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Dialogical Biblical Hermeneutics: George M. Soares-Prabhu's Contribution towards an Indian Biblical Theology

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Abstract: This paper analyses George M. Soares-Prabhu's contribution towards developing a method for an Indian biblical interpretation and biblical Theology is quite unique and admirable. As a biblical exegete, Soares-Prabhu was moved by one singular concern throughout his career, such as 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 a deeper reflection and experience of several years. For him an Indian reading of the Bible means to read the Bible using the traditional Indian methods in the light of specifically Indian social concerns, with an Indian mind and with the sensibilities proper to an Indian culture. Such a dialogical hermeneutics will generate a hermeneutical circle giving

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us an Indian reading that involves a fruitful 'conversation' between the text and the reader, the biblical text and its Indian context. This dialogical hermeneutical reading will involve a radical commitment to the poor with a contextual, inclusive, holistic, cosmocentric, symbolic and pragmatic Indian world-view. This could be done with a three-fold reading keeping in mind the sensibilities proper to the Indian culture and context, such as a religious, social and an inter-textual reading.

Keywords: Dialogical Hermeneutics, Indian Mind, Hermeneutical Circle, Text and the Reader, Holistic Orientation, Cosmocentrism, Symbolic Perspective, George Soares-Prabhu.

Introduction

George M. Soares-Prabhu's contribution towards developing a method for an Indian biblical interpretation and biblical Theology is quite unique and commendable. He proposed to have an Indian reading of the Bible and spelt out its characteristics, keeping the 'Indian mind' of the reader and context. According to him, "an Indian reading of the Bible is a reading from an Indian point of view: a reading guided by a sensibility shaped by Indian culture, and provoked by questions emerging from the Indian situation."[1] He was convinced that "ideally, one ought to read the Bible in India in the light of Indian concerns, with a sensibility that is Indian, using where helpful traditional Indian methods of interpretation" (*CWG* 2, 273). Even though, it is rather difficult to speak of an Indian mind in a country where the cultural scene is so immensely varied, he believed that there is "a certain 'attitude to life', a certain way of experiencing reality, which is distinctively Indian" (*CWG* 4, 8).

He devoted his whole life to solve a question that haunted him throughout his life, namely "how is one to read the Bible in India today, in this India of ours with its vigorous and pluriform religiosity, its grinding poverty and its dehumanizing caste? Is an

Indian reading at all possible?" (*CWG* 1, 207). He confronted the conservative and liberal schools which assumed that "the text of the Bible has only one true meaning, wholly independent of the class or cultural conditioning of the reader" (*CWG* 1, 207). and came up with an alternative reading of Bible with a dialogical, contextual and hermeneutical reading of the Bible. Since 'Indian mind' experiences things as part of a whole, he envisaged a holistic and inclusive Indian interpretation of the Bible (*CWG* 4, 79). According to him, everything is bound by a context without which it cannot be properly understood. Since the Indian mind perceives things and persons are interconnected, interrelated and interdependent, the Indian interpretation of the Bible must be contextual, dialogical, integral, holistic and inclusive (*CWG* 2, 274).

He envisioned biblical interpretation as "a fruitful 'conversation' between text and the reader, in which the reader (not the implied reader of the literary critic, but the real reader who reads the text from a concrete historical setting) plays a decisive role" (*CWG* 2, 272). Such an Indian method of interpretation will be "critical and relevant - faithful to the text and responsive to the specific concerns of the Indian interpreter" (*CWG* 4, 34). He believed that this sort of Indian interpretation "can at best aspire to be a sort of pastoral embellishment to the real study of the Bible effected by the historical critical method" (*CWG* 1, 208).

