

FRONTIERS IN ASIAN
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY:
EMERGING TRENDS.
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Chapter 2

Toward a Christian Dalit Theology

ARVIND P. NIRMAL

Indian Christian theology, in its eagerness to relieve itself from the stranglehold of Hellenistic, Latin, Germanic, and Anglo-American influences, reclaimed uncritically brahmanical philosophical insights to work out its own indigenous theology. Though it looked innovative at that time, especially the imaginative way in which Hindu religious categories were grafted onto the Christian theological scheme, it is now clear that it overlooked and surprisingly made no impact on the majority of Indian Christians who are dalits. This group of people have been variously known as *harijans* (Children of Hari [God] Mahatma Gandhi); *avarnas* (casteless); *panchamas* (fifth caste); *chandalas* (worst of the earth); Protestant Hindus (Ambedkar); depressed class (British colonial days); scheduled caste (Indian Constitution). This article is one of the initial attempts to look at the dominant Indian theologies and work out a theology of dalit liberation that would incorporate the pain, wounds, and hopes of the dalits.

Arvind P. Nirmal is the head of the Department of Dalit Theology at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Madras, India. He is one of the pioneers in articulating dalit theology and has written widely on the subject. His recent edited volumes are *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology* and *Reader in Dalit Theology*, both published by the Department of Dalit Theology, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute.

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"When they divided the *Purusa*, into how many parts did they arrange him? What was his mouth? What were his arms? What are his thighs and feet called?

"The *brahmim* was his mouth, his two arms were made the *rajanya* (warrior), his two thighs *vaisya* (trader and agriculturist) from his feet the *sudra* (servile class) was born."

— *Rig Veda*, X, 90:12

"But a *sudra*, whether bought or unbought, he may compel to do servile work; for he was created by the self-existent (*svayambhu*) to be the slave of a brahmin.

"A *sudra*, though emancipated by his master, is not released from servitude; since that is innate in him, who can set him free from it?"

— *Manu Dharma Sastra*, VIII, 413–14

"I had the misfortune to be born with the stigma of 'untouchable.' But it is not my fault, but I will not die a Hindu, for this is within my power."

— Dr. B. Rambedkar

"There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' . . . The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans."

— John 4:7, 9–10

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

— Galatians 3:28

Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him."

— John 9:3

Introduction

This is an historic moment for Indian Christian theology. At this moment Indian Christian theology has ceased to be an enterprise of the elite, on behalf of the elite, and has allowed itself to be an enterprise of peoples. These peoples are the dalits: one, the broken, the torn, the rent, the burst, the split; two, the opened, the expanded; three, the bisected; four, the driven asunder, the dispelled, the scattered; five, the downtrodden, the crushed, the destroyed; and six, the manifested, the displayed.

If we want to grasp the full significance of this historic movement, we must look back at the tradition of Indian Christian theology. In the seventies, I had made the following observation in one of my articles:

Broadly speaking Indian Christian Theology in the past has tried to work out its theological systems in terms of either Advaita Vedanta or Vaishishatha Advaita. Most of the contribution of Indian Christian theology in the past came from caste converts to Christianity. The result has been that Indian Christian theology has perpetuated within itself what I prefer to call the *Brahminic* tradition. This tradition has further perpetuated an institutional interiority-oriented approach to the theological task in India. One wonders whether this kind of Indian Christian theology will ever have a mass appeal.

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This brief observation can be spelled out a little more fully. To speak in terms of the traditional Indian categories, Indian Christian theology, following the Brahminic tradition, has trodden the *jnana marga*, the *bhakti marga*, and the *karma marga*. In Brahrnabandhab Upadhyay, we have a brilliant theologian who attempted a synthesis of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta and Christian theology. In Bishop A. J. Appasamy, we had a *bhakti margi* theologian who tried to synthesize Ramanuja's Vishishtha Advaita with Christian theology. In M. M. Thomas we have a theologian who has contributed to theological anthropology at the international level and laid the foundations for a more active theological involvement in India — the *karma marga*. In Chenchiah we find an attempt to synthesize Christian theology with Sri Aurobindo's "Integral Yoga."

