

all women' (in Mary Pepper phrase). The number of Christian women who dislike what they hear Christian 'feminists' saying, and the way they are saying it, is very large indeed. And many men feel the same, and dare not say so for fear of appearing sexist. That is a pity, because there is a prophetic voice that needs to be heard, and changes that need to be called for. Let us not spoil our mission—which should be to the whole Church, indeed to the whole of humanity—by confining it too narrowly to a minority political judgment.

Community: The Place where Theology is made

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An expanded version of a paper given at a seminar on "contextual theology" held in November 1983 at the Pastoral Institute at Multan, in the Punjab, Pakistan.¹

At the various meetings of Third-World theologians it is stated again and again that theologizing is not an academic exercise of a highly trained group of professional experts. Rather, the fundamental subject of theology is the Christian community. This is true of whatever theology exists, because it is the character of a Christian community, its life and witness, which determine the kind of theology it will produce. A truly Third-World theology, therefore, can only grow from within a community that is aware of its being part of the struggles of the Third World and has made an option for the poor and their liberation against the structures of evil and oppression.

Against this background, it is the purpose of this article to describe the history of the Punjabi Christian community and the theology which has been developed in this community, with its strengths and weaknesses, up to the present day. In this description certain directions for the future may perhaps emerge.

1. *Origins*

The history of the Punjabi Christian community is a history of humiliation and exploitation, of injustice and slavery. Belonging to the outcastes, they were the object of discriminatory behaviour. They were not allowed to drink from the same well or to eat from the same plates as others. They had to wear different dress, and their names would reveal the group they belonged to. Considered of low position, they were treated as such and many injustices were done them. They were systematically deprived of whatever would make it possible for them to initiate and develop their own policies. Structures were devised in such manner as to prevent them from rising out of their low status. Thus they were kept illiterate and any access to education blocked. They were held in utter financial dependence so that they could never make it on their own. They were not even allowed to hear the scriptures. All that they heard about God was controlled by feudal masters who used religion to condition their minds to accept their low status and be resigned to it.

In this situation religion was for them not an active dynamic force, bringing them together as a group. They had only themselves. Hence, rather than religion-centred, they were clan centred. Not God and his law, but the clan, the *biradari*, was the touchstone of morality: good or virtuous is whatever promotes its well-being; evil or sinful whatever does harm to it.

Under the circumstances, virtue was not to be found on the intellectual level. Rather, virtue consisted in strength. It was only by being strong that one could survive and be of service to the *biradari*. The weak, therefore, and especially women, were despised. Strength was also required in order to obtain a leadership role within the *biradari*, where disputes were not solved by meeting together, sorting things out in a peaceful manner, but rather by a show of force and strength and even violence. This attitude was in marked contrast with the behaviour of the community's members towards the outside world, where they were forced to show submission and loyalty even towards their hated oppressors. Perhaps it was precisely this situation, where their 'strength' could not find an outlet in their relationship to outsiders, which led to an increased aggressiveness within the *biradari* itself, especially with regard to the solution of conflicts among themselves.

What kind of theology existed in this community? How did its members see and experience God? How did they speak about him? Since the community was uneducated and illiterate, it largely depended on the dominant class for its language and its ideas. Hence, in matters of religion, they accepted the God of their feudal masters with all his feudal traits. In this way the oppressed, without knowing it, contributed to their own oppression by submitting to the use their

oppressors made of religion in order to maintain their own privileged position and maintain the people in slavery. Theirs was a God whose will it was that they suffered poverty, while their masters were blessed with plenty. This will was not to be challenged but accepted in a spirit of humble submission: the only possible attitude of man before God's inscrutable design. At the same time, to please this God and not arouse his anger, the people would indulge in all sorts of superstition inspired by deep-seated fear of a rather arbitrary God who could deal with them at will, just as their masters often did.

Although the weak and oppressed spoke the religious language of their masters and were indeed largely resigned to their lot, yet there were undercurrents of a certain messianic hope. At times they might protest against unjust feudal laws and customs which came to be understood not as willed by God but as made by men. Their hope for liberation, however, lived mainly on in their stories, and especially in their poetry and songs. There they would dream of a God who would love all his children without any distinction, who would treat them all as equals, as free human beings and so open up a new future.