He was aware that the traditional biblical methods of interpreting the biblical texts remained "adamantly mono-cultural in its outlook serve to alienate them from their traditional culture, and prevent any local reading of the text. In India, a reading of the Bible from "this place", instead of being a natural process (as a reading of the Vedas, or of the Pali Canon would be), becomes a reading against the grain, which needs to be undertaken with considerable self-conscious effort" (*CWG* 2, 273). It was this realization that led him to propose a contextual dialogical biblical hermeneutics for interpreting the Bible for an Indian context.

1. Historical Criticism: Ineffective and Irrelevant for an Indian Context

The starting point for an alternative way of interpreting the Bible was his disillusionment with the historical criticism. According to him historical critical method was proved ineffective, irrelevant and ideologically loaded (*CWG* 1, 208). The ineffectiveness of the historical critical method was shown by "its chronic inability to arrive at conclusive results", as it gives only "hypothetical possibilities," (*CWG* 1, 208) and the belief that "the assured results of today will be automatically challenged tomorrow" (*CWG* 1, 209).

He firmly believed that "as long, then, as Historical Criticism remains the standard method of biblical exegesis there is little hope for an 'Indian' exegesis" (*CWG* 1, 208). According to him, historical critical method does not measure up to the nature and intention of the text, because it is a method "fashioned to obtain the exact information of the text", and not "to interpret a text which aims at the personal transformation of the reader through his response in faith" (*CWG* 1, 209). Therefore, he argued that "the historical critical method at least as traditionally practised, does not measure up to the concrete literary and historical dimensions of the biblical text" (*CWG* 1, 210). He maintained that "the objectivism of the method prevents it from appreciating the role of the reader in constituting the meaning of a text, and so blinds it to the authentically new meanings that a text may, indeed must, acquire as it is read in ever new situations" (*CWG* 1, 210). He contended that mere philological and grammatical analysis of the critical exegete would not be sufficient to unlock the meaning of the biblical text, because the text is "a living reality which is 'created' through the interaction of a reader in his concrete historicity (bringing with him his specific perspective and his concrete commitments) and a text bringing with it all its history" (*CWG* 1, 211). It is therefore, he says: "The critical exegete sees himself as a dispassionate and uncommitted 'observer' of the text, who will release the meaning locked up in it by juggling expertly with philological and grammatical keys" (*CWG* 1, 211).

For him a "method which deliberately brackets off the concerns of the subject" remains necessarily 'academic'(*CWG* 1, 211). and therefore, it is unacceptable.

According to Soares-Prabhu, historical critical method remains irrelevant in India because of the way it is carried out in seminaries in a cultural isolation, cutting off from the real life experiences. He says:

> The problem of irrelevance is accentuated in India where biblical exegesis (what there is of it) is done almost exclusively in seminaries and Church faculties, where academic irrelevance is compounded by cultural isolation. The Seminary professor living in his utopia (his 'nowhere', the closed culture of the seminary, isolated in language and lifestyle from the lives of people around), theologizes only too often in a vacuum, cut off from the real life experiences that should nourish his theology (*CWG* 1, 212).

Consequently, such exegesis would lose its social moorings and its social concern, and thereby no longer becomes the message of the Bible significant. Accordingly the Bible becomes like any other book to be discussed, dissected, analysed, annotated, and it would spell out everything except the significance of its challenging and transforming word (*CWG* 4, 33).

2. Dialogical Biblical Hermeneutics

Disillusionment with historical criticism led him to the exploration of more contextualized ways of reading the Bible. Following the hermeneutical principles of Gadamer he proposes a contextual dialogical hermeneutics for an Indian reading of the Bible. And in this process, he identified two significant issues in biblical hermeneutics which enabled him to propose an interpretation of the text that will be objective, relevant and Indian, i.e. to become aware of the semantic autonomy of the interpreted text, and to realize the importance of the concerns

of the interpreter for the operation of the hermeneutical circles (*CWG* 4, 27). He states: "A dialogical hermeneutics locates the meaning of the text not in some original author-meaning (what the author intended to say), to be recovered by the controlled use of neutral methods, but in the text-meaning which emerges from a creative and dialogical encounter between the interpreter and the text" (*CWG* 4, 28). According to him biblical interpretation does not mean to dig out an original author-meaning supposedly hidden in the text under layers of subsequent interpretation, as historical criticism attempts to do, but to enter into a conversation with the text (*CWG* 4, 4). Thus, a dialogical hermeneutics invites for a mutual reciprocal openness of interpreter and text. He says,

