



Editorial:

George M. Soares-Prabhu, SJ: A Passionate Biblical Exegete and a Committed Liberation Theologian

Twenty-five years have gone by since George M. Soares-Prabhu, SJ (1929-1995) left behind his precious memories in Jnana Deepa. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance either to see him or to attend his lectures in Jnana Deepa. Nonetheless, two years after his tragic death (on July 22, 1995) I came to De Nobili College, where he lived for more than 25 years, to do my Bachelor's in Philosophy at Jnana Deepa. Since then, I have been hearing about him as being an excellent teacher, brilliant biblical scholar, first-rate biblical theologian, creative author, thought-provoking preacher, original thinker, scientific researcher, eloquent speaker, committed activist and so on. As I heard about him more, read about him, and tried to understand his writings, all these epitomes became personal realizations. I had the opportunity of reading his collected writings during my Bachelor's in Theology at Jnana Deepa, and since then my reading of the Bible has been challenged by the concerns that he raised for reading the Bible in the Indian context. Now, as a faculty member of the biblical department, where he taught and preached the Word of God for more than two decades, I am

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inspired by his erudite biblical scholarship and his prophetic role in communicating the message of the Bible for a –“poverty-religiosity-caste- ridden” Indian society.

As one of the pillars of Jnana Deepa, he exercised enormous influence on his students and colleagues, challenging them to interpret the Bible in a way that would bring it alive in the Indian context, especially focusing on the poor. As a testimony to this, I quote the words of Prof. Scaria Kuthirakattel, SVD, a student and later a colleague and a close friend of Soares-Prabhu:

His lectures and his personal life inspired a number of students to shift from a notional study to a personal understanding of Jesus, to move from a lethargic academic life to an active interest that combined with a committed ministry, and to lead a life of radical following of Jesus with minimum personal comforts and facilities but with maximum service in love (Kuthirakattel, 2009:42).

Prof. Francis X. D’sa, SJ, another friend and colleague of Soares-Prabhu describes him like this:

Scientist by training, artist by inclination, thinker by nature and theologian by commitment, George approached Scripture with the precision of a scientist, the hermeneutic sense of the artist, the questions of a philosopher and the passion of a committed theologian. In addition to all this he brought with him the pen of a poet and writer. The literary quality of his theological work is the achievement of a meticulous mind who though born with a talent for writing nonetheless crafted his essays with great care and labour (D’Sa, 1997: vii).

A careful and discerning reading of his writings will reveal that his goal was to work out a biblical theology that could respond to contemporary issues and challenges in India. His theological approach was contextual, inclusive, holistic, cosmocentric, symbolic and pragmatic with an Indian world-view. As a biblical exegete, Soares-Prabhu was moved by a singular concern throughout his career: to interpret the message of the Bible for contemporary India.

Therefore, the dialogical hermeneutics that he proposed for an Indian reading of the Bible comes from deep reflection and wide experience of several years. For him, an Indian reading of the Bible entailed reading the Bible using traditional Indian methods in the light of specifically Indian social concerns, with an Indian mind and with the sensibilities proper to Indian culture. He firmly believed that if one expected the biblical text to reveal itself to the reader, then the world of the text and the world of the reader would have to interact dialogically and meaningfully. Such an Indian method of interpretation would be “critical and relevant - faithful to the text and responsive to the specific concerns of the Indian interpreter” (Soares-Prabhu, 2003: 34). It was this approach that made him brilliant in his interpretation of the biblical texts.

He was perhaps one of the most influential biblical scholars that the Indian Church has ever known. What distinguished him in this regard was not simply his analysis and exegesis of biblical texts, but his reading and interpretation of the Bible from the Indian situation, characterized by massive poverty, dehumanizing hereditary caste system and pervasive pluriform religiosity. He firmly believed that living in the midst of massive poverty, deep social stratification of caste, religions vying with each other, no biblical theologian in India can seriously reflect on the message of the Bible without understanding closely what the Bible has to say about these grim realities. Thus, his interpretation of the biblical texts had serious implications for understanding the role of the Church in our Indian society.