If we look at India's involvement in the ecumenical movement, we recapture the following story. The International Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910 set an official seal on the "Fulfillment Theory" expounded by J. N. Faruhar. The second International Missionary Conference held in Jerusalem in 1928 encouraged the efforts of the supporters of the fulfillment theory but warned against the danger of "syncretism." It also said that different world religions should cooperate with one another against the common enemy of "secularism." Between the Jerusalem conference and the Madras meeting of the same body in 1938, Barth's neo-orthodoxy became the dominant theology of at least continental Europe. Hendrik Kraemer, the Dutch theologian, applied the Barthian insights to the "problem" of non-Christian faiths. He worked out what might be called the "gospel-judging religion" model. Kraemer argued that there was a basic difference between the gospel or revelation on the one hand and religion on the other. All religions were human attempts at salvation, and as such they had to be judged by the gospel. Christianity, on the other hand, was not a religion, but a gospel — the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was revelation from above. The gospel was not addressed to a Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist but to a sinful and fallen human being. Kraemer's thesis was published under the title, *The Christian Message in Non-Christian World*, on the eve of the Third International Missionary Conference in 1938.

Thus, from the early days of India's ecumenical involvement, it had concerned itself with the "problem" of other faiths. Out of this ecumenical involvement emerged the concern for dialogues with other faiths, and this concern continues to be taken seriously. But this concern again has contributed to Indian Christian theology's obsession with the Brahminic tradition. As a matter of fact, in connection with the International Missionary Conference at Tambaram, several research studies in the economic social environment of the Indian church were conducted by various Christian colleges. They gave a very sober picture of the economic condition of rural Christians. It also became clear that depressed-class converts continued to complain of indifference and neglect. All this, however, did not make any change to Indian Christian theology's obsession with the Brahminic tradition. It had no time or inclination to reflect theologically on the dalit converts who formed the majority of the Indian church.

The situation did not change till the seventies. It was in the seventies that Indian theologians began to take the questions of socio-economic justice more seriously. The Indian theological scene thus changed considerably and there emerged what is known as "third-world theology." The advocates of the third-world theology were

held together by their allegiance to "liberation theology." It was yet another imported theology. Its chief attraction was the liberation motif, which seemed entirely relevant in the Indian situation where the majority of the Indian people face the problem of poverty. But somehow I felt that liberation motifs in India were of a different nature, the Indian situation being different, and we had to search for liberation motifs that were authentically Indian. Latin American liberation theology, in its early stages at least, used Marxist analysis of socio-economic realities — the haves and the have-nots. The socio-economic realities in India, however, are of a different nature, and the traditional doctrinaire Marxist analysis and these realities are inadequate in India. It neglects the caste factor, which adds to the complexity of Indian socio-economic realities. A journalist-scholar like V. T. Rajashekar Shetty tells us *How Marx Failed in Hindu India*.

The Indian advocates of the third-world theology also ignored the incidents or violence against dalits in the seventies. The seventies saw several caste wars. Belchi in Bihar in 1977, the urban area of the North and the South (Agra and Villupuram), both in May 1978, and Kanjhawala near the heart of the country's capital are a few of the places that witnessed organized violence against the dalits by caste-Hindus in the seventies. This real-life context was overlooked by our Indian third-world theologians, and they continued to engage in the Latin American liberation rhetoric. The sixties and the seventies were also the decades when the dalit *sahitya* (literature) movement and the dalit Panther movement were making headway in Maharashtra. Somehow our theologians did not see in these dalit movements and struggles a potential for theological reflection.

