

## **Asia As Locus of Theology Religious Pluralism**

**Paul A Bharathi**

MMI College of Theology, India

Email: paul.bharati10@yahoo.com

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### **Abstract**

The article explores the imperative need to shift theological focus towards Asia, emphasizing the unique contextual challenges and rich cultural diversity within the continent. The prevailing theological landscape, influenced primarily by Western culture and thought, often fails to resonate with the intricate realities of Asian societies. The historical imposition of Western theology in Asia, dating back to colonial times, has created a disconnect between theological discourse and the lived experiences of Asian people. In response to this disconnect, Asian theologians are advocating for the development of indigenous Asian theology, one deeply rooted in the region's culture, traditions, and values. This shift towards an "Asianness" in theological reflection seeks to create a theology that is both authentic and relevant to the people it serves. Context plays a pivotal role in shaping theology, and the unique socio-political and religious context of Asia, characterized by overwhelming poverty and multifaceted religiosity, demands a contextualized theology that addresses the concrete issues faced by its diverse population. Such a theology bridges the gap between theory and practice, focusing on authenticity, relevance, and meaningfulness. Religious pluralism, a prominent feature of Asia, is a key focus of Asian theology. This diversity calls for a reevaluation of Christian traditions in light of the Asian situation, emphasizing the need for theology to engage with the specific issues of poverty and religious pluralism that define the continent. In essence, "Asia as the Locus of Theology" underscores the necessity of a theology that reflects the unique context and concerns of Asia, challenging the dominance of Western theological paradigms and highlighting the importance of contextualization, authenticity, and relevance in theological discourse.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Theology; Contextualization; Religious Pluralism.

## 1. Introduction

The title of our webinar, “Asia as locus of Theology” begs many questions. Why do we need to focus on Asia? What compels us to do so? What does focus on Asia mean and signify? So many factors contributed to the rise of Asian Theology. When we talk about theology in general, the main characteristics are universal, abstract, and Westernized, in terms of being influenced by Western culture and thinking. But theology that is imported from the West is sometimes irrelevant and non-applicable in the context of Asia. Fr. George Soares-Prabhu states that “a Theology elaborated in the West, in response to Western concerns, in a Western idiom, has been exported to every corner of the globe by generations of Western church men”.<sup>1</sup> This Western theology tried to universalize itself to every corner of the world without understanding that this approach has no relevance in Asia to people who live in a different context and have different concerns. This attempt to implement foreign theological education and theological knowledge among Asian people dates back to a century earlier with the arrival and establishment of Christianity by the Oriental Orthodox tradition, and it was later enhanced by successive Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian missionaries from Europe and North America.<sup>2</sup> It was imported from the West and imposed on seminarians and the laity by teaching and catechizing throughout Asia. S.J. Emmanuel states: “Asians do have a right and a duty to question and challenge the validity, relevance, and suitability of a theology formulated in Europe and imposed on Asia as the only theology”.<sup>3</sup> This is because this theology has been conceptualized in a Western culture and, therefore, it is more suitable to the West than to Asia. Asian theologians and Christians are, therefore, obliged to articulate an Asian theology that is born from the “womb” of Asia, one that is more intuitive and story-oriented in contrast to the Western style of logical reasoning. Asian theology should be rooted in the culture of Asia rather than in the culture of the West. Asia has its own culture, tradition, and values which are different from the Western culture

We need more “Asianness” in our theological reflections. It is always the “local church” that will be the proper locus of an indigenous theology. As an indigenous theology created by a local church, Asian theology should have a secure identity of its own and avoid all imitation, refusing to follow Western academic models in its theologizing. Its character should be both Asian and Christian. Another factor which contributed to the birth of Asian Theology is context which undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in shaping and forming theology. In the first stage, the beginnings of an understanding of a truly global Church, people recognized the importance of the local context as an element in the construction of theologies. In the second stage, the heights of postcolonial discourse and its hermeneutics of suspicion, people tended to develop (maybe in the enthusiasm of discovering the possibilities

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Padinjarekutu, ed., “Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, SJ-Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today,” 1st ed. (Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidayapeeth Theology series, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Huang Po Ho, “Theologies in Asia and Asian Theologies; A Radical Paradigm Shift of Doing Theologies from Contexts,” *Concillium* 1 (2022): 22–32.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel, “Asian Mission for the next Millennium? Chances and Challenges,” *The Way* 39, no. 2 (1999): 103–17.

