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# A Liberation Christology of Religious Pluralism

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Fidelity and Fairness in Inter-Faith Fellowship**

A Christian 'theology of religious pluralism' has to be a blend of two imperatives:- *fidelity* to what is unique to Christian faith, and *fairness* towards every other religion's distinctive otherness. But the tragedy is that even Asian theologians who promote this ideal are not unanimous as to what constitutes Christian uniqueness, and often also what is non-negotiably proper to every other religion ! It is in the context of this basic disagreement, that I am writing this essay, which, consequently, assumes an apologetical character. Thus a few other view-points, which are not consonant with mine, have formed the backdrop of this brief presentation, in which I strive to clarify and confirm the "liberation Christology of religions", which I have proposed to the Asian theologians over the past decade. (Pieris, 1999, 2000, 2006). The **thread of the argument**, which runs through this thesis, is as follows:-

- (a) What is *common* to all religions (indicated in 'd' below) is what all religions regard a *soteriological absolute* (i.e., universally necessary condition for salvation), and whatever is 'unique' to a religion is the defining and distinguishing character of the soteriology which *that* particular religion is. Hence uniqueness is *not* synonymous with superiority but merely refers to specificity of each religion.

For it is the uniqueness of each religion that accounts for pluralism of religions. Besides, whatever is unique to a particular religion is also a *constitutive dimension of its own soteriology*, inseparable from the common thrust of religiousness which it shares with others.

- (b) Hence what is *unique* to a religion is not an optional extra for other religions. It is exactly what each religion is called to contribute to other religionists for mutual enrichment. But only those who *practise the common spirituality* of all religions (what is called the 'soteriological absolute', here) are entitled as well as able to indulge in such exchanges in the areas specific to each religion.
- (c) Two examples:- the practice of mindfulness as a path of liberation is nowhere developed to such sublime perfection as in Buddhism so that the Christians who live in a Buddhist ethos are summoned to appropriate it within their own *Christian* soteriology as I have demonstrated by unearthing the biblical version of mindfulness hidden in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, though obviously it would not be an exact equivalent of Buddhist mindfulness (Pieris, 2008b, 187-91). Conversely, the justice dimension specific to biblico-Christian Theism (Part II) could be appropriated by Buddhists within their own non-theistically distinctive spirituality through a similar exercise of cross-scripture reading. (Pieris 2003, 246-53). Such exchanges are one of the aims as well as a natural consequence of inter-religious encounters.
- (d) The *beatitudinal spirituality*, or the 'happy life' which knows neither hoarding nor anxiety, as advocated in the Gospels, is the **Christian version of the common soteriological absolute**, but spelt out in theistic categories in some religions and in a non-theistic idiom in others. The belief in *God crucified in Christ who is One Body with the Oppressed* defines **Christianity's uniqueness**.
- (e) This thesis of ours runs counter to the rabid fundamentalism of evangelicals (in and outside the main-stream churches) on one extreme, and to the well-meant irenism of some dialogists on the other. The Christian fundamentalists preach the Crucified (and Risen) Jesus but omit the fact that the victims of injustice form one body with Christ on the Cross. On the other hand, some dialogists, too, fear to emphasize the *social conflict* which constitutes the Cross of Christ (scandal to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles) and therefore they compromise Christianity's uniqueness either by adopting the non-confrontational idiom of certain Indic religions such as Buddhism or by claiming for such religions spurious equivalents of Christianity's uniqueness. Both groups, according to our

perception, fight shy of proclaiming the centrality of Cross, which is where Christ, who is one body with the victims of oppression, announces *his* as well as *their* paschal victory, which offers the victimizers the opportunity for conversion and salvation.