II Advent of the missionaries

When Christianity entered into this world, the poor and oppressed saw in the missionaries a certain fulfilment of their messianic hopes. So many things denied them before were now made possible. Missionaries opened schools and dispensaries, obtained land for them, defended their rights. They not only acknowledged their right to worship, but taught them also to pray. The people greatly appreciated not only all that the missionaries in so many different ways did for them; they admired the way in which they did all these things. They were deeply impressed by the personal virtues of the missionaries, by their love and concern, their care, their great sense of dedication, the respect they showed them; something that had rarely, if ever, happened to them before.

Unfortunately, despite all the zeal and enthusiasm of 'bringing good news to the poor and setting captives free', the missionaries did not understand the religious and 'cultural world-view of the people. Thus their efforts of liberation led to a dichotomy in the people's lives, and even to an alienation from their own origins, a real cultural uprootedness. The following will illustrate this.

The people liked the stories missionaries told about Jesus, how he performed miracles, was kind to outcasts and full of concern for the poor and the weak. They admired him as a great miracle worker and as a liberator. What appealed to them more than anything else, however, was Jesus' suffering: that he, breaking the caste law, became an outcaste himself. In him they could recognize their own history of suffering and humiliation. He became for them the symbol of so many

of their unspoken feelings. But they did not understand him in his uniqueness, that he was the one and only mediator between God and man. Rather, in their world-view, which was monistic and pantheistic in character, Jesus became one of many, or one next to many others. And so, while the missionaries basically preached a Jesus against religion and culture, whose acceptance demanded that the people reject their own religion, their own world-view, the people themselves were happy to give Jesus a place, though not a unique or exclusive place, within their world-view. They saw no problem in this. In this juxtaposition of religious ideas of different origin fear also played a role, because they did not want to make their old gods angry. The people were, of course, aware that the continuation of their old practices did not please the missionaries. So, in order not to offend those who had become their great benefactors, the people practised their traditional customs mostly when the missionary was not present. If he happened to be present, they would come to his religious services, not because they were so attractive—in fact they could not make much use of them—but because it pleased the missionary. Church and life were experienced on two different levels altogether. One thing is clear: in the beginning Christianity did not go deep. It was largely outward, mainly remaining at the surface, not touching the deeper layers of the Punjabi soul. A foreign element, however, had been introduced which would slowly alienate the people from their own cultural and religious roots.

Another dichotomy arose from the way in which the missionaries saw the liberation of the people. Stress was laid on material goods. Thus Jesus came to be seen as a 'material' liberator, and so, too, those who had come to announce him. The missionaries, then, were not looked upon as 'spiritual' or as 'holy' men. Because of this they could not take the place of the 'holy men' in the life of the people. On the contrary, the people had to continue giving an honoured place to their traditional 'holy men' since it was to them that they had to go for their spiritual needs, while the missionaries would look after the material ones.

A second important aspect of the Punjabi world-view affected by the advent of the missionaries was the people's understanding of community, of the clan, the *biradari*. For them, all important decisions had to be taken by the *biradari*. The *biradari* was the concrete norm of good and evil, of virtue and sin. Not knowing this structure and its importance, missionaries started in various ways to build new structures according to their insights and traditions. The people, however, did not so easily give up structures which had grown over the centuries and had proved effective. Thus, structures introduced by the missionaries, in other words the church and its organisation, remain a foreign element that exists next to the

traditional structures. The latter have not been utilised, so a truly local Christian community, grown from within the culture of the people, does not exist. And the Punjabi Christian finds himself, again, living on two different levels: in the traditional community structure, where still many decisions are being taken, and in the new structures initiated by the missionaries. They are not interrelated and hence not supportive of one another. On the contrary, the new structures, supported by the 'powerful' church, threaten the traditional ones and undermine their authority.

This started with the practice of conversion of individual persons or families. The community was not acknowledged in this most important decision, which, therefore, took place outside the traditional community structure. As 'Christians', individuals or families could not, then, fall back on the community, the *biradari*, as centre of reference. Instead, the missionary built for them a new centre: the parish house and church. Here the new Christian would go for whatever he expected to receive from the missionary, mainly the provision of his material needs. For other matters, however, matters which had nothing to do with his being Christian, he would still refer to the *biradari*. Thus marriages, for example, were all arranged and contracted according to traditional customs. If the missionary insisted that the bridal couple appear before him, they would oblige him, but the real marriage took place outside the church, in the community.

