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## **Jesus of Faith: The Christological Reflections of George M. Soares-Prabhu, SJ**

**Jacob Parappally, MSFS**

*Prof (Emeritus), Jnana Deepa, Pune 411014, India*

**Abstract:** Based on his scholarly research and studies on the New Testament witness about the Person and mission of Jesus, George Soares-Prabhu presents his insights into the mystery of Jesus of Faith. Thus, he overcomes the dichotomy between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith that plagued the discussions about the NT Christologies for more than a century. It is the Jesus of faith encountered by the early community of the disciples that is articulated in the gospels conditioned by the specific context of the communities in which they were formed. Soares-Prabhu affirms that in the Indian context relevant Christological reflections can be developed only by those who are graced to have an experience of the Person of Jesus and actualize that transforming experience in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, the discriminated against and all who are oppressed in some way or other.

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## Introduction

The history of Christological reflections has been on the ontological identity of Jesus or “who is Jesus Christ?” or on his functional identity or “what has he done for me?” The Catholic Christological reflections emphasized an ontological Christology and the Protestant theological reflections emphasized a functional Christology or *Christus pro me*. Responding to the demands of Enlightenment’s thinking that only what is empirically verified can be affirmed as truth the Western biblical theology tried to prove the historicity of gospels and in the process raised the issue of the Historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith. Some went to the extent of separating the Historical Jesus from the Christ of Faith as if they were two distinct realities. While many biblical theologians are still grappling with this issue the well-known Indian biblical theologian George M. Soares-Prabhu having taken this issue and the questions raised by these perspectives seriously went beyond them providing a synthetic biblical perspective about the person of Jesus Christ as Jesus of Faith.

In this paper an attempt is made to explain the Christological reflections of George Soares-Prabhu on Jesus of Faith and the implications of his insights into the mystery of Jesus of Faith based on his scholarly research and studies on the New Testament witness about the Person and mission of Jesus. Using the historical-critical method of analysing the Gospel texts only to the extent they are useful for an Indian reading of the Gospel that is, by an integrated ‘religious’ and ‘social reading’ of the texts “which will disclose the liberation announced by Jesus in its totality” (CWG 1, 35). Soares-Prabhu presents Jesus of Faith who is witnessed by the New Testament. Jesus of Faith is the One encountered by his disciples during his earthly life as ‘a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people’ (Lk 24: 19) and as the Lord and God of their lives after his crucifixion,

death and resurrection. The Gospels narrate to us the belief of the disciples about the Person of Jesus and their transforming faith-experience or their belief in Jesus as the meaning of their life.

## **1. A Critique of the Traditional Christology**

The relevance of the Christ-talk in terms of Jesus of Faith can be seen only when it is compared and contrasted with the traditional Christology of the Church. We have inherited the dogmatic Christology of the post-apostolic Church which was developed from a single strand of logos-Christology of John. It was finally articulated in the councils of Nicaea (325 AD) Ephesus (431 AD) and finally in Chalcedon (451 AD). This unilinear development of Christology, according to Soares Prabhu led to the progressive alienation of Jesus from the world in which he lived as human. The logos Christology was further articulated through the use of Greek philosophy and the Hellenistic categories of thought like substance, nature subsistence, person etc. led to many Christological controversies which were to some extent resolved in the council of Chalcedon. For Soares-Prabhu, the Christological tradition of the early Church which finds its articulation in the Chalcedonian formulae “though ‘correct’ it might be, represents a narrow culturally conditioned and even politically motivated development which offers only a small fraction of the Christological potential that the New Testament offers” (CWG 1, 267).

Soares-Prabhu arrives at three conclusions about the historical development of Christology which has failed to unleash the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ. First of all, he affirms that any formula ‘however intricate, subtle and complex, is bound to be inadequate theologically and pastorally’. It is obvious that the mystery of Christ cannot be defined. To define is to mark limits. The philosophical categories that were used to encapsulate the mystery of Christ alienated Christ from life. The life-giving mystery of Christ can be understood to some extent at least and its significance can be articulated not by way of analysing

it with conceptual methods and expressing them ontologically but metaphorically. Soares-Prabhu is probably indicating that the mystery of Christ and its significance can be made experiential only by approaching it as an eternal poem written by God!

Secondly, no Christological formula was accepted as normative by Christians as a whole. The Christological affirmations of Nicaea were rejected by Arians, of Ephesus by the Nestorians, of Chalcedon by the Monophysites. One can consider those who hold the decisions of the Councils as orthodox and those who reject them as heretics. However, it must be admitted that ‘the accusations of heresy do not negate the fact that all who profess faith in Jesus, no matter how they articulate this faith’ ‘are authentic Christians’ (CWG 1, 269).