of local theologies) a sense of the primacy of the local context over the trans-local challenges.<sup>4</sup>

In Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism and Sikhism. In these different stages of theology, theologians in Asia realized the importance of context for the construction of Theology in Asia and the need to adapt their theological reflection and thinking to the situation, challenges, and issues of the people in Asia thereby making sense and providing meaning for the people. Every context is different socio-politically and religiously. The Asian situation and context are complex. As Aloysius Pieris demonstrated, two massive, closely interrelated realities shed light on Asia's context and character. These are its "overwhelming poverty" and its "multifaceted religiosity".<sup>5</sup> As we indicated in "Asia as the locus of Theology", the Asian context is the basis and foundation for our theological reflection which leads to a contextualized theology, new way of theologizing. It involves not only words but actions. Through this, the inherent danger of a dichotomy between theory and practice, action and reflection, the classroom and the street should be overcome. Authentic theological reflection can only take place as the theologian in loco, discerning the contextuality within the concrete context.<sup>6</sup> The contextual theologies from Asia, which emerge from the concrete context or from the life situation of the people, can be both authentic and relevant.

They can contribute to the signs of the times, and they can offer remedies for the crises that we face. Theology based on context is characterized by authenticity, relevance, and meaningfulness for the people. It can also be called people-oriented theology or praxis-oriented theology. It demands a course of action in line with the theology that is propounded. "Liberation Theology", Black Theology, Feminist Theology and in India, Dalit Theology and Tribal Theology are all results of this contextualized and people-oriented approach. All these theologies are based on the concrete context of the people

In "Asian Theology," therefore, the context of Asia is considered as the basis for our theology so Asian theologies engage with issues, questions, and concerns arising from Asian contexts. In the Asian context, Asian perspective (contextualization) means simply that the reflections offered are made by someone trying to live his Christian faith in daily contact with neighbors of other faiths in India and in other parts of Asia.<sup>7</sup> Theology must address those issues and concerns of the people in Asia, the specific issues of poverty and religious pluralism.

Asia has been the cradle of every one of the world's scriptural religions, and it is the only continent where all these religions are fully at home, flourishing vigorously amid an immense number of primal religions.<sup>8</sup> Asia gave birth to many major religions of the world, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism and Sikhism. Plurality and diversity of race, cultures,

<sup>4</sup> Clements Sedmak, "Spiritual Resilience-A Contextual Theology for Asia," *Landas* 24, no. 1 (2010): 19–30.

<sup>5</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation: Some Religio-Cultural Guidelines," *Vidayjyothi* 43 (1979): 261–84.

<sup>6</sup> Ho, "Theologies in Asia and Asian Theologies; A Radical Paradigm Shift of Doing Theologies from Contexts."

<sup>7</sup> Felix Wilfred, "From the Dusty Soil- Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity" (University of Madras Chennai, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Padinjarekutu, "Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, SJ-Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today."

social institutions, and religious ideologies are characteristic of Asia. It has its own distinctiveness which distinguishes it from other continents. Asian theology must identify what is distinctively Asian and use this distinctiveness in its theological discourse. It must also focus on Asian concerns and issues. And it must begin by raising issues and concerns of Asia, rather than issues and concerns to Augustine, or Barth, or Rahner. In other words, Asian Theology must focus on the concrete situation of the people of Asia, rather than engaging in speculative and abstract ideas. Therefore, Asian theology calls for the radical rethinking of the Christian tradition in the Asian situation.<sup>9</sup>

The context and situation of Asia lays the foundation for the construction of Theology in Asia. This contextualized theology addresses not just its product (i.e., specific doctrines) but also indeed, especially the process which produces the product: the dynamic interaction of faith with life. Its focus is rightly on theology as wisdom not abstract, academic religious knowledge.<sup>10</sup> It is a methodology which tries to move from the abstract to concrete, from dogmas to context and the life experience of the people. I already mentioned the two important areas in which the Asian context is situated: poverty and religious pluralism. Religious pluralism is one of the important characteristics of Asian Theology. As we are dealing with the topic “Asia as locus of Theology”, religious pluralism is an inevitable and critical focal point for our discussion.

