



Integral Liberation: George M. Soares-Prabhu's Contribution towards a Biblical Theology of Liberation for India

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Abstract: George M. Soares-Prabhu's contribution to develop a Biblical Theology of Liberation for India is quite laudable and admirable. He devoted his whole life to develop an Indian theology of liberation from a biblical perspective that is basically Indian. He has never considered liberation as something that happens towards the end time, or an arbitrary act which ignores human history, but as something that happens in the concrete flux of human history here and now. Therefore, he has brought the issues of human rights, the poor, oppressed and exploited in the discussion of theology and envisaged their socio-economic liberation, a liberated and a liberating community in the Indian Church and society. What made him very unique in this process is his use of the Bible to give a foundational theological background. He asked us to be sensitive to the social, economic and political dimension of the Bible to interpret the issues of our time, and thus he placed the Bible as *Magna*

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Carta of movements for liberation and human Rights. Thus, the theology that he suggested for India is distinctly a Biblical Theology of Liberation seen through Indian eyes.

Keywords: Liberation Theology, Biblical Theology of Liberation, Human Rights, Poor, Oppressed, Socio-economic Liberation, Jesus Community.

Introduction

Liberation Theology has been a powerful inspiration to Indian theologians since its origin in Latin America, and has served to awaken the social consciousness of the theological reflections in India and led to an awareness of the social demands of the biblical messages. George. M Soares-Prabhu was not an exception to this and, in fact, he devoted his whole life to develop a biblical theology of liberation for India. The Indian situation of massive poverty, social discrimination based on hereditary caste, and increasingly competitive and pluriform religiosity led him to believe that an inculturated theology in the Indian context should fundamentally be a theology of liberation. His concern was to develop an Indian theology of liberation from a biblical perspective that is essentially Indian. It is theology of liberation, because it is with the help of the Kingdom values enunciated in the Scriptures, and in the early Christian communities that he attempted to interpret the Indian situations. It is biblical, because he turns to the Bible for inspiration and models, and thus the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus of the Synoptics became paradigms of liberative actions. It is Indian, because it is with the sensibility shaped by Indian culture, and provoked by questions emerging from the Indian contexts that he listened to the cry of the poor, marginalized and oppressed, and thus made them understand the ‘down-side of their history.’

1. Why an Indian Biblical Theology of Liberation?

Although his inspiration was from the ‘Latin American Theology of Liberation,’ he distanced himself from it because he believed that “such a theology does not respond to India’s [Asia’s] deep-rooted need for an ‘existential’ liberation from personal bondage” (CWG 1, 56). Therefore, his goal was to “develop an Indian [Asian] theology of liberation which will be concerned with both societal change and personal self-realization” (CWG 1, 56). This will not be the fruit of the adaption of the Western or Latin American models but it will emerge as the spontaneous response to the Indian or Asian reality. He says:

It will not be the result of some ‘project’ operated by a team of theological experts, artificially ‘adapting’ Western or Latin American theology to Asian situations; but will emerge as the spontaneous expression in their own cultural and religious idiom of the liberation experience of Asian Christians who allow themselves to be fully immersed in the Asian reality (CWG 1, 56).

However, he urged to integrate two essentially interrelated concerns of ‘Latin American Theology of Liberation,’ such as socio-economic liberation as excellently propounded in Latin American Liberation Theology and a liberative reading of the Bible from the Indian *Sitz im Leben*, i.e. to engage the individual or community in the context with the text and the reality. Therefore, he was very particular not to bring ‘the so called academic irrelevance or excellence and professionalism’ propagated by the Western Theology to the Indian theology of liberation (D’Sa, CWG 4, xiii).