Thirdly, the Christological development took place in the horizon of a single cultural tradition which can be called the Mediterranean world and its cultural colonies or in the Hellenistic Church. Even the Christologies of the so called oriental churches were Hellenistic in their theology and ‘the Christologies of Copts or the Syrians were different and opposite variants of Roman or Byzantine Christology’ (CWG 1, 270). In general, Christian theology is less catholic than it imagines it to be. Only after the colonial times is there a development of Christologies in various continents and if they have to develop further they have to liberate themselves from the Hellenistic, sectarian, and politically biased Christologies of the early Church and reach their sources, namely, the New Testament.

The Christological reflection of Soares-Prabhu is, therefore, is an attempt to overcome limitations of a culturally conditioned, philosophically determined, politically biased and sectarian traditional Christologies. He has attempted to offer a New Testament-based, context-sensitive, inclusive and experience-based Christology that is relevant to the context of developing countries<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Contours of a Contextual Christology

The Christology of the New Testament is strongly contextual and it evolved under the influence of the context. It all began with the Easter-experience or the experience of the resurrection. It was the experience of Jesus as alive after his death on the cross and the burial. This foundational experience of Jesus or this originary experience is the basis of the Christian tradition and all Christological reflection in the New Testament. Soares Prabhu refers to Raymond Brown who spells out progressive articulation of this originary experience of the risen Jesus. According to Raymond Brown the progressive development of Christology in the New Testament is from *future Christology* to *present Christology* and then to *past Christology* and finally to *pre-existent Christology*. The first followers of Jesus were Palestinian Jews who expected the liberation of the Jews from foreign rule and the establishment of the Jewish kingdom with the arrival of the Messiah or Christ. Since this had not taken place even after the resurrection of Jesus they believed that when he would come in future he would be Christ and would fulfil these messianic expectations. This was the beginning of future Christology (Acts 3:19-21). The experience of risen Jesus was such that they could not but preach that he was already messiah or Christ at his resurrection. The early proclamations of Paul and Peter indicate a shift from future Christology to present Christology (Rom 3-4; Acts 2:32-36; 5:31; 13:32-33). This change of thinking from a Jewish political messiah to a spiritualized understanding of the messiah or Christ was possible because of the coming of Hellenistic Jews into the early Church. They could interpret liberation as liberation from sin and the kingdom which the messiah would establish as a 'kingdom not of this world'. "The spiritualism of Greek thinking with its dichotomy of matter and spirit has begun to infect the holistic earthy spirituality of Palestinian Christianity" (CWG 1, 272).

From the present Christology the Christological reflection was pushed back to the pre-Easter past Christology. Was Jesus already Christ before his resurrection from the dead. The gospel

according to Mark affirms it because Jesus was anointed at baptism by the Spirit as 'Son of God' (Mk 1:9-11). The same line reflection was taken further into the past before the baptism. Jesus was Messiah or Christ from the moment of his conception in his mother's womb. Matthew (1:18) and Luke (1:35) affirm this because he was invested with the Spirit from the beginning of his existence here on earth and thus he is the 'Son of God'.

The next stage of Christology was by moving backward from past Christology to pre-existent Christology. It was an answer to the question whether he was Christ even before coming into the world. Already in Paul's letters to Philippians (2:6f) and to Colossians (1:15f) there are possible references to a pre-existent Christology. In John's Prologue (1:1f.) John clearly shows Jesus as the pre-existent divine Messiah and the incarnation or the hominization of the eternal logos, "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).

The development of New Testament Christology with its richness and complexity provides us certain lessons for developing contextual Christologies. First of all, the New Testament Christologies are strongly *contextual Christologies*. The articulation of the Christic experience evolved from the struggle of the early Church to reconcile its monotheistic faith with the experience of the divinity of Christ. In the beginning the Palestinian Christians found it difficult to affirm the divinity of Christ but thought that he was the eschatological prophet but later the Hellenistic Judaism could see Jesus in relation to the Spirit of God as narrated in Matthew and Luke. This Spirit-Christology could explain that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Spirit. There is also a development of Pauline Christology which identified Jesus with Wisdom. In the Johannine community Jesus is believed as the incarnate Word. The contextual Christologies of the New Testament developed under the influence of their environments.

