

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE CHURCH FROM INDIA

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Ecclesiology is the articulation of the self-understanding of the Church, characterized by history, time and culture. Therefore, ecclesiologies are always in the making. Since the national independence and the end of Western Colonialism, many Indian theologians tried to evolve authentic Indian Churches and corresponding ecclesiologies. This article tries to present the reflections of contemporary Indian theologians on the Church. The first part presents the underlying theological presuppositions. The second part deals with the question of theologizing in India and its methodology. The third part presents in a summary way the ecclesiological reflections of Indian theologians expressed mainly in the forum of *Indian Theological Association*. The concluding part tries to highlight the question of the identity of the Indian Churches.

1. Theological Presuppositions

1. What has happened in our times is a revolutionary change in the very concept of reality. In the Aristotalian-Thomistic concept reality is ready-made, fixed and static. Everything is constituted once for all by

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its 'essence' and 'existence' and it is unchangeable. Changes happen not at the level of substance or essence of things but only with regard to their 'accidents', that is, their external, tangible and visible aspects. Today we have a dynamic, evolutionary and processive concept of reality. "The human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one."¹ The immediate objective of Vatican II was to adequately respond to the radical changes happening in the world by renewing and restructuring itself, its customs, practices, worship patterns and by reformulating and reinterpreting its doctrines and theologies. Therefore, changes in the Church are inevitable. The Council, indeed, acknowledged that "many people are shaken" by these changes.²

2. The Church is a divine-human reality. It is indeed not a mere human creation. The Church has its origin in God, in the Trinity.³ It came into existence in the mission of the Son by the power of the Spirit. But it becomes incarnate in history in concrete historical, and socio-cultural forms. In other words, the human, visible and institutional elements of the Church are assumed in an incarnational process in response to the concrete realities in which it exists, and this process is continued till the end of history. The numerous and different individual Churches today witness to this ongoing process. The concrete hierarchical structures of the Churches, their patterns of worship, and statement of doctrines are shaped in history in response to the historical and socio-cultural forces, but always under the guidance of the power of the Spirit.

3. By the new discoveries and inventions the present understanding of the universe and its functioning are often challenged and the new understandings are presented as 'paradigm shift'. The new paradigms are evolved to explain the reality in a more satisfactory way. This usage started in the physical sciences is now applied also in philosophy and theology. The new developments in the Church and in theology are today frequently explained by 'paradigm shift'. When some of the existing basic assumptions, approaches, doctrines, patterns and models are challenged as they cannot satisfactorily explain the new facts and reality, after a long period of crisis and search, new paradigms slowly emerge and they become gradually

¹Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (GS)*, No. 5.

²GS, No. 7.

³LG, Chapter one, No. 2 – 5.

established. The new paradigm has to be tested and verified in a gradual process. The emerging new paradigms do not totally reject all the elements of the old paradigms. The success of a new paradigm depends on its capacity to contain the truth elements in the old paradigms. Hence in the emergence of the new paradigms what happens is not a rejection of the past, but integration and development.

4. The new paradigm of the Church emerged during the period of Vatican II is 'People of God' and 'Communion'. *Lumen Gentium* chapter two presents the Church as the 'People of God'. The Church is the community of Jesus' disciples where all are equal, free and are united in love. They are called to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus in the world. All the members of the Church share in the prophetic, priestly and pastoral ministry of Jesus. Special ministers or 'ordained ministers' are called to serve the community. Their ministry is called 'service' or 'diakonia' (literally meaning 'serving at the table').⁴ Participation and communion were the hallmark of the early Christian community. Every member of the community was committed to the mission and ministry according to his/her gift. The Spirit bestowed various gifts to different members, all for the building of the community and for its mission. The community gathered together took important decisions, which we call today as 'democratic' way of functioning. The entire humanity is called to and included in this communion.⁵ Therefore this 'communion' shall not be understood simply in terms of 'ecclesial' and 'eucharistic' communion.

5. The central message of the New Testament was the arrival of the 'Reign (Kingdom) of God', and the ministry of Jesus was primarily the proclamation of the Reign of God. Jesus revealed the mysteries of the Kingdom through his numerous sayings and parables and distributed the gifts of the Kingdom through his miracles which were the signs of the coming of the Kingdom. Preparing the way to the Kingdom of God, therefore, has to be the main concern of the disciples of Jesus and not merely the Church. Of course, in the past

⁴LG, Chapter 3, no. 24 -27.

⁵LG Chapter two, no. 14 -17 try to explain how the whole humanity belongs to the people of God though in different grades or levels. But belonging to the 'Reality and Mystery of the Church' and to 'the visible institutional and hierarchical Church' is to be distinguished. The disciples of Christ can exist outside the frontiers of the visible Churches, and it is admitted that there are today many such 'Christians'.

the Church often identified itself with the Kingdom and claimed that salvation is limited to the membership in the Church, and this led to triumphalism, exclusivism and absolutism of the Church. Today the Church makes a distinction between Kingdom and the Church.⁶ Kingdom of God is indeed a 'mystery' and it can only be described in various ways by various imageries. It may be understood as 'the new humanity' proclaimed, manifested in and effected by Jesus. The Church is presented today as the servant, messenger and sacrament of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, Reign of God has primacy over the visible Church, though the Church and the Reign of God cannot be totally separated.

6. The Church had its origins in Jerusalem and the earliest Church was a typically 'Jewish Church', patterned after Jewish traditions, customs and worship. Some of the Jewish Christians even wanted to impose on the Gentile Churches all the Jewish traditions including the rite of circumcision. But the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) made a unanimous decision that Jewish traditions need not be imposed upon the new Gentile Churches, and that they can have their own ways. The first nine centuries witness to enormous diversity among the various Churches both in the East and in the West. Only when the process of centralization and homogenization got established in the Church that the diversity among the Churches was looked upon as a threat to the unity of the Church. Vatican II reinvented the diversity of the Churches and strongly endorsed it by acknowledging the "different ways" of the Churches.⁷ By different ways the Council meant pluralism of customs, disciplines, liturgy, spirituality, government and theology among the Churches. The special mention of "freedom in theological elaborations of revealed truth" and "different methods and approaches in understanding and proclaiming divine things" is extremely important.⁸ Pluralism and diversity derive from the very nature of 'ecclesiogenesis', where the Gospel becomes incarnated in different traditions and cultures assuming their genius, specificities and particularities. Naturally a new Church will not be merely the extension or carbon copy of the so-called 'Mother Church'.

7. In the history of the Church very often uniformity and conformity had been imposed upon the other Churches under the pretext of unity.

⁶LG, no. 3 -5. Also note the commentaries on these numbers.

⁷Decree on Ecumenism, nos. 4, 14, 17.

⁸Decree on Ecumenism, no. 17.

Today we realize that unity does not mean uniformity. Unity among Christians and Churches is fundamentally a 'spiritual unity', a spiritual communion, a participation in the divine life which has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. It is a unity in Christian 'faith experience'. When this experience is externally articulated, naturally it assumes different forms and expressions which are conditioned by language, culture, temperament and socio-economic structures. Hence unity has to be searched and experienced within and in spite of diversity. In the history of the Church one could trace different 'types of Churches' existing side by side even in the New Testament period.⁹ Vatican II spoke about unity as "a brotherly communion of faith and sacramental life."¹⁰ Universal Church is a communion of diverse or pluriform local/individual Churches, united in the same faith and sacramental communion. It must be added that different historical types of Churches shall not be understood as static or petrified, but they always remain dynamic, open and creative in constant interaction, dialogue and in a give and take process aiming at convergence and not uniformity.