To sum up, then, whether it is the traditional Indian Christian theology or the more recent third-world theology, our theologians failed to see in the struggles of Indian dalits for liberation a subject matter appropriate for doing theology in India. What is amazing is the fact that Indian theologians ignored the reality of the Indian church. While estimates vary, between 50 and 80 percent of all the Christians in India today are of scheduled-caste origin. This is the most important commonality cutting across the various diversities of the Indian church that would have provided an authentic liberation motif for Indian Christian theology. If our theologians failed to see this in the past, there is all the more reason for our waking up to this reality today and for applying ourselves seriously to the task of doing dalit theology.

My friend, Professor John Webster, in his article, "From Indian Church to Indian Theology: An Attempt at Theological Construction," has seen three stages in the history of the Depressed Class Movement in India. The three stages are somewhat overlapping chronologically, but they all have their own distinctive characteristics. The first stage is dated from the 1860s or 1870s through the 1930s. The chief characteristic of this first phase is the phenomenon of mass conversion, especially to Christianity. The second stage of this movement begins around 1900 and goes up to 1955. The chief characteristic of the second stage is the caste Hindu efforts to improve the condition of the depressed classes. Initially, voluntary organizations such as the Depressed Classes Mission (1906) and the all India Shuddhi Sabha (1909) were involved in these efforts, and later Mahatma Gandhi and the Harijan Sevak Sangh (1932) expanded the work. After 1937 the government agencies were used to pass laws and to finance and administer programs for the welfare of the depressed classes. The third and the last stage is dated from the 1920s to the present day. The

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stage is characterized by self-assertion on the part of the depressed classes themselves. Webster's study is important because it underlines the point I have made earlier: the fact that so much was happening on the dalit front, but Indian Christian theology failed to take note of it.

It is the contention of this article that the struggle of Indian dalits is a story that provides us with a liberation motif that is authentically Indian. This story needs to be analyzed and interpreted theologically. The struggle is far from over. All the documentation on the situation of the dalits is clear indication of the fact that the liberation story of Indian dalits is incomplete as yet. Theirs (or rather ours) is an ongoing struggle. This liberation struggle needs to be undergirded theologically.

Having looked at the background of and the need for a Christian dalit theology or dalits theologies, we should now attempt to answer the question: What is dalit theology? It is rather difficult to answer this question in simple and straightforward language. For one thing, dalit theology is still in the process of emergence. We are still trying to construct a dalit theology or theologies. This is why I have entitled this essay "Toward a Christian Dalit Theology." What I am trying to do in this paper is to indicate the possible shape or form that Indian Christian dalit theology may take. The task that I have set before myself is to anticipate the possible shape of dalit theology in terms of our understanding of the Holy Trinity.

What Is Dalit Theology?

This question, according to Webster, may be answered in at least three different ways: The first answer may be that it is a theology *about* the dalits or theological reflection upon the Christian responsibility to the depressed classes. Second, the answer may be that it is a theology *for* the depressed classes, or the theology of the message addressed to the depressed classes and to which they seem to be responding. Third, the answer may be that it is a theology *from* the depressed classes, that is, the theology which they themselves would like to expound.

This article will expound the third answer, as I happen to be a dalit Christian myself. There is a parallel for my stand in dalit literature of Maharashtra. In 1970, Bagul published his long story entitled "Sood" (Revenge) with the foreword by the late M. N. Wankhade, the former principal of Milind Maha Vidhyalaya. Wankhade defined dalit literature as "Sahitya produced by dalits about dalits giving expression to their anger against those who have made them dalits." Wankhade's definition of dalit literature was followed by a stormy discussion in the traditional circles of literary criticism. Along with Wankhade, I would say that a Christian dalit theology will be produced by dalits. It will be based on their own dalit experiences, their own sufferings, their own aspirations, and their own hopes. It will narrate the story of their pathos and their protest against the socio-economic injustices they have been subjected to throughout history. It will anticipate that liberation is meaningful to them. It will represent a radical discontinuity with classical Indian Christian theology of the Brahminic tradition. This Brahminic tradition in the classical Indian Christian theology needs to be challenged by the emerging dalit theology. This also means that a Christian dalit theology will be a countertheology. I submit that all people's theologies are essentially countertheologies. In order that they should remain countertheologies, it is necessary that they are also exclusive in character.