> It is along the lines of such a hermeneutical conversation between text and reader, where each is open to and respects the claims of the other, that an Indian reading of the Bible is to be attempted. An Indian Christian reading will be a reading of the Bible by an interpreter sensitive to the Indian situation and true to the biblical text. It will be, that is, a true-to-the-text reading made with an Indian pre-understanding and responsive to Indian concerns (*CWG* 4, 28).

While the text is open to the questions the interpreter brings, the interpreter is open to the truth claim of the text (*CWG* 4, 28). Such mutual reciprocal openness of interpreter and text leads to the appropriation of the meaning of the text. Because in this process, as he articulates, "the interpreter makes the text his own, enters into its world at its intersection with his own, shares its perspective, is changed by it. In a dialogical hermeneutics, therefore, appropriation is not the 'application' of a previously understood text, but is part of the process of understanding itself" (*CWG* 4, 30). Thus, the mutual openness of text to interpreter and interpreter to text leads to a mutually enriching encounter of the one with the other leading to a hermeneutical circle (*CWG* 4, 31). Such a hermeneutical circle envisages a synchronic reading of the text, rather than a diachronic reading of the text. Therefore,

he says, "it is the Bible as a whole, then, not this or that particular passage or book in it, that will be the 'text' for a hermeneutical reading. Any particular biblical passage will be read in the light of the text - that is, in the perspective of the great 'metaphors' or lines of signification that the Bible as a whole reveals" ((*CWG* 4, 43).

The hermeneutical circle is initiated by the interpreter's understanding of the text, which calls into question both his present, commonly accepted understanding of the text, and the questions which the interpreter keeps on addressing the text from his continually changing situation. Therefore, the context and concerns of the interpreter become equally important for a hermeneutical reading with the questions which the interpreter keeps on addressing the text, which he defines it as 'exegetical suspicion' (*CWG* 4, 32). Therefore, the hermeneutical reading that he proposes is invariably guided by a sensibility shaped by Indian culture, and provoked by questions emerging from the Indian situation (*CWG* 4, 34). It is concerned about what the text has to say to the interpreter today. Therefore, "the questions it asks are not historical (what happened?), nor redactional (what did the author intend to say?), but existential (what does the text mean to me?)" (*CWG* 4, 43).

His quest was for developing new and more contextualized ways of reading the Bible, and therefore he made a conscious effort to include the concerns of the Indian society in the proposed dialogical reading of the Bible. According to him, the Indian context is constituted by massive poverty, pervasive religiosity and apparently immovable social structure of caste. And all these factors 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). Therefore, he says "An Indian interpretation of the Bible must be attentive to these determinative factors of the Indian situation, if it is to avoid

the kind of irrelevance which, to Indian eyes, seriously afflicts academic exegesis in the West" (*CWG* 4, 6).

According to Soares-Prabhu, the Bible should be interpreted for 'today,' by retrieving the context of the text and interpreting it in the context of India. Having retrieved the context of the text, the exegetes need to analyse the context of our times, of our region, of our country and our community, so that they may reveal the message of the Word of God in and through the happenings of our times.[2] Therefore, the exegetes should have a familiarity, if not the mastery, of the economic, political, social and religious structures of our times, and their influence upon the day-to-day life of the faithful. In such a way, the exegetes should be able to unravel the meaning of the texts in the reader's universe of meaning.