The New Testament presents also a *pluralism of Christologies*. The development of Christology from the understanding of Jesus

as the eschatological prophet to Spirit Christology and then to Wisdom Christology and finally to Logos-Christology of John is not to be understood as a progression from a simpler to complex Christology or from an imperfect to perfect Christology. The later stages of Christological development do not surpass or negate the previous ones. They all have their importance in understanding and articulating the ineffable mystery of Jesus Christ and each adds a new dimension to the Christological whole. Further, the pluralism of New Testament Christologies reveals the *christological open-ended-ness*. The New Testament does not offer us a specific model for our Christology as the models of Christology in the New Testament are historically and culturally conditioned. “Instead the New Testament gives us a model for our christologizing by mediating an encounter with Jesus, and inviting us to articulate his significance for us today in our own local language, just as the New Testament writing did in theirs.” (CWG 1, 275). Therefore, the plurality of Christologies in the New Testament invites us to develop our own Christologies responding to our context.

There is an essential difference between belief *about* Jesus and belief *in* Jesus. All historical studies can only lead one to affirm that the historical reality of Jesus existed and the truth about some of his teachings and activities. But belief *in* Jesus is the consequence of an existentially transforming encounter with the Risen Jesus similar to that of Paul on the way to Damascus. Such an existential encounter with the Risen Jesus transformed the self-understanding of Saul as a righteous Pharisee to Paul “a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God “ (Rom 1:1). The meaning of Paul’s existence was transformed and he realized his existence in Jesus Christ (Gal 2:20). Belief *in* Jesus involves giftedness of revelation and the self-surrender of faith. Belief *about* Jesus is witness of those who had belief *in* Jesus. So at the heart of all New Testament Christologies is *the experience of Jesus*. It is the experience of Jesus’ life, teaching, death and resurrection as mediated through the communities to the New Testament authors was the starting

point of their Christologies. The New Testament authors used metaphors and symbols like Son of God, light, life, bread etc. Though these have emerged from their particular culture as they have roots in a common human experience they can be transposed from one world-view to another. Thus they are able to communicate to us the experience of *Jesus* and *belief in Jesus* that underlies the New Testament Christologies. Thus this trans-cultural experience of Jesus interpreted in the context of our lives is the starting point of our contextual Christologies. Some of the contextual Christologies of the New Testament would give us certain insights into developing our Christologies responding to our contexts.

### 3. Jesus of the Gospels

The Gospels do not provide us with a biography of Jesus but they allow us to *encounter him* (CWG 2, 120). In writing about the historicity of the gospels (CWG 2, 1-5-21) Soares-Prabhu says, “The starting point of the Gospel tradition is the historical Jesus of Nazareth whose words and works were seen and heard by his disciples, eye-witnesses of what he said and did” (CWG 2, 114). After the death and resurrection of Jesus narrations of what Jesus said and did were handed down by the disciples and they were used for preaching, teaching and the worship of the early Church. The memories of the words and events of Jesus’ life and ministry became transfigured memories after the resurrection of Jesus as they were all interpreted in the light of the shattering impact of the transforming experience of the resurrection of Jesus. Soares Prabhu says, “The post-Easter memory of Jesus was a *transfigured memory*; so that when the first Christians spoke about Jesus they described not what they had actually seen happening exactly as it was, but what they now understood to have then happened. And they reported the words and works in such a way as to bring out this new meaning they had seen in them” (CWG 2, 115). The Gospels are the skilful compilations of these interpreted narrations of the transfigured memory of the words and deeds of Jesus which each Evangelist arranging in a particular way



touching it up wherever necessary and interpreting his tradition according to the context of his community. Therefore, it is each evangelist's own theology of the Christ-event.

Mark's is the Gospel of "secret epiphanies", proclaiming that the words and deeds of Jesus as the hidden manifestations of the 'Son of God' who is also the crucified Messiah. Matthew sees the Church as the new Israel where Jesus as the risen Lord is present and walks in the way righteousness which Jesus taught. Luke presents the salvation history in which the ministry of Jesus is *the* time of salvation. For both Matthew and Luke Jesus is Son of God invested with the Spirit from the moment of conception. For John Jesus is the pre-existent wisdom, divine Messiah, the incarnation of the logos or the word made flesh. Soares Prabhu says, "The man who reads the Gospels critically, with the freshness its first hearers brought to them, does indeed meet Jesus in all his strangeness and fascination. He finds himself face to face with this man who fits into no category and yet belongs to all, who gentle yet strong, patient yet violent, conscious of his towering authority yet spending himself in service, so tolerant yet so adamant against sin" (CWG 2, 120). Such a Jesus one finds as utterly like every human in his suffering and anguish yet awesomely remote in his consciousness of his mission and his relation to God whom he calls *Abba*. In the Gospels one meets Jesus dying on the cross, only to rise again and there one "learns to accept a life that is always threatened by death, and finds the courage to be" (CWG 2, 121).

