

‘Oneness’ as a Heterogenous Reality in Asia

Abstract

Asian countries are rich in cultural and religious traditions. Religions, profound philosophies of life, and cultures have been the soul of the Asian peoples for many generations due to which, Asians have never been a homogenous group. The core of the Nicene creed is the teaching that there is only one God; the Father, Jesus the only-begotten Son of God, and the Spirit are one God: Oneness of God. Oneness of God is synonymous with unity, harmony, and indivisibility. While highlighting the significance of distancing the church of Asia from its colonial roots and its representations to make a paradigm shift from Eurocentrism to Asiacentrism, this presentation will explore the ‘(O)oneness’ as Asian heterogeneous reality, which is a source of communion and harmony as it is the witness of Christians in pluralistic Asia. Taking Asian praxis as a hermeneutical lense, especially ensuring the participation of people from all walks of life including women, the purpose is not only of moving from suppressionism to ecumenism but beyond these boundaries without which making sense of the church of Asia will be a futile exercise.

Introduction

The Nicene creed of faith, widely used to profess what we believe in by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and others, is a scripture-based summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the creed's core is the teaching that there is only one God; the Father, Jesus the only-begotten Son of God, and the Spirit are one God: Oneness of God. Oneness in the Bible is often synonymous with unity, harmony, and indivisibility, especially in relation to the doctrine of God and God’s creation: the unity of God, and the unity of believers. The church, as the Body of Christ, is the bearer of the Spirit, who shapes the church as "a community of witnesses". The presence of the churches offers an encounter between Jesus Christ and the peoples of Asia as the creed calls for unity within the church being ‘of one mind’. Hence, taking unity and diversity within the Triune God into consideration, my effort is to discuss the ‘oneness’ of Asian heterogeneous reality, which is a source of communion and harmony as it is the witness of Christians in pluralistic Asia.

1. The ecclesia within the diversified Asian context

A defining characteristic of the Asian continent is its pluralism in the cultural, religious, historical, and political spheres. Asian countries are rich in cultural and religious traditions. Religions, profound philosophies of life, and cultures have been the soul of the Asian peoples for many generations due to which, Asians have never been a homogenous group. Even though Christian presence in Asia goes back to the earliest centuries, Christianity was (re)introduced by Western forces from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century. However, the Christian community is a fragment of a much larger multi-religious and multi-cultural community in Asia – a bare five percent of the total population.

Aloysius Pieris claims that Christianity came across in Asia more “as a euro-ecclesiastical expansionism that threatened the mission of the ‘chosen people’ rather than as the message of

deliverance that Jesus, the Holy Man from West-Asia wished to share with them.”¹ Furthermore, he says, the church **in** Asia is not **of** Asia, but is a monarchical or feudal establishment of another continent.² Hence, Christianity and Asia have remained strangers to each other despite their *longue durée*. For the church **of** Asia to be the church in Asia, it must distance itself from the roots of the Western and colonial idioms. This pluralistic cultural context demands a non-west-centric and non-great power-centric model.

Asian poverty and Asian religiousness are two dominant realities in Asia. Therefore, Pieris says, Christianity must respond to **both** these issues, not in isolation, but **together**.³ In other words, Christians will not adequately address the problem of Asian poverty unless they do so within the context of dialogue with Asian religions, and they will not carry out an authentic and successful interreligious encounter unless they base that dialogue on concern for the poor.

The evil patriarchy-construct which subjugates and oppresses women in society is also in operation in the church. The institutional church is not only patriarchal, hierarchical and clerical but also colonialistic, capitalistic and feudal. Patriarchy is an ideology that gives power to men and legitimises the oppression of women in all sectors of society. Patriarchy in the church is nurtured by androcentric biblical interpretations that are gender biased. Essentialising theology from the perspective of women is also de-patriarchalisation of theologising in Asia. Any theology from Asia that does not deal with the multi-layered oppression of Asians due to clericalism, hierarchical structures, especially women; is limited in scope and cannot liberate any person in Asia. Unless all oppressed are liberated no one can be liberated.

Despite harsh realities, Felix Wilfred says, “a fundamental characteristic of Asian tradition is its vision of unity. All things and events are manifestations of the one ultimate and undifferentiated reality, variously called as Sarvam, Brahman, Sūnyatā, Tao and so on.”⁴ Hence, the final goal of churches is to bring all the peoples into oneness with God, which is the ultimate and undifferentiated reality. This offers us a ground to address oneness of God because we cannot each to be one with God, yet not be one with each other.