He spells out the concerns of an Indian exegete in a dialogical hermeneutical reading. First of all a dialogical hermeneutical reading must be read from the perspective of the poor in the country. He says,

> Indeed commitment to the poor is demanded of the Indian exegete, not only by his Third World situation of overwhelming poverty which is the true context of his interpretation (however much he may try to isolate himself from it), but also by the thrust of the Bible itself. For the Bible, in spite of all the efforts of Western exegesis to domesticate of remains a revolutionary text proclaiming 'good news to the poor' (*CWG* 4, 35).

Secondly, he requests every Indian exegete to have an Indian world-view. He argues:

> The radical commitment to the poor which is the starting point of any genuine Indian hermeneutic in India must be made within the distinctive understanding of humankind and its world, which constitutes the Indian world-view, and gives particular shape and colour to its Third Worldness. An Indian hermeneutic will respect the specific sensibility shaped by

the Indian world-view - or, more accurately perhaps, world-views (*CWG* 4, 35).

Thirdly, he asks every Indian exegete to be inclusive in understanding and interpreting the text: He tells,

> Indian thinking is inclusive. It is guided by the principle of identity rather than that of contradiction. That is, it defines truth not by exclusion (A is A because it is not B), but by identity (A is A, whether or not it is also B). And because it is profoundly convinced of the relativity of all 'beliefs' (for it knows that the Absolute cannot be packaged into a formula), and is determined to risk the chance of error rather than the loss of any part of the truth, it will opt for the 'Ying-Yang' way of complementarity (both/and) rather than for the Aristotelian way of exclusion (either/or) (*CWG* 4, 36).

Fourthly, he appeals to have a cosmocentric world-view because the Indian world-view encompasses the whole cosmos rather than focusing on humankind alone. He says, "humankind is experienced not as standing over against nature and dominating it, but as rooted in the cosmos and integrally related to it" (*CWG* 4, 37). Humankind does not stand alone, but must always be understood as part of the totality of the cosmos. Indian thinking is thus inevitably "cosmocentric, not (like Western thinking) anthropocentric" (*CWG* 4, 9). Therefore, he argues that, the Indian exegete should be particularly sensitive to the stream of biblical tradition which is aware of nature as the backdrop to human history, and is conscious of the cosmic responsibility of humankind (*CWG* 4, 38).

Fifthly, he calls for a symbolic world-view because the Indian concern for the cosmos is rooted in the awareness that the world is the symbol of the Absolute. It is here he recourse to the traditional Indian *dhvani* method of interpretation of the sacred texts. He says,

> All things have an aura of the numinous and a dimension of depth. They are the visible expression of the invisible Real *(sat),* the inexpressible expressed, the unmanifested

(avyakta) made manifest. It is this experience of the world as symbol that grounds *'dhvani,'* the method of interpretation through evocation proposed in classical Sanskrit poetics. … the Indian exegete will always approach the biblical text with an openness to its depth meaning. He will be sensitive to the evocations of the text, aware of the "other echoes (that) inhabit the garden" (*CWG* 4, 38).

Sixthly, he suggests having a pragmatic world-view because the new meanings disclosed by a symbolic Indian reading of the Bible will always bear practical meanings, as they will lead to a transformation of the interpreter and his world. He believes that "the reading of Scripture in India has never been an academic exercise (the pursuit of truth for truth's sake), but always a severely practical quest for liberation" (*CWG* 4, 39). In his efforts to unravel the meaning of the biblical texts, the Indian exegete should express his concern for justice, transformation of the individual, human society and the cosmos. Therefore, the pragmatic world-view of the exegete leads to liberation of the individual and society. He articulates it:

> It is such a dialectic between the historical concern for justice (the righteousness of the Kingdom of God) on the one hand, and the longing for individual liberation (*mumuksa*) on the other, leading to a 'passionate desire for the welfare of all being' *(sarvabhutahite ratah*) that will determine the horizon of the Christian Indian exegete of the Bible, and save him from the academic bareness which afflicts so much of Western exegesis today.[61] An *exegesis* which is not fully liberative, that is, which does not result in a word that transforms the individual, human society and the cosmos, will not be truly 'Indian' (*CWG* 4, 40-41).