8. Different types of Churches and different ecclesiologies, in principle, do not contradict each other, but complement each other. They enhance the 'catholicity' of the Church or they enrich the Universal Church. The Eastern and Western Churches are often characterized as the 'two lungs' of the Church, and the Church is called to breathe with both lungs for a healthy existence. Divisions happened among the Churches several centuries ago, and ever since they have lived in opposition and isolation with the consequence of certain fragmentation of truths and exaggeration of their positions. In the modern ecumenical movement the different Churches meet today in dialogue, collaboration and work in closer relationship, and in this ecumenical process the Churches learn from each other, correct each other and become enriched. In the Catholic Communion of Churches there are different 23 Individual Churches with their differences in the formulation of doctrines, patterns of liturgy and discipline, and theological and ecclesiological approaches. These differences among them are not a threat to unity, rather they enrich the wholeness, beauty and unity of the Catholic Church.

⁹James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, London: SCM, 1977. He identified four different types of Churches existing side by side in the New Testament period: Jewish, Hellenistic, Apocalyptic and Early Catholic type.

¹⁰*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 14.

The above mentioned eight theological presuppositions or principles justify the legitimacy of theological and ecclesiological reflections in India.

2. Theologizing in India

1. Theologizing takes place in an encounter, encounter between faith experience and the experience of reality in the world. It is a critical reflection on human experience in the context of faith.¹¹ It cannot take place in a vacuum by abstract speculations and academic exercises. Theologizing takes place when believers search for answers in the midst of their struggles and agonies where they feel the pinch of their faith and the cost of discipleship in Christ. Every authentic theologizing is contextual, experiential and existential anywhere and anytime. Context is a constitutive element of theologizing. Theologizing is a continuous dialogue and interaction between the Gospel or Christian faith and the realities of every new age. The Gospel or Christian faith puts questions to the actual situation on the one hand, on the other the present realities pose questions to faith so that the faith itself may be reconceptualized, reinterpreted and thus revitalized. New understanding and interpretation of Christian faith in every new age is only one side of the theologizing process. Christian Gospel has also a perennial task of challenging, correcting and transforming every age, people, society and culture into a new creation, which is called in the Biblical tradition as "Kingdom of God."

2. Indian context is characterized by mainly three elements: massive poverty of the people, inhuman social systems/structures and religious pluralism. Of the Indian population 52.5% are Backward Classes, 22.5% Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. About 40% of the people live below the poverty line. Globalization and the new market economy have only worsened the situation. The "trickle down theory" does not work. Today the poor and the marginalized are just ignored and excluded from the system and they feel that they are not wanted. The traditional Hindu society is divided into castes and sub-castes, and the lower castes are brutally discriminated in the society. Attitude of 'other worldliness', individualism and a fatalistic understanding of the doctrine of karma also played a role in

¹¹See Kuncheria Pathil and Dominic Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, Bangalore: TPI, 2005, 8- 21.

perpetuating the static and unjust social structures. India is the birth place of several World Religions, such as, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Christianity reached the Indian shore already in the first century. Islam came in the Middle Ages and India was under the Muslim rulers for several centuries until the period of the British. Religion and culture cannot be strictly separated in India. Though it is generally acknowledged that India has an overarching culture, still it is marked by diversity of peoples and cultures, especially the “little traditions” of the tribals and the dalits. Theologizing in India has to take seriously this multi-dimensional context of India and respond to them and address the problems implied.

3. The call of Vatican II for radical renewal in the Church by reading the signs of the time, interpreting them meaningfully and shaping the Church, its structures, theology, liturgy and pastoral praxis accordingly gave great impetus and inspiration to theologizing in India. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* stated that the Church is not bound or identified with any one culture or nation and it has to incarnate in all cultures for the enrichment of both the Universal and Local Churches.¹² The important paradigm shift made by the Council from the Universal Church to the Local Churches, from the hierarchical Church to the People, from the institutional Church to the Mystery of the Church, and from monarchical Papacy to the Collegiality of Bishops contained the agenda for theologizing in a new way.¹³ Local Church is a group of people who responded to the Gospel from its own situation and formed a community by the power of the Word and the Spirit. It is in the Local Church that the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church becomes truly and fully present and active.¹⁴ It is the task of Indian theology to assist in building up an authentic and fully Local Church which should emerge from the Indian soil and not from outside.

4. There took place hectic activities in the Indian Catholic Church immediately after Vatican II. “All India Seminar on the Church in India Today” which took place at Dharmaram College in Bangalore in 1969, was a major attempt on the part of the Indian Church to

¹²GS, no. 58.

¹³See, “Vatican II and the Paradigm shift in the Theology of the Church,” in *Theology of the Church: New Horizons*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006, 29–51.

¹⁴*Christus Dominus*. No. 11, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 26.

implement the decisions of Vatican II and to spell out their implications for India. The Seminar was thoroughly prepared by an efficient and expert team by supplying resource material and workshop hand books well in advance. The participants of the Seminar, all bishops, representatives of the clergy, religious and laity and many theologians and resource persons, almost 500 in number, spent together ten days in studying the documents of the Council, praying together, discussing and deliberating on the future paths and orientations of Indian Church. The Seminar gave a great impetus to theologizing in India in a new way. In 1976 a Colloquium between some Indian bishops and theologians was held at Hyderabad for mutual understanding and at the end of that Colloquium the theologians gathered there founded the "Indian Theological Association". Thereafter, the members of the Indian Theological Association used to gather annually, choose a relevant topic for study and discussion and make a theological "Statement". This theological exercise is being continued for the last 35 years and the statements and publications of the Association are well known both in India and abroad. I make use as resource material the Annual Statements of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) in the next part of my article on ecclesiological reflections from India, though Indian theological developments in India cannot be limited to the work of ITA.¹⁵

5. Methods of theologizing had been different at different times and at different places. For the early Fathers of the Church theological method was simply the commentaries and interpretations of the sacred Scriptures. With the Scholastics and the establishment of the system and institution of 'Universities', theology became an academic discipline. The Scholastic method was to use the service of Greek philosophical categories and systems to explain the Christian doctrines in an understandable manner. This tradition of using different philosophical systems and categories to explain and understand Christian faith and doctrines became established in the West. Western approach to theology is thus tended to be more rational, academic, abstract and philosophical. Its emphasis was to 'understand the reality'. It is only with the emergence of Liberation Theology in South America, this exclusive dependence of theology on philosophical systems was questioned. Liberation theology's

¹⁵See, *Theologizing in Context: Statements of the Indian Theological Association*, ed., Jacob Parappally, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2002.

emphasis was 'changing the reality' rather than 'understanding' it. Theological method of the Eastern Churches was more Biblical, Patristic, liturgical, poetic and experiential. In the East, theology and theological method was mainly liturgy-centred, and it is expressed in the ancient dictum, *lex orandi, lex credendi* ('law of praying is the law of believing'). There can be of course many models and methods of theologizing as required by the contexts and needs. One can only evaluate each method and highlight its strength and weakness. No one universal method of theologizing is possible as theologizing is contextual.