To sum up, “Asia as locus of Theology”, challenges the theology which emerges from Western thinking and culture which is not in synchronicity with the thinking and culture of the people in Asia. Second, the context is an element in the construction of theology. The Asian context is different from the context of the West where the theology was born and exported to other countries like Asia and Africa. Asians live in the context of religious pluralism and poverty. Religious pluralism provides a foundation for “Asia as locus of Theology”, as it is one of the important factors in the faith aspect of our Christians in Asia.

## 2. Research Methodology

The approach applied in this research is comparative not to display distinctions but relations. The step taken is a massive knowledge of the theological basis developed in the Western world which then developed also in the Asian world. Along the way, these theologies meet with various popular religions and cultures that also have values related to theology. Therefore, the comparative approach is not aimed at showing the superiority of one over the other, or eliminating one over the other, but complementing each other to uphold the virtues of human value. This approach shows respect for popular religion and culture and makes place a part of theology.

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<sup>9</sup> Padinjarekutu.

<sup>10</sup> Timoteo D. Gener, “Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia: Challenges and Prospects,” *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 1–2 (2018): 49–68.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1. Religious Pluralism

Asia is rich in tradition and culture. It has the characteristics of pluralism and diversity in religion, language, and culture. Asian Christians face many challenges in their faith life, challenges such as poverty, political oppression, economic exploitation, religious pluralism, and fundamentalism. Religious pluralism is one of the key challenges that we as Asian Christians face. In this context, several questions come to mind. How do we understand our faith concerning the faiths of other religions? How do we view salvation for the people of other religions, when we hold the view that the salvation of the world is possible only through Jesus Christ and how do we understand the mission commandment of Jesus in which he says, “Go therefore, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).

Since we are discussing “Asia as locus of Theology, pluralism is a critical element for the construction of our theology. Pluralism does not play a negative role in the faith of the Christian life, but it does play a constructive role. The theology in Asia is infused with the positive affirmation of diversity and the spirit of pluralism, not only as a fact but as a value to be fostered.<sup>11</sup> Pluralism derives from the fact that human beings are subjects and their perception of reality, and their judgements are shaped by their differing worldviews, experiences, diverse contexts, histories, etc. This realization had led Asian theologies to view the diversity of perspectives not as a hindrance but as a great enrichment to the life of faith.<sup>12</sup>

The living experience of Asian Christians with the other faiths has taught them the spirit of openness and inclusivism, not exclusivism. Openness does not lead one to affirm that “All religions are the same” or “All religions are equal”. However, it does recognize the legitimacy of other religions as ways to the absolute, as all of them, as a matter of fact do.<sup>13</sup> First and foremost, the spirit of openness enables one to accept that not only Christianity, but also other religions, do lead people to God. It is also recognizing that reality is not one but many. Reality exists not so much in itself but rather in relationship to other realities.<sup>14</sup> Openness understands that it is not only Christianity which contains truth, but that truth (reality) does exist in other religions too. An Asian theology of religious pluralism is mainly in search for salvation outside of Christianity. Its theology attempts to discover how Christians could recognize, understand, and evaluate other faiths.

The spirit of openness leads us not to regard our own religion as the one and only ‘true’ faith and way of ‘salvation’ uniquely superior to all others. The Hindus in India have no problem with the existence of Christianity in India, if we don’t preach that Christianity or Christ is the only way to salvation. So, theology in Asia must reflect this context. Asian Theology makes us understand that God’s revelation is not limited to Christianity, but God

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Amaladoss, *Public Theology in a Multi-Religious Society*, ed. Felix Wilfred (New Delhi: Felix Wilfred, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Amaladoss.

<sup>13</sup> Amaladoss.

<sup>14</sup> Wang Shik Jan, “Relativism and Difference: Toward a Genuine Pluralism- The Multi- Religious Situation in Asia and Its Challenges to the Mission,” *Theologies and Cultures XIV* (2008): 128.

has spoken to other religions as well. It contends that the whole truth about God is beyond human comprehension, and our efforts to seek these truths can never be complete. Each religion attempts to find God in its way, recognizing that God is transcendent and eludes a complete human understanding. In other words, no religion can fully understand and comprehend the Ultimate. As Hick says, “hypothesizing that there is one divine Reality that exists beyond the scope of human comprehension. What we know about this Reality, he contends, is what is perceived and experienced by each individual in a particular tradition. In effect, each religious tradition, civilization, and individual preference acts as a conceptual lens through which people recognize “the Real”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, each religion views the “Real” from the perspective of its tradition, and there are different understandings on the same “Real”.