The readers of the *Collected Writings of George M. Soares Prabhu, SJ, (Vols. 1-4)* will undoubtedly agree that he was a creative, insightful biblical exegete and a committed, radical liberation theologian. Twenty-five years later when we read them, we still feel the passion and depth of his research and commitment to the issues of contemporary society. He devoted his whole life to develop an Indian theology of liberation from a biblical perspective that is basically Indian. He 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 refreshingly unique in this process was his use of the Bible to give a foundational theological background. He explored the Bible from the standpoint of the poor, the victims, the oppressed, the marginalized, the voiceless and the exploited. The starting point of his dialogical contextual theology was a biblical theology which he then interpreted in the Indian context.

His primary concern, as I understand, was not with “doctrinal preoccupations” but with a faith that liberates humans from their ‘non-freedoms.’ He made a conscious effort to present a Jesus to India/Asia who responds to the challenges of our cultures, and the grim realities that we are grappling with, in our day-to-day life situations. Thus, he reflected upon the relevance of the Jesus of Faith in the context of the religions and ideologies in India today. All his exegetical efforts, I would say, were directed towards this goal. He reconciled the dichotomy between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith by placing the Jesus of Faith in the Indian context for a transforming experience in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed and the exploited in some way or other. As Francis D’Sa says, his “Jesus was not the metaphysical Jesus of the ecumenical councils,” (D’Sa, 2003:6) but Jesus who identified himself with the poor and the oppressed in order to show them an active and effective concern (Soares-Prabhu, 2003:173 -196).

We are indebted to him for the phrase “*Dharma* of Jesus” as he was instrumental in studying and speaking about this concept especially from the Indian context and biblical perspective. As Francis D’Sa held, he thought that it was imperative to present Jesus’ *Dharma* in a multireligious and multicultural context of Asia so that any person of good will would be able to understand and appropriate it (D’Sa, 2003a: 3). Indeed, he had a keen sensitivity towards Indian social and religious traditions, and therefore, he could cite Indian social thinkers and religious texts authoritatively and draw critical insights from them.

He was aware of the need for inculturating the Gospels in the Indian socio-cultural context. Therefore, he called for an openness and receptivity to the East and West, to religions and cultures of

Asia and Europe. Consequently, the theological method that he proposed for our consideration is basically of an inclusive, holistic and dialogical one. At the same time, he was not afraid to speak out against the injustice that the Church practised within its ecclesial functions. For him the “the unprejudiced Jesus” was always the inspiration for critiquing the “prejudiced Church.” The way and dharma of the biblical prophets always challenged him to carry out his prophetic vocation in the specific context of India. He critically reflected upon the mission of the Church, and proposed a vision of a new society, taking into consideration the challenges of Indian Church and society. He showed us a world-view that cuts through the sacred-secular, faith-justice, and contemplation-action divide. Taking Jesus in the Gospels as a measuring rod, he proposed a liberative biblical spirituality, against the legalistic spirituality of the Pharisees, for everyone who likes to follow Jesus radically.

Striking in his contribution was his attempt to interpret the Bible from the perspective of the poor and the marginalized. He has hermeneutically interpreted the Bible by considering Jesus’ radical option and revolutionary mission for the poor and marginalized in the Synoptics. He could brilliantly explain the liberative notion of poor in the Bible, the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount and the table fellowship of Jesus from the perspective of the poor to bring equality, justice, peace and liberation, to the poor, marginalised and the most suffering and oppressed Dalit Christians in India. His identification and solidarity with the oppressed classes of society made him a passionate champion of the cause of the poor and marginalised.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his untimely departure from our midst, I am glad to dedicate this issue of Jnanadeepa in memory of this unforgettable teacher, George M. Soares-Prabhu, who was always inspired by the liberative pedagogy of His Teacher, Jesus. The essays in this issue are soul searching studies of his writings, a tribute to his seminal contribution towards Indian biblical theology and biblical interpretation.

We are grateful for his prophetic vision, leadership and pioneering spirit that led Jnana Deepa to its heights and to achieve its goal. He was a passionate biblical exegete and a committed liberation

theologian who had the depth and vision of seeing things in their ultimate perspective. Through his writings, he continues to invite us to take interest in the issues of our times, to engage with them in the light of the Scriptures and to read the Scriptures in the light of the issues, and to be passionate about Jesus of Faith and his Kingdom upon Indian soil.

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Guest Editor

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