6. The early pioneers of Indian theology belonged to the period of Indian nationalism and the struggle for political independence, and naturally the idea of an indigenous Christianity with an Indian theology was appealing to all. But once the political independence was gained, the movement for indigenous Christianity met with a setback. Most of the pioneers of Indian theology had an inclusivist methodology.¹⁶ For them, the salvation history is one and the same. Like the Hebrew religion of the Old Testament, all religions are a *preparatio evangelica*. Jesus Christ and the Spirit are present everywhere, in all cultures, religions and peoples. The attempt and method of most of these pioneers was to experience Christ and the Spirit present among our people and our religious traditions and scriptures, and thus they could see the continuity of salvation history. Most of the pioneers were engaged in dialogue with the religious traditions of our country, Indian Scriptures and the classical as well as modern Indian philosophical systems. In general, one could say that their theological contributions were mainly from the cultural, philosophical and religious point of view. The methodology of the pioneers of Indian theology was often along the line of a *translation model*. Namely, they tried mainly to translate the Christian faith and doctrines as well as western theology into Indian cultural, philosophical and religious categories, so that they may be understood and received by the Indian mind. But today several serious questions are raised against such methods: As India has a plurality of cultures, religions and philosophies, which cultures,

¹⁶For an introduction on the Pioneers of Indian theology, see, Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity*, Madras: CLS, 1969; Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Madras: CLS, 1969, Reprint 1979; M. Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998.

religions and philosophies have to be the dialogue partners? The Culture and religion of the higher castes and dominant groups promoted the discrimination of the marginalized, the Subaltern, Backward classes and Dalit groups, who belong to the majority of the Indian population. The exclusive use of those cultural and religious categories, as done by the pioneers of Indian theology, is today questionable. Vedic religion and most of the classical Indian philosophies today seem to be, to some extent, outdated at least for a good number of people. Therefore, instead of dialoguing with them, it is proposed by many that we should enter into dialogue with the popular religions and the thought patterns of today.¹⁷ Moreover, in our Christian theologizing how do we take the religious experience of the people of other religions in order to understand the fullness of God's revelation? What should be the theological methodology for an inter-religious and inter-cultural approach especially in view of building up a better society or God's Reign?

7. The Indian theologians slowly became convinced that a shift in the method of theologizing in India is needed and efforts were made in the various annual meetings, sessions and publications of the ITA.¹⁸ I shall reconstruct this paradigm shift in a succinct manner as follows: For any authentic theologizing in India what is required *first* is to focus on the actual and urgent problems of the society today and study them in an interdisciplinary manner to have a comprehensive view. Indian theologians therefore in their meetings dealt with topics, such as, Political theology, Reconciliation, Liberation, Socio-cultural Analysis, Communalism, Religious Pluralism, Role of Theologians, Future Vision of India, Ecological Crisis, Challenge of Hindutva, Inculturation, Church and Society, Concerns of Women, Church's Engagement in Civil Society, Theology of Economics, Indian Secularism, Violence, Corruption, etc. Of course, the internal problems of the Christian communities and traditional theological themes were not eliminated or excluded. *Second*, an analysis of these problems with historical, socio-cultural and scientific tools was made that would lead to a critical understanding of the problems and the situation. Socio-cultural analysis is found to be a constitutive

¹⁷For a short introduction and critique of the work of the pioneers, see, Kuncheria Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology*, Chapter One, Bangalore: ATC, 2005, 13–61.

¹⁸See, Jacob Parappally, "Theologizing in Context," in *Theologizing in Context*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2002, 23 - 53.

dimension of theologizing which calls for an inter-disciplinary approach.¹⁹ Thus attempts were made to discover the deeper issues underlying the problems and their interconnectedness. *Third*, they tried to make a Christian response to those issues and problems. Response on the part of Christian faith has to be always complemented with the response from other religious traditions and ideologies. God is to be met not only in the Christian history and the Bible, but in the history of all peoples, in their cultures and religious traditions and in their socio-political struggles.²⁰ Word of God has to be discerned in the actual context. God's revelation is not simply the historical revelation in Biblical history, but God's self communication in the divine-human encounter that continues to take place in our own times and in our own histories.²¹ All Biblical interpretations have to be guided by the Spirit's manifestations in the events of today and complimented by the riches of the other religious traditions.²² Along with religious scriptures and traditions, people's perception of reality and their aspirations expressed in their stories, myths, wisdom sayings and poetry have to be seriously considered and critically investigated. Faithfulness to one's own religious convictions has to be coupled with openness to the experience of others in other religious communities.²³ Moreover, Christian faith shall not be identified with its Greco-Roman or Western formulations; we need Indian formulations of Christian faith that should have the smell of its own soil and psyche.²⁴ *Fourth*, Christian response can be made only with the help of hermeneutics of the Christian sources and resources, such as, the vision, life and praxis of Jesus, interpretation of the Scriptures, the tradition and the teachings of the Church. Then only it will become an authentic *Christian response*. This hermeneutical step should be coupled with the interpretation of the sources and resources of other religions and the Indian culture. *Fifth*, involvement and participation in the life, movements and struggles of the people is necessary on the part of theologians to understand the actual problems and the situation, to critically analyze them and to respond

¹⁹ITA Statement 1986, *Socio-Cultural Analysis in Theologizing*, no. 23.

²⁰ITA Statement 1981, *Political Theology in the Indian Context*, no. 3.

²¹ITA Statement 2003, *Society and Church: Challenges in Theologizing in India Today*, no. 15-19.

²²ITA Statement 1983, *Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology*, no. 29.

²³ITA Statement 1991, *The Role of the Theologian in the Church in India Today*, no. 2, 12.

²⁴ITA Statement 2007, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, A Hindu-Catholic: His Significance for Theologizing in India Today*, no. 35.

to them adequately. Theologians are part and parcel of the community and they can never be isolated from the movements and trends in the community and function as separate individuals. *Sixth*, a concrete or plan of action has to be delineated for which the collaboration of all people of good will has to be ensured. The proposals should be praxis-oriented and change-oriented. In the Christian perspective, the risen Lord and the Spirit is alive and at work in the midst of the realities of the world fermenting it and preparing thus the way to the 'Reign of God'. People have to respond to this divine presence and action in a creative way. The Church and theologians are called to animate this ongoing process with their special prophetic vocation.

3. Ecclesiological Reflections in India

The Main Problem

In the early centuries of Christianity when the Gospel encountered different peoples and cultures, it became incarnated or inculturated in that people and culture with the result of the birth of different Individual Churches. Those Individual Churches had their own shape and structure, with different patterns of worship, different formulations of doctrines, different disciplines, and different approaches to spirituality. Thus the Church became Hebrew in Palestine, Greek in the Hellenistic world, Roman in Rome and Syrian in the Middle East. The early Churches received a lot from the surrounding cultures and religions. When the Gospel encountered India, unfortunately such a process called *ecclesio genesis*, did not really take place. Indian theologians observed:

It is paradoxical that in India which is a land of religions, we Christians, remain often unaware of, and insensitive to... our religions and our common cultural heritage with them... Turning our back on their rich religious heritage is closing our eyes and ears to God, who disclosed himself to us through them; this narrows our own concept of divine revelation.²⁵

The historical Churches in India are either Roman or Syrian or Antiochean or German Lutheran or Anglican or Irish Presbyterian or British Methodist and so on. They are mere 'extensions' or 'transplantations' from outside.²⁶ Ecclesiologies, structures of the

²⁵ITA Statement 1983, *Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology*, no. 9.