According to him an Indian theology of liberation should be rooted in the Indian religious traditions, namely, on its insistence on the need for personal freedom because in the Indian tradition, liberation has always been understood as the liberation of the individual from the psychic sources of personal or societal bondage (CWG 1, 137). He argues: “This unwavering insistence on the need for personal freedom in any movement for social

change is, I believe, the most significant contribution that Indian religions can make to any theology of liberation. For no genuine societal change is possible without a corresponding personal conversion” (CWG 1, 137). In the Indian tradition, personal freedom is the necessary precondition for a liberated society. Moreover, liberation in the Indian traditions is a comprehensive term which also includes ‘self-liberation’. He says,

It is an experience of unconditional freedom resulting from an experiential realization of the radical relativity of the empirical world ... a state of absolute freedom from psychological and sociological bondage, which finds its concrete, institutionalized expression in the Buddhist monk (*bhikku*) or the Hindu wandering ascetic (*sannyasin*) ‘Liberation’ for the Asian psyche is not only liberation from poverty, but equally the liberation which leads to that ‘poverty’ which is freedom from illusion, attachment and greed (CWG 1, 56).

Therefore, he says, in spite of the massive poverty and dehumanizing caste system, a theology of liberation, after the model of the Latin American Liberation Theology, which focuses almost exclusively on social change will not be appropriate for India (CWG 1, 56). Instead, “an Asian/Indian theology of liberation will have to be concerned both with societal change and personal self-liberation” (CWG 1, 56). As Francis D’sa says, “he was convinced that any theology of liberation that India produces will have to recognize the fact that there is no substitute for fidelity to the Indian context” (D’Sa, CWG 4, xi).

2. The Context for an Indian Biblical Theology of Liberation

Soares-Prabhu believes that if we are to understand the challenges that India poses to the Theology of Liberation, we need to understand the Indian situation in its complexity and its otherness. According to him, the Indian context is constituted by massive poverty, pluriform religiosity and apparently

immovable social structure of caste (CWG 1, 142). For him, poverty, pervasive religiosity and untouchability created by the hereditary caste are not only socio-economic issues of the Indian society but also a moral and theological one (CWG 1, 83-86). And all these factors, according to him, are closely interrelated because “poverty in India is not just an economic category, it is a religious value as well. Caste, even in its most degrading form of untouchability, is legitimized by India’s dominant religion and tolerated by others, Christianity included!” (CWG 4, 6). Thus, “the social immobility engendered by caste contributes to India’s poverty, as does its fatalistic and other-worldly religiosity. Poverty creates a fertile field for the development of fatalistic and other-worldly forms of popular religion” (CWG 1, 142).

He says that these three factors of the Indian situation are ambiguous with a positive and a negative side:

The massive sociological, enforced poverty of India is greatly dehumanizing; but it leaves room (as a consumer society does not) for the nurturing of a religious or voluntary poverty, that freedom from greed which is the goal of all Asian religions. Religions which foment caste and communalism are thus also sources of spiritual freedom, and provide millions of our people with the sense of meaning and the ground for hope which enables them to survive in situations of desperate need. Caste is a fearfully oppressive social system inflicting deep psychic injuries on those who are deemed outcaste. But it also provides the Indian with a sense of belonging, Yet, for all the liberative potential they possess, India’s poverty, religiosity and caste are ultimately oppressive. They reinforce each other dialectically to form a spiral of steadily intensifying oppression (CWG 1, 86).

In short, “poverty-religiosity-caste constitute India’s *samsara*, its cycle of bondage” (CWG 1, 86). It is in this context that he asked himself, how can we proclaim the message of the Bible where the institutionalized inequality perpetrated by the massive poverty and caste system and its consequences. He is convinced

that no Indian theology can afford to bypass the grim reality of India's poverty.

The poverty of most Asian countries, and the alarming extremes of social and economic inequality to be found in them, derive from and are maintained by their stagnant social and religious institutions (like the caste-system in India), which as popularly understood and practised, are often "a tremendous force of social inertia". But it would be unfair and unrealistic to stop here. For Asia's underdevelopment is at least equally the result of induced socioeconomic processes (CWG 1, 55).

According to him, among the three factors that determine the social situation of India, poverty-religiosity-caste, caste plays a significant discriminatory role. For he says, "India's religiosity is a caste religiosity; India's poverty is caste poverty. Caste determines the shape of India's poverty. The 'poor' in India are not just economically deprived but are socially, ostracised as well, and what determines their self-awareness is not so much their economic as their social status" (CWG 1, 143).

