrated their existence.

#### **4. Jesus' View of Women**

Jesus' unusual relationship with women ought to be viewed against his setting. The milieu of Jesus was extremely discriminatory and oppressive towards women. Woman had been a property of man, which he could use and abuse at his fancy. As she was totally in his control, a married man could divorce his wife at will and take another woman. Outside sexual relationship, man could hardly imagine any type of adult relationship with a woman. Besides, a man should shun any public contact with women. The attitude towards women can be depicted through a set of references that display the Jewish views of women during the time of Jesus.

“Any iniquity is small compared to a woman’s iniquity.... From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die” (Sirach 25:19, 24). “Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; it is woman who brings shame and disgrace” (Sirach 42:14). According to Josephus, the Jewish-Roman historian, “The woman is inferior to the man in every way”.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to this Jewish setting of his time, Jesus assumed his responsibility for the ‘inclusion’ of the excluded.

His *Abba* experience guided him to adopt the cause of women in a unique manner. Women were his friends and equal companions. The episode on Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11:1-45) depicts this fact powerfully. In accepting women as equals, he addressed an oppressive system of his day – annulling the liberty of man to divorce a woman at his will and take another woman (Mt 5:31-32). He clarified that marriage is mutually binding on both men and women. He negated the idea that only women had to be dedicated to men in and through marriage.

Advancing a step further he openly defended women who had ill-repute as prostitutes (Jn 8:1-11; Lk 7:36-50). His gesture demonstrates that in an act of adultery or prostitution, both the man and woman stand equally accused or equally vindicated. Jesus accepted Mary Magdalene, the converted woman, to minister to him, despite her past life. She, in turn has evidenced beyond doubt that a woman experiencing equality and dignity is a deeply committed disciple....

He established powerfully a sense of filial and maternal relationship when he entrusted his mother to his disciple (Jn 19:26-27). He also demonstrated remarkable trust in women when he entrusted his apostles to the care of his mother. Having known fully well the capacity and power of women to minister to the needs of the Kingdom of God – especially in and through him



and his band of apostles – he allowed them to follow him (Lk 8:2-3). He transformed the ill-reputed Samaritan woman to be his missionary in the Samaritan village. Thus, he provided a public social space for women. This was certainly revolutionary for his times.

We need to take note of the approach of women towards Jesus in responding to him. In a male-dominated society, women take courage to approach him (Lk 7:36-50). They dare to stand beneath the Cross (Jn 19:25). They involve themselves fully in the process of liberation that Jesus was striving to achieve for them. Their companionship with Jesus has been a liberating experience; it bestowed on them a public social place to live in dignity, self-respect, and a sense of equality. The ability of Jesus to be sensitive to the pain and suffering of others drew them towards him; in his presence, they felt totally accepted, respected, and dignified.<sup>26</sup>

Disaffiliating himself from the conventions of his discriminatory society that even disdained women, Jesus showered on them respect, dignity, equality; he also availed them an opportunity to respond to such a relationship. He crafted a new set of values to challenge the archaic customs, which would liberate women to live in a totally new way – celebrating their existence as God's image and likeness. To be precise, he assumed his responsibility of 'inclusion' in an exceptional manner. In fact, the task has objectively taken place at the incarnation of the Son of God, when God as Trinitarian community entered into human history, making it possible to eliminate the barriers of distinction and to create a community of equals.<sup>27</sup>

## **5. The Stance of the Church on Dignity of Women**

In an attempt to follow Jesus in his footsteps, the Church has asserted the God-given fundamental rights of all human

persons and the human dignity of women. The magisterium has declared it as follows:

It is obvious to everyone that women are now taking a part in public life ... Since women are becoming more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as inanimate objects or mere instruments, but claim, both in domestic and in public life, the rights and duties that befit a human person (Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 41).

True, all men are not alike from the point of view of varying physical power and the diversity of intellectual and moral resources. Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet universally honoured. Such is the case of woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men (*Gaudium et Spes*, 29).