Regrettably, a Catholic version of the evangelistic approach mentioned above runs through the twelve documents issued on Asian theologies and Asian theologians by the Congregation for Doctrine of Faith (CDF).<sup>1</sup> Understandably, the CDF's criterion of orthodoxy is the traditional Christology traced back to Chalcedon. It is on the basis of that Christology that the CDF judges the Asians to be "relativists" who allegedly deny the 'uniqueness of Christ'! In *our* vocabulary, we speak of the 'uniqueness of Jesus', which is his Christhood, so that the CDF's phrase 'uniqueness of Christ' sounds tautological in *our* ears! Besides, our critics in the CDF do not seem to concede that the Chalcedonian Christology has utterly failed to define, leave alone defend, the uniqueness of Jesus for Asians, and that for two reasons:- (a) because the idea of incarnation around which it revolves has reduced God-Man Jesus to a mere cosmic power (*deva*), one among many in the Asian pantheon; (b) because the message that God was crucified in Christ who forms one body with the oppressed—which is what defines Christianity's uniqueness—is conspicuously absent in that Council's formula (Pieris, 2000, 194-96; 209-211). Our contention, therefore, is not that traditional Christology is wrong in what it says, but that it is utterly jejune and incapable of depicting Jesus' uniqueness before the Asians. We are happy that some Western theologians who are familiar with the Asian reality have empathized with our view as expressed above and have endorsed the "Covenant Christology", which we have proposed as a possible alternative to the traditional one (Neuner 213-14; also Waldenfels, 220-21).

The Covenant Christology is as simple and profound as the one that Jesus implied when he *summed up* the whole of revelation and salvation in the two inseparable love commands: Love your God and Love your Neighbour. Hence Christ Jesus, who *sums up* (or "recapitulates" as Paul puts it) in Himself the whole of revelation and salvation, ought to be the embodiment of these two love commands, which, like Him, are the sum and substance of revelation and salvation! This is the *foundation* of a Christology, which unlike the Chalcedonian one, holds together the common basis of all religions as well as the distinctive character of Christian soteriology. This foundational thesis, which we spell out in Part One and Two of this article, can be outlined as follows:-.

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1 These documents are listed in John Allen Jr, "Perils of Pluralism", *Nationals Catholic Reporter*, September 15, 2000, 222.

PART ONE: The first love-command is epitomized in the *non-idolatrous* spirituality of interior freedom consisting of greedlessness. It is the spirituality common to all religions, even non-theistic ones, but formulated in a *theistic* idiom by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and in the Address on the Plain in Luke as *beatitudinal* life. It was Jesus' understanding of the first commandment of the Decalogue: "Yahweh alone, no other gods." (Ex,20:2-3).

PART TWO: The second love-command, not at all absent in other religions, takes on a radically new format in Christianity on two counts taken together:- first because Jesus fine-tunes the concept of one's neighbour as that of the victim of violence, whom one meets in one's life's journey, demanding a total change of one's pre-arranged programme and spelling out Eternal Life (salvation) in terms of the service one renders to him or her; second, because Jesus himself has opted to become *that* neighbour by being himself a victim of violence —so that God's alliance and identification with the oppressed, who therefore are one Body with Christ, defines our mission as a death-defying option for the victims of injustice.

This specific way of understanding Christ and his mission is the source and basis of the Liberation Christology of Religious Pluralism, which we are now going to spell out in greater detail.

## PART I

### **The Common Spirituality that Underlies Religious Pluralism**

My colleague and friend Jude Lal Fernando, enthused by a thesis presented by Regina Schwartz, the professor of English Literature at North Western University, Evanston, claims that the constitutive dimension of biblical revelation, almost a canon within a canon, is not God's option for, or covenant with, the poor ( as I have always maintained) but the *pluralism and plenitude* offered by the whole of Creation to humankind, and the gift of land which is never to be partitioned and possessed as private property but to be enjoyed by all.(Fernando, 369-70). Before I entice the two authors into a dialogue with me, I wish to complete Fernando's partial picture by

mentioning what he and Schwartz have missed out:- the “pleasure park”, which this cosmos was destined to be (Gen.2:10), with its vegetation providing bodily nourishment as well as aesthetic gratification (2:9). Hence I go beyond what Schwartz and Fernando claim, and maintain that all *pain and suffering* caused by injustice and inequalities result from violating and vitiating this **cosmic order** of *plenitude, pluralism* and *pleasure*!

