

# Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious Context

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## Introduction

“Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious Context” is a relevant topic to be re-visited and re-reflected in light of our Christian histories. Whether we like it or not, the Christian church has been identified either with negative or positive historical legacies and some of these legacies haunt the church even today and mar its image. I do not intend to speak about the positive nature of Christian identity as that is not what is expected from my talk.

## Christianity and its Negative Identities

### 1. Christianity and Colonialism

Christianity had its humble beginnings, especially with the birth of Jesus the Christ taking place in a stable. Later on the Christians experienced persecution from the Roman Empire because of their faith in Jesus the Christ and that forced them to become an underground church in catacombs for its survival and security. But after the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when the church aligned itself with the Roman Empire and became a state religion beginning with Emperor Constantine, it began to deviate from its fundamentals and the spiritual source of peace, justice, equality, humility, tolerance and righteousness. Over the years Christianity got linked with three “M’s” and they came to be identified in terms of Missionary, Military and Mercenary. These negative alliances and legacies continue to haunt the church in one way or another whether we like it or not. I am not exaggerating when I say that in many Asian and other national contexts the legacy of colonialism and the church’s past identity and alliance with colonial powers have a negative impact on the contemporary mission of the church. In order to show the irony, dilemma and contradictions of Christian history, the former Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “When the missionaries came to our countries, they had the Bible and we had the land; they taught us to pray and we closed our eyes for prayer; and when we opened our eyes they had our lands and we had the Bible.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Charles Villa-Vicencio of South Africa talks of ambiguity of church-state relations when he writes:

At times it has blessed and legitimated the state. This has at least since the Constantinian settlement, been the dominant position of the Church. This it has done either by direct support or by default, through affirming a “future happiness” divorced from the existing order. At other times the Church, more often minority groups within the Church, has rejected the status quo by affirming the rule of God,

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<sup>2</sup> Josef P. Widyatmadja, *Re-routing Mission: Towards a People’s Concept of Mission and Diakonia* (Tiruvalla, India: CSS Books, 2004), p. 23.

which has often meant a renunciation of the existing social order. To take this argument one step further, on occasions and more often than not, the same Church has played two different social functions in society depending on the cultural and ideological view which has impinged on that particular Church at a given time.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Christianity and Westernization

Although Christianity was born and nurtured in a non-western context it left that context and entered the non-western contexts or continents hand and glove with colonialism as a westernized religion. Of course, there are some exceptions to the rule and some Orthodox churches in India are examples to it. The introduction of westernized Christianity to Asia has created an identity crisis for the church and thereby the church is often identified as an arm of western imperialism. The fact that the theology, mission practices, governance, liturgy, art, symbols and architecture of the church still are replicas of the west and the inability of the church to enter into a process of inculturation all confirm and acknowledge the critiques of the church. Dr. C.S. Song calls this the "Teutonic Captivity" of the church. Fr. Aloysius Peiris's call for the church to go through a double baptism, namely to be baptized in Asian religiosity and poverty, is another way of saying to the church in Asia that it has to renounce its dominant image and identify with Asian cultures and the suffering of Asian peoples. It was late Dr. D. T. Niles who compared the Church in Asia to a "potted plant" which has no roots in Asian soil. Furthermore, the alienation of the Church from the context of Asia was described at one of CCA's conferences in Kandy, Sri Lanka in the following manner:

We have inherited the 'great Tradition' of the Gospel from those who brought the Gospel to Asia, but we believe that Christ has more of His truth to reveal to us, as we seek to understand His work among men in their several Asian cultures, their different religions and their involvement in the contemporary Asian revolution. In the past we have been too tied to inherited traditional conceptual forms of confession to make such ventures. Such formulations have been signposts and pointers to the truth but we have often interpreted them, or had them interpreted for us, as the final word of truth so that we have encamped around them, forgetting that even as people of other times and cultures made their own confession, we too must do the same in our time and culture. When we make absolute the written confessions of the churches of another culture or age, we become incapable of discovering the new depths of truth God can reveal to us in Christ amidst Asian life.<sup>4</sup>

All this shows that the identity of the church in a westernized form has a negative impact and alienates the church from being a true manifestation of Asia and taking its rightful place amidst Asian people, the majority of whom are adherents of Asian religions.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar*, Michigan: Grand Rapids), p. XI.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in "Confessing the Faith in Asia Today," a statement issued by the consultation convened by the East Asia Christian Conference held in Hong Kong, October 26-November 3, 1966, p. 10.