This will be a methodological exclusivism. This exclusivism is necessary because the tendency of all dominant traditions — cultural or theological — is to accommodate, include, assimilate, and finally conquer others. Countertheologies or people's theologies therefore need to be on guard and need to shut off the influences of the dominant theological tradition.

In such a theological venture, the primacy of the term "dalit" will have to be conceded as against the primacy of the term "Christian" in the dominant theological tradition. This again will be a question of methodological primacy. What this means is that the non-dalit world will ask us, "What is Christian about dalit theology?" Our reply will have to be: "It is the dalitness which is 'Christian' about dalit theology." That is what I mean by the primacy of the "dalit." The "Christian" for this theology is exclusively the "dalit." What this exclusivism implies is the affirmation that the Triune God — the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit — is on the side of the dalits and not of the non-dalits who are the oppressors. It is the common dalit experience of Christian dalits, along with the other dalits, that will shape a Christian dalit theology.

Historical Dalit Consciousness

The historical dalit consciousness is the primary datum of a Christian dalit theology. The question of dalit consciousness is really the question of dalit identity, the question of our roots. If we leave aside the so-called Apostles' Creed and the so-called Nicene Creed and examine some of the biblical creeds and confessions, we will see the question of identity is an integral part of any faith-affirmation. Take, for instance, the Deuteronomic Creed found in Deuteronomy 26:5-9:

"And you shall make response before the Lord Your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and laid upon us harsh bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an out-stretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'"

I would like to expound this passage in full because it has tremendous implications for a dalit theology. For the Latin American liberation theologians, it is the Exodus experience which is important. It opens with the calling to memory the roots of the people who experienced the Exodus liberation. A creed, a confession, a faith-affirmation, therefore, must first exercise in laying bare the roots of the believing community: "A wandering Aramean was my father" recalls the nomadic consciousness. To confess that "once we were no people" is also an integral part of a confession before we come to claim "now we are God's people." It is only when we recognize our roots, our identity, that we become truly confessional. A truly confessional theology, therefore, has to do with the question of roots, identity, and consciousness.

Second, we notice that this wandering Aramean is also described as "few in number." The Aramean ancestor, therefore, stands for the entire community. The question of identity and roots is inseparably bound with the sense of belonging to a community. In our search for a dalit theology, it is well worth remembering that what we are looking for is community identity, community roots, and community consciousness. The vision of a dalit theology, therefore, ought to be a unitive vision — or rather, a "communitive" vision.

Third comes the recalling of their affliction, the harsh treatment meted out by the Egyptians and their bondage. Then comes their cry to the Lord; Christian dalit theology, therefore, is a story of the affirmations, the bondage, the harsh treatment, the toil and the tears of the dalits. A genuinely dalit theology will be characterized by pathos, by suffering.

Fourth, the Exodus liberation is symbolized by "a mighty hand," "an outstretched arm," and by "terror." "Signs" and "wonders" are low in the order. Liberation does not come only through "signs" and "wonders." A certain measure of "terror" is necessary to achieve it. In terms of dalit theology, this would mean that the dalits cannot afford to have a fatalistic attitude to life. They must protest and agitate to change their lot. The late Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's mantra for the dalits was "unite, educate, and agitate."

Finally, we should also notice that the "land flowing with milk and honey" comes last. It is an outcome of the liberation already achieved. Liberation is its own reward. The "land flowing with milk and honey" is not the chief goal of the Exodus. Rather it is the release from the captivity and slavery and the liberation from the Egyptian bondage that is the chief goal of the Exodus. The implication for a dalit theology is that the liberation struggle we are involved in is primarily a struggle for our human dignity and for the right to live as free people created in the image of God.