He gives a few criteria for such an Indian hermeneutical reading, namely (*CWG* 4, 46):

1. Fidelity to the linguistic structure of the text because a valid reading must not say more than the text permits it to say.
2. Continuity with the author meaning of the text because, in a religious text, it is the author meaning that mediates the originary experience which constitutes the text as a religious text and allows it to make demands on us.
3. Responsiveness to an Indian pre-understanding; for a reading will be Indian only to the extent that it is guided by the perceptions and values of an Indian world-view, and responds to concerns that arise from the Indian situation.
4. Eventual acceptance by the Christian community in India and elsewhere; for only such eventual acceptance will show that the new Indian reading is also a Christian reading, made from within the perspectives of the Christian tradition.

A hermeneutical reading based on the above criteria, according to him will be true-to-the-text, prompted by concerns arising from the Indian situation and guided by a sensibility shaped by an Indian world-view (*CWG* 4, 45-56). It will "respect both the historical distance of the text and the specificity of the religious experience it seeks to communicate."[3] "Laughing at Idols: the Dark side of Biblical Monotheism (an Indian Reading of Isaiah 44:9-20" is a best illustration of this hermeneutical reading that he proposed (*CWG* 2, 272-296). Here, he situates the text in its literary and sociological context, spells out the structure of the text as accurately as possible, and reflects on the significance of what the text has to say to a reader in India today.

In short, the dialogical hermeneutics that he proposed based on a radical commitment to the poor with an inclusive, cosmocentric, symbolic and pragmatic Indian world-view. Such a dialogical hermeneutics will generate a hermeneutical circle giving us an Indian reading which involves a constant

dialogue between the biblical text and its Indian context, by formulating appropriate biblical answers to the stream of questions exerting dialectically from the Indian situation (*CWG* 4, 41). Therefore, an Indian hermeneutical reading will not be satisfied with applying already acquired meanings of the biblical texts to the Indian situation, rather it will read relevant meaning directly out of the biblical text, reading it from a concrete, specific, real-life, point of view.

This does not mean that hermeneutical reading will not make use of the tools of the historical criticism, and will not undertake a close reading of the text. He very clearly says,

> A hermeneutical method, then, will study the text as closely and as carefully as historical criticism does. It will use the techniques that historical criticism has developed (particularly form and literary criticism) and will draw on the splendid philological aids (dictionaries, grammars, word-statistics) that historical critics have compiled. But it will do this for purposes different from those of historical criticism and from a very different point of view (*CWG* 4, 43).

Moreover, he affirmed that an Indian exegesis will result from the cross-fertilization of modem methods of biblical exegesis with contributions from Indian exegetical tradition, rooted in the socio-cultural reality of India today (*CWG* 1, 216). Though he critiqued the modem historical critical methods thoroughly, he was convinced that a sound exegesis could never do without analyzing the text philologically and semantically (CWG 2, 3-48 and *CWG* 2, 105-125). Therefore, he says that an Indian reading of the Bible will not replace an historical reading but will complement it. He makes it clear in the following way:

> In the universe of Indian exegesis there is room for a wide variety of methods - historical criticism to determine the origin and the transmission of a text, literary criticism to analyse its literary and linguistic structures, canonical criticism to find out what function the text had in successive believing communities. But all these must be completed, if the

> interpretation is not to remain barren, with a hermeneutical reading which will determine the significance of the text for the reader here and how, by engaging text and reader in a critical conversation, that respects not only the meaning trajectory of the text but the new Indian context in which the text is now read (*CWG* 4, 6).

In short, as he says "in many ways, then, the intensely visual, pluriform, inclusive, cosmocentric Indian mind is the polar opposite of the word-oriented, exclusivist, anthropocentric mind-set of the Bible. Reading a biblical text with an Indian mind can therefore be a disconcerting experience" (*CWG* 2, 275).