2. Oneness of God: God-talk in Asia as essential to the discourse of ecumenism

To begin my reflection on God-talk in Asia, I would like to share one of the powerful experiences of a Tamil woman from my own country as an example of listening to the pluralistic women’s narratives of God-talk in their struggle for liberation, which I feel is essential. How the women speak of the ‘Only One God’.

¹ The English version of a German original, Aloysius Pieris, “Buddhismus und Gewalt: Ein Blick auf die Situation in Sri Lanka,” *Forum Weltkirche* (Verlag Herder, Freiburg) 133 (Nov-Dec, 2014): 21.

² Pieris, “Mission of the Local Church in Relation to Other Major Religious Traditions”, CTC BULLETIN, Vol. 4, No.: 1, April 1983, p.41.

³ Cf. Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation: Faith Meets Faith Series* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 15-23.

⁴ Felix Wilfred, “Asia and Western Christianity”, in *Pacifica: Australian Theological Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 3 (October, 1989), 269. (268-281).

When we struggled for life in the bunkers, some of our people were injured and died on the spot by shelling. Not only the people who were shot but **our God was also shot**. We, as a family believe in God, who is also vulnerable like us, but never forsakes us any time as God was with us in our struggle for freedom. We still have the strength to face life because the same God is with us, even today.

The traditional assumption of God's omnipotence was challenged by the sharing of the woman who happened to become a widow at a young age due to the ethno-national war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Nevertheless, she did not want to claim that God's power had failed. Instead, her response reveals that God is vulnerable. As Carter Heyward claims that openness and vulnerability are prerequisites. Compassion begins in the soil of our vulnerability. But it is vulnerability that is seen as strength, not weakness."⁵

Another war widow expressed how she and her people powerfully experienced God through their daily interactions with one another.

I still remember the day when we were in Mullivaikkal. I did not have anything to give my youngest child who was crying despondently. Then can you believe one woman came to us with some biscuits. I gave them to my child. Even though all the people suffered during the last days of the war, they helped one another. That is the presence of God for me. I really thank God for being with us and continuing to be with us in our struggles.

She imagined a relational God in a 'right relationship' with one another. Hence, the question remains is not about 'Who God is' but how we are to speak about God in our daily experience as we struggle for liberation?

The present experiences of God of contemporary people, especially women who have been excluded from the process of God language formation in Biblical and post-Biblical times shed light to reflect that human language about God cannot be frozen into old, traditional terms, even if those terms come from the scripture or later Christian tradition. The new language about God must not contradict the knowledge about God that we have from the scripture and the Christian tradition, but it may, and indeed it must, also reflect "the present faith-experience," of people.

Our image of God, the God of Oneness, affects how we see ourselves, how we worship, how we relate to one another, how we work for justice, and all the other aspects of life. In other words, how Christians shape language about God powerfully moulds the collective identity of the community and directs its *praxis*. How we understand the 'oneness of God' directs us to live the oneness within the church moving away from the borders that separate us from being in unity to have ecumenical relationships. Hence the following is to discuss the significance of overcoming oppressive cultural demands in ecumenical relationships.

⁵ Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1988), 207.

3. Overcoming oppressive cultural demands in ecumenical relationships

Felix Wilfred claims, “the basic oneness of reality is also source of communion and harmony among the various parts of the reality which all have cosmic, human and divine dimensions. The totality of reality is that all its parts are interconnected and interdependent. We ourselves are a part of this web of harmonious relationships which bind the entire reality together.”⁶

The ecumenical relationships between different Christian denominations and different Asian religions are an advance toward a greater understanding between cultures. Culture and religion are two inter-connected elements that affect people in Asian society. As mentioned earlier, Asia is rich in cultural diversity, which makes the culture unique and contributes to the Asian identity. Nevertheless, the culture is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, culture gives a community its identity, but on the other hand it is used as a means to justify oppression or suppression of people, especially women. In the name of culture, women have become subordinate.

The practices that subordinate women and defend in the name of culture are a common reality not only in society but also in many churches in Asia even though culture is a dynamic and contested force, rather than a static and unchanging monolith. Throughout history, the question of the participation of women in the life of the churches has been a central commitment. Nevertheless, women’s voices have in the past decades, become sharper and more courageous and they have made a major contribution to ecumenical dialogue even if their visibility in numbers is not always reflective of their capabilities and commitment to contribute. Speaking about these ecumenical deals, Radford Ruether claims, “When men negotiate ecumenical relations between churches, it is often assumed that women should be willing to pay the price, rather than be an “impediment” to the merger.”⁷

There is a need to listen to women’s experiences, and women need to feel that they have been heard and have made a contribution to the life of the church. When lived- *praxis* becomes the axis for theologising, the lived experiences of women cannot be excluded. Hence, without consulting women, for churches to speak of the integration of cultures and to build true relationships among all members is not realistic.