We, the Asians who live in the pluralistic context, understand this better than the West whose interests may be more uniform and homogeneous. Vivekananda, a world teacher who preached on universalism, pointed out that religion is about mutual acceptance but not tolerance. Religious tolerance implies that one religion is superior to other religions and allows other inferior religions to exist. The idea of the dominance of one religion over other religions still exists through religious tolerance. In mutual acceptance of religions, there is no superiority and inferiority; some truth inherently exists in every religion. All religions are true or closer to the truth in some way.<sup>16</sup> What Vivekananda said a century ago, the Church and theologians realize today. Today, we hold this view concerning religious pluralism. In Asian theology of religious pluralism, we search for salvation outside of Christianity. It does accept and recognize that other religions possess a kernel of truth that leads one to God. Finally, as Vivekananda pointed out, the photograph of an object from a different side looks different, but it is the same object. Just so, different religions may have different beliefs, but they are looking for the same reality from a different perspective.<sup>17</sup>

To sum up, several questions arise concerning our co-existence with other religions. We as Asian Christians learned to live with other religions. and we try to understand them from the perspective of their religious tradition. This leads us to a spirit of openness and inclusiveness. This openness is an attitude resulting from the fact that other religions do lead people to God through their own culture and tradition. It also makes us understand that Christianity is not only the way to salvation. Other religions do show the way to the salvation. When we discuss “Asia as locus of Theology” certainly all these theological points are relevant and meaningful for the people in Asia. What we are trying to achieve is a relevant theology for Asia.

### **3.2. Exclusivism vs Inclusivism**

As far as religious pluralism is concerned, the Church has been battling between exclusivism and inclusivism. Exclusivism is a real threat to religious pluralism. It also disintegrates the unity and disturbs the harmony in a multi-religious society. Exclusivism

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<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel, “Inter-Religious Dialogue in Asia at a Turning Point towards New Christologies and Ecclesiologies,” in *Zeitschrift Für r Missionswissenschaft Und Religionswissenschaft*, 1989, 235–240.

<sup>16</sup> Swami Adiswarananda, ed., “VIVEKANANDA WORLD TEACHER- His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind” (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Adiswarananda.

does a lot of harm in a country where secularism is practiced. It creates fertile ground for the rise of fundamentalism and, sometimes, violence. The Asian context is multi-religious, and Asia is the least Christian of the continents of the world. Perhaps, except in Philippines, in all other countries in Asia, Christians are considered as minorities.

In this situation, exclusivism is a most dangerous element which can create havoc in countries where Christians are a minority. Exclusivism proclaims that the ideology of one religion is superior to other religions, and the description of the reality of a particular religion is the only truth or closer to the truth than other religions. Every religious tradition has the conviction that their explanation of Reality is the best explanation. They uphold the view that my truth is the only truth, and other religious traditions must follow it.<sup>18</sup>

The theology of Asia certainly does not approve of this absolutism and tries to approach theology by eliminating exclusivism and absolutism. Vivekananda explains exclusivism with a story of a frog in a well. The Christian sits in his/her little well and thinks the whole world is his/her well. The Muslim sits in his/her little well and thinks that it is the whole world. Likewise, all other people belonging to different religions think similarly.<sup>19</sup> Vatican II speaks against absolutism and exclusivism (LG.15, 16, 8: N.A.1,4)

Exclusivism which has a tendency of claim superiority over other religions impels religious leaders to work for religious conversion, thereby causing religious rift and sometimes riots. In the past, missionaries exhibited this tendency during the period of colonization. Because of this exclusivism, in India religious violence is currently becoming a common phenomenon, and we observe attacks against minorities (Muslims and Christians) because of attempts at religious conversions. The majority (Hindus) are suspicious of Muslims and Christians because of religious conversions. Christians' running of educational institutions is seen by Hindu fundamentalists to impose our religious beliefs on the majority of Hindu children.