²⁶The Only exception in India is the ancient Church of St Thomas which had its origin from the Apostolate of Apostle Thomas. There were three significant elements in their ecclesiology: (1) They believed that different religions are different paths to

Church, and worship patterns are borrowed from outside. Only minor adaptations or adjustments are made to fit into our context. Already in 1983 the Indian theologians made the following statement:

The present day 'crisis' which we recognize, has some characteristics of the struggle of the Infant Church, predominantly Jewish, even Judaistic, when it discovered that the Spirit was also at work among the Gentiles. Were they expected to become Jews in order to become Jesus' disciples? Should Indians become Romans or Syrians in dress, customs, government, worship and thought, in order to become Jesus' disciples? How far should the Church's past, however rich and multi-colored, determine its present and its future? To what extent should the past, if at all, serve as a paradigm for the future? Do we have to look – while being guided and inspired by the past – beyond earlier solutions to meet the radically new situation in India and in the world at large?²⁷

Many people in India look upon Indian Churches as 'foreign' or 'Western' and part of Colonial history for various reasons. The Roman Catholic Church functions almost like a multi-national company with Head Office in Rome, which supervises, controls, coordinates and sanctions the branch offices/local Churches in different countries. Appointments, transfers, promotions, rules and

God and each one could be saved in one's own religion, and they had close collaboration with people of other religions, between temples and churches, and had common festivals. (2) The Western missionaries considered the Western Roman or Latin Church as the only true and valid Church and others as heretic and schismatic. According to the St Thomas Christians, their Church follows the 'law of Thomas' and the Western Church follows the 'law of Peter'; both are legitimate and valid and both derive immediately from Christ. (3) St Thomas Christians had indigenous ecclesial structures, such as *Pallyogam*, and *Malankara Yogam* which were local and general assemblies of the people which governed the Church and decided on all matters related with the Church. Most of the sources of St Thomas Christians were burned by the Portuguese missionaries alleging that they contained heresies. The above three points are derived from the Acts of Decrees of the *Synod of Diamper* (1599). For some of the details see, A.M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I, Bangalore: TPI, 1984; Jonas Thaliath, *Synod of Diamper*, Rome, 1958; A. Vallavanthara, "The Ecclesial Structures and the Ecclesiology of the St Thomas Christians," in *Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology*, ITA, Bangalore: ATC, 1984, 151–173.

²⁷ITA Statement 1983, no. 4. In his paper presented in the 1983 ITA meeting, Raimon Panikkar formulated the problem as follows: "The Church in India has undergone the unnatural experience of inheriting an Organization, accepting an Institution, and from there striving to convert itself into an Organism... A living Church in India is fruit of the re-enactment of the of the transtemporal mystery of the Incarnation: a fecundation between the Spirit and the Indian matrix," in *Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology*, ed., Gerwin van Leeuwen, Bangalore: ATC, 1984, 36–37.

instructions are given by the Centre. The duties of the branches are just faithfully executing the orders of the Head Office. Many of Churches' huge and impressive institutions were mostly funded by the West and it is alleged that many of Church's educational and healthcare institutions cater exclusively to the needs of the rich and the super rich. Many of the formulations of Church doctrines are Greco-Roman and Scholastic. Patterns of worship, devotions, and music are either Roman or Syrian or Antiochean. The Church seems to be alienated from the Indian cultural, religious and spiritual ethos. Often conversion and Baptism have become a repudiation of one's own socio-cultural and religious identity, including personally inherited names from one's own family and society, and accepting a name, norm and style of life alien to one's own.²⁸

India's Sages remind us that the core of every religion is spiritual and mystical experience. If religion fails to communicate this spiritual experience, it becomes an empty shell. Although the early Christian community began as a spiritual movement, today the Church has become too much institutionalized, ritualistic and legalistic. Above all, the traditional Christian claim of the exclusive possession of the 'fullness of truth' or 'absoluteness of Christianity' and the concession that other religions have some 'seeds' or 'rays of truth' are totally unacceptable in India.²⁹ For the Indian mind only God is absolute and all the historical revelations are limited. Hence the plurality of divine revelation and the rich variety of their expressions.

Any Indian ecclesiology has to be constructed on three pillars or principles: (1) Understanding of Jesus Christ and his mission and ministry in India. (2) Continuity with the *Tradition* of the early Church, which should not be confused or mixed up with the later *traditions* of the Church or Churches. (3) Indian ecclesiology should be an authentic response to Indian reality, to India's socio-cultural and religious context, which implies mainly two things: Church should recognize the religious experience and values present among the people of other religions and in our culture, identify with them and creatively respond; the Church should incarnate into the material conditions of the people, share their thoughts, aspirations, join in their struggles and agonies, and transform their life. The following ecclesiological reflections are based on these three principles,

²⁸ITA Statement 1987, *Communalism in India*, no, 23.

²⁹ITA Statement 1987, *Communalism in India*, 16.

although Indian theologians have not yet succeeded in articulating a full-fledged ecclesiology as such.

Understanding Christ in India

The core experience of Christianity is the "Abba experience" of Christ, his experience of his oneness with God, his total transparency to the Divine and his radical concern and commitment to humanity.³⁰ "The self-manifestation of the Divine in and through Jesus as the Christ is primarily the manifestation of God as love."³¹ Jesus' proclamation of the 'Kingdom of God' was the announcement of salvation based on God's unconditional love for all and thus the emergence of a new humanity with freedom, fellowship and justice for all. Indian theologians emphasized the '*kenotic Christ*':

We look at Christ as one who, by emptying himself, takes us to the ineffable mystery of God. His *kenosis* signifies a 'not clinging to' his divine status (Phil 2:6). It was an act of unconditional surrender to His Father's universal salvific will. Christ accepted the human condition to the ultimate consequences. He gave himself totally to others... This led him to the final expression of *kenosis*, namely, the death on the cross, consecrated by the resurrection and symbolized in the Eucharist. This kenotic Christ is present in every human vicissitude as servant and leaven. He belongs to the whole humanity. Through this servanthood he gives himself incessantly to men and women of all cultures and leads them unobtrusively to their self-realization. His is a liberative action which makes the person whole, transform the cultures it encounters by forming them into a community of love in which the other is respected and accepted in his or her self-understanding.³²

To the question of 'Theocentrism' or 'Christocentrism', the Indian theologians in general take an inclusive approach, while liberating themselves from a narrow Christocentrism or Christomonism. "Christ is constitutively the Way to the Father and as such he is theocentric. But to one who is on the Way, the Way is also the goal."³³

Indian theologians propose a *Pneumatic Christology*. Spirit is not an outside principle or element, it is the *antaryamin*, the inner principle, the abiding *Logos* which animates the entire humanity and the cosmos and resides in the heart of every reality (*Gita* 15:15). The Spirit

³⁰ITA Statement 1987, *Communalism in India*, no. 29.

³¹ITA Statement 1987, *Communalism in India*, no. 29

³²ITA Statement 1989, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 26–27.

³³ITA Statement 1989, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 28.

that pervades and permeates the whole reality continually communicates to us the Word of God.