This historic Deuteronomic Creed has paradigmatic value for our dalit theological construct.

The historical dalit consciousness in India depicts even greater and deeper pathos than is found in the Deuteronomic Creed. My dalit ancestors did not enjoy the nomadic freedom of the wandering Aramean. As outcastes, they were also cast out of their villages. The dalit bashes (localities) were always and are always on the outskirts of the Indian village. When my dalit ancestor walked the dusty roads of his village, the *Sa Varnas* tied a branch of a tree around his waist so that he would not leave any unclean footprints and pollute the roads. The *Sa Varnas* also tied an earthen pot around my dalit ancestor's neck to serve as a spittle. If my dalit ancestor tried to learn Sanskrit or some other sophisticated language, the oppressors gagged him permanently by pouring molten lead down his throat. My dalit mother and sisters were forbidden to wear any blouses, and the *Sa Varnas* feasted their eyes on their bare bosoms. The *Sa Varnas* denied my dalit ancestor any access to public wells and reservoirs. They denied him the entry to their temples and places of worship. That, my friends, was my ancestor — one among many in Maharashtra. My dalit consciousness therefore has an unparalleled depth of pathos and misery, and it is this historical dalit consciousness, this dalit identity, that should inform my attempt at a Christian dalit theology.

Our paradigmatic creed tells us that "signs" and "wonders" are not enough for

the liberation we are seeking. We need a "mighty hand" and an "outstretched arm" and a certain measure of "terror" — in short, we need an activist struggle for liberation, a movement informed by its action towards its theological reflection. Our pathos should give birth to our protest — a very loud protest. Our protest should be so loud that the walls of Brahminism should come tumbling down. A Christian dalit theology will be a theology full of pathos, but not a passive theology.

The Gentile-consciousness of the New Testament can confess that "once we were no people but now we are God's people." The dalit consciousness in India cannot say even that much. We were not only "no people" but we were also "no humans." For the *Sa Varnas*, humans were divided into four castes: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras. But we were the outcasts, the *Avarnas*, no-humans, below even the shudras in the social ladder. We were the *panchamas*, the *chandals*, and the *Mlenchhas*. This "no-humanness" also should become a part of our theological affirmation or confession.

The dalit consciousness should realize that the ultimate goal of its liberation movement cannot be the "land flowing with milk and honey." For a Christian dalit theology, it cannot be simply the gaining of the rights, the reservations, and the privileges. The goal is the realization of our full humanness or, conversely, our full divinity, the ideal of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in us. To use another biblical metaphor, our goal is the "glorious liberty of the children of God."

Our Exodus Experience

The ideal of the *Imago Dei* in us leads us to the question of God. What kind of God are we talking about? What kind of divinity does dalit theology envision?

But before that question is answered, I must make one final comment about the Deuteronomic Creed under study. The creed speaks not only about the roots and the historical nomadic consciousness of the people of Israel but also about their changed status and their thanksgiving. The nomadic experience is brought to memory, but so is the Exodus experience. "Few in number" are now a "nation," great, mighty, and "populous." "No people" are now "God's people." But Christian dalits in India also affirm their own exodus experience. What I mean is that as we should be aware of our historical consciousness, our roots, and our identity, we should also be aware of our present Christian consciousness. We are not just dalits. We are Christian dalits. Something has happened to us. Our status has changed. Our exodus from Hinduism — which was imposed upon us — to Christianity, or rather to Jesus Christ, is a valuable experience — a liberating experience. The non-dalits of this country have teased us as "rich Christians" or "bulgar Christians." But we know that this is not true. Both the 1935 Constitution under the British and the Constitution of the Indian Republic deprived us of our economic rights, political rights, privileges, and reservations. We have been discriminated against in the past, and we continue to be discriminated against in the present. Notwithstanding all this, we have followed Jesus Christ. Our exodus to him enabled us to recognize our dalitness, the dalitness of Jesus of Nazareth, and also the dalitness of his Father and our Father — our God; in our exodus to Jesus Christ, we have had a liberating experience. Although we have not reached our ultimate goal, we are confident that the Jesus of Palestine or the more immediate Jesus of India is in the midst of the liberation struggle of the

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dalits of India. A Christian dalit theology, therefore, should also be doxological in character. Our struggle is not over as yet, but we ought to be thankful that it is undergirded by our own exodus experience and our own exodus hope.