But this view, with due respect to these two writers, is *not unique* to biblical revelation; it is the *common ideal* of most major religions and *all* primal religions. It is the universal and original revelation, conserved up to this day in tribal and clannic cultures that still survive in many pockets of Asia, Africa and the Americas; it is the first fruits gained by the evolutionary process when the hominized beast was humanized into a *homo religiosus*. Hence it seems to be a **pre-biblical and extra-biblical vision**, that is to say, something that the Hebrew Tradition absorbed and traced back to Yahweh, who had been *already* experienced and recognized as God of justice and freedom, a faithful partner in an anti-slavery campaign (Ex.20:1-3). But in the biblical version of this primordial spirituality, God holds us “co-responsible” (Gen.1:26) for fostering this healthy **cosmic order of a shared abundance**, and treats us as ‘co-creators’, calling us to ‘work over’ or ‘serve’ (*abad*) the cosmic reality for human benefit (2: 5;15). God, therefore, is our partner in the struggle against plutocracy that manufactures *scarcity and suffering* in a world destined by God to be a paradise of *plenitude and pleasure*.

From Shirley Lal Wijesinghe, an Asian biblical scholar, who has gone beyond *mere* literary criticism of texts and has followed J-L Ska’s lead in recognizing the strong symbolism of the ancient West Asian culture as well as its socio-political history, I have come to learn (*contra* Schwartz and Fernando) that the chain of violence initiated by Cain reflects a “crisis of brotherhood” resulting from an exploitation of Nature in a ‘civilization’ which was based on innate compulsive tendencies (“serpent”; “dust”), and which would end up building a megapolis (symbolized in Enoch); whereas Abel, by contrast, represents freedom from compulsions within a cosmic spirituality that ensures *plenty and pleasure* (Cf. Wijesingha, 47-51).

Unfortunately, it is only in the Bible that some of today’s creation-theologians meet this primal spirituality for the first time! No wonder, they conclude rather naively that it is unique to the bible! The probable reason for this seems to be that the *non-biblical* (Hellenistic, moralistic and speculative) Christianity which Europe developed during the centuries after its conversion had eliminated the European version of this ‘primal religiosity’ as mere nature-worship or superstition. Even the remnants of that primordial religion were eliminated during the time of the Reformation and the Counter-reformation as vestiges of paganism. The wheat had been removed

with the weeds!

Hence it is quite understandable that the species of Christianity that the missionaries brought to Asia from Europe had adopted the same negative posture towards Asia's own primal religions, as the Asian Bishops have observed and even criticized (*FABC Papers*, no 81, 25). Furthermore, science and technology, which had developed in the West along the Cartesian vision of "Man exploiting Nature", has now erased from history the memory of the "human-cosmic alliance" of ancient times. The result is a *technocracy*, i.e., technology allied to a "secular ( or non-sacred) *this-worldliness*", which is now swallowing up the "*sacred this-worldliness*" of Asia's 'cosmic religions'. The signs of the times summon the advocates of both biblical and non-biblical versions of this *cosmic spirituality* to join forces to resist *such* technocracy (and *such* Christianity!) from continuing to produce scarcity where there is plenty (Pieris 2005, 171-77).

This cosmic religiosity, which *reveres this world as sacred*, should, therefore, serve as the *common foundation* on which all religions must meet and celebrate religious pluralism as a gift to humanity, appreciating and encouraging one another's unrepeatably identities. Most anti-religious and anti-pluralist fundamentalists responsible for today's inter-religious conflicts do not seem to practise this common spirituality ! It is they who invoke various 'isms' (including monotheism) to justify their monocratic programs, and even pogroms. In any history, an idolatry invoking divine will to justify *violence* is internally critiqued thanks to the soteriological absolute that each religion spells out in its own categories. In the history of Israel recorded in the Bible, this critical religious stance is an *option for God Yahweh*, whose vehement opposition to accumulated Capital or undistributed wealth (Mammon) which creates poverty, has found concrete expression in *Yahweh's defence pact with the victims of Mammonolatry*. This is the canon within the canon. Hence the root of all evil, including violence, is certainly not to be traced back to the 'isms' (including monotheism) invoked by religious bigots to justify their fanaticism, but to their *idolatry*, which St Paul identifies with *greed* (Col 3:5).