Incarnation is the unfolding of the Divine *Logos* from within the womb of reality by the power of the Spirit... creation will reach its fullest wholeness (*poornam*), when the new earth and the new heaven will appear... The Resurrection of Jesus heralds a new creation. The Risen Jesus is part of our land... just as he was present in the land of Palestine even before his birth from Mary. His manifestation will be significant when he takes the flesh and blood from the soil of this nation. He will proclaim the good news of a restored creation. Inculturation is an effort toward the realization of this body of the Divine in India.³⁴

In Jesus Christ different peoples in different nations experienced the ultimate meaning of their lives which brought about a total transformation in them that knit them together into a community of equals, united in love, freedom and sharing. This new experience in Christ was articulated differently in different Christian traditions, cultures and situations. Thus we witness to different Christologies in Christian history, such, Jewish, Hellenistic, Scholastic, Latin, Syrian etc.³⁵ In India we need to develop *a new Christological thinking, which is Pneumatic, inclusive, cosmic, liberative, kenotic and opening to other religions*. It should be a Christology from below, less triumphant without universal and absolute claims, and at home in our land and culture.

A Kenotic Church

Jesus proclaimed the Reign of God (Kingdom of God) and for the sake of the coming of God's Reign he emptied himself and became a servant. The Church is called to continue the mission of Christ by preparing the way to God's Reign which emerges here and now in the form of a new human community characterized by freedom, fellowship, equality and justice.³⁶ But the Kingdom of God is beyond this world and it will be fully realized only in the world to come

³⁴ITA Statement 1997, *Ecological Crisis: An Indian Christian Response*, nos. 21–25.

³⁵ITA Statement 1998, *The Significance of Jesus Christ*, no. 3.1–3.6.

³⁶The idea of the 'Kingdom of God' has been translated by Michael Amaladoss as "cosmotheandric communion" borrowing the term of 'cosmotheandric' used by Raimon Panikkar to describe Reality. The idea of 'communion' is generally limited to humans, and word "cosmotheandric" will enlarge it including God, humans and cosmos. ("A new way of Being Christian in India Today" in *Church's Engagement in Civil Society*, edited by A. Kalliath and F. Gonsalves, Bangalore: ATC, 2009, 133).

(*eschaton*). The Church is thus said to be the *sacrament, messenger, and servant of the Kingdom*. As a sacrament the Church has to manifest the 'Kingdom' by making it visible in its own life by its *kerygma, koinonia and diakonia*. The messenger's role is to announce the message only, and not to become the message itself. Proclamation has to be mainly by its witness and action, rather than by mere verbal proclamation. The Church is only a humble servant of the Kingdom of God, and in itself it is not the Kingdom. What is the nature of this servant Church and its self-emptying? Could the Church be a catalyst, the salt and the leaven in the world and thus lose itself for the Kingdom of God? Is the servant Church ready to renounce all its claims to power, honour and privileges and its own institutional interests? John A.T. Robinson pointed out that if the Church is the servant of the world, it has to strip down its own parallel structures and learn to live within the structures of the world, because the first characteristic of a servant is that he/she lives in someone else's house, not in his/her own.³⁷ The servant Church should not think and act in such a way that it has all the answers to the problems of the world from its inherited traditions. But it has to listen to the world, read the signs of the times and seek the answers in partnership and collaboration with all other religions, ideologies and human sciences.

But the Church does not have the monopoly over the Kingdom, and the Kingdom exists beyond its borders and boundaries. Wherever people respond to the unconditional love of God and become "converted" by turning to God and to the neighbour, there the Kingdom of God is present. Wherever and whenever people strip themselves of their egoism and go out to meet their neighbour in an act of self-giving, there emerges today the new humanity, and there becomes manifest the Kingdom of God. Kingdom of God is thus a new ordering of the human society in accordance with God's Rule. It is the "new humanity" manifested in and effected by Jesus who was a fully authentic man, a man lived fully for others, to the extent of sacrificing his own life for others. When Jesus emptied himself, the Father raised him to new life and glorified his humanity. Jesus thus became the corner stone of the Kingdom and the centre of the new humanity.³⁸ Along with people of all religions and ideologies the

³⁷J.A.T. Robinson, *The New Reformation*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965, 92.

³⁸Kuncheria Pathil, *Theology of the Church: New Horizons*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006, 74.

Church has to struggle for the realization of the new values, social order and the new creation manifested in Jesus and proclaimed by him. The Church can fulfil this mission only by undergoing the process of 'kenosis' that took place in Jesus.³⁹ A Church which is preoccupied only with increasing its own members and institutions and exclusively catering to them, and concerned only with preserving its own inherited doctrines and structures intact, guarding its own walls against the attacks of 'enemies' of other religions and ideologies, can never become a *kenotic* Church and give way to the Kingdom of God. The idea of a *kenotic* Church as a servant engaged in the world at the service of God's entire people gives fresh hope and enthusiasm.⁴⁰

Church of the Poor

The poor and the marginalized people heard the good news of Jesus and followed him, not the rich or influential people or scholars or Jewish leaders. It is to them that Jesus proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God. In a country where top ten percent people own seventy percent of the wealth of the country and lowest twenty percent has to be content with two percent of the wealth, Jesus' proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom of God to the poor (Lk 4:18) is very significant.

Today, in the age of Globalization, economic liberalization and Free Market, the plight of the poor has become worse than ever. The social-consciousness and sense of justice are disappearing today. The poor are unwanted and they are totally excluded from the system.

In the feudal system, the slaves were ill-treated, but they knew that they were wanted; in the traditional caste-organization, the outcasts were discriminated against, but they knew that they were wanted and without them and their toil the society could not function. But today, the worst thing happening with globalization is that the poor are told in many words that they are not wanted, that they are a burden and that they are simply redundant.⁴¹

Option for the poor is the basic requirement of the Church in order to be true to itself. In this regard the Church cannot take a neutral stand. To be neutral means to be for the *status quo*, which will be in favour of

³⁹ITA Statement 1987, *Communalism in India*, no. 31.

⁴⁰ITA Statement 1987, *Communalism in India*, no. 44.

⁴¹Felix Wilfred, "Church's Commitment to the Poor in the Age of Globalization," *Vidyajyoti*, Vol 62, No.2, 80.

the rich and dominant classes. Commitment to the poor is a matter of our faith. For when we serve the poor, we are serving Christ and our final judgment will be according to what we do to the least of our brothers and sisters (Mt 25). In the poor we have to see the face of Christ and their voice is the voice of Christ for us today.

At this juncture of history the Church is called to take care of the poor in a special way and to become a "Church of the Poor" once again as in the case of the early Church by promoting a culture of solidarity and identification with the poor and the marginalized. Solidarity with the poor means that the Church has to renounce power and wealth and opt the way of Christ. "Over reliance on the material wealth especially flowing from centres of power and influence closes any person or community to the working of the Spirit. The Church in India can ill afford to ignore the presence of the Spirit who raises up the *anawim* of all ages and cultures."⁴² The institutions of the Church in India, whether in the area of education, health care, or communication media have to be challenged today, whether they are at the service of the poor or in favour of the rich and the powerful. Definitely, such option for the poor will have its consequence, namely, risk for the Church's institutions and danger to its vested interests and 'security'.