The Question of God

Now I return to the question of God. I have already said that our exodus experience has enabled us to recognize the dalitness of Jesus and his Father. It is in this recognition that the mystery of our exodus lies. This recognition means that we have rejected non-dalit deities. A non-dalit deity cannot be the God of dalits. This is why our other dalit friends have rejected Rama (the deity whom million of Hindus worship and pray to). The story goes that Rama killed Shambuka — dalit — because Shambuka had undertaken *tapascharya*, a life of prayer and asceticism. The dominant religious tradition denied to the dalits the right to pray. Rama, therefore, simply killed Shambuka and performed *dharma* (a religious act). This is why dalits have rejected Rama. For dalits, Rama is a killer-God — killer and murderer of dalits.

But the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a dalit God. He is a servant-God — a God who serves. Service to others has always been the privilege of dalit communities in India. The passages from *Manu Dharma Sastra* say that the shudra was created by the self-existent (Svayambhu) to do servile work and that servitude is innate in him. Service is the *sva-dharma* of the shudra. Let us remember that fact that in dalits we have peoples who are *avarnas* — those below the shudras. Their servitude is even more pathetic than that of the shudras. Against this background the amazing claim of a Christian dalit theology will be that the God of dalits, the self-existent, the Svayambhu, does not create others to do servile work but does servile work himself. Servitude is innate in the God of dalits. Servitude is the *sva-dharma* of our God; and since we, the dalits, are this God's people, service has been our lot and our privilege.

Unfortunately, this word "service," *ministry* or *diakonia*, has lost its cutting edge. A shop tells you, "service is our motto." Is it? Isn't profit the real motto? A dentist plucks your tooth out and sends you a bill saying, "for the professional services rendered." A member of the state cabinet or of the central cabinet calls himself or herself a "minister" — a servant — whereas what he or she really enjoys is power (*satta*) and not *seva* (service). The word has become an "in" thing. Originally, the word *diakonia* was associated with waiting at the dining table. The "servant," therefore, means a waiter. Our housemaid, or the sweeper who cleans commodes and latrines, is, truly speaking, our servant. Do we realize that? Let us be prepared for a further shock. Are we prepared to say that my housemaid, my sweeper, my *bhanghi*, is my God? It is precisely in this sense that our God is a servant-God. He is a waiter, a *dhobi*, a *bhanghi*. Traditionally, all such services have been the lot of dalits. This means we have participated in this servant-God's ministries. To speak of a Servant-God, therefore, is to recognize and identify him as a truly dalit deity. The Gospel writers identified Jesus with the Servant of God of Isaiah 53. In his service, he was utterly faithful to God. But what kind of language is used to describe his servant?

He has no form or comeliness that we should look at him,
 and no beauty that we should desire him.
 He was despised and rejected by men,
 a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,
 and as one from whom men hide their faces.
 He was despised, and we esteemed him not.
 Surely he has become our griefs
 and carried our sorrows;
 Yet we esteemed him stricken,
 smitten and afflicted.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
 yet he opened not his mouth;
 like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
 and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,

So he opened not his mouth.
 By oppression and judgment he was taken away
 and as for his generation, who considered
 that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
 stricken for the transgression of my people?