### ***3.1 Spirit Christology of the Synoptic Gospels***

Soares-Prabhu, while affirming the conspicuous role the Spirit of God played in the birth, life and ministry of Jesus, does not call it a Spirit Christology but his development of the theme, Jesus and the Spirit, is, indeed, the Spirit Christology of the Synoptic Gospels. Roger Haight defines Spirit Christology as: "A Spirit Christology I mean one that 'explains' how God is present and active in Jesus, and thus Jesus' divinity, by using

the biblical symbol of God as Spirit, and not the symbol Logos” (Haight, 1992, 257). In both Matthew and Luke birth from the Spirit is the basis for the divine Sonship of Jesus which goes beyond the traditionally attributed Sonship of Israel or the Messiah. In Matthew it is this divine Sonship of Jesus that makes him Emmanuel or God with us (Mt 1:23; 28:20). Luke expresses the divine Sonship of Jesus by narrating the loss of Jesus in the Temple and the revelation of the unique Sonship of Jesus himself by affirming his relation with his Father (Lk 2:41-51).

The Spirit is active in the life of Jesus in the beginning of his ministry. At his baptism Jesus receives the fullness of the Spirit. The dove-like Spirit comes down on Jesus and anoints him. After his baptism the Spirit leads him to the desert to be tempted. Jesus has victory over the evil spirit during his temptation. “The Spirit thus not only identifies Jesus as the Son, the authenticity of whose sonship is revealed through his fidelity in temptation; it also invests him with power to overcome evil, a power he will exercise through his ministry to free men from the bonds of Satan, sickness and sin” (CWG 2, 132). So the Spirit animates the entire ministry of Jesus.

Not only the inaugural proclamation of Jesus presented by Luke 4:16-30 reveals Jesus as the Spirit-filled evangelizer, but the entire Synoptic tradition affirms that Jesus is filled with the Spirit and is committed to the project of liberation. He is also presented as a Spirit-filled exorcist. He teaches the disciples to rely on the Spirit who will help them to hold on to their faith when they are persecuted. “The whole of Synoptic tradition thinks of the Spirit that inspires the life and mission of Jesus along the lines of the Old Testament *ruah Yahweh*, that is, as a creative and inspiring power (Lk 1:35; Mt 12:28). This power fills up the whole existence of Jesus...” (CWG 2, 137). Therefore, the Spirit that ‘rests’ on Jesus is distinguished from the enthusiasm of an ecstatic prophet’s inspiration. It shows itself in the authority of Jesus in his teaching, healing and exorcisms. It works in Jesus’ work which is wholly redemptive. The Spirit that rests on Jesus

is creative and the Synoptic tradition sees it as the Spirit of Sonship.

### ***3.2 Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew***

The conclusion to the Gospel (28:16-20) gives the key to the Christology of Matthew according to Soares Prabhu. It provides a center around the Christological texts of Matthew's Gospel. Using this key Matthew presents the Church's understanding of the theological status of their Lord. The Christological titles like the Son of Man, the Son of David, the Son of God, which reveal his significance for the new people of God (CWG 2, 157). Matthew re-structures the miracle stories to bring out their Christological meanings. The sayings of Jesus and the narratives of events in his life are arranged in Christologically significant patterns (CWG 2, 157).

Matthew tries to present Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah.

To paint this theological portrait of Jesus Matthew uses a wide variety of literary and theological devices. He has Old Testament quotations which present events in the life of Jesus as fulfilment of Scripture: figures from Old Testament history like Moses and Israel who serve as 'types' of Jesus and reveal his significance for the new people of God.; Christological titles like the Son of Man, the Son of David, the Son of God,, which formulate the early Church's understanding of the theological status of their Lord; miracle-stories which have been re-structured to bring out their Christological meaning; sayings and narratives arranged in Christologically significant patterns (CWG 2, 157).

The theological portrait of Jesus presented by Matthew must be seen from the perspective of the revelation of Jesus' life and mission as recognized and understood by the disciples through the post-Easter encounter with Jesus narrated in Matthew 18:16-20. It is from the experience of the discipleship of the risen Jesus, the Lord to whom "all

authority” is given that one encounters the reality of Jesus. From this faith-encounter with the risen Jesus, the disciples understand the significance of what Jesus taught and did during his earthly life.