Though our constitution allows minorities to use religious symbols in our institutions, right-wing groups are against using such symbols as they think that those symbols can be used to convert the Hindu children who study in our institutions. Though the Indian constitution allows everyone to preach and practice one's own faith, the fundamentalistic group alleges that there are forced conversions. The Church vehemently denies this allegation and clearly states that we no longer believe in religious conversions of people from other faiths. This deep-seated hatred towards minorities (Christians and Muslims) by the majority has roots in the past. Yes, in the past, Christian missionaries converted people from other faiths, especially from Hinduism.

Our ancestors were all Hindus, so conversions did occur because of the theology which supported exclusivism and absolutism. I just highlighted a dangerous problem that was caused by the theology of exclusivism and absolutism which still has repercussions in the present. The main task of our theology in which we focus on Asia, is to battle against exclusivism and absolutism, and it is to highlight inclusivism and relativism. We, the Asians

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<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel, "Asian Mission for the next Millennium? Chances and Challenges."

<sup>19</sup> Adiswarananda, "VIVEKANANDA WORLD TEACHER- His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind."



have a different experience. We start from the experience of how God the infinite has relativized Himself as man and revealed Himself.<sup>20</sup> The incarnation theory itself is the basis for relativism. It helps us to relativize our religious ideology and to see other religions positively. Relativism makes us understand that there is no truth that is always universal and objective. There is nothing absolute. This is what relativism is all about. Whatever the religious truth, it cannot be absolute.

We have a story in Indian tradition, in which there are four physically challenged persons (blind) who are asked to touch an elephant and describe it what it looks like for them. Each one after touching one part of the elephant's body started describing it in his own way by comparing the part of the elephant's body with an object that he was familiar with. For example, a man who touched the strong leg of elephant said, that the elephant looks like a pillar. What the man said may be correct, but he does not know that he touched and experienced only a part of the body of the elephant not the complete body. So, he is right in his own very limited way, but he does not possess complete knowledge of the elephant. Similarly, all religions can tell a partial truth, but not the full, complete truth. The key elements of Theology in Asia must be inclusivism and relativism. Another important fact is that no one would deny that relativism has played a positive part in making religious pluralism effective.

When it is said that there is nothing absolute and, therefore, everything is relative, relativism contributes to the spirit of religious pluralism in which it is emphasized that all religions are equally valid so that there is no only absolute religion. This is why relativism functions positively for the sake of religious pluralism in the sense that pluralism has facilitated the cooperation of religions in peace-making.<sup>21</sup> Relativism in a pluralistic context brings all religions together. Despite the richness of religious diversity, there are some collective agreements among all major religious traditions.

Every religion has some core teachings which do not contradict other traditions, and which are very much essential for humanity. The core teachings of religion are the building blocks on which an entire belief system is based. Compassion, unconditional love, and peace are the core teachings of every religion.<sup>22</sup>

Another important issue we deal with is inclusivism as opposed to exclusivism. I discussed how the practice of exclusivism in a pluralistic context plays a negative role in building up relationships with other religions. Inclusiveness understands that there is salvation outside the Church. In other words, we don't hold the view that there is no salvation for non-Christians. The sense of divine mystery inspires Asian theologians not to follow paths of exclusion but rather of integration and inclusion. The mysterious God has a plan to save the whole of humankind irrespective of caste, creed, religion, and race. We believe that God is a universal God and has a mysterious plan for the salvation of the people of other

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<sup>20</sup> Emmanuel, "Inter-Religious Dialogue in Asia at a Turning Point towards New Christologies and Ecclesiologies."

<sup>21</sup> Jan, "Relativism and Difference: Toward a Genuine Pluralism- The Multi- Religious Situation in Asia and Its Challenges to the Mission."

<sup>22</sup> Manas Kumar Sahu, "Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 47, no. 7 (2019): 57–62.



faiths. We need to understand that there is a universal plan of God's salvation for the world.<sup>23</sup> The Vatican Council states that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of participating in the Paschal Mystery in ways unknown to us. The churches in Asia are moving into the new millennium, but not with any confrontational or conquest mentality to win over converts and save only those baptized from the millions of followers of other faiths. We believe in the universal salvific will and God's plan as well as in the unique mission of Christ in Asia.<sup>24</sup>

Karl Rahner speaks of "anonymous Christianity," a Christian way of life beyond the boundaries of the institutional Church. Michael Amaladoss, an Indian Theologian says "The Church becomes the visible part of a mysterious, ahistorical entity, identified as the mystical body of Christ, and every person who is saved becomes an anonymous Christian. To call a believing Hindu an anonymous Christian is offensive unless one is also ready to be considered an anonymous Hindu"<sup>25</sup> Through this concept of "anonymous Christianity" Rahner tries to impose superiority of Christianity over other religions which can destroy the unity and harmony of the society. This thought is very much influenced by the West, where there is no religious pluralism.