That is the language used to describe the servant-language, full of pathos. That is the language used for God—the God of dalits. But that is also the language which mirrors our own pathos as dalits. The language that mirrors the God of dalits are dalits themselves. Incredible, isn't it? Isaiah also thought so. Therefore, he asks a question right at the beginning of this passage, the Servant Song: "Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" We Christian dalits in India can answer that question. We should, with full confidence, tell Isaiah, "We have believed what you have heard. And to us has the arm of the Lord been revealed. That is why, Isaiah, we are Christian dalits and not just dalits."

Dalit Christology

But what does it mean to say that we are Christian dalits and not just dalits? This statement has christological implications that must be faced boldly. It means, first of all, that we proclaim and affirm that Jesus Christ, whose followers we are, was himself a dalit—despite his being a Jew. It further means that both his humanity and divinity are to be understood in terms of his dalitness. His dalitness is the key to the mystery of his divine-human unity. Let us note some of the features of his dalitness. Let us forget for a moment the wonderful story of his birth colored by the angelic choir, the bright star, and the wise men. Let us have a close look at his genealogy as given in the Gospel according to Matthew (1:1–17). We seldom read this genealogy carefully. Among Jesus' ancestors are few names that should startle and shock us. The first name is that of Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah. She outwitted her father-in-law by sleeping with him and conceiving by him (Genesis 38:1–30). Second, there is Rahab—the harlot who helped the Israelite spies (Joshua

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2:1-21). Third, there is King Solomon. We should not forget that Solomon was an illegitimate child of David. These small details of Jesus' ancestry should not be forgotten, as they are suggestive of his dalit condition. He is also referred to as a "carpenter's son." That sounds like looking down on his father's profession.

The title that Jesus preferred to use for himself was "the Son of Man." The title is used in three different ways, according to the New Testament scholars. First, it simply means "man" in an ordinary way. For instance, in one place when a scribe wanted to follow him, Jesus said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20). The second group of the Son of Man sayings is indicative of Jesus' present suffering and imminent death. The third group of the Son of Man sayings is called the Eschatological Son of Man sayings. There is some debate about the order of the second and third groups. The second of the Son of Man sayings is significant for developing a dalit Christology. These sayings speak of the Son of Man as encountering rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering, and finally, death. Let us look at a few of these sayings:

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things; and now it is written of the Son of Man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt." (Mark 9:12)

For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve and to give life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

These sayings indicate that Jesus as the Son of Man had to encounter rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering, and death — all these from the dominant religious tradition and the established religion. He underwent these dalit experiences as the prototype of all dalits. The last saying quoted above also connects the theme of service with the Son of Man.

Another noteworthy feature of Jesus' life is his total identification with the dalits of his day. Again and again Jesus is accused of stealing and drinking with publicans, tax collectors, and "sinners" of his day (Mark 2:15-16).

In his study entitled, "Jesus' Attitude to Caste — A Bible Study" (*Madras Diocesan News and Notes*, January 1982), M. Azariah has drawn our attention to Jesus' approach and attitude towards Samaritans, the dalits of his day, and has demonstrated that Jesus loved and cared for the dalits.

The Nazareth Manifesto in the Gospel according to Luke has often been commented on recently, especially during the Emergency of the seventies. Some of our church leaders even compared it with the twenty-point program of the Indira Congress. What is generally overlooked is its significance for a Christian dalit theology. When Jesus quotes the passage from Isaiah and declares, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," we read that "all spoke well of him and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth." But then Jesus goes on to tell his audience for whom his liberation is meant. His two illustrations indicate that

the liberation he is talking about is meant for the dalits and not for non-dalits. In his first illustration he speaks about Zarephath the widow in Sidon, to whom Elijah was sent. And he also makes the point that there were many widows in Israel, but Elijah went to none of them. Similarly, it was only Namaan the Syrian, the leper whom Elisha cleansed. Of course, there were many lepers, in Israel, but they were not cleansed. The "dalits" were set over against "Israel." The gospel that Jesus brought was the gospel for "dