Asian Missionary Spirituality

Jacob Kavunkal SVD

Our world, despite the phenomenon of secularization, is witnessing an abundance of religiousities, frequently in conflict with one another, leading to violence and intolerance. In contrast, what we need more than ever, is genuine spirituality. The word spirituality is derived from the Latin root spirare, meaning to breathe. Spirituality, thus, has to do with life and contributing to life. Spirituality is a way of life that is foundational and the unifying dimension of the religious person providing the motivation and vision for life and actions. For the Christian it is communion with God, the source of life, and the constant search to contribute to the fullness of life for all. It is the alignment with the Spirit of God so that we are attuned to God's presence and mission in the world.

In Christian terms, spirituality is the constant struggle for the realization of the divine reign (Mk 1:14-15). For the Christian it is a life-style of following Jesus who called his disciples to be with him and to be sent out to cast out the demons and to proclaim the arrival of the Kingdom (Mk 3:14-15). Hence, Christian spirituality is missionary by its very nature. No wonder, the apostolic community was known as the Way, rather than a new religion (Acts 9:2; 19.9, 23; 22:4; 24.14). In this paper I wish to discuss some of the leading characteristics of this missionary spirituality especially from an Asian perspective.

Asian Spirituality

After Vatican II there is a genuine search for authentic Asian Spirituality. In contrast to the pre-Vatican European transplant, liturgy has become increasingly vernacular and Asian forms of prayer and meditation aided by breathing techniques, mantras, and mindfulness are encouraged. This is only natural in so far as Asia is not only the continent that is the cradle of religions, but also that which sought God with relentless desire, in deep meditation, and silence and in
hymns of fervent prayer. The earnest longing of the continent is well expressed in the Upanishadic prayer: “From the unreal lead me to the Real; from darkness lead me to Light; from death lead me to immortality” (Brahadaranyaka Up 1.3.28).

What is characteristic of Asian Spirituality is its search for wholeness and harmony. In contrast to the western tendency to dissection, Asians prefer to synthesize, to unite. It is not exactly a question of either or, but finding a place in the wider spectrum for everything. The substratum of everything is the inexhaustible and incomprehensible divine Mystery that cannot be exhaustively or exclusively understood by any one particular religion. Nor can any religion claim a monopoly over this divine Mystery, which is like an immense ocean into which many rivers flow, none of which would be justified to think itself be the only source of the ocean.

This holistic thinking pattern naturally has an impact on Asian spirituality as well. It does not lay exclusive emphasis on universality, but also on cultural feelings which normally are imparted through cultural media: stories, poetry, dance and other such instruments. Moral standards are not always guilt driven but also based on shame and honour. Intuition and direct experience play an equal role with reason. Art, paintings, sculpture, architecture, all have great concern for balance, peace and tranquility, harmony. Not dualism represented by either or, but harmony represented by both and, is the Asian mind set.

In the context of harmony Asian Catholics are not burdened by the weight of facing other religions and their spiritual patrimony. Rather, they become part of the Asian search for living in relatedness, with family members, with neighbours, with the religions and philosophical traditions of Asia. These religions and traditions go into the making of the Asian soul. This is represented by the classical symbols of yin-yang (purush-prakriti, in the Indian world), which are not in conflict but complement each other in the making of the phenomenal world. Harmony is the principle of interdependence and the basic unity.

Spirituality of Extensio-Dei

In the light of what has been said, it follows that Christian spir-
love of God finds its expression in the Christian community through
ts Christomorphic welcome and service. The triumphal 'ad gentes'
spirituality gives way to 'inter-religions' spirituality.

To be caught up in the expansive nature of God's self-reaching
out makes mission spirituality robust, enabling it to merge with the
present and future mission of the church. Surely, the traditional
association of mission as being sent is valid, but it has to be subsumed into
the category of the extensio-Dei, as in the case of Jesus who was sent
to be the actualization of the God who reaches out.