Church's option for the poor is not an option against the rich. The Church wants the conversion of both the rich and the poor for mutual benefit. The Christian vision does not endorse any class struggle between the rich and the poor. Class struggle and the elimination of the rich even by recourse to violence and the creation of a classless society is the Marxian ideology, is not acceptable in India. In the Christian vision the resources of the earth are meant for all and what is called for is mutual sharing and caring. The Indian vision of *sarvodaya* through *anthyodaya* is also the Christian vision.⁴³ Welfare and prosperity of all is the final goal, but the immediate priority or option is the promotion of the least and the last and their liberation.

A Prophetic Church

In a situation of poverty, misery, injustice, exploitation and discrimination, the Church in India has to rediscover the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. Many of the Old Testament prophets

⁴²ITA Statement 1983, *Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology*, no. 28.

⁴³ITA Statement 2002, *Christian Commitment to Nation Building*, no. 35.

courageously pointed out their finger against injustice and oppression of the people and took a bold stand against the religious and political rulers and authorities of the time. Jesus himself belonged to this prophetic tradition, and not to the priestly or temple tradition. By his Baptism from John the Baptist, Jesus declared his solidarity with the people, received the power of the Spirit and inaugurated his prophetic ministry by proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He projected the vision of a new society in his sayings, teachings and parables, distributed the gift of God's reign by his signs and miracles and liberated the people who were in ignorance, slavery, oppression and misery. The Church is called to continue this prophetic ministry in the world and pave the way to the Kingdom of God. If this is the ministry of the Church, then the Church has to move into the world from its own secure corridors and seriously engage in the civil space along with all other people. By too much preoccupied with orthodoxy, with its own doctrines, liturgies, rules and regulations, without corresponding concern for orthopraxis in the world, it will become a counter sign.⁴⁴

Commitment to the poor and becoming the "Church of the Poor" means total involvement in the struggles of the people for freedom and justice. Our solidarity with the poor and our presence in their struggles is more important than what we preach. As the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14), so the Church has to set its camp among the people in their struggles and respond to their needs. The mystery of incarnation is the mystery of God's identification with the struggles and sufferings of humanity, and it invites the Church to do so by being and becoming a catalyst, the salt and the leaven. The Church's mission of promoting the Kingdom of God, which is already come demands the Church to be involved in the socio-economic and political realities of our society and to fecundate and transform them with the Gospel values. It means that the Church should join hands with all the secular and democratic forces, which are committed to the cause of the people.

The Indian theologians took such a move and clear stand already in 1980 in the National Seminar on "Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society". The Statement of the Seminar tried to identify the core issues the Church has to grapple with in the civil society:

⁴⁴ITA Statement 1999, *Hope at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, no. 25.

Neglect of rural areas, large land holdings, bonded labour, child labour, caste system, neglect and exploitation of tribals, the problems arising out of male chauvinism, such as, dowry system, bride-burning, rape, sati, and a host of other indignities heaped on women; the injustices meted out to repatriates; the groaning of the poor due to rapacious money-lenders; and an administration corrupt from top to bottom. If the Church were to address herself to these and other such problems, she would certainly be relevant to the society in India today.⁴⁵

The Seminar called that all the ministries of the Church and the activities of all the sections of the Church must be geared to these issues and struggles.⁴⁶ Such involvement in the struggles of the people and deeper study and analysis will certainly lead to a new experience in the Indian Church, which will be the starting point for new ways of being Church in India.

ITA Annual Meeting in 2008 was focused on “Church’s Engagement in Civil Society, A New Way of Being Christian in India Today”. Its Statement declared:

If Christians want to transform people and the world then they have to be active and engaged in civil society... Such involvement implies empowering people and facilitating their active participation in mechanisms of policy-making and decision-making through advocacy and lobbying... such engagement in civil society demands a new way of being Christians... Since the new way of being the Church focuses on its role as servant and prophet in civil society, there is need to safeguard secular and democratic values, to get involved in vital issues affecting people’s lives and to empower subaltern groups in the larger project of nation building.⁴⁷

Church-in-Dialogue

‘Church-in-dialogue’ is the concrete mode of its existence in the Indian context of religious pluralism and the new discovery of other religions. With the Second Vatican Council’s document on other religions started a new era of positive understanding of other Faiths. The Council acknowledged that God’s love and grace has no limits and boundaries; it is universal. God’s revelation or self-gift is

⁴⁵*The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, ed., D.S. Amalorpavadas, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, 63.

⁴⁶For a pastoral plan of action geared to the participation of the Church in the struggles of the people, see, *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, 62-77.

⁴⁷ITA Statement 2008, *Church’s Engagement in Civil Society*, no. 17-40.

unconditionally given to all peoples, and the varieties of religious traditions in the world may be seen as different kinds and ways of human response to God's self-gift, or different ways of encountering the mystery of God or the Absolute reality. Different religions are the expressions of God's revelation and human response of faith from different historical and socio-cultural contexts.⁴⁸ The different religions manifest the different faces of that Supreme mystery which is never exhausted.⁴⁹ It is significant that Vatican II and the recent Popes have affirmed that the old Covenant with Israel remains still valid and not abrogated by the new Covenant. This affirmation of the validity of Jewish religion can be extended also to other religions based on God's Cosmic Covenant in creation and the Covenant with Noah (which was also a Cosmic Covenant) after the flood.⁵⁰ It does not mean necessarily that all religions are equally authentic as the fact of human sinfulness can distort any religion or all religions. This is why it is said that all religions, including the Church, are to be always reformed. All religions are to be subjected to critic, a liberational critic. On the one hand, religions have tremendous potential for socio-economic and political liberation and the transformation of society, as they contain an original prophetic charism. On the other hand, all religions historically tend to become conservative forces of *status quo* and oppression, and thus they constantly need to be subjected to a *liberational critique*.⁵¹ In the past our approaches to other religions were from mono-socio-cultural societies; today we live in a religiously pluralistic society which calls for a new theology of

⁴⁸ITA Statement 1989, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 3.

⁴⁹ITA Statement 1997, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 32. In this regard the often-quoted statement of the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC is significant: "In this dialogue (with the great religious traditions of our people) we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our people to Himself through them" (*For All the Peoples of Asia*, 14, no. 14–15).

⁵⁰*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4, *Dei Verbum*, Nos. 14–15.

⁵¹ITA Statement 1985, *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation*, nos. 10, 14, 17.

religions.⁵² Indian theologians emphasize that an authentic theology of religion and a theology of religious pluralism can be evolved *only in the actual context and praxis of dialogue, interculturalisation and liberation*.⁵³

Dialogue is the chance for mutual encounter, mutual learning, reform and purification. Whatever may be the defects and distortions of the existing religions, we can rightly say that ultimately they have a legitimate place in the economy of God's plan of salvation. In interreligious dialogue we open ourselves to the experience of others and journey with them towards our common ultimate goal.⁵⁴ The spirit of transcendence invites us to openness and dialogue with others. Awareness of the limitations of our own experience and its expressions also calls for reaching out to others and their experience by which both will be enriched and transformed and we will have a deeper understanding of the mysteries of our own faith.⁵⁵

By interreligious dialogue, inter-culturalisation and liberational praxis, the present self-understanding of the Church will be challenged and a new self-understanding of the Church will emerge. Inter-religious dialogues will be a corrective to egoism, assertiveness, dogmatism, self-sufficiency and water-tight exclusivism.⁵⁶ "When religions encounter one another in dialogue, they build up a community in which differences become complementarities and divergences are changed into pointers to communion."⁵⁷ Every religion has to open itself to God and his saving presence in other religions. Therefore, according to Indian theologians, "to be religious is to be inter-religious."⁵⁸

In the Indian context of religious pluralism, we have to emphasize the modality of *mission as presence, witness, service and dialogue*. George Soares had pointed out that during the aggressive and conquering mission of the Colonial period, mission was exclusively understood as "Church growth" based on the Great Commission (Mt 28:16-20). Today it has to be balanced and corrected by *mission as witness*, by the

⁵²ITA Statement 1989, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 3-5.