It is an undeniable fact that exceptional excerpts such as these, proclaiming the dignity of women, often remain mere assumptions. Pope Francis has taken a few concrete measures to translate them into the action. On 13 September 2014, he appointed Sr Luiza Premoli as the first woman member of the *Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*. Currently, a greater number of women are members of the *International Theological Commission*. Hailing from diverse locales, vocations, charisms, they constitute sixteen percent of the

Commission's members. He has pointed out that 'the feminine presence in the church has not been emphasized much because the temptation of chauvinism has not allowed for the place that belongs to the woman of the community to be made very visible'.<sup>28</sup> He has underlined that the 'Church leadership and outreach must be rooted in the pursuit of holiness and always attentive to the dignity of each human being'.<sup>29</sup>

However, a woman's role continues to be defined restrictively. During his second Wednesday general audience on 03 April 2014, the Pope said that women's main role in the Church is to communicate God's love. When asked about another controversial topic, the possibility of women cardinals, the Pope was quick to point to the problematic assumption underlying the question: "Women in the Church must be valued, not 'clericalized'. Whoever is thinking (about) women cardinals suffers a bit from clericalism".<sup>30</sup> An assertion of A. Bharti seems to be in place: "Only a leadership that has imbibed a broad vision and a willingness to delve into the root causes of the problems of inequality will be able to solve them permanently".<sup>31</sup> M. Shanti points out that a claim for full humanity and equality for women pre-supposes inter-changeability of roles, i.e., equal access to authority and leadership roles. This means that all members of the community have access to spiritual power, and participation in communal decision-making process.<sup>32</sup> The table-fellowship the early church expressed such an egalitarian relationship among community of believers who consisted of women, tax-collectors, in slaves ... – people otherwise belonging to the category of 'wasted lives'. Having said this, it ought to be noted that the forward and sometimes backward movement by the Church is certainly a profound move toward considerable progress.

## 6. Feminist Perspective of the *Dharma* of Jesus: The Capability Approach

The ugly reality that women face – discrimination, exploitation, oppression, exclusion, a lack or even absence of full humanity and equality with men – renders a feminist perspective along the lines of the *dharma* of Jesus, not only necessary but also urgent. Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher-feminist from the USA spells out tangible measures in this regard. She articulates a completely new paradigm for establishing new universal human values, which she terms as ‘Human Capabilities’.<sup>33</sup> It refers to what people are actually *able to do and to be* – in a way informed by an intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being. A feminist perspective of human capabilities can be spelt out in the words of Joseph Gordon Levitt, the star of ‘Inception’ and several other movies. He asserts, “what feminism means to me is that you do not let your gender define you who you are – you can be who you want be, whether you are a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, whatever. Every person is unique”.<sup>34</sup> The following list provides a set of ‘Human Capabilities’ spelt out avidly and perfectly by Nussbaum:<sup>35</sup>

1) *Life*: Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living.

(2) *Bodily Health*: Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

(3) *Bodily Integrity*: Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

(4) *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*: Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice, religious, literary, musical capacity, and so forth; being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise and being able to have pleasurable experiences, and to avoid non-necessary pain.

5) *Emotions*: Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development).

(6) *Practical Reason*: Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about planning of one’s life (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience).

(7) *Affiliation*: This involves two factors (A): Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech). (B): Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to

that of others. This entails protections against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, caste, ethnicity, or national origin.

(8) *Other Species*: Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

(9) *Play*: Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

(10) *Control over one's Environment*: (A) Political: Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protection of free speech and association. (B) Material: Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods); having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. This also involves being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

Nussbaum maintains that capabilities in question should be pursued in accordance with *each person's capability*, based on the *principle of treating each person as end*. Women have all too often been treated as the supporters of the ends of others, rather than as ends in themselves; thus this principle has particular critical force with regard to women's lives. Moreover, the list that helps to assess gender inequalities has a specifically political conception namely, placing the 'central human capabilities' in the place of constitutional rights. Nussbaum is animated by the question, how governments might move from bestowing empty egal rights to making a real difference in women's lives. This means that central capabilities may not be infringed upon, to pursue other types of social advantage. While the presentation of capability approach includes several aspects, we would like to underline one facet, namely, the challenge it offers to involve actively in

policy-making and policy-implementing at the level of the government and the Church.