He also frankly confesses that the challenge of the poor to the Church in India is mostly shaped by caste, and it finds its clearest expression in the dalits, who constitute the lowest stratum of Indian society, and form a large component (an estimated 50%) of the Indian Church. The *Dalits* are the poor and the outcaste, victims of both economic exploitation and social rejection (CWG 1, 143). Sixteen per cent of India's population belongs to the so-called *Dalits* or untouchables, living at the very bottom of its social system. He observes,

In the caste system, the *dalits* are both economically exploited and socially oppressed. ... the vast majority of the *dalits* are landless labourers, earning a precarious livelihood in conditions marginally better than serfdom; or they are condemned to engage in religiously polluting and socially demeaning occupations, like scavenging, handling the

carcasses of dead animals, or working in leather. They are the poorest of the poor (CWG 1, 146).

He also perceives that more than their economic poverty, it is the social ostracism that is practised against them that demoralizes them and keeps them in their present position of subjugation (CWG 1, 141-49). Christianity is not an exception to this as it is practised by the Church too:

Dalit Christians, who constitute about half of all the Christians in the country, frequently suffer caste discrimination within the Church - not only in their social interactions with upper caste Christians, but ... their participation in Church administration and worship as well. They often live in segregated colonies even in Christian villages, are not allowed to draw water from 'clean caste' wells, are segregated in special parts of the Church (at the back or in the side aisles not in the main aisle), are forbidden to serve mass or read at Church services, have little say in the decision making bodies of their own Churches, are treated with open contempt by their clean caste fellow Christians and their priests (most of whom come from these 'upper' castes), and may even be buried in separate cemeteries (CWG 1, 150).

In short, the challenge, posed-by-the Indian-situation is the challenge of India's caste-ridden poor (CWG 1, 142). It is from within this vicious cycle of bondage that the theologians of India must proclaim the liberative message of the Bible. Therefore, he says an Indian Theology of Liberation must be attentive to these determinative factors of the Indian situation, and the theology that we develop must have a definite liberative thrust. Taking from the final statement of the Asian Theological Conference held at Wennappuwa in Sri Lanka in 1979 Jan 7-10, he categorically says that, "in the context of the poverty of the teeming millions of Asia and their situation of domination and exploitation, our theology must have a very definite Liberational thrust" (CWG 1, 55).

3. The Bible as Magna Carta of Movements for Liberation and Human Rights

According to Soares-Prabhu Liberation Theology has made at least two significant contributions to contemporary reading of the Bible. He says that “it has sensitized exegetes to the social, economic and political dimensions of the Bible; and it has made them aware of the extent to which their supposedly scientific exegesis is inevitably coloured by cultural and class prejudices” (CWG 1, 260). As he says, what Liberation Theology has done is to draw attention to the class character of the reader’s perception of the biblical text (CWG 1, 260). It is an accepted fact that it is with the Liberation Theology that the social reading of the Bible begins in earnest. In order to draw the meaning of the Bible for a contemporary society, therefore, he proposes a social reading of the Bible where the real-life situation of the individual/community and the world around will come in contact with community of the author or biblical times and community of the reader.

Social Reading of the Bible

According to Soares-Prabhu, a ‘social reading’ will read the Bible in the light of a liberating praxis among the socially oppressed, without succumbing to the sociological reductionism of a strictly Marxist approach (CWG 4, 216). He is very much convinced that a ‘social reading’ of the Bible is not a socio-economic analyses of the biblical texts. Instead “it will search the biblical text for transmaterial (anti-consumer) values which could inspire the change of attitude (“the abolition of the ‘mental’ cause that engenders capitalism”), which alone can make a genuine social revolution possible” (CWG 1, 217). He further says,

A growing awareness of the massive social evils that plague our land (in which eighty percent of the people are below, on, or just above the poverty line, and fully seventy percent are totally illiterate; where just ten percent of the rural rich own

more than sixty percent of all the cultivable land, and ninety percent of private-owned industry is producing consumer goods for less than fifteen percent of the population) is having its impact on Indian theology - particularly among Indian theologians who have been exposed to a social analysis which points, correctly, to institutional structures rather than personal ill will as the source of social ills (CWG 3, 73).