⁵³ITA Statement 1988, *Towards s Theology of Religions*, no. 8, 20 -29.

⁵⁴*Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.

⁵⁵ITA Statement 1989, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 18-19.

⁵⁶ITA Statement 1989, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 24, 33.

⁵⁷ITA Statement 1989, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 32.

⁵⁸ITA Statement 1989, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, no. 36.

Church being and becoming the salt and the light based on the mission text of Mt 5:13-16.⁵⁹ In our context, the proclamation of Jesus and his Gospel and dialogue are not mutually exclusive, but essentially related. Here proclamation can be fruitfully done only through dialogue, and dialogue is the way of proclamation. In dialogue we have the common goal of proclaiming and promoting the Kingdom of God and its values of freedom, fellowship, justice, love, compassion and harmony. The Challenge before the Indian Churches is to witness to Jesus Christ and his Gospel while remaining open to the spiritual values and religious experience of other religious traditions by being and becoming a *Church-in-dialogue*, and thus to develop a genuine theology of religions and to create the fellowship of all Living Faiths.

Church as Participatory Communion

The ecclesiology of Vatican II made a major shift in ecclesiology focusing on 'People of God' and as 'Communion', both of which are intimately related. The Church is the People of God in communion with God and with one another in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is a participatory communion which calls for actual participative functioning in the Church.⁶⁰ It calls for an institutional decentralization in the Church with the rediscovery of the identity and autonomy of the Local Church as people's Church. Besides, every member of the Local Church, as God's people, has his/her own gift and function in the Church, and all members enjoy equal status, dignity and freedom as in the early Church.⁶¹ The Council rediscovered the role and mission of the laity in the Church and called the laity to take their rightful place in the Church and exercise their role and mission effectively.

What is paradoxical today is the gap between theory and practice. The ecclesiology of the Council is indeed beautiful, relevant and valid. But the age-old practices of the Church are still being continued without much change. The Catholic Church is still a too much centralized institution that all the major decisions are taken at the Centre without sufficient participation, consultation and communication. The principles of collegiality and co-responsibility

⁵⁹George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Church as Mission: A Reflection on Mt. 5:13-16," *Jeevadhara*, Vol. 24, 142 (1994) 271-281.

⁶⁰ITA Statement 1996, *The Church in India in Search of a New Identity*, no. 58 – 65.

⁶¹ITA Statement 1985, *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation*, no. 12.

still remain merely at the theological level, and they are not yet translated into praxis. Individual/Local Churches are still unable to exercise their legitimate autonomy. Unity is still conceived as uniformity and diversity of the Churches is seen as a threat. Concern for unity and uniformity crushes originality, creativity and participation.⁶² Hierarchy and the clergy still dominate in the affairs of the Church and the laity has no role at all in any of the decision making bodies of the Churches. Unless the laity becomes competent and ready to take their rightful place in the Church, the Church will never become the leaven and the salt in the world.

We have to take certain bold and serious steps to promote *participatory communion* in the Church.⁶³ The initiative taken by Vatican II for decentralization must be continued and completed. The identity and legitimate autonomy of the Local Churches must be respected. Unity, Communion and Collegiality with all other Churches must go hand in hand with legitimate freedom, flexibility and the identity of each Church in its socio-cultural and religious context. The Universal Church is not one centralized institution, but the Communion of all the Local Churches. Ninety-nine per cent of the members of the Church are laity and unless they take their rightful place in the Church, in its ministry and mission, the Church will not become a participatory communion. Although the specific mission of the laity has a *secular quality* that they witness to Christ and the Gospel in the world where they live and work, the *sensus fidelium* and the *sensus fidei* of the entire community provides a strong theological basis to include them in all the decision making bodies of the Church including decisions on matters of faith. Among the members of the Church women are in fact the majority. If they are excluded from the ministry, mission and structures of the Church, how can the Church be a participatory communion? The Church is set in the world as a sign and sacrament of the Kingdom of God and of the Eschatological Community, where there is equality, freedom and love. If it does not recognize the valuable gifts of women, their capacity for love, their power to give life and their commitment to caring the sick and the abandoned, and use them for ministry in the Church, the Church cannot become a sign of the Kingdom of God. Women should be full partners in the Church and not mere assistants.

⁶²ITA Statement, *Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology*, no. 12.

⁶³ITA Statement, *Searching for an Indian Ecclesiology*, no. 21 – 23.

Liturgy is the source of the life of participatory communion in the Church and it gives power and strength to sustain the communion in the midst of conflicts, tensions and divisions. Sacraments and worship are to build up fellowship and community and not mere channels for personal grace. There is a wide-spread complaint that the liturgy in the Catholic Church is too rigid, ritualistic, legalistic and rubric-centred and not experiential and participative. All the details are dictated from Rome and there is no freedom and flexibility for the local Churches for adapting the liturgy to the local cultural, religious and social contexts. Many of the surveys have revealed that many people from the Catholic Church and other traditional Churches are attracted towards the Neo-Pentecostal groups as their worship is more experiential, participative and fellowship-oriented.⁶⁴ While keeping the essential structure and basic prayers, the local Churches must have the freedom to adapt the liturgy to their context and pastoral needs. Participation of all the members in the liturgy must be essential in a participatory communion. Sunday liturgies must be the celebration of the whole community and it should respond to the actual problems, needs and aspirations of the members of the community and thus help building up the community.

Disciples of Jesus and Membership in the Church

In India there are many people who venerate and worship Jesus and have become his 'disciples', but do not have membership in any Church. It is reported that in some parts of North India new communities are emerging called *Isu-panthis* and *Krist-bhaktas*.⁶⁵ They follow the traditional Hindu distinction between *samaj dharma* and *sadhana dharma*. *Samaj dharma* is the way of life of the society to which one belongs. It is his/her participation in the socio-cultural and religious world in which one is born and brought up. He/she is rooted there in that society and he/she follows the customs, traditions and life-style of the society. But Hinduism gives its votaries "the inner freedom to choose any authentic path to spiritual progress and even the choice of one's own *ishta devata*."⁶⁶ Based on this principle, some traditional Hindus continue to belong to the Hindu

⁶⁴Paul Parathazham, "Neo-Pentecostalism in India," in *Word and Worship* (1994) 81-101.

⁶⁵ITA Statement 2007, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, A Hindu-Catholic: His Significance for Theologizing in India Today*, no. 23; ITA Statement 1996, *The Church in India in Search of a New Identity*, no. 33.

⁶⁶ITA Statement 2007, no. 19.

society, follow its customs and practices, but they accept and worship Jesus as their personal God and way of salvation. They claim that they are disciples of Jesus, but not members of the Church. They refuse to accept 'Baptism' in any church.