Jesus as the *Teacher of Righteousness* has the authority (*exousia*) not only to cast out demons, to heal and to forgive sins but also to teach the way of righteousness leading those who follow him by his example. . According to George M Soares Prabhu, “His [Jesus’] authority, then, derives not from the traditional institutions of his society, but from his own personal charisma. ..., similar to that of the Old Testament prophets. His charisma, like theirs, is based not on personal magnetism but on the possession of the ‘spirit’, It derives, that is, from a profound religious vocation-experience,...Jesus probably had such a call experience at his baptism by John (Mk 1: 9-11” (CWG 2, 141). Matthew organizes the teaching of Jesus into five discourses like the five books of Torah (Pentateuch): the Sermon on the Mount, the Missionary Discourse, the Parabolic Discourse, the Discourse on the Church, the Discourse on the End Times (Mt 5-7; 13; 18; 24-25). All the discourses end with a stereotyped concluding formula: “when Jesus has finished all these sayings” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Further, the miracles of Jesus are also means of teaching for Matthew. Both words and deeds of Jesus are the manifestations of God’s offer of salvation.

Though the gospel according to Matthew emphasizes the ministry of Jesus as a teacher (Mt 4:23; 9:34; 11:1) the other Synoptic gospels also refer to the teachings of Jesus along with his preaching and healing ministry (Mk 2:13; 4:1; 6:34. Lk 4:14, 31; 6:6; 13:10; 19:47; 20: 1; 21: 37). Jesus had no school or any assigned place where he would offer his teaching. He taught in the synagogues, in the Temple, on the shores of the lake or wherever the people gathered to listen to him and get themselves healed of their infirmities. So his teaching was mostly in the rural countryside or in the villages rather than in the cities. Though he had a group of disciples whom he taught specifically on matters that would be important for their future mission, Jesus’ teaching

was predominantly addressed to the poor, the marginalized, the so called sinners and the outcasts.

It should be clear to us that there is a distinction between his *teaching* (*didaskein*) and his *preaching* (*keryssein*). The theme of his preaching is the good news about the arrival of the Kingdom of God. Jesus “went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Mt 4:23). His teaching is about how God sees humans and their world and how God relates with his people. The observation of the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians is that Jesus teaches about the way of God. “Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men” (Mt 22:16). “‘Preaching’ is thus proclamation: the announcing of the good news: ‘teaching’ is ethical and religious instruction: an explanation of the form that the ‘repentance’ or ‘conversion’ (*metanoia*) brought about by our acceptance of the good news must take. Who is this Jesus who speaks with such authority with which he teaches, heals and casts out demons? Matthew has many Christological titles for Jesus: he is the Nazarene (1:23), the Lord (8:2; 9:28; 15:25), the Christ (11:2; 16:16), the prophet from Nazareth (21:11), the Son of David (9:27; 15:22; 21:9), the Son of Man (8:28; 9:6; 10:23) and the Son of God (4:3; 14:33; 16:16). He also presents Jesus as *the Saviour*, *Emmanuel*, *the Son of God*, *the Personified Wisdom* and the Revealer of the Father and the Son of David.

## ***Jesus the Saviour***

An important element of the portrait of Jesus is his authority to forgive sins. In the infancy narrative of Matthew itself Jesus is presented as the one who “will save his people from their sins” (1:21). At the Last Supper, the symbolic pouring out of his blood as the sacramental anticipation of his death is explained that it is “for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28). Jesus proclaims the

Kingdom which calls for repentance and conversion. Matthew affirms that Jesus alone can forgive sins and save his people.

### ***Jesus the Emmanuel***

In the key text of the gospel of Matthew (28:16-20) the risen Jesus promises his presence till the end of the age. This presence is not a cultic presence or a place-linked presence like the *shekina Yahweh* or the glory of God on the tent in the Old Testament. It will be like the supporting presence of Yahweh, a personal presence, given to the charismatic leaders of Israel whom Yahweh had called for a special mission (Ex 3:12; Josh 1:5; Judg 6:16; Jer 1:3). This active presence of God himself with the disciples till the end of the ages promised at the close of the gospel has its beginning in the first chapter of the gospel itself (Mt 1:23) as Matthew presents Jesus as *Emmanuel* (God with us). Jesus is Emmanuel as he is the mediating presence of God among people because he is the Son of God and at the same time he is also Son of David.