3. An Exegetical Model for India

He asks the Indian exegetes to be firmly rooted in the Indian culture and situation, if they have to produce an Indian interpretation at all. For this, he says that the Indian exegetes must free themselves from the Western bourgeoisie conditioning so that they can "get into touch with, and articulate the questions which the 'real' India addresses the Bible" (*CWG* 4, 35). Since the Indian exegetes are sensitive to context, their interpretation of the text should be interconnected, interrelated and interdependent whole. This makes Indian exegesis holistic and inclusive. Thus, the contextual dialogical hermeneutical method that he suggests for India consists of a three-dimensional reading: a religious reading, a social reading and an inter-textual reading.

3.1 A Religious Reading

According to Soares-Prabhu, "a 'religious' reading brings to the text a pre-understanding informed by India's rich religious tradition, so as to discover in it resonances missed by the Western exegete with his very different sensibility" (*CWG* 3, 76). It will apply the traditional methods of Indian exegesis to the biblical text and transpose its symbols into Indian ones, without destroying the social concern which is very essential to the Bible's message (*CWG* 1, 216). However, he warns that an Indian religious

reading of the Bible should not be reduced to a Hindu reading or to a *brahmanic* reading of the Bible by applying the traditional Indian hermeneutics (*mimamsa*) and poetics (*kavyasastra*). But it must also take into consideration the rich folk, dalit and tribal traditions that make up nearly one fourth of the Indian population (*CWG* 3, 77). That is to say, a religious reading of the Bible will not attempt merely to discover traditional Indian values in the Bible, but it "will strain to find an Indian 'language' for the specific incarnational insights of biblical religion - that man is now the locus of one's encounter with God; and that to 'love God with all one's heart' now means 'to love one's neighbour as oneself'" (CWG 1, 217.

"The *Dharma* of Jesus: An Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount" (*CWG* 4, 153-172) is basically an interpretation of Mt 5-7 with an Indian religious 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. He places the *dharma* of Jesus, as portrayed in Mt 5-7, as normative for Indian Christian community. It was his sensitivity to the Indian religious context that led him to coin the phrase '*dharma* of Jesus,' and within no time this Indian phrase became the sum and substance of his understanding of Jesus' message for the Christian community in India.[4] 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, 2003: 3).

An Indian reading of the Prologue of John shows that it echoes the 'prologue' of the *Isha Upanishad* and takes us beyond it (CWG 4, 214-219). In his own words:

> John too implies that the world, all that lives and moves, is pervaded by the Lord. The Word pervades the whole of creation and all human history, because all things were made through the Word (1:3) and every human being enlightened by it (1:9). But when the Prologue goes on to affirm that the

Word became flesh and lived among us, (1:14), it reveals a dimension of God's presence in the world which goes beyond what Hinduism has conceived (CWG 4, 217).

In "The New Testament as a Model of Inculturation," (*CWG* 1, 112-123) he clearly illustrates that the New Testament can be read with an Indian religious mind, and shows how a religious reading of the Bible can stand as a model for the 'accommodation', 'adaptation' or 'inculturation' through which the Christian proclamation must become "all things to all men that (it) might by all means save some" (1Cor 9:22). "The Man Born Blind: Understanding a Johannine Sign in India Today" (*CWG* 2, 187-197) invites us to read the Gospel of John with truly Indian mind, and urges us to a radical openness to other religions and dialogue. "The Sacred in the Secular: Reflections on a Johannine Sutra: "The Word Was Made Flesh and Dwelt among Us" (Jn 1:14)" (*CWG* 2, 201-213) demonstrates how a religious reading of Johannine Sutra (Jn 1:14) strives to hold both poles – sacred and secular- together in their mutual connectedness and integrity. As the Indian mind cannot separate the sacred and secular, the exposition of Jn 1:14 with an Indian religious mind shows us how the sacred interpenetrates the secular in the mystery of Incarnation.