### 3.3. Christological Implications in Religious Pluralism

In the context of religious pluralism, Christology raises many questions. How is Christ relevant for Asia? How do we view "Jesus is the mediator of salvation" for the people of other faiths? The Church teaches that salvation is only through Jesus. In other words, Jesus Christ is the mediator of salvation for the world. When we have exclusivism and absolutism, it becomes more complex. When we integrate inclusivism and relativism, there will not be any problem. Jesus is relevant today for the people of Asia who live in the religious pluralistic context. Asia has a vast number of people who live in poverty and on the margins of society. This extreme poverty experienced by the people in Asia is regardless of their religion, caste, or creed. In other words, there are poor in Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, etc. In this situation in Asia, Jesus is relevant, not because the bulk of the Asian masses are non-Christians, but because they are poor. In fact, there is an inextricable relationship between Jesus and the poor.<sup>26</sup> Jesus' total identification with the poor and downtrodden is evident in his choice of choosing a socially low status and associating himself with the poor in terms of relationship. Jesus through his suffering and death stands with the poor of Asia who go through so much suffering, struggles, and violence. As a prominent theologian of Asia says,

A very significant encounter of India (it could be for the whole Asia) with Jesus Christ takes place on the path of the suffering and agony its millions of poor are undergoing today. Jesus is known and experienced not in what he is away from the people, but what he is solidarity with them. The poor and the suffering of India (Asia) identify him with

<sup>23</sup> Wilfred, "From the Dusty Soil- Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity."

<sup>24</sup> Emmanuel, "Asian Mission for the next Millennium? Chances and Challenges."

<sup>25</sup> Michael Amaladoss, "Inter-Religious Dialogue: A View from Asia," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 1 (1995): 2-5.

<sup>26</sup> Wilfred, "From the Dusty Soil- Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity."

themselves. His suffering and death speak to them powerfully as they find their own experience of suffering, humiliation and helplessness reflected in his passion. It is in his suffering, close to their own way of the cross, that the people recognize his person and discover his mystery.<sup>27</sup>

Asian theologies celebrate their pluralism and have tried to understand Jesus Christ and Christian faith from this perspective. Jesus could be meaningful in a pluralistic context, when we present Jesus not as dogmatic Jesus, not with adjectives and nouns, but Jesus who is active, as verb who loves, shows compassion, and forgives. In other words, we need to present an active and dynamic Jesus, not a static Jesus who remains at the dogmatic level. In a pluralistic context, Jesus becomes meaningful when we present, not who Jesus is, but what Jesus does. It is important that we view theology (Christology) as the process of thinking and acting in a Christian manner in context- as a verb, putting our emphasis on its practice, rather than as a noun, putting our emphasis on the finished doctrinal product.<sup>28</sup> Christology needs to be presented as a process to be undergone rather than a set of doctrines to be learned and applied in different situations, explaining why and how it is so. This implies that Christology needs to be understood as a continuing endeavor in changing contexts and circumstances and not as a once and for all effort.<sup>29</sup>

The Christology that was presented to Asians in the past was not the historical person of Jesus, but rather it was based on the monopolistic-exclusive absolutism which cannot meet the demands of Asian pluralism.<sup>30</sup> We need to understand and express our belief in categories which would give meaning to our pluralistic context. We need to rediscover Jesus Christ from the biblical sources through Asian categories and allow an Asian Christology to evolve in history.