### **3. Christianity and Capitalism**

It is important to understand that colonialism and capitalism are like two sides of the same coin. The ultimate goal of colonialism is not to serve the people that they conquer. Its goal is to conquer nations either by conquest or through alliance to exploit the resources of those nations. Centuries of colonialism are a witness to what I am saying. In a similar way the ultimate aim of capitalism is profit at the expense of people's needs and wants. Capitalism is anti-God. That is the reason Jesus said one cannot serve God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24) and the power of Mammon is manifested in capitalism. Mammon is a cosmic power finding organized expression in principalities and powers creating inequalities and injustice among people (Eph: 6:12). This is what capitalism does and the church has often failed to critique capitalism when compared with its critique of communism or socialism. On the whole majority of institutional churches have been comfortable associating with capitalism and enjoying the benefits of capitalism.

Satish Kumar of India makes the following critique of capitalism when he writes:

...when we look around the world we find that not only is capitalism incapable of solving the problems of humanity but in fact hunger, pollution, war the breakdown of the social fabric, human unhappiness and every other major problem is caused by capitalism. In my view there is no such thing as good capitalism or compassionate capitalism or capitalism with a human or even natural capitalism. The truth is capitalism is bad, bad, bad!" (See [www.resurgence.org](http://www.resurgence.org))

This is the general reflection of capitalism. Therefore, the church in Asia has to make a self assessment of itself and attempt to renounce the sin of captivity to the power of mammon. On the other hand, the identity of the church with capitalism has a negative impact on the mission work it wants to do in contemporary history in Asia.

#### **Imitation of Christ**

Because of the negative image of the church due to its close identification with dominant cultures of colonialism, westernization and capitalism, the church in Asia has failed to imitate the life and mission of Jesus the Christ in contemporary history of Asia. In other words, the church has failed either to be or to become the Body of Christ. It is one thing to claim to be the Body of Christ but it is a totally different thing to be the Body of Christ. It is also being said that there is a distinctive difference between the Confessional Church and the Confessing Church or between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis. The important question is: how has the church in Asia failed to demonstrate the spirit of Christ or the mind of Christ? Once again when one looks into the history of the mission of the church in Asia one sees the failure of the church to be the authentic Body of Christ.

#### **The manifestation of Christian Mission in Asia**

As stated above it is one thing to profess that the church is the Body of Christ; but, totally another how the church carries out its mission amidst people who are not believers. It is in this context that we hear from diverse groups and communities across Asia how they have perceived the church over centuries and decades. In this context we need to look

at these responses in light of Jesus' first question to his disciples in Caesarea Philippi: who do people say that I am? I notice that very often the church is almost preoccupied answering the second question: who do you say that I am? In the search to win more and more people to the church we have either ignored or failed to hear the comments people of other faiths or no faiths make about the church and its mission.

In many contexts Asian history reveals that Christianity came hand in hand with colonialism. I can speak with much authority about the history of missions in Sri Lanka. Because of its negative impact even today Christians are looked upon as foreigners or traitors who collaborated with colonial powers to conquer Sri Lanka. The architecture of church buildings, music and liturgy, life styles all lend support to the accusation that Buddhists and Hindus have made and make even today to undermine the credibility of the churches in Sri Lanka. I am not denying that attempts have been made by the church from time to time to correct the past mistakes and indigenize the church to the cultures of the nation. It has been a cosmetic approach and therefore the churches have failed to manifest a truly Sri Lankan identity. In spite of being a minority community, our churches and our schools and the institutions and the power we derive through them, contradict the mission of Jesus and the spirituality he embodied. This contradiction stands as a negative reflection of the church and the irony is that many in the church do not see it as a contradiction but as a great opportunity to serve the nation.

We have evidence that the colonial powers like the Portuguese, Dutch and British not only abused power but the churches among others benefited immensely from such abuse of power. Today, if we move around Sri Lanka you will notice that prime locations where churches and their institutions are located have been secured in many instances because of the privilege status of the church with colonial powers. If one were to visit the city of Kandy in the central hills of Sri Lanka, St. Paul's Church is adjacent to the holy of holies (Dalada Temple) to the Buddhist community. I believe we have no right to have a church in that place. How did that church come into existence? That shows the power and influence of the church during British colonial times. In the 1960s the government of Sri Lanka offered alternative land but the church refused to accept it gracefully and moved out. Today, there is tension between Buddhists and Christians because of the presence of a Christian church almost adjoining the most sacred place of worship for the Buddhist and this issue is politicized to create tension among religious communities. We also have evidence that there are a few churches built by using the bricks of the temples destroyed by colonial powers. These are a few examples taken from Sri Lankan history to indicate the tarnished image of the church. I am sure similar stories can be collected from other Asian countries which have lived under the domination of colonialism.

On the one hand, this historical legacy is so strong that Christians find it almost impossible to be redeemed from it. I believe this is one of the reasons Christianity has not been able to make new ground in contemporary Asia. On the other hand, the evangelical zeal of some of the newly emerged younger churches is creating more confusion and chaos in many Asian contexts, including Sri Lanka. Their actions and the style of evangelism affirm and confirm what some of the older churches are ashamed of and wants to renounce. Today one sees in Asia a clash of evangelical methods which is discrediting the church from within and undermining the very foundation of Christianity.