## 7. Relevance of the *Dharma* of Jesus for Women's Situation Today

Nussbaum not only proposes measures to reclaim the divested dignity of women, but also proposes legal measures, i.e., to place the central human capabilities in the place of constitutional rights. We are aware that 'enlightened state policies' alone do not transform the entrenched and dreadful patterns. In other words, we need to admit the futility of mere laws and courts to secure liberty without real change of heart in human beings. Justice Leonard Hand has expressed it vividly: "I often wonder if we do not rest our hopes too much on constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. Believe me, they are false hopes, liberty lies in the hearts of men [and women]; when it dies there is no court can do much to help it".<sup>36</sup> A change of heart or *metanoia*, which includes change of attitudes, is a pre-requisite in the task of restoring the dignity and equality of women, i.e., the task of acquiring full humanity for women.

Chetan Bhagat, a self-declared 'underage optimist' illuminates the subject matter. After watching the film *Mary Kom*, he analyzes the human-made role differentiation between men and women and reacts as follows: "It is time all this changes. ... It is about time we men bring a little bit of Mr. Mary Kom within us. ... If India has to move ahead, we have to optimize our resources". In exhorting the Indian husband to be supportive, he proposes three mantras:

One, Listen and see your wife as a human being first; not as woman, wife or your parent's daughter-in-law. Your wife is an individual. And Individuals have individual dreams, opinions, motivations, and points of view. You may or may not agree with all of them,

but are you at least aware of them? Your wife may want to reach the heights in her career, or she may want to completely be there for the kids, or perhaps she wants a good mix. Do you know what she wants? How are you helping her achieving that? Two, be fair in parenting responsibilities.... Three, strive to make your partner the best person they can possibly be. This need not just be career related. ... Is there a role you play in her life for achieving her dreams, even if it is patiently listening to her insecurities? ... A lot of being supportive is intuitive. However, it does take courage for an Indian man to truly be there for his wife. This is because our sexist society mocks men who back their wives, almost implying a sense of weakness in them. However, I hope the new Indian husband will not be so insecure. Being a supportive husband doesn't make you less of a man or hen-pecked or weak. It just makes you a better, cooler human being. And don't forget, any Mr Mary Kom is just as much of a champion as Mary Kom.<sup>37</sup>

While complying with the stance of Bhagat, we would like to underline three points. First, his counsel to 'Indian husbands can be extended to all unequal and oppressive spheres of life and sections of society; second, a demand for equality of women does not suggest wresting of the marginalized/excluded women with men but rather resisting the history wrought deeply with patriarchy and its perpetuating value system. Third, it assumes a conviction that both men and women are not codified as enemies but are complementary to each other. While reasserting the stance of Bhagat regarding the responsibility of men towards women in the words of a Cherokee proverb, "A man's highest calling is to protect woman so she is free to walk the earth unharmed", it



'seems fitting to underline the task of women towards men through another Cherokee proverb, "A woman's highest calling is to lead a man to his soul so as to unite him with source".

Whereas Bhagat proposes remedies concerning sexual inequality at the societal level, Nelle Morton a professor at the Harvard Divinity School devises an imaginatory exercise recommending remedies to the religious arena. Endeavouring at helping people realize how women feel in a sexist profession she asked her audience to imagine how they would feel and understand themselves and theology if the male-female roles were reversed: "Imagine Harvard Divinity School as a school with a long female theological tradition. All the professors except one are women, most of the students are women, and all of the secretaries are men. ... All language in such an institution has a distinctly feminine character'. 'Womankind' means all humanity; 'women' as generic word includes men (Jesus came to save all women). ... If a professor announces a course on 'the doctrine of women' or speaks about the 'motherhood of God', she of course does not want to exclude men".<sup>38</sup>

Women suffer inequality and exclusion at every level – social, economic, religious, cultural sexual.... When seen from the perspective of the suffering of Jesus, their suffering can be asserted as a profound participation in the Paschal mystery. Their affliction offers them the asserted as a profound participation in the Paschal mystery. Their affliction offers them the hope of resurrection. The Trinity offers both a model and the task for including the excluded. Being true to his *dharma*, Jesus has disposed of the systematic distinctions and built community of equals. The task is shared with everyone; it continues.....

## Conclusion

A feminist perspective of the *dharma* of Jesus is an appeal to be *dhârmic*, i.e., to dialogue with the otherness of the

other, which pre-supposes an attitudinal change. The lack and even absence of dignity women experience is certainly a crucial issue for discourse. Discounting the plea would amount to reducing the concern to mere indicators and benchmarks, managed and manipulated endlessly especially by the bureaucracy and leadership. Nevertheless, it ought to be noted that the question of full humanity for women and their equality with men, in other words, reclaiming their dignity as having been created in God's image and likeness should not only be a concern of those who are the victims of discrimination and persecution but also of everyone touched by the Dharma of Jesus. It calls for questioning the old foundations, exploring new possibilities and seeing the old problems in a new perspective.