In Jesus' beatitudes, an Asian hears the echoes of a cosmic spirituality common to all religions:- "the happy life" (beatitude) of *sharing Nature's abundance* like the birds in the air and the lilies in the field *without hoarding* and *without anxiety* (Mt 6: 19-34; Lk 12:22-34). Here a universally accepted spirituality is articulated in the idiom of biblical theism, namely, as an exercise of "faith" (*'emuna*, meaning *anxiety-free reliance*) in a Father-Mother God who is "faithful", (*'emet*, or absolutely reliable). Hence one's trust in such a God excludes any reliance on other 'gods' ( Ex. 20:2-3), who are symbolized by Mammon, which is 'Unshared Wealth' as well as 'absolutization of what is relative', such as colour and caste, religion and

race, language and land.

Since such idolatry is 'greed' (Col.3:5), we acknowledge that those Asian religionists who are not God-believers in the biblical sense, are nevertheless anti-idolatrous Mammon-repudiators in that they practise and promote *greedless* living, which is the *sine qua non* for shared abundance. Thus the "God-Mammon conflict" is the *specifically* Christian formulation of a common religious heritage. Hence our faith in the enfleshed Word, crucified and risen must culminate in a Christological confession: Jesus is the irreconcilable contradiction between God and Mammon. That is the characteristically Christian formulation of the common spirituality of all religions.

## PART II

### **Christianity's Uniqueness and its Specific Contribution to Inter-religious Exchange**

Whenever and wherever the Money-Demon's clients threaten to replace *plenitude, pluralism and pleasure*, respectively, with *penury, plutocracy and pain* through exploitation and hoarding, Yahweh cannot and does not remain neutral as She is *bound by a covenant* to identify Herself with the victims of that sinful option, which is to say, *the Covenant with the runaway-slaves of Egypt ratified on Sinai and renewed by Christ on Calvary*. It is not surprising, therefore, that the **justice** for which the poor cry to heaven in at least 40 of the psalms, as a Scripture Scholar has explained, is an appeal to **God's** (covenantal) **love and fidelity towards the poor**, in stark contrast with **God's wrath towards their oppressors, *orge tou Theou*** (Lyonnet, 63), i.e., **the anger of the victims appropriated by Yahweh, their defence-ally**. Hence our *unique* contribution to the inter-faith dialogue is to confess that **Jesus is God's defence-pact with the poor** □not by mere words but by actively joining God's own defence of the poor. Such activity could never be a threat to other religions, because its main thrust is ***not necessarily a conversion of other religionists to Christianity but the conversion of the chaos of induced scarcity into the order of shared abundance through greedless living***. All religionists can join this struggle without compromising their faiths.

I would have ceased being a Christian theist if Yahweh of the Bible was incapable of anger that threatens hell-fire on oppressors in the name of their voiceless victims—not in order to destroy them for ever (that would be hatred), but to elicit their conversion and thus bring relief to the outcasts. For *prophetic anger is an expression of redemptive love*. The

parable of the Last Judgment (Mat 25) is Good News to the poor, because the *threat* of eternal damnation jolts the non-poor from their complacency before the plight of their oppressed brothers and sisters. God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures does not address the powerful and the powerless in the same language; nor should we!

The Hitlers, Pinochets, and Bushes had their way because their pastors failed and even feared to announce Jesus Christ as God's Defence Pact with the oppressed! For Christian fundamentalists dilute the notion of "God's Wrath" by spiritualizing it and removing it from the Covenantal justice of God so that the violence against the poor disappears from the concerns of *their* God and from *their* theology of "atonement" or "appeasement of God's wrath".

What these fundamentalists have done through a misguided evangelism, we *dialogists* could do through genuine irenism. Paul Knitter, in the process of trying sincerely to accommodate Thich Nhat Han's and Rita Gross's Buddhist critique of Liberation Theology, expresses some uneasiness about the aggressive expressions such as Jon Sobrino's phrase "anti-Kingdom" or my own reference to Jesus as the "defence pact" between God and the poor (Knitter, 199-200). The implication seems to be that an Asian theology of liberation based on God's Covenant with the poor, invoking the notion of divine anger against the victimizers, smacks of the confrontational idiom of the Bible, which allegedly sounds offensive to non-Christian Asians who employ the language of non-violence.