In his article "The Bible as Magna Carta of Movements for Liberation and Human Rights" he explores the contribution of the Bible to the development of liberation theologies (CWG 4, 73-84). He says, "In the last fifty years, biblically-based theologies of liberation have irrupted everywhere in Third World Christianity, and in the oppressed sectors of the Christian First World. The role of the Bible in these theologies of liberation is well known" (CWG 4, 73). With regard to the human rights he speaks of two-fold contributions of the Bible, such as its emphasis on the sacredness of every human person, and a radical commitment to the welfare of the powerless and the needy (CWG 4, 77). He explains the Bible's teaching on human dignity and human rights with the notion of "covenant idea of co-responsibility" because he believes that in order to ground human rights the covenant co-responsibility must be taken as a basic value. Otherwise "we may end up with a system like the caste hierarchy in India, which is justified precisely in terms of co-responsibility!" (CWG 4, 82).

"The *Dharma* of Jesus: An Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount" (CWG 4, 153-172). is basically an interpretation of Mt 5-7 keeping the Indian context in mind, and he shows that the '*dharma* of Jesus' can serve as a paradigm for Indian Christian theologizing, and building up a fraternal human society characterized by freedom, 'sonship,' and concern. The *dharma* of Jesus proclaims freedom from the burden of the "Law" as practiced in the Jewish community since it is grounded on an experience of God as *Abba* who loves us his children with an unconditional love. This *dharma* of Jesus demonstrates concern for the neighbour, i.e concern for any one in need, and solidarity with the oppressed and exploited.

His interpretation of the table fellowship of Jesus with a *Dalit* Christian perspective shows how Jesus' table fellowship becomes a liberative paradigm for the oppressed *Dalit* Christians in India today (CWG 1, 223-40). As Jesus, through his meals with the religious and social outcasts of his day, presented a new experience of God and a new understanding of community, a *Dalit*-reading of Jesus' table fellowship challenges everyone to see every fellow Christian as a brother or a sister. Jesus' table fellowship gives a radically new understanding of holiness, of community and of God, against the Pharisaic and Essene ideal of Israel as a holy community, whose holiness is to be maintained by preserving a state of complete separation from all that is ritually unclean (CWG 1, 228).

Through "a *Dalit* Reading of the Decalogue," he unravels the plight of the *Dalits* in Indian society, and the Decalogue with its implicit proclamation of the equality of all human beings draws the broad outlines of a liberative community, towards which all *Dalits* everywhere, can aspire (CWG 4, 208-213). He acknowledges the emerging trend of reading the Bible from a *Dalit* point of view, and the Church's silence to the plight of their oppressive situations. "It is only recently", he says, "that the emergence of a militant *Dalit* Christian movement claiming their rights has (hopefully) begun to make the Christian churches conscious of their sin. Part of this movement is the attempt to fashion a *Dalit* theology that will read the Bible from a *Dalit* point of view. I attempt to do this here for the Decalogue in Ex 20:1-17" (CWG 4, 209).

His interpretation of Mk 10:17-27 and 10:35-45 in the light of tribal values shows that the values which undergird the ethos of tribal society are strikingly similar to those taught in the Bible and by Jesus (CWG 1, 241-259). An egalitarian, antigreed and antipride social order preserved in the Indian tribal society is similar to the counterculture envisioned by Jesus in the Gospels. He argues that Jesus sees himself as standing within the tribal traditions of India (cf. Mk 6:4; Lk 13:33). "They [the tribal society] bring a new element to India's political and religious

consciousness: an indigenous experience of an egalitarian society” (CWG 1, 243). He further says that these values are precisely rooted in the ethos of the Bible and in the ethical teachings of Jesus.

He firmly believed that if we are to understand the challenges that India poses to the Church, we need to understand the Indian situation in its complexity and its otherness, especially the challenges posed by massive poverty and caste system. His article “The Indian Church Challenged by Poverty and Caste” urges us to begin with an analysis of the Indian situation, the diversified society both in its social structure and extreme poverty, so that the Church in India may opt for a meaningful mission in a highly polarized and divided society (CWG 1, 141-56).