### Notes:

1. William K. Mahony, "Dharma" in *Encyclopaedia of Oriental Philosophy and Religion* vol. 1, eds. Nagendra K Singh, A P Mishra New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House,(2005),213.
2. Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmasastra* Vol.1,(Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1953, 1; Thomas M. Manickam, "Manu's Vision of the Hindu Dharma," in *Journal of Dharma* 1 (1974): 102; Bangalore Kuppaswamy, "A Modern View of Hindu Dharma." *Journal of Dharma* 1 (1973): 118; Johannes Adrianus Bernardus Van Buitenen, "Dharma and Moksa," in *Studies in Indian Literature and Philosophy: Collected Articles of J.A. B. van Buitenen*, ed. Ludo Rocher Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, (1988) 115; Malur Rangacharya, *The Hindu Philosophy of Conduct: Being Class-Lectures on the Bhagavad Gītā*, Vols 1-3, vol. 1, (Madras: The Educational Publishing Company, 1957-1966), 39; Mahony, "Dharma," 348-349; Ashok S. Chousalkar, *Social and Political Implications of Concepts of Justice and Dharma* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1986), 66-67. Friedhelm Hardy, *The Religious Culture of India* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 1995) 348-

3. Mahony, "Dharma," 329.
4. Joyce Littlejohn, ed., *Collins Latin Dictionary & Grammar* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 184.
5. Gerald A. Larue, *What Is 'Religion'? – Well, It's Hard to 'Say Exactly'* ([http://www.teachingaboutreligion.org/White Papers: Larue \\_ whatisreligion.htm](http://www.teachingaboutreligion.org/White%20Papers/Larue_-_whatisreligion.htm), 2003, accessed 10.09.2014).
6. God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 12: 1-3, 17: 5), Isaac (Gen 17: 19), Jacob (Gen 28: 12-15), Moses (Ex 19-24) and Israel (Deut 29: 1- 29) can be said as God's bond with people. In making covenant with people, God adopts people into God's family and treats them as heirs to the family fortune. Like God, Christ strikes a covenant with us at our baptism – one that is stronger than blood, one that establishes a divine, everlasting kinship bond.
7. Thomas J. Scirghi, "The Trinity: A Model for Belonging in Contemporary Society," *The Ecumenical Review* 54, no. 3 (2002): 333-342.
8. Boff describes the dynamic activity between the three persons thus: "Each person is open to the other, accepting the other unconditionally, giving the best one has to other and receiving from the other in kind". Each divine person is affirmed by affirming the others, and through surrendering to the others. Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 3. Cf. 1 Pet 1: 1-2.
9. Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 54.
10. See, Final Message of the 1994 World Synod of Bishops, "Consecrated Life, Expression of Church's Spiritual Vitality," *Origins* 24, no 22 (1994): 373; Chittister, "Vows," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, (1993) 1011.
11. Ignacio Ellacuria, "Discernir el signo de los tiempos," *Diakonia* 17 (1981), 58, cited in Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 3.

12. John M. Koller, "Dharma: An Expression of Universal Order," *Philosophy East & West* 22, no. 2 (1972): 132.
13. George M. Soares-Prabhu, "As We Forgive: Inter-Human Forgiveness in the Teaching of Jesus," *Concilium* 184 (1986): 57.
14. Jesus' life/'being' was expressed through the following. As 'born of the Spirit' (George M. Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, ed. Francis Xavier D'Sa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 13-26), he worked miracles but that was not to show his power but as witnessing to the presence and power of God's Kingdom (Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 133-144). He lived constantly with conflict (Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 164-172), but he never failed to preach love (Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 193-207). He remained free of prejudice (Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 155-163). He insisted on forgiveness (Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 220-228). He survived everything because of his experience of and trust in his *Abba* (Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 208-219).
15. Jesus' ministry/'doing' consists in responding to the challenges of his times by being prophetic and provocative (George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus the Prophet," *Jeevadhara* 21 (1974): 206-217); making the *anawim* aware that the Kingdom of God is theirs (Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 229-243); questioning the social and religious divisions prevalent during his time through his table-fellowship with sinners and tax-collectors (George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for *Dalit* Christians in India Today," *Jeevadhara* 22 (1992): 140-159).
16. For details on Soares-Prabhu's illustration of the issue see, Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 184.
17. *Sri Krishna* as the *avatâra* of God teaches humans to be faithful to their *dharma* and act for the sake of *dharma*. He teaches the path of detached action and the path of devotion as the way to respond to his plan to establish *dharma* in the universe