Likewise, the articles, on "Inculturation - Liberation - Dialogue: Challenges to Christian Theology in Asia Today" (*CWG* 2, 201-213), "From Alienation to Inculturation: Some Reflections on Doing Theology in India Today" (*CWG* 1, 79-111), "The Indian Church Challenged by Pluralism and Dialogue" (*CWG* 1, 157-172), "Religion and Communalism: The Christian Dilemma," (*CWG* 1, 173-190) and "Jesus Christ amid the Religions and Ideologies of India Today" (*CWG* 1, 191-204) emphasize the need to read the Bible with a 'religious world-view of the Indian culture' and show how a religious reading of the Bible can serve for linguistic and theological inculturation of the Gospel message in India.

3.2 A Social Reading

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* 1, 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, 216). 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, 79).

In his article "Socio-Cultural Analysis in Prophetic Theologizing: a Biblical Paradigm," he shows how the prophetical 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). The prophetical 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. Thus, he argues for

a prophetic theologizing for an effective transformation of Indian society and people.

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, 223-240). 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 will challenge everyone to see every fellow Christian as a brother or a sister. 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).

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 Jesus (CWG 1, 241-259. An egalitarian, antigreed and anti-pride 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).

He firmly believed that if we are to understand the challenges that India poses to the Church, it is important that we try 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, 141-156). 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). In "Jesus and the Poor," 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, 173-196). 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, 173-194). 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, 173-194),

3.3 An Inter-Textual Reading

According to Soares-Prabhu an intertextual reading of the Bible will certainly be of much help for better understanding and appreciation of the Scriptures of different religions. He firmly believed that when texts of different cultures are brought together the light of one text brings out elements that were hidden or missing in the other. For example, by applying the *dhvani* theory of Indian poetics to Jesus stilling the storm in Mk 4:35-41, he points out how the application of such a method elicits deeper meaning in the hearer which otherwise would not have been perceived at all (*CWG* 2, 245-255). Likewise, taking the *Mahavagga* text of the Buddhists he compares the context and the content of the mission command of Jesus in Mt 28:16-20 and shows how the text of Mt 28:16-20 throws light on

aspects which are either hidden or ignored or found missing in the *Mahavagga* text (*CWG* 4, 53-69).

4. Problems of an Indian Interpretation

While trying for an Indian method of biblical interpretation, he also identified certain problems for an Indian interpretation, such as the alienation of the Indian interpreter from the Indian situation, and the Indian mind. The reason for such an alienation, according to him, is "biblical interpretation in India is not emerging from grass-root communities (as is happening in Latin America and the Philippines), but is the work of Westernized scholars, living in the seclusion of culturally isolated church institutions, patterned on Western models, and forming enclaves of a Western clerical culture in the alien vastness of India" (*CWG* 4, 10). Therefore, he says that Indian interpreter "needs to be rescued by the people of India as the Latin American theologians were rescued by their poor" (*CWG* 4, 10).

Conclusion

As a biblical exegete, Soares-Prabhu was moved by one singular concern throughout his career, such as 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 a deeper reflection and experience of several years. For him an Indian reading of the Bible means to read the Bible using the traditional Indian methods in the light of specifically Indian social concerns, with an Indian mind and with the sensibilities proper to an Indian culture. Such a dialogical hermeneutics will generate a hermeneutical circle giving us an Indian reading that involves a fruitful 'conversation' between the text and reader, the biblical text and its Indian context. This dialogical hermeneutical reading will involve a radical commitment to the poor with an inclusive, holistic, cosmocentric, symbolic and pragmatic Indian world-view. This could be done with a three-fold reading keeping in mind the

sensibilities proper to the Indian culture and context, such as a religious reading, a social reading and an inter-textual reading. According to him such an Indian method of interpretation will be critical, relevant, faithful to the text and responsive to the specific concerns of the Indian interpreter.