**Dialogical Spirituality**

A natural consequence of this Christomorphic Theocentrism is the
openness to people of other religions and cultures. Asian spirituality
is one that seeks to integrate the values and spiritual experiences of
other religions, without reducing them to "mere seeds of the Word," and
seeks also to witness to others what we have experienced in
Jesus Christ, basically the divine love, divine self-reaching out to
all without discrimination or exclusion, inviting all to the creation of
a community of love, fellowship and freedom based on respect for
human life and human dignity.

Spirituality, in Asia, tends to be more experience-based and not
exclusively based on rational knowledge. Asian Christians expe-
rience how their neighbours of other religious traditions are also on
a pilgrimage to the Transcendent that they express through prayer,
fasting, pilgrimage, sacramental celebrations, alms-giving and others.
It is this experience that makes Asian Christians to be open to the
followers of other religious traditions as fellow pilgrims. This does
not mean that all religious traditions are equal, for the perception of
and the response to the same divine Mystery can be mixed also with
human selfishness. The Transcendent is at liberty to manifest itself in
ways not always clear to the Christian and this makes Christian spir-
ituality open to integration and enrichment by other religious sources.
Commenting on the Asian Bishops' appraisal of Eastern spirituality
during their second plenary session at Calcutta in 1978, Thomas C.

Fox writes: "Calcutta marked the first time an international body of
Catholic bishops had come together and "baptized" Asian spirituality,
viewed only a few years before with great suspicion and hostility
within the church." 417

The spirituality of dialogue is not only for the sake of enrichment
but also for the sake of the transformation of society in collaboration
with other religions. Not one of the religions of the world can pretend
to solve all the problems of the world all by itself but it requires the
specialization of others as well. The Christian collaborates with others
in the light of what the Christian has experienced in Jesus Christ,
and thus in the dialogue spirituality there is the mission also of wit-
tnessing to Jesus Christ. Inter-religious dialogue in Asia is different
from a harmonious multiculturalism as we have in the west, in so far
as the Asian Christians, through inter-religious dialogue, seek the
realization of the divine reign, the heart of the mission of Jesus. No
wonder, the Asian Bishops, already in their first meeting at Taipei in
1974, described mission in Asia as a triple dialogue: dialogue with the
religions of Asia, with the cultures of Asia and with the poor of
Asia. 418

Needless to say, dialogue spirituality is pluralistic as well. Pluralism is the immediate visible characteristic built into creation and
declared to be "very good" in the bible (Gen 1:31). Asian receptivity to
pluralism is manifested in the colour of the rich diversity. True, in
some cases like China, the diversity has been bulldozed by powerful
political dynasties and in some instances attempts are made by
extremists to impose a particular interpretation of culture to reign in
uniformity, as is the case of the Hindutva ideology of a section of
Hinduism in India.

Recognizing the diversity of religions and cultures as well as the
different socio-economic conditions, the missionary vision of the
Asian church is anchored on the creation of local churches. 419 Pluralism is
not just toleration of differences; rather it is the acceptance, appre-

417 Fox, T. C., Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church, Maryknoll 2002, 45.
418 Cf. Rosales, G. B./Arevalo, C. G., eds., For All the Peoples of Asia, Quezon City 1992,
14-15.
419 The Asian Bishops asserted the justifiability of the differences in local churches when
they said at Calcutta: "For the local church is the realization and the enrichment of the Body
of Christ in a given people, a given place and time." in: Gaudencio, Rosales / G. Arevalo, For
All the Peoples, 14.
cation and promotion of differences. Exclusion of differences must give way to respect for differences at all levels. In this spirit, Asian Christians refrain from stamping only the Christian response to the revealing God as faith while regarding others' responses as merely belief systems. Judging the faith of others is not our business but belongs to God alone (Lk 6:37).

A Comparative Spirituality

The foregoing reflections imply how Asian missionary spirituality is based not only on the basis of our experience of God in Jesus Christ through the reading of the bible, but also in the light of the God experience of others through the reading of their own scriptures. It underlies our thinking inter-religiously and interpreting Christian tradition in critical correlation with other traditions. For instance, the Asian Christians experience the many faces of Jesus Christ and not only that of Jesus as being the only Saviour. Michael Amaladoss speaks of Jesus as the Sage, the Way, the Guru, the Satyagrahi and in other similar images taken from Asian religious experience. The Asian faces of Jesus and the ensuing deeper experience of Jesus is rooted in the Asian religious and cultural experience.