(*Bhagavad Gītā* 4.7-8; *Bhagavata Purāṇa* 9. 24.56; 5.19.5). See also V. Bhavé, *Talks on the Gītā* (Varnasi: Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1982), 2, 16, 89, 175, 183.

18. The ugly preference for male child has caused the sex ratio to be 940 females per 1,000 males. See, (<http://www.indiaonlinepages.com/population/india-current-population.html>), accessed 25.09.2-14.
19. <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/india-ranked-135-human-development-report-2014>, accessed 20.09.2014.
20. <http://www.dailypioneer.com/state-editions/bhubaneswar/india-ranks-127th-for-mothers-safety-study.html>, accessed 20.09.2014.
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1993), 84-87.

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34. "Levitt for Feminism," *Sunday Times of India*, 17.08.2014.
35. See, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, vol. 3. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 77-80.
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## The *Dharma* of Jesus: *Karma* of Pastors?

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**Abstract:** The focus of this article is the Sermon on the Mount that is at the heart of the *Dharma* of Jesus, but given a cosmotheandric interpretation by Francis D'Sa where the cosmos, God and human beings are seen as three constitutive dimensions of reality that are inseparable from one another. Adopting this view, the author goes on to explore its implications in terms of Freedom, Fellowship and Justice, and concludes with some reflections on how these would affect one's pastoral care.

**Key words:** Sermon on the Mount, Freedom, Fellowship, Justice, Pastor

### Introduction

The phrase *Dharma of Jesus* immediately brings to mind the great person of George Soares-Prabhu who was indeed instrumental in studying and speaking about this concept especially from the biblical point of view and from the perspective of the Christian cultural world. After the death of Fr. George Soares-Prabhu, in an edited book entitled *The Dharma of Jesus, Interdisciplinary Essays in Memory of George Soares-Prabhu*, the editor Francis X. D'Sa has made a study on Soares-Prabhu's interpretation of the message of Jesus from within the world of *Dharma*.

With this background of Soares-Prabhu's interpretation of the message of Jesus and Francis X. D'Sa's cosmotheandric interpretation of the *Dharma* of Jesus, I attempt, in this essay, to study the message of Jesus as interpreted by George Soares-Prabhu from within the world of *Dharma* and draw out implications for our pastoral ministry.

## 1. The Word Dharma

Traditionally, *Dharma* has been identified with *varnashrama Dharma*, the code describing the obligations of the four ideal castes of society (*Varnas*) and the four stages (student, householder, hermit, and wandering ascetic) which should ideally define the life of every individual in each of the three upper classes. Hence, though the word *Dharma* had a comprehensive character, it was limited to two principal ideas, namely the organization of social life through well defined and well regulated classes(*varnas*) and the organization of an individual's life within those classes into definite stages(*ashramas*).<sup>1</sup>

However from the time of the Bhagwad Gita at least, this narrow understanding of *Dharma* has been leavened by the notion of *Svadharm*a or natural law. As the Bhagwad Gita puts it, "Better one's own *Dharma* (*Svadharm*a) however unglamorous, than the *Dharma* of another (*Paradharm*a), however well done."<sup>2</sup> Francis X. D'Sa suggests that *Dharma* can be an outcome not of internal values which domesticate, but of the liberating exigencies of human freedom. This, according to D'Sa, is true of the original *Dharma* of the Gita.<sup>3</sup>

The word *Dharma* is derived from the root *dhr*, which means to uphold, to support, to nourish. *Dharma* has to do with holding, upholding, holding together, supporting, maintaining, sustaining. The Mahabharata, therefore, derives the word *Dharma* from the word *dharana*, that is holding together. *Dharma* is that which holds the peoples together.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The World of Dharma

The world of *Dharma* is an interconnected, interrelated and therefore interdependent whole wherein whatever exists, exists as interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. Correspondingly, whatever is not interrelated, interconnected and