In “Class in the Bible: The Biblical Poor a Social Class?,” he further elaborates on ‘the poor in the Bible’ and shows that they constitute a sociological group which is both the victim of history and its maker; a dialectical group whose identity is defined not by their religious attitude but by their social situation determined by antagonistic groups standing over and against them (CWG 1, 260-282). He spells out the biblical understanding of the poor in three major propositions:

(1) the poor in the Bible form *a sociological group* whose identity is defined not by their religious attitude but by their social situation, (2) the poor in the Bible *are a dialectical group* whose situation is determined by antagonistic groups standing over and against them; and (3) the poor in the Bible are *a dynamic group* who are not the passive victim of history but those through whom God shapes his history” (CWG 1, 264).

In the light of Liberation Theology, he says, a topic like ‘Class in the Bible’ poses two distinct questions. “It raises (1) the sociological question: to what extent is the biblical narrative intelligible in terms of class and class struggle? And it raises (2) the hermeneutical question: how far does one’s class culture determine one’s reading of the biblical text?” (CWG 1, 260-

261). According to him both questions are significant as they elicit deeper meanings of the biblical texts for a contemporary reader.

According to the biblical understanding, the ‘poor’ is the oppressed class as such; the oppression is caused by economic, social and religious factors. The way to eradicate poverty consists in following the path of Jesus, and this is further elaborated in his article “Jesus and the Poor” (CWG 4, 173-96). In “Jesus and the Poor” he brings out the similarity in the exploitative situation of the poor in Palestine at the time of Jesus with that of the poor in India. He shows hermeneutically that the poor in the Bible stands not merely “for the economically destitute but also for the socially marginalized groups ... the illiterate, the outcast, the ritually polluted, the physically handicapped and the mentally ill” (CWG 4, 175). All these victims of oppression are the *anawim*. He analyses Jesus’ attitude and response towards the poor in the land of Palestine and in the Bible, and he asks whether the response of Jesus towards the poor serve as a model for our response to the situation of the poor in India today (CWG 4, 173-96). He says that “Perhaps it can - but only if we remember to follow Jesus, not to imitate him! For Jesus gives us no concrete strategy for the ending of poverty ... [and] his strategy and his blue print would surely have become obsolete in the very different world we live in today” (CWG 4, 194). However, as he says, we can surely adopt his *Abba* experience of “God as our Father and of human beings as our brothers and sisters; a set of values clustering round freedom and love which grow out of this experience; the vision of a new humanity free, fraternal, non-exploitative in which these values will be concretely expressed, and the inspiration of a life lived out in absolute commitment to the building up of this community” (CWG 4, 194).

4. Liberative Biblical Paradigms

Soares-Prabhu identifies, at least, three paradigms by which we can think of a Biblical Theology of Liberation for India.

God as the Liberator

Soares-Prabhu presents God of Israel as a biblical liberative paradigm of the oppressed. God liberated his oppressed people, and the people of Israel in turn experienced Him as the God who liberates the oppressed. He says,

Yahweh is, by definition almost, the one who brings Israel out of Egypt. He is the God of the oppressed, profoundly concerned for the poor, who as victims of exploitation and oppression have a claim on his compassion and his love. He is thus shown in the Bible as the refuge and stronghold of the poor, who defends the poor against the powerful and responds to their needs(CWG 4, 187).

The God of Israel irrupts into history to set free a group of bonded labourers, and create a nation one in which freedom would replace oppression, justice prevent exploitation, brotherhood transcend all social stratification, and compassion be valued more than cult (CWG 4, 172). So the God of the Bible, as he says, “reveals himself progressively as the God who as *El Shaddai*” promising the Patriarchs liberation (‘the land’), redeeming this promise by rescuing Israel from a series of life and death situations in their history (bonded labour in Egypt, starvation in the wilderness, the threat of annihilation at the conquest, exile in Babylon) (CWG 4, 200). Thus, the Old Testament characterization of God as hater of exploitation, lover of justice, and liberator of the oppressed fully satisfies the Indian quest for an inculturated Biblical Theology of Liberation.