### ***Jesus the Son of David***

It is the Jewish tradition that the expected messiah comes as a descendent of David (Is 9:6f; Mic 5:2) following the prophesy of Nathan (Sam 7:12). Therefore, the title Son of David is a messianic title. Matthew applies this title to Jesus in his Genealogy (1:1). In the Annunciation story Jesus is Son of David as he is adopted by Joseph into David's family. Jesus is addressed as 'Son of David' by some who pleaded with him to heal them (9:27; 15:22; 20:30f). Jesus' life and mission as the Messiah is presented by Matthew by means of the familiar Jewish technique of *typology*. He is the type of Moses and Israel. Jesus is the new Moses, the true Suffering Servant and the Servant of Yahweh. Jesus as the Messiah is Son of David but for Matthew the messiahism of Jesus can be more appropriately expressed by the title, 'Son of God'

## ***Jesus the Son of God***

Matthew presents the confession of Simon Peter acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah or Christ and the Son of the living God. “You are Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:17). The revelation of Jesus as the Son of God is affirmed also at the baptism scene, (Mt 3:13-17), at the time of temptation (Mt 4:1-11) at the transfiguration (Mt 17:1-8) and in other narratives like the invocation of the demoniacs cast out by Jesus (Mt 8:29) and the answer to the question of the High Priest at the trial of Jesus (Mt 26:4). On four significant occasions of Jesus’ life he is referred to as Son of God by Matthew. In the infancy narrative we find that Matthew identifies Jesus as Son of God in the context of the flight into Egypt (Mt 2:15): “Out of Egypt I called my Son” (ref Hos 11:1). Both here and in Mt 1:23 Jesus is the Lord. Jesus is also acknowledged as Son of God by the disciples when they experienced him as walking on the water (Mt 14:33) and finally by Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi acknowledging Jesus as “the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). Matthew’s affirmation about the identity of Jesus as the Son of God is not in the sense of the Old Testament understanding of the messianic king who is also termed as God’s son or in the Hellenistic sense of the miracle working ‘divine man’. In Matthew the title ‘Son of God’ refers to his being.

So Jesus appears in Matthew’s Gospel as the Son of God, related to God in an altogether unique and intimate way, so that he can regularly address God as ‘my Father’ (7:21:11:27, 20:23; 26:29, 26:53) , ‘my heavenly Father’ (15 13: 18:35), or ‘my Father who is in the heavens’ (10:32; 12:50, 16:17; 18: 10-19. Such Sonship certainly transcends any that we find among the charismatic leaders of the Old Testament or the divine men or the Hellenistic world, though Matthew has not spelled out its metaphysics (through, for instance, a doctrine of pre-existence) in any systematic way (CWG 2, 1664-65).

Though the theological reflection on the pre-existence of the Son of God later unfolded in the Logos theology of John

or the Cosmic Christology of Colossians, it may be discerned in a related Matthean theme: the identification of Jesus with the personified Wisdom of God.

### ***Jesus as Personified Wisdom***

In articulating the Christian experience of Jesus as the Son of God Matthew alludes to the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament more than other evangelists. He identifies Jesus with the personified Wisdom. Both in the Wisdom literature and in the writings of the intra-testamental period the wisdom of God is a feminine personification. In the Old Testament “she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore .... For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (Wis 7:25-26). She pre-exists creation and takes part in the shaping of it. (Prov 8:22-31). This personified wisdom is identified with Jesus by Matthew. Therefore, in Matthew’s gospel Jesus’ makes Wisdom’s invitation to “those who labour and are heavy laden’ his own (11:28-30) as in Sirach 51:26.

### ***Jesus the Son Who Reveals the Father***

Jesus as the personified Wisdom is intimately united with God, his Father. Therefore, only he can reveal the Father to all humans (Mt 11:27). Only the Son knows the Father. This knowledge is not an intellectual knowledge but a personal communion. This mutual relationship of communion or the knowledge of the Father and the Son is proclaimed by Jesus. “Father and Son, then are united by bonds of deep personal communion, and it is this personal relation which the Son extends to those to whom he chooses to reveal the Father” (CWG 2, 167-168). Jesus reveals the Father as Father and shares his Sonship with all humans revealing the Father’s love inviting them to experience his gracious and forgiving love. Jesus’ Person and mission are rooted in this Sonship. Soares Prabhu affirms: “It is this revelation of Jesus as the Son who makes known the Father which gives



Mathew's portrait of Jesus its unity and depth. For if Jesus is indeed personified wisdom, if he is the Teacher of Righteousness and the Saviour from Sin, he is all these because he is the Son of the living God, or more simply the Son" (CWG 2, 168).