Nevertheless, ecumenical women in Asia are connected to secular women's efforts and with women of other faiths to bring transformation in the lives of women, to challenge violence in all its manifestations, and to demand justice and dignity and equality for all women and men. These experiences of women who find new ways of being in the church with their potential while challenging the oppressive cultural norms in their churches is an influential and essential source of deconstructing the theologies, ideologies, and cultural norms that have long been sustained by a conception of men’s power over women. Each man and woman despite their gender, ethnicity, and culture is a part of the whole; a web of life, hence we all are interconnected, interdependent

⁶ Felix Wilfred, “Asia and Western Christianity”, in *Pacifica: Australian Theological Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 3 (October, 1989), 269. (268-281).

⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, ‘Ecumenical deals’ that leave women out’, available from https://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001d/121401/121401k.htm.

and interrelated. The unity of God makes us a unified people. Therefore our mission is to witness to the oneness.

4. Coming together for mission: A oneness as Witness

In 2009, an ecumenical prayer service was held in an Anglican church in Colombo to remember the people who were killed during the war in Sri Lanka and to honour those who died in the war in a special way. A few Tamil and Sinhala Christians from various Christian denominations, such as Anglicans, Methodists, and Catholics, participated. This prayer service was organised to join in sharing the pain of the people in the North and East who were still suffering deeply as a result of the war. This was also a non-violent way of protesting against the Government and the Sinhala nationalists about the way they had celebrated the war victory. It was a public declaration that this small group, despite their denomination, ethnicity, ideologies, and gender supported and was with the oppressed people of the country during their time of suffering and distress.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles describes how the early Christian community witnessed their faith;

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common.”⁸

These verses illustrate that when believers are united in purpose and spirit, miraculous events can unfold, and shared resources ensure that the needs of all are met. The communal life of the early Christians was characterized by unity, shared possessions, and mutual support. This early Christian community in Acts 4 is a foretaste of the Reign of God due to which this text is invoked frequently as a model for the church to follow today. It is clear that the existence of community flowed from their relationship with God. For them, faith is not passive rather is a firm confidence that results in action.

As togetherness is oneness, not sameness, a theology of the unity of the church understands that unity does not mean homogeneity. It transcends denominational, cultural, and societal boundaries as they all share a common identity of oneness. Unity in the body of Christ does not mean uniformity; rather, it means a harmonious functioning of diverse members towards a common mission. Christian unity refers to the desire and effort of Christians to come together and form a united community, however, we do not come together for the sake of coming together but for a mission.

Witnessing to the church's mission is therefore not merely one of “going forth”; it is also one of listening, receiving and openness to the presence of the oneness: to be one with the people who are struggling for liberation from their oppressive realities. Hence, the multiplicity of religious heritage that exists and interacts within and among Asians needs to provide resources for a

⁸ Acts 2: 42-44.

paradigmatic shift in the struggle for liberation. The ecumenical, inter-religious and inter-ethnic gathering, dialogue, sharing, and worship and journeying together need to extend the solidarity of both men and women for the common goal of working together for liberation.

In conclusion

The challenge that remains a concern for the church of Asia is to distance herself from the colonial roots and its representations and make a paradigm shift from Eurocentrism to Asiacentrism. Eurocentricism does not fully echo the Asiancentric ideals of interdependence and interrelatedness which are core values of Asiancentricity. Nevertheless, being Asiancentric does not relate to being contrary to Eurocentrism nor cultural separatism, rather using Asian *praxis* as a hermeneutical lense.

It is problematic to speak of Christianity in the singular as there is a great diversity in the way the Christian faith is lived and practiced in Asian plurality of churches. Hence, the interaction between Christianity and Asian religions needs to be deepened while breaking from the Western 'orthodoxy' and norms.

Asian *praxis* not only demands moving from suppressionism to ecumenism but beyond these boundaries without which making sense of the church of Asia will be a futile exercise. Mimetic histories of leadership model that is vertical may not suit as the context demands an inclusive structure that is horizontal that ensures the participation of people from all walks of life. For the church of Asia to choose the 'preferential option for the women' is ensuring the preference G(g)od adopted by taking the side of the oppressed.