Prophets as Liberators

The prophetic messages always communicate a God who sets the oppressed free, and project a free, equal, non-exploitative alternative community; their critique of society is linked to a critique of religion; they rebuked the structures of the dominant society and encouraged the dominated to build an alternative community. In his article “Socio-Cultural Analysis in Prophetic

Theologizing: a Biblical Paradigm,” he shows how the prophetic messages, which are always linked to contemporary events, become the basis of theologizing in the Bible (CWG 2, 61-67 and (CWG 4, 14-23). He says that “the prophet’s message always derives from a reflection, (and not just a religious or an ethical reflection but a historical and therefore ultimate social reflection) on what is going on around him” (CWG 2, 66). Thus, he argues for a prophetic theologizing for an effective transformation of Indian society and people. The prophecies of the prophets do not end in words but in effective transformation of people and society. Prophets spoke for the powerless especially the poor, needy, oppressed, refugees, widows and orphans (CWG 3, 114-15). Thus, the *dharma* of the prophet was to communicate the liberative message of God to these marginalized in the society.

Jesus as the Liberator

In his article “The Liberative Pedagogy of Jesus Lessons for an Indian Theology of Liberation,” he poses the liberative pedagogy of Jesus as paradigm for a Biblical Theology of Liberation For India (CWG 1, 124-40). He says that the Church in India must go back to the ‘liberative pedagogy’ of Jesus which is best suited for the Indian context. He identifies this liberative pedagogy of Jesus as a pedagogy that is nonelitist, praxis oriented and dialogical, based on the equality of all before God. He says,

Because it is a nonelitist and a dialogical teaching, it liberates people from the restless demons of unbridled competitiveness and insatiable greed by making them conscious of their worth. It teaches them that, as children of God, their value derives not from personal ability, accumulated wealth, or social status, but from the inalienable reality of God’s love (Mt 6:25-34). Such a pedagogy leads toward that realm of a wholly unconditioned personal freedom (*moksha*) which is the goal of the religious traditions of India. Here all greed comes to an end; all aggression is stilled; all illusions engendered by the absolutization of finite values are dispelled (CWG 1, 136).

He further elaborates it as a pedagogy that is experience-based, action-oriented, and critical of oppressive structures. It stresses the intrinsic worth of every human being, irrespective of his or her material possessions and social status. He says,

Because it is an action-oriented, experience-based and critical teaching that subverts the unquestioned assumptions and shocks the stereotyped expectations of its hearers, it frees them from the great manipulative myths that legitimize the oppressive structures (economic, political, social and religious) of the society, and so allows them to work for a new, nonexploitative world in which men and women will be able to live together as brothers and sisters under their one Parent in heaven, taught by their one Teacher, the Christ (Mt 23:8-10) (CWG 1, 137).

Thus, the pedagogy of Jesus shows a pedagogy of the oppressed with a strong commitment to societal liberation. In “Jesus and the Poor” he presents Jesus as the one who announces good news to the poor, and the one who inaugurates the community of the Kingdom (CWG 4, 173-96). He shows how Jesus responds to these masses of the poor who confront him in their misery and their need. He distinguishes four elements in his response:

Jesus (1) identifies himself with the poor, in order (2) to show them an active and effective concern. Such a concern looks to (3) the ending of their “social” poverty, while calling for (4) a “spiritual” poverty that will set them and their rich exploiters free from “mammon”, the compulsive urge to possess. Together, these four elements spell out the “compassion” of Jesus (Mt 9:36; Mk 6:34; 8:2) — that active, caring and passionate love which defines so sharply his life-style and sets a pattern for the life style of his followers (CWG 4, 176).

Soares-Prabhu makes a detailed account of all these factors and shows how liberative was Jesus in his life and mission:

A carpenter by profession (Mk 6:3) ... He abandons the security of family and home to become an itinerant preacher

without shelter or means of subsistence. He breaks with his family (Mk 3:31-35) to join the 'family' of all those who do the will of the Father in heaven (Mk 3:31-35), by their radical obedience to God, translated into a radical concern for their neighbour (Mk 12:28-34). ... depending for support on the casual help provided by sympathising friends (Lk 8:1-2). He lives, that is, by begging. ... Not only does Jesus become poor with the poor, but he makes himself an outcast with the outcasts. He touches a leper to welcome him back to human fellowship (Mk 1:41), thus incurring ritual defilement. He dines with tax-collectors and sinners (Mk 2:15; Lk 15:1) earning the reprobation of the religious elite (CWG 4, 177).