According to Soares-Prabhu, in the context, especially if one looks at the reality of Jesus from the *bhakti* traditions Jesus is the divine *Sadguru*, the incarnate deity who can be mystically encountered by his followers. Matthew's presentation of the reality of Jesus is this *Sadguru* in the absolute sense of this word. Jesus is the authoritative Lord, the teacher of righteousness, the Saviour from Sin and as the Son he perfectly reveals the Father. "Jesus is indeed *the Sadguru*, infinite in his greatness and grace, infinite too in the perspective he opens and the revelation he gives", Soares Prabhu affirms.

#### **4. Jesus of Faith for Contextual Christologies**

Soares Prabhu argues that our task is not to repeat or elaborate the formulae of traditional Christology but to create new Christologies by confronting the cry for life in our contexts with our own experience of Jesus. His critique of the traditional Christological formulae is that they are formulated in metaphysical categories of thought which would not make any sense today especially in the situation of the developing World which has many poor and many religions. In this situation it is also not relevant to adopt or adapt the New Testament models of Christologies which are expressly tied to specific communities living in concrete historical situations.

The contextual Christologies we need to create must take into account two important aspects of life and faith-life: the cry for life and our Christian experience of Jesus as Jesus of Faith. The cry for life involves the economic dimension which grounds our physical existence, the affective dimension which grounds our psychic life and the meaning-giving or symbolic dimension of our life which finds expression in religious quest (CWG 4, 276). Both bread and the word are needed in all contexts of life

especially where massive economic poverty, the racist, sexist, caste and gender discriminations dehumanize and oppress human beings and there are many religions which throw up competing worlds of meaning. In these contexts of life Soares Prabhu says that the “cry for life is a cry for survival, for recognition and for meaning. It is a cry for liberation (economic and cultural) and for dialogue. It is within these parameters that Jesus must be interpreted...” (CWG 4, 276).

In interpreting Jesus in the context of the cry for life it is not ‘the historical Jesus’ discovered by means of historical criticism. It is also not ‘the Christ of faith’ presented through the dogmatic and liturgical formulae but the *Jesus of faith*. Who is this Jesus of faith? It is the Jesus presented to us in the confessional history of the New Testament. Soares Prabhu further explains; “The Jesus of faith is the Jesus of history as experienced by his faithful followers (and not, for example, as experienced by the religious and political leaders who opposed him). It is a category that lies between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, taking off from the Jesus of history and moving towards the interpretative explicitness of the Christ of faith” (CWG 4, 277). It emerges, according to him, in the *dialectic interaction of the critic’s Jesus of history and communities’ Christ of faith* (CWG 4, 277). Jesus of faith is the Jesus of our personal encounter, a Jesus we *know* or experience and not just a Jesus we *know about*. However, it is not just a personal experience alone but a community’s experience of the living Jesus. “The Jesus of faith is the community’s Jesus, of which scripture and tradition are constitutive parts, and where faith meets scholarship in a mutually corrective tension.” Therefore, the contextual Christologies in the developing nations (formerly called the Third World) have their loci or places in the communities which are shaped by their experience of Jesus and give expression to it in the totality of their lives, their worship and their studies and their praxis. A relevant contextual Christology pre-supposes christological faith and praxis.

The contextual Christologies need to enter into dialogue with religions and movements which stand for human values like

freedom, equality, love, justice etc. The Christological insights can be gathered from the sufferings of people all over the world especially in the developing countries. Such a dialogue needs to focus on the mystery of Jesus and not on the ‘mechanisms’ that have been put forward to explain the mystery of Jesus. Traditional Christology moved from mystery to mechanism. Contextual Christologies must focus on the mystery of Jesus and follow ‘the hermeneutic circle’ which moves from experience/praxis to mystery and back to experience.

Jesus experienced God as unconditional love and as his *Abba*. This God-experience was the source of his authority and freedom. With authority he confronted the religious, social and political establishment of his people with sovereign freedom. Jesus challenged the oppressive system of his society and all its rules of discrimination and the exclusion of the poor, the sick and women. He transcended all religious laws which dehumanize humans. He taught and practiced the spirit of law embodied in love (*agape*). The love commandment of Jesus is that we love God by loving our neighbour. To love God means, concretely, to love one’s neighbour. Love involves justice. Therefore, love as exercised by Jesus led him into conflict with forces that oppose justice and love. Soares Prabhu says: “In an unequal world where class, caste, race and gender conflicts exist, love must take sides. For nothing is more unjust ( or more unloving) than to divide equally among unequals, or treat the oppressor and oppressed alike. The love of Jesus leads him to make (as the God of Bible makes) an unambiguous option for the poor and the outcast, because they are as the Bible sees them, always victims of oppression” (CWG 4, 288).