## Re-discovering Church's Identity and Credibility

In order for the church to re-discover its true identity and credibility, the church needs to imitate Jesus the Christ, its founder, sustainer and guide. Until we get back to the foundation of Christianity, which means to the founder of Christianity, the mission of the church is flawed. To know the Church's founder is to know who Jesus is. That is the second question Jesus asked his disciples in Caesarea Philippi: who do you say that I am? As Peter got it wrong right from the beginning, the church too has got it wrong and we are paying the price for it today. In order to know who Jesus is we need to reflect on the Gospel narratives and the Acts of the Apostles at least for a start.

- a. According to the Gospel narratives Jesus was born to an economically poor family and that fact cannot be reputed or questioned. According to Matthew 1:23 Jesus was also identified with God, and that is the reason in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus' name is Emmanuel, which means God with us. This identification of Jesus to be poor or with poverty should not be understood as the church has often understood and interpreted it to be God's way of glorifying poverty. It should be understood as God's protest against poverty. In other words, incarnation is God's protest against poverty and the abuse of power. It is in that context that one has to understand the song of Mary, known as the Magnificat, in Luke 1:46ff. Therefore, the Jesus of the Gospels is pro poor and has a bias towards those who are oppressed, exploited and excluded from society. It is on the basis of this biblical and theological stance that the liberation theologians came out with the term "Option for the Poor" or the call for the church to be biased towards those who are forced into poverty. That is the reason Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mat: 6:24).
- b. Jesus was also a man of peace and that is the reason he said, "Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt: 5:9). The heart of his preaching was centered on the concept of the Reign of God - a reality that is present in the world but not fully realized or the fulfillment is yet to come. The values of God's rule are radically different to the dominant and oppressive values of this world. That is the reason he said if anyone wants to follow him and imitate his way then he/she must repent first. (Mark1:14-15). Furthermore, as an embodiment of peace, Jesus told his disciples, "Moses has said an eye for an eye but I tell you love your enemies" (Matt: 5: 43-44). That is a call to his followers to renounce the way of the world and accept his way, which is the way of peace and righteousness.
- c. Jesus can be identified as a person who transcended existing divisions of class, religion and gender to forge new communities of peace in which what mattered was humanity. That is the reason he broke all existing barriers to associate with the sinners, women, especially the Samaritan woman, Gentiles and a person like Zacchaeus although rich but despised by society. It is with such people that Jesus associated most of the time and it is in that context one has to understand the mission mandate he proclaimed and which is recorded in Luke 4: 16-19.
- d. According to the Acts of the Apostles, the early church or the followers of Jesus imitated their Master. They lived their lives by imitating Jesus. At the beginning they were known

as people of the "Way" (Acts 9:2:22:4) and not as Christians in the way we understand that term today. Only in Antioch were they called Christians for the first time (Acts 11:26). In Acts 17:6 these Christians were again identified as "people who turned the world upside". It is an interesting term to identify a group of people, especially the followers of Jesus as people who turn the world upside down. In contemporary society this term implies being subversive. In actuality, Jesus was a subversive because he refused to conform to the oppressive and dehumanizing values of his day. He is a man who always worked against the dominant culture of his day and that is the reason there is always a confrontation between Jesus and the powers of his day, whether they are religious, political, class or patriarchal. To understand his clash with religious establishment of his day, read Matt: 23. To understand his confrontation with the religious and Roman power, read the story of the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem. To understand Jesus' clash with the political power, read Luke 13:32.

The early followers of Jesus lived their lives imitating Jesus. Their attempt to imitate the life and works of Jesus is evident at least till the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and later the alliance of the church with the state led to its deterioration and to become a corrupt religion. It is this rapid deterioration which led the church in many instances to distort and deform the image of Jesus the Christ. The price for it is paid by all of us and today the temptation of Christianity as a whole is to conform to the status quo and suppress and marginalize the prophetic tradition which is close to the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ who was seen as a threat to the established political, social, economic, cultural, religious and political powers of his day.

e. Finally, I wish to say that the Jesus the Christ revealed in the gospels is a man of tolerance, compassion and one who lived his life for others. His tolerance and compassion can be lifted up from the dialogues he had with Mary of Magdala and the woman of Samaria. Furthermore, a similar attitude of tolerance of the other is revealed in the text of Luke 9:51-56. In these contexts he transcends religious bigotry, sin of self-righteousness and the spiritual pride of thinking that either you are saved in the name of Jesus the Christ or you are damned. This poses a challenge to the church to re-think the message it preaches to propagate the gospel of Jesus the Christ and to redeem the distorted picture of Jesus. In other words, we have a task to liberate Jesus the Christ who is created in our own images because of our captivity to power, corruption and misreading of scripture.

Jesus the Christ has to be liberated from the false dogmas and teachings of the church in order for him to take his true identity and become the crucified and saving presence amidst crucified and broken peoples in Asia.