Jesus' very identification with the poor, and their life style led him to choose his close followers from the same artisan class to which he himself belonged and to preach the Kingdom in obscure places (CWG 4, 177-79). His mission field was the Palestinian country-side with its poor, backward villages and its primitive townships, and not the Hellenized urban centres to which the rich flocked (CWG 4, 179). The beneficiaries of his healing were mostly the invalids of society (CWG 3, 152). He reinstated religious and social outcasts to human fellowship by his communion with them, and he stood up against all sorts of the religious and social oppression of the poor and the needy. He considered love as the basis of all law and superior to every form of ritual (CWG 4, 179), and for him liberation comes through his revelation of God's unconditional love, God as *Abba* (CWG 3, 152).

As the one who proclaims the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:14-15) Jesus confronts the exploitative situation of his time by taking a decisive stance for the poor (the oppressed) and against the rich (the oppressor) (CWG 3, 152). With his life and mission he inaugurated a community of the Kingdom, a genuinely fraternal society characterized by freedom, fellowship and justice (CWG 3, 153). He has left us an enormous legacy of freedom, for his whole ministry was spent in bringing freedom of every kind to the unfree.

He frees the rejected of society from the terrible isolation to which they have been condemned by social ostracism (Lk 19:1-10), ritual impurity (Mk 1:40-45) or mental illness (Mk 5:1-13). He summons his followers to freedom from the hampering weight of possessions (Mk 1:16-18; 10:17-23; Mt 6:24), or from the clinging hindrance of over-developed family ties (Lk 9:59-62). He empowers them with the freedom to love (Lk 7:36-40). That singing freedom that comes from a trust in God our Father so absolute that one needs no other security in life (Mt 6:25-34) is thus the foundation of the new social order that Jesus proclaims (CWG 3, 152).

In short, Jesus identified himself with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized to show them his active effective concern, and to liberate them from the oppressive and exploitative situations of their socio-religious life. He voiced against the economic disparity in which the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few is paralleled by the destitution of many. Such disparity is sensed by Jesus as a serious and unjust violation of human existence (CWG 4, 193). The response of Jesus to the poor, oppressed, and marginalized of his society was a response in freedom and in love.

This experience of humankind as brothers and sisters (as the 'family of God') affirms for Jesus the radical equality of all human beings whoever they are, and will not tolerate any form of racial or caste discrimination which might imply that one group is intrinsically inferior to another. It will not tolerate either the massive economic disparity in which the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few is paralleled by the destitution of many. Such disparity is sensed by Jesus as a serious and unjust violation of human existence (CWG 4, 193).

5. The Christian Liberative Response: An Integral Liberation

We cannot think of a liberation theology in abstract notions, but it should manifest in the concrete flux of human history. According to Soares-Prabhu a Christian response to the Indian

situation must be historical, incarnational, preferentially weighted response, and integral. A God who intervened in the human history calls for a concrete, radical commitment for the human needs in the history. Therefore, a liberative approach should be, he says:

Economic problems must find economic solutions, political crises be met with political measures, structural disorders corrected by structural change. A Christian response will not provide a spiritual palliative for a historical need. This would go against the grain of biblical revelation, in which God is encountered in history, working for the transformation of history (CWG 4, 202).

A liberative response must also be an incarnational response, because the God of the Bible, who is concerned with the history of humankind, became part of this history in the person of Jesus (Jn 1:14), and thus humankind became the locus of our encounter with God (CWG 4, 202-203). An incarnational response, therefore, must identify with the neighbour: He says,

The Christian response cannot be that of a spectator, exhorting from the side lines. It must be the response of the committed participant, involved in the struggle for justice and identified with his struggling brothers and sisters - even as God is involved in his history, and as Jesus has identified himself with humankind. An incarnational response will thus always be an active and an involved response (CWG 4, 204).

He is also convinced that the Christian response to the Indian situation will necessarily be a preferentially weighted response. For he says, "Universal love for the neighbour does not imply neutrality in the struggle for justice. For the God of the Bible, though he loves all humankind, explicitly declares himself the vindicator of "the widow, the orphan and the refugee" (CWG 4, 205).