Jesus lives out this *solidarity* and *conflict* throughout his life. It finds its christological symbol in the *incarnation*. This solidarity of Jesus with the victims of economic, social and political oppression is not merely a passive solidarity but leads to confrontation with the oppressors and finally to his crucifixion. But the death and burial of Jesus was not the end of everything. He was encountered alive. Indeed, the mystery of Jesus experienced

as alive is the answer to the cry of life. Jesus experienced alive by individual persons and communities must live out that experience by *Christo-praxis*. From such experience and praxis contextual Christologies will emerge.

In the Indian context Christological reflection that is relevant can be developed only by those who are graced to have an experience of the Person of Jesus and actualize that transforming experience in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, the discriminated against and all who are oppressed in some way or other. It is by actualizing the *dharma of Jesus* which involves experiencing God as *Abba* and God's unconditional love that makes every human being a son or a daughter without any discrimination. It lets one to be truly free to be oneself and give oneself up in self-emptying love or *agapeic concern* for others living out the values of the Sermon on the Mount. It is all inclusive and it establishes solidarity and table-fellowship with those who are excluded from the main-stream of the society especially the Dalits. A relevant contextual Christology gets into serious dialogue various religions and world-views in order to establish the reign of God where all humans are brothers and sisters and everyone is concerned about the welfare of all. The contextual Christology in the Indian context needs to articulate the demands of continuing the prophetic tradition of Jesus who challenged all oppressive and dehumanizing systems. In solidarity with those who cry for life contextual Christology or Christologies need to have concern for the welfare of nature, protecting and caring for it as it manifests God's goodness, graciousness and grandeur as well as it is necessary for humans' survival as humans.

## Conclusion

Among the important contributions of George M. Soares Prabhu to the development of biblical theological reflections is his presentation of the Jesus of Faith. He overcomes the unnecessary controversies created by biblical scholars in the last century on the distinction between the historical Jesus

and the Christ of faith by introducing his well-researched and insightful articulation of Jesus of Faith. Soares Prabhu affirmed that unlike the Jesus of history which is the result of historical critical search for information, the Jesus of Faith is the one who can be experienced by personal encounter and in the community by one who follows Jesus as his disciple. It is the Jesus of faith encountered by the early community of the disciples that is articulated in the gospels conditioned by the specific context of the communities in which they were formed. The traditional Christologies further expressed it through dogmas and doctrines using the metaphysical categories. Contextual Christologies of all generations cannot adopt or adapt the traditional Christologies or the specific New Testament Christologies. They need to be evolved from the personal and communitarian experience of the Jesus of faith who continues to be with the disciples till the end of time.

George M. Soares Prabhu's critique of the traditional Christologies and the limitations of the contextual Christologies of the gospels seem to be valid only to the extent that they have limitations of the categories of thought and specificity of the context in which they were articulated. But he has not explained how one would reach the Jesus of faith without them. In spite of it, the challenging insights of George M. Soares Prabhu on the Jesus of faith are important for the development of contextual Christologies especially in dialogue with many religions and in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized and the discriminated in the Indian context.

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Jacob Parappally, MSFS: Jacob Parappally holds a doctorate in Theology from the University of Freiburg, Germany. He was teaching systematic theology at Jnana Deepa, Pune for 14 years where he served as the dean of the Faculty of Theology. He is a visiting professor of many theological faculties in India and abroad. He was the Rector of Tejas Vidya Peetha, Institute of Mission-Oriented and Contextual Theology, Bangalore and was the President of the Indian Theological Association (2005-2011). He is the author of *Emerging Trends in Indian Christology*, *The Meaning of Jesus Christ: An Introduction to Christology*, *A Way of the Cross for Today* and the editor or co-editor of another 10 books. He translated the second book on Jesus Christ by Pope Benedict to Malayalam. He published more than 200 theological articles. He is the chief-editor of the *Journal of Indian Theology*. E-Mail: [Jacob.Para@gmail.com](mailto:Jacob.Para@gmail.com). ORCID: 0000-0002-6943-7046.

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