Of course, there are several issues and questions connected with it. Christian *sadhana* of being a disciple of Christ and following him involves a 'communitarian dimension' which needs to be distinguished from the Hindu *samaj*.⁶⁷ It may be possible that such disciples of Jesus slowly form their own community or church, or they may merge with other Christian communities. Some of these new disciples of Jesus may join with other Christians for Sunday worship and liturgy. Admitting them to Eucharistic communion may become an issue. This issue is also related to the difficult question of 'multiple belonging to religious communities'. Today intermarriage between Christian boys and girls with those belonging to other churches and religions has become an ordinary practice in big cities of India and abroad. Many of these couples go for worship alternatively in the worship centres of different religions or of different Christian denominations. Religious upbringing of their children is one of the most difficult questions. Religion and faith is a matter of personal and absolute commitment. An 'absolute' commitment seems to be difficult in the case of 'multiple belonging'.

The Church, indeed, cannot make any exclusive claim of Jesus Christ. By his Incarnation and Resurrection Jesus Christ belongs to the whole humankind, and he is present and active in the whole world, among all peoples, cultures and religions, transforming everything into his own Body, into the Kingdom of God. It may be asked whether a subjective, conscious and personal acceptance of Jesus Christ necessarily involves becoming a member of the visible Church and its juridical and sacramental structure?⁶⁸ Today it is already accepted that Baptism and membership in the visible and institutional Church is not necessary for salvation, and salvation is possible to people who belong to other Faiths.⁶⁹ Of course, there are many theological views and theories to explain the salvation of people who are outside the

⁶⁷ITA Statement 2007, no. 23.

⁶⁸Anto Karokaran, "The Relationship of Mission, Conversion and Baptism," *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 72, 287 (1983) 344.

⁶⁹LG, no. 16; NA, no.1; AG, no. 7; GS, no. 10, 22.

visible Church. But the old explanation of "Baptism of desire" (*Baptismus in Voto*) is no more held today.

Gregory Baum while describing the Church as a Movement, points out that the essential character of a movement is that people can belong to it in different ways depending upon their life situation: some may take part fully in all its programmes and activities; some only in some of its aspects; there may be others who prefer to follow only the main ideals of the movement. But the important thing is that the movement is open to all and everybody can establish a real relationship with it.⁷⁰

There may be three different ways of belonging to Christ: (i) One becomes a disciple of Christ in and through the historical Church and its membership. He/she professes faith in Christ as God and Saviour and practices the Christian way of life by belonging to a church or Christian community. (ii) One belongs to Jesus Christ by his/her personal experience of Jesus as God and his/her personal way of salvation. For him/her membership in any church seems to be superfluous. For them faith and religion is a personal and private matter. (iii) There is a third category of the disciples of Jesus. They follow Christ as their leader and 'Guru'. In their secular and ethical life they follow the ideals and precepts of Jesus. But they do not 'worship' Jesus as 'God'. Christ and the Church belong to the category of 'Mystery' and we may not be able to define who belong to Christ and the Church. There may be different ways of belonging to Christ and the Church, and different Christian 'life-styles'. What is needed today is not excluding any one from Christ and the Church, but relating with all in a spirit of openness.

4. Conclusion

We started our ecclesiological reflections by pointing out the main problem that most of the Indian Churches are transplantations from outside and that they are now in a life and death struggle to convert themselves to be fully Indian while remaining authentically Christian. We conclude our discussion with some reflections in broad outline on the *identity of the Indian Churches*:

⁷⁰Reference to Gregory Baum is taken from Anto Karokaran, *International Review of Mission*, 363-364. The author is indebted to L. Rutti, *Zur Theologie der Mission*, Muenchen, 1972, 326-327.

1. There are many historical churches in India, three Catholic Individual Churches — Syro-Malabar, Latin and Syro-Malankara; Oriental Orthodox Churches, main line Protestant Churches, Pentecostal Churches and Protestant United Churches, such as, Church of South India and Church of North India and others. Today in post-Colonial period most of the Churches are in the same predicament and they all struggle for their identity. They cannot begin all over again from a zero point, but they start from where they are today and try to become authentically Indian.

2. Identity is very often misunderstood as static; but it is dynamic, organic, open and is always in the making. Often identity of a Church is presented as its distinctiveness and differences from the other Churches. But identity consists in *relationality*, though there is an ontological aspect of identity. Identity consists in the relation of a church to other churches and the realities in the world. All Catholic Churches have a commonality, unity in the same faith, communion in the same sacraments and pastoral guidance under the Roman Pontiff. Often the differences among the Churches are exaggerated and are elevated as essentials. Communion in the Catholic Church implies that the different Individual Churches have to share their heritage and values each other with openness and learn from each other and move towards a convergence. Identity of the Indian Churches has to be continuously created and re-created in mutual relationship and not in opposition. Identity consists not in clinging to the past, but moving forward to the future in the power of the Spirit.

3. All the Indian Churches have to incarnate in the Indian culture or cultures in the process of *ecclesiogenesis*. The traditional notion of inculturation is not theologically welcome. In the traditional notion a ready-made Church is clothed in a culture which is out there as fixed. But culture is not an objective reality out there ready-made and fixed. Rather it is a web of relationship, and it is continuously constructed in an ongoing process. Culture is the result of a dialogical relationship between peoples and nations by giving and taking, mutually challenging, and thus getting enriched in this process. Although all religions and Churches have their historical origins in different socio-cultural worlds, like every other reality in history, they undergo an inter-cultural and interreligious process in history. They meet and merge letting themselves be transformed in this process. Of course, for the birth of an authentic local Church, it requires

legitimate autonomy. Moreover, there should be willingness and courage to correct the historical distortions, if any.

4. Identity of the Church and an authentic ecclesiology in India is to be created as a result of the interaction of three constitutive elements: (i) Recovery of the original Christian experience and encounter with the living Christ today. (ii) Fidelity to the Tradition of the Early Church, which includes the Scriptures, the Sacraments and the Apostolic ministry. (iii) Creative and critical response in the power of the Spirit to the actual Indian realities today, including the reality of other religions and cultures. There is a tendency to exaggerate one element at the expense of the other elements. A proper balancing of the three elements and the ongoing continuation of this creative process with openness results in a new identity for the Indian Churches and an authentic ecclesiology.

5. Identity of the Church is identity in its mission. Identity consists mainly by being faithful to the mission of the Church given by Christ. Proclamation without the experience of the mystery of Christ becomes 'proselytism'. Evangelizer has to be equipped as well as transformed by Christ-experience rather than with the so-called orthodoxy of doctrines and formulas, as Christianity is not an intellectual or religious system, but a mission to communicate the love and hope experienced in the Jesus event. The Church can fulfil this mission only in so far as it undergoes the *kenotic process* which took place in Jesus.⁷¹ "Only by being deeply involved in the lives, problems and issues of our people can the Indian Church fulfil her mission and thus realize her authentic identity."⁷²

The Indian theologians have the *dream* of a new Indian Church: "We dream of an Indian Church that is authentically local, autonomous and participative, committed to the promotion of the Kingdom. Such a Church will be a community of hope, guided by the Spirit, exercising its prophetic function, fully convinced that it is in a pilgrim state, ever involved in dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies, and with a special attention to the needs of the oppressed and marginalized."⁷³

⁷¹ITA Statement 1987, *Communalism in India: A Challenge to Theologizing*, no. 31.

⁷²ITA Statement 1986, *The Church in India in Search of a New Identity*, no. 26.

⁷³ITA Statement 1986, *The Church in India in Search of a New Identity*, no. 37.