He also firmly affirms that the liberation promised by the Bible is never a merely social liberation, but an integral personal liberation. Therefore, he says:

Such an '*integral liberation*' must obviously be the goal of any genuinely Christian response to the Indian situation.... It will be *authentically liberative* in that it will vigorously and effectively oppose all forms of oppression and exploitation ... it finds inspiration for acting in favour of brotherhood, justice, and peace; and against all forms of domination, slavery, discrimination, violence, attacks on religious liberty, and aggression against human beings and whatever attacks life (CWG 4, 206-07).

He further suggests the following salient features, which must remain normative for every Christian community, no matter what the concrete structures it may at any time adopt: a community that is free, all inclusive, open to sharing, prepared for service, and radically equal (CWG 4, 143).

- **A Community of Radical Freedom:** a freedom from both internal compulsions towards greed and ambition, and from the external constraints of a servile bondage to ritual and to law. The basis for this radical freedom is God's preferential love and providential care: "For the experience of God's caring and provident love liberates them from anxiety about their daily sustenance (Mt 6:25-34), and from the need of affirming themselves by accumulating possessions or exercising power" (CWG 4, 143).
- **A Community of Radical Universalism:** The radical freedom from both internal and external pressures leads to a universal commitment. Because he says, "the experience of God as *Abba* implies experiencing all human beings as brothers and sisters, and so rules out all discrimination on any ground whatsoever" (CWG 4, 145).

- **A Community of Radical Sharing:** such an inclusive community commits itself to a radical sharing of their ‘being’ and ‘haves.’ According to him “this is to be understood not merely as doing works of social relief such as alms-giving ...but the assumption of responsibility by each member of the community for the welfare of all” (CWG 4, 146).
- **A Community of Radical Service:** an attitude of radical freedom, inclusivism and sharing will lead to the formation of a serving community: He says that “In imitation of Jesus, who came “not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45), the Jesus community is essentially a community that serves. ...There is no room in a Christian community for any desire for domination or for any ambition for power” (CWG 4, 146-47).
- **A Community of Radical Equality:** a radically free, inclusive, sharing and serving community will never assume the roles of inequality, but will always promote egalitarian virtues and values. He says,

Differences of race, class and sex do not affect their basic relationship with Jesus nor their basic worth as human beings who are children of the one Father in heaven. The Jesus community, then, will not tolerate any form of stratification (racist or caste) which touches the intrinsic worth of a person. Differences of status within the community will be differences of function, not of being (CWG 4, 147).

Conclusion

Soares-Prabhu’s contribution to develop a biblical Theology of Liberation for India is quite laudable and admirable. First of all, he was aware of the hermeneutical significance of the Liberation Theology to interpret the Bible in the Indian context. He has never considered liberation as something that happens towards the end time, or an arbitrary act which ignores human history, but as something that happens in the concrete flux of human

history here and now. Therefore, he has brought the issues of human rights, the poor, oppressed and exploited in the discussion of theology and envisaged their socio-economic liberation, a liberated and a liberating community in the Indian Church and society. Therefore, he emphasized on the sacredness of the human persons, especially the downtrodden, socially discriminated, the poor, oppressed, exploited and underprivileged in society and our responsibility for their welfare.

What made him very unique in this process is his use of the Bible to give a liberative theological background. He asked us to be sensitive to the social, economic and political dimension of the Bible to interpret the issues of our time, and thus he placed the Bible as *Magna Carta* of movements for liberation and human Rights. He was not speaking in abstract notions but based himself on the liberative biblical paradigms, such as the God who intervened in the history of his people and liberated them from the clutches of oppressive structures, the prophets who spoke for the powerless especially the poor, needy, oppressed, refugees, widows and orphans and finally Jesus who identified himself with the poor and oppressed in the society. Therefore, his call for a Christian response, which is historical, incarnational, preferentially weighted response, and integral liberation, finds its foundation in the Bible itself. The Community that he envisages, which is free, all inclusive, open to sharing, prepared for service, and radically equal, draws inspiration from the Jesus' community in the Scriptures. Thus, the theology that he suggested for India is distinctly a biblical theology of liberation seen through Indian eyes. In short, as Francis D'sa noted, "the watch-word of Soares-Prabhu's theology was liberation, liberation from all manner of alienation and oppression" (D'Sa, CWG 4, xxviii).

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