Another parallel structure is that of leadership. The *biradari* has its own pattern of leadership. The missionary introduced next to this his own form of leadership, which had no links whatsoever with the existing ones. This was most evident in that the missionary, the new leader, came from abroad and was a foreigner. But even until today this continues, in that the new local leaders, the priests, are trained outside the *biradari*, which has no voice in their selection and training, and on their return to their dioceses—a foreign structure—are usually not placed in their own villages, but somewhere else, where they have no link with the local community and its leadership.

Yet another threat to traditional structures is the educational structure which the missionaries introduced. This radically disturbed the balance within the *biradari's* authority-structure, which was not built on a certain competence obtained through learning but on a practical wisdom gained through experience. The young now had a tool in their hands to challenge the authority of the old, and therewith the possibility of undermining the whole traditional structure. In voicing these negative criticisms with regard to the educational system I do not in any way wish to imply that education in itself is wrong. I only want to stress that education should not be introduced as a foreign structure which has developed abroad, but should build on what is present in a given culture, not undermining it or even breaking

it down, but integrating in a new and richer synthesis.

III *The Present*

A new situation of diaspora arose at the time of independence in 1947, when the colonisers left. Under British rule the Christian community had enjoyed relative protection. This was now lost. Further, its members had adopted certain western customs, and even western names. Thus, in the eyes of others, they had become part of the world of the foreigners—so much so that Muslims were surprised to see Christians still around after partition: ‘How come they are still here?’. The Christians themselves felt like strangers in their own land. And although certain groups among them did make great progress in the years after independence, the feeling of being strangers did not go away. It was even strengthened by the increasing efforts at Islamisation on the part of the government. The Punjabi Christian therefore faces an identity crisis in present-day Pakistan. This was further aggravated by the nationalisation of schools, the source of their progress. Irony willed it that mainly the Urdu-medium schools were nationalised, leaving the church with the English-medium schools. Another important factor which contributed much to the identity crisis, and the feeling of insecurity that goes with it, was the discrimination Christians suffer in society.

In such an atmosphere it is not surprising that many Christians see their faith, especially their faith in the suffering Jesus, as a source of comfort and consolation. Religion becomes thus largely privatised religion, a world of its own, where the individual Christian can escape from the often very real hardships of life and find solace in the difficulties and trials he must endure.

At the same time, however, there are people who feel that, after the missionary era, the church is now coming into its own. In this process the church finds itself confronted with the exciting task of discovering itself anew as a local church in Pakistan. To realise this task, they are well aware, the church will have to go through a real *kenosis*, emptying itself of all that is foreign and that reminds others of the colonial times of the past, in order to find its roots in the culture of the Punjabi people. It is then only that the church—together with others for the church cannot go it alone—will be able to realise its liberating mission, not imposed from the outside but developed from within. In this way it will fulfil the deep longings for liberation present in the culture of the Punjabi people and which their own prophets have been dreaming and singing about. It is precisely this that the church is called to in the name of Jesus, who came to bring good news to the poor and to set the captives free. And this task is not less urgent now than it was before, in face of the new feudal lords who have entered on the scene in Pakistan: the industrialists and the military.

We will, however, not be able to realize our mission unless we are really one. The urgency of the moment, then, forces us to do away with division and to come together as a community which find a unified vision and a renewed vitality in the rediscovery of its own roots and in its own commitment to the liberation of the poor and oppressed. To this end we have to examine ourselves thoroughly as to where our commitment in reality lies. Too many ambiguities exist in our church. We speak in favour of the poor, yet we are not ready to attack the structures which keep them poor; we profess equality but are still helping create an elite and maintain the class system; we proclaim the building up of people yet we spend little on people; we speak about inculturation but still stick to foreign structures and a largely foreign language, even if translated; we talk about community yet our prayer and theology remain very individualistic. We have a lot of soul-searching to do, helped therein also by a thorough social analysis. The basic question we ought to continue asking ourselves in this whole process is a theological one: who is the God in whom we believe? a God who wills that the poor suffer or a God who is himself deeply involved in the struggle against suffering and for liberation? If we then believe in a truly liberating God, we have to set him free from his hidden, unknown and nameless presence in the history and culture of the people, and in his name commit ourselves to the liberation of the people.

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