This uneasiness can perhaps be traced back to three unexamined assumptions. The first is the false equation of *anger* and *hatred*. The forgiving love in Christianity encompasses prophetic anger but excludes rancour. The Apostle's advice to "become angry without sinning" (Eph 4:6) insinuates that there is a legitimate place for a non-hateful anger in the life of a Christian and in the life God. I would gently remind Thich Nhat Han, Rita Gross and other Buddhist critics, as well as Christians in dialogue with them, that even the Buddhist Scriptures allude to monk-saints "burning" with holy indignation against their errant colleagues (Vinaya III, 137,138), indicating that Buddhism too differentiates between anger and hate.

The second assumption emanates from a dubious method of inter-religious accommodation—a methodological error, which I have already illustrated from the writings of Thich Nhat Hahn himself (Pieris 2003, 241). To compromise the distinctive character of Christianity in the name of inter-religious harmony is to eliminate one partner of dialogue altogether! And, here, we are dealing with a non-negotiable element in the Biblical Christianity, just as non-theism is a non-negotiable factor in Theravada



Buddhism. Each religion's uniqueness, which is not to be equated with absoluteness or superiority, is the foundation of religious pluralism, and therefore of inter-religious dialogue. Even irreconcilable differences between religions offer a message to be shared amongst all religionists.

The third source of misapprehension is the failure to understand the **nature of God's defence strategy** illustrated in the incarnate, crucified and risen Word in whom God and the victims of injustice constitute one sole covenanted, and therefore salvific, Reality. For in Jesus we meet both partners of the covenant, God and the oppressed, demonstrating **two kinds of resistance to violence**:- on the one hand Jesus exercises God's wrath against the *wicked* who exploit the *weak*, i.e., the weak whom he befriends as the inheritors of God's Reign; on the other hand, the same Jesus offers forgiveness rather than divine wrath to *his own* persecutors. To put it in another way:- in the *life and work* of Jesus we see God's wrath being unleashed on the violators of the vulnerable, but in the *passion and death* of Jesus, we see God identifying Himself with the vulnerable so indistinguishably as to become the Violated One, who dares to defy His violators by braving the atrocities of torture unto death, *thus* engraving in the annals of human history that it is *deicide* to rob the poor of their life! Hence God's option for the oppressed is not an option for violence but a divine protest against it.

This kind of God and this kind of divine involvement with the oppressed as revealed in Jesus is unique to Christianity. Michael Amalados' claim that Hinduism advocates such a God does not seem to have any foundation in Hindu scriptures as I have already argued (Pieris 1999, 83-89). No theologian, who is at the same time a qualified and recognized Indologist, has so far produced a single instance of such a belief from any Indic religion.<sup>2</sup> By saying this, I do not claim that Christianity is superior to these religions, but merely indicate where and how it differs from them.

**To sum up:** A twofold Christopraxis conceals a Christology of Religious Pluralism. Our fidelity to our own Christian identity requires, in the

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2 When asked to comment on my response to him, Amalados, instead of adducing a counter argument, has merely dismissed my challenge saying that I am playing with the word 'poor' (Ann Alden, 123) when in reality the term 'poor' is not my invention but a blanket term recurrently used in the Hebrew and Christian *Scriptures* (as the writings of the Scripture scholar George Soares-Prabhu have amply demonstrated); besides, it is an expression which I have taken pains to spell out in terms of *all the concrete categories of the poor* mentioned in the *Scriptures*, with such insistence and clarity in so many of my writings that 'playing with the word' (which Alden too repeats without substantiating the statement) is, to say the least, a *lame response to my challenge*. I am still waiting patiently for an honest attempt at procuring a counter-demonstration !

first place that we proclaim Christ as the One who demands conversion from mammon-worship (Mt 6:19-24) rather than conversion from other religions (Mt 23:15), thus *confirming the common spirituality* of all religions within our own distinctively specific faith; secondly, in keeping with our *Christian uniqueness*, we must confess from that common platform, both by word and deed, in liturgy and life that Christ-Crucified and Risen is God's defence pact with the oppressed, so that our action-filled confession of this distinctive feature of our faith would drive us to a relentless struggle for justice and peace, as the mission of *the seed that must die to bring forth life*, rather than a *weed that kills the religious identity of others in the name of evangelization*. The other religionists can join such a struggle for justice and peace without compromising *their* faith, as is amply attested in many multi-religious "Basic Human Communities" in Asia today.[]

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