He earnestly believed that his knowledge of the Bible is not to make him a "technician of the Bible" but to acquire the courage "to enlarge the tent and widen the horizon so 'that nothing that affects the plight of one's fellow human beings is absent from the scope of biblical interpretation" (*CWG* 4, 238). Therefore, he not only proposed a theoretical framework for a contextual dialogical interpretation of the Bible for India, but also applied it in his exegetical treatment of the biblical texts. As Francis X. D'sa rightly noted, "What distinguishes Soares-Prabhu from other exegetes is that for him exegesis was only a spring-board for theologizing. Besides, in his exegetical endeavours he employed tools whose validity he did not take for granted; he tested them very critically and gave a reasoned account of them" (*CWG* 4, xii).

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Notes

1. General Note: Collected Writings of George.M. Soares Prabhu, SJ, Vols. 1-4 (Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1999-2003) have been used all along in this article. For the sake of space and brevity, henceforth, CWG refers to The Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J. Soares-Prabhu treats of the subject thematically in his "Socio-cultural Analysis in Prophetic Theologizing", CWG 2, 61-67.
2. Soares-Prabhu, "Interpreting the Bible in India Today," CWG 4, 5. He says that "fundamentalist Christian readings, a growing trend in India just now, fail to maintain the historical distance of the text, because they read the Bible as if it were a work written directly for the contemporary reader." CWG 4, 5.
3. The word dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root dhr, which means to uphold, to support, to nourish, and therefore dharma has to do with upholding, supporting and sustaining. Therefore, dharma can be understood as that which holds the people together. As D'S a says, "In the Indian subcontinent it stands for the complex of relationships that one thing has with every other thing", Francis X. D'Sa, "George M. Soares-Prabhu: A

Theologian for Our Times," in The Dharma of Jesus, George M. Soares-Prabhu, ed. by Francis X. D'Sa (Orbis Books: Maryknoll 2003), 3. The term dharma has been used not only in Hinduism but also in Budhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

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Selected Quotes by Soares-Prabhu

"When the revelation of God's love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in man's acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings freedom inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters fellowship, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to justice, because it impels every true community to adopt just societal structures which alone make freedom and fellowship possible. Freedom, fellowship and justice are thus the parameters of the Kingdom's thrust towards the liberation of man." (Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God," CWG 4, 238-239.)

"Jesus opted for a radicalism which sought to realize as perfectly as possible, the spirit of the Law, which he saw embodied in love (agape), that is in interhuman concern." (Soares-Prabhu, "The Dharma of Jesus," CWG 3, 7.)

"The Eucharist has always carried the memory of Jesus' meals with tax collectors and sinners." (Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus," CWG 1, 235.)

"An Indian reading of the Bible is a reading from an Indian point of view: a reading guided by a sensibility shaped by Indian culture, and provoked by questions emerging from the Indian situation." (Soares-Prabhu, "Commitment and Conversion: A Biblical Hermeneutic for India Today," CWG 4, 34.)

"It is along the lines of such a hermeneutical conversation between text and reader, where each is open to and respects the claims of the other, that an Indian reading of the Bible is to be attempted. An Indian Christian reading will be a reading of the Bible by an interpreter sensitive to the Indian situation and true to the biblical text. It will be, that is, a true-to-the-text reading made with an Indian pre-understanding and responsive to Indian concerns." (Soares-Prabhu, "Interpreting the Bible in India Today," CWG 4, 28)

"Indeed commitment to the poor is demanded of the Indian exegete, not only by his Third World situation of overwhelming poverty which is the true context of his interpretation (however much he may try to isolate himself from it), but also by the thrust of the Bible itself. For the Bible, in spite of all the efforts of Western exegesis to domesticate of remains a revolutionary text proclaiming 'good news to the poor'" (Soares-Prabhu, "Commitment and Conversion: A Biblical Hermeneutic for India Today," CWG 4, 35.)