This implies the willingness to place oneself into the religious world of other religious traditions, not only intellectually by trying to understand the reality behind the symbols, but also through an honest attempt to enter into the religious mindset of the other with a view to understand the other from within. It expresses empathy on the part of Asian Christians to enter into relationship and communion with other religions, evoking a certain reciprocity from these other religions, wanting to familiarize better with our faith. Thus it becomes a form of witnessing in our times.

Vulnerable

We are the disciples of the one who could not (did not) come down from the cross to prove that he was the Christ (Mk 15:32), but was raised from the dead for his faithfulness (Acts 2:24). Asian Christians do not shy off being a "little flock," though they are equally conscious of the fact that they share the responsibility with the early Christians.

to serve as an animating source to the Asian world, as the soul to the body. These Asian Christians share in the brokenness and lack of grasp of the disciples as described in the Marcan gospel. Mark presents the constant failure of the disciples to understand Jesus, which some have interpreted as the Messianic secret, though wrongly, I am inclined to think. Despite their rejection of Jesus' concerns (Mk 6:27-10:52), preoccupied with their own places of power (9:34; 10:36-37), and their fleeing and abandoning of Jesus at the time of the trial and crucifixion, Mark shows how God's love and strength persists, and in the end they believed and some gave up their lives for the gospel. Evangelist Mark shows the way for Christians in Asia. It is a way of surrender and commitment despite the existing contradictions and failures, contradictions springing from the plurality of religions and the negligible percentage of the Christian community. As a little flock Asian Christians are called to make a radical surrender to the Lord, and be witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Mk 1:1).

Prophetic Spirituality

To be a Christian in Asia is not an individualistic grab for personal perfection, but an engagement with God's creation with a sense of responsibility to work towards the realization of God's justice and peace in line with biblical prophetic tradition. Jesus' own self perception was pre-eminently that of the prophet (Mk 6:4; Mt 13:57; Lk 4:24), without prejudice to his identity as the Son of God. However, true to the Old Testament tradition, he is the prophet of the human person rather than God (Lk 4:16-19). His concern for God is expressed through his concern for humans (Mt 25:31-46).

Their missionary awareness does not make Asian Christians restless with regard to number or impatient with the lack of expansion, but with the overwhelming frontier situations of the non-Kingdom quality of life for humans and nature. One of the outstanding services that Asian Christians have contributed is through their involvement with human rights, based on human dignity, enshrined in the bible.

422 "In a word, what the soul is to the body Christians are to the world," writes Letter to Diognetus; 6. The Fathers of the Church, Vol 1, Washington 1969, 362.
Asian Christians have been in the forefront for the fulfillment of the basic human needs and the exercise of fundamental human freedoms, as well as the protection of essential patterns of human relationships. Even if Christians have not succeeded in eliminating the dehumanizing caste system in the Indian subcontinent, through their various human-oriented ministries, they have instilled in the society a sense for the other, inspiring to walk the extra mile (Mt:5:41). In fact, the major reason for the persecution of Christians in India is their involvement among the depressed classes of people and working for the improvement of their human existence, as happened in the states of Orissa and Gujarat, and the murder of priests like Thomas Pandipally, CMI or [religious like] Sr Rany Maria FCC of Indore, central India.

This prophetic involvement is expressed either through active movements or through working for the dignity of the least, as is done by the Sisters of Charity and many other similar groups. In the bible we come across two models of God's people trying to live a life faithful to God: the Exodus and the Exile. The former was a sort of resistance movement leading to liberation and this paved the way for the modern liberation movements.

We also have another model in the bible that is the exile model which we come across typically characterized in Jeremiah 29:5-7, where God's people submit themselves to the oppressive regime but pray for the peace of the city, the best they could do, but always remaining resolutely faithful to their own ideals, forming an alternative community, with its own orientation. We come across both of these two types of prophetic engagement in the lives of the Christian community in Asia. Their efforts of consciousness raising, many Christian leaders are trying to remove the blindness (Mt 20:32) of the powerful of the Asian society, so that the dehumanized and marginalized poor can live be accepted and respected as human beings. Often it involves the removal of the blindness of the poor as well in so far as they are resigned to the existing inhuman conditions.

Integrative Mission

We can appreciate how the biblical spirituality is integrative when we realize that the Israelites celebrated the Exodus from Egypt, along with its promise of freedom, in a deeper dimension with the love poetry of Song of Songs that expresses the mutual love between God and Israel. Magonet goes on to tell us how sexual intercourse between a husband and wife is encouraged on the night of Shabbat, as it is the time of the holy union of the Shechinah, the indwelling presence of God, seen both as feminine and masculine. Only in this context can we appreciate the fact that Jesus frequently uses the image of the wedding feast to speak of the Kingdom.

Even as it was true of Jesus' ministry that most of the time he was busy with the historical wellbeing of humans, so is it with the ministry of the Christian community in Asia. The manifold ways in which Christians busy themselves in their evangelizing mission, converge on this point: how is God working in this history to transform it into the anticipation of the Kingdom to come? In this context it is also to be noted that most of the projects of Missio and other similar agencies are also working with the same philosophy: transforming this world into a new world as the projection of the world to come. As Sebastian Painadath underlined: "The Kingdom of God unfolds the salvific dimension of historical process and the sacred depth of the secular. The Kingdom is already in our midst, still its fulfilment is yet to come." Christian life is an actualization in the present of what happened in Jesus Christ, but always looking forward to his future coming.

Rooted in Baptism

In his priestly prayer, according to evangelist John, Jesus prays: "For their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth" (17:19). Jesus' earthly life and ministry was a pre-existence, for the sake of others. Through baptism every Christian participates in this pre-existence. Baptism should not, and cannot be seen as a passport to heaven, as it was frequently interpreted in the past. Christian baptism is a participation in Jesus' own baptism (Rom

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425 Cf. Magonet, J., Spirituality and Scripture: A Jewish View, in: The Way Supplement, 72 (1991), 96. Magonet points out how the entire Pentateuch is read during the Sibhdats of the year, accompanied by a second reading derived from the Prophetic books, and the five Megillot (Scrolls) read in association with a particular feast: Song of Songs - Passover; Ruth - Pentecost; Lamentations - the Ninth of Av; Ecclesiastes - Tabernacles and Esther - Purim.

426 Ibid.

427 Painadath, S., We are Co-Pilgrims, Delhi 2003, 71.
6:3-4) with which Jesus began his ministry (Act 1:22). Through his/her baptism, every Christian becomes a public person to serve as the salt and light (Mt 5:13-14) to the world, every action having a bearing on the world. Each Christian becomes a gospel for the world to read (2 Cor 3:3).

All these are of immense significance for Asian missionary spirituality. Mission is no more understood primarily as a geographical endeavour, when missionaries from the west came to proclaim the gospel and plant the church in Asia. Asian Christians cannot subscribe to such an exclusivist understanding of mission. Rather, they believe every Christian is in mission in so far as the church by its very nature is called to participate in God’s mission to the world.428 Though inter-cultural mission cannot be ruled out, in the globalized world of our times, and with the new understanding of the role of other religions, we must transcend the notion of mission as ad Gentes, but must recognize that wherever the Christian is, there mission is. Asian missionary spirituality invites every Asian Christian to be a presence of God’s self-reaching out, a transforming presence, transforming the world for the realization of God’s reign, according to the specific situation where one is.

By way of conclusion, Asian missionary spirituality is no more a preoccupation with saving souls, with indifference to the body, or to the concerns of the world. It is a return to the biblical holistic understanding of the human person, which is not restricted to any one area of human life, but concerns itself with the whole of life, with its various relationships. It is a historical involvement for integral liberation aimed at a life of perfect harmony within oneself, with God and with others and the environment. Through this the Christian community becomes an Extensio Dei, in and for Asia today.

428 Vatican II’s Mission Decree, numbers 1-5.
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REDISCOVERING FAITH

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Sebastian Painadath SJ

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cci@claret.org • ccf@claretianpublications.com
www.claretianpublications.com

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