For example, presenting Jesus as Liberator, gives meaning to the Asians who are poor and who are oppressed socially, economically, and politically. This aspect of Jesus Christ would more effectively appeal to the Indians who are in a caste-ridden context. In the caste system, there is an oppression of lower caste by the people of the upper caste. For those in the oppressed class, "Jesus as Liberator" gives more meaning than any other categories derived from the dogmas of the institutionalized Church. In India, a few decades ago, theologians were interested in presenting Jesus in an Indian and pluralistic context. They were presenting Jesus as "Guru" (teacher) and a "sanyasi" (a renounced person), and Jesus was dressed as an Indian religious teacher (Guru). This is the way, in Asia, we need to find new categories of Christology which will have more effective appeal among the people who live in a pluralistic society.

Jesus is the savior of the universe, and there is no barrier of religion, caste, creed, or race because his message is universal. When missionaries arrived in Asia, they presented Jesus as savior for those who were baptized. They were exclusive in their approach. The centrality of

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<sup>27</sup> Wilfred.

<sup>28</sup> Gener, "Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia: Challenges and Prospects."

<sup>29</sup> Jose M.de Mesa, "Making Salvation Concrete and Jesus Real-Trends in Asian Christology," *Exchange* 3, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>30</sup> Emmanuel, "Inter-Religious Dialogue in Asia at a Turning Point towards New Christologies and Ecclesiologies."

Christ for our faith and for our Christian life unfolds itself in the Asian context. It flowers concretely as the recognition of the universality of the message of Christ. Jesus is central for Asia because his spirit, his life, is catholic, universal, open to all peoples.<sup>31</sup> A kingdom-centered Christology should be presented in the Asian context, where the kingdom values of love, justice, and equality are emphasized. Asians who experience religious plurality will discover that the Kingdom of God makes sense to their faith-life. Through the kingdom-centered Christology, we present a historical Jesus rather than a Jesus who is described in dogmatic terms.

Karl Rahner admits that whether consciously or not people find themselves in a condition in which God, on God's own initiative, approaches them. No one is excluded from attracting God's grace, although human beings are also able to reject the gift of grace. It is an abstract reflection because he emphasizes an encounter with God's grace has a transforming effect on human beings. This life can be shared by everyone who follows Jesus. But Rahner adds that Jesus Christ can also be followed by people who cannot recognize the person of Christ in the institutional Church.<sup>32</sup> His Christology seems to be inclusive, but in a subtle way he affirms that the salvation is only through Christ. I do not know if I tell my Hindu brother who is morally a good person who follows the moral principles of their religion, that he/she is saved by Jesus Christ, whether it will be acceptable to them. I doubt it. Hence, in the Asian context, the message of Jesus Christ i.e., love, justice, and equality, should be emphasized instead of stressing the importance of the person of Jesus.

### **3.4 Mission In The Context of Religious Pluralism**

The mission command of Jesus (Mt. 28:19; Mk.16:15; Lk. 24:47) and the early teaching of the Church urged many missionaries from Europe to go throughout the world and convert people to Christianity. With a colonized mind-set, the European missionaries came to Asia, with a mission of conquering souls. At present, this is untenable both politically and theologically. Politically, it is no more possible for any missionaries both from within the countries and outside the countries to do the ministry of conversion and increase the number of faithful in the church. In India, especially, the majority Hindus became conscious about the waning of their number as many Hindus were converted to Christianity. In order to take some measures to stop conversions, an anti-conversion law was passed and is very effective in some parts of India.

Despite the missionary efforts, today Christianity enjoys only a minority status among the religions. After nearly four hundred years of missionary activity, the Catholic population, including Philippines, is only 2.27 percent of the Asian population, and excluding the Philippines only 1.47 percent of the population is Catholic. In the present political situation, we do not think that there will be an increase in the population of Catholics in Asia. Vivekananda in his address at the final session of Parliament of religion in Chicago, criticized the idea of religious conversion. He pointed out that "Do I wish that Christian would become

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<sup>31</sup> Wilfred, "From the Dusty Soil- Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity."

<sup>32</sup> Kamil Pawlik, "Inter-Religious Dialogue According to Karl Rahner" (Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, Facolta di Teologia-Dipartimento di Teologia Fondamentale, 2021).

Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? The Christian is not to become Hindu, or a Buddhist, Buddhist, nor Hindu become Christian. However, each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his law of growth.”<sup>33</sup>

Theologically speaking, in a pluralistic context, religious conversion is no longer relevant. The Churches in Asia are moving toward a new millennium, but not with a confrontational or conquest mentality intended to win over converts from other religions. After Vatican II and the understanding of the Asian realities, we have new directions and priorities which result in new ways of spreading the light of Jesus Christ in the multi-religious continent of Asia.<sup>34</sup> In the Asian context, the mission of the Church should not be understood in terms of the classical sequence of proclamation-conversion-baptism and membership in the Church. Rather, the mission of the Church should be understood in terms of proclamation, witness, Christ like-deeds, dialogue, and liberation. Here, proclamation is to be interpreted in terms of witness. When we follow this latter sequence in our mission, certainly it will not cause any disharmony with the other religions.

When we follow the conversion-Baptism sequence to increase the membership of Church, this can lead us to confrontation with the other religions as we try to show our superiority over others. Superiority results from the attitude that Christianity is the true religion, and it alone can save people. In the Asian context, proclamation should not be understood in terms of universal missiology, in which the spreading of the gospel to the non-believers in Christ is emphasized. Proclamation in Asia will differ because we are led to a deeper understanding and growth into the mystery of what we proclaim through our relationship with neighbors of other faiths.<sup>35</sup> Proclamation in the Asian context should be a witnessing life in the practice of love, justice, and equality among people with whom we live regardless of their religion. In other words, our witnessing life is a kingdom-centered life. It calls for a commitment to build a human community. It refers to building up the common human community of freedom, fellowship, and justice in which all believers are invited to collaborate.<sup>36</sup>

Each Christian’s mission is not to work for the conversion of the other who is a non-Christian but to work together with the people of other faiths to build a better human community. It is not to work for the conversion of souls but to work for the conversion of hearts. It can be also a prophetic mission through which we fight for justice and peace and against all sorts evil in society to build a more just society. I am concluding my paper by citing the example of a Jesuit priest who engaged in prophetic mission among the Tribals, the most oppressed class in India.

Fr. Stan Swamy S.J., a missionary from the southern part of India, had been working for several years among the tribals in the central part of India (Ranchi). He fought for their cause, because their lands were taken away forcefully by the government and given to corporations

<sup>33</sup> Adiswarananda, “VIVEKANANDA WORLD TEACHER- His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind.”

<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel, “Asian Mission for the next Millennium? Chances and Challenges.”

<sup>35</sup> Wilfred, “From the Dusty Soil- Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity.”

<sup>36</sup> Amaladoss, *Public Theology in a Multi-Religious Society*.

for establishing big industries. He was supporting the tribals and was engaged in legal battles against the government. The government targeted him and made false charges against him, branding him as a Naxal, anti-national and accused him of religious conversion. Eventually, the government put him in prison, and prison life took its toll on this 82-year-old priest. He worked for the tribals for almost 50 years. Through his work and life, he showed us what prophetic mission means. Without focusing on or emphasizing the cultic Jesus, he presented Jesus as the one who liberates the poor and the oppressed. This is what we need to do in a pluralistic context.

#### 4. Conclusion

As I conclude my paper, I would like to reiterate the points that have been highlighted. The so called “traditional theology” which is mostly from the West, and which has been imported to other continents such as Asia, is irrelevant and insignificant as the people of Asia live in a different context, a context of poverty and religious pluralism. Asian theology needs to be contextualized and based on the concrete experience of the people in Asia. Today, it focuses on various aspects of the Asian people, and one predominant and relevant topic is religious pluralism.

This paper deals with the theological issues associated with religious pluralism. As we discuss this topic further, exclusivism and absolutism are the major problems we face in theology in the context of religious pluralism. These two elements in no way help the Christian faith which exists in a multi-religious context. Theology in Asia tries to highlight the points of inclusivism and relativism. In the Asian context, we further discuss Christology in which we need to rediscover and reinterpret Jesus and bring a true “Asiannes” to our Christology. We focus no longer on the dogmatic Jesus, but on the historical Jesus who preached the Kingdom of God. Kingdom-centered Christology is much more relevant and meaningful for Asians. Finally, we discuss Mission in the Asian context. Traditionally, the mission has been understood as converting people from other religions to Christianity, but presently, in Asia’s pluralistic context, this is becoming unacceptable both politically and theologically. Our mission in Asia should not be the conversion of souls but rather the conversion of hearts to build a just society in the world. The purpose of Jesus’ coming to this world and His mission was also to build such a society based on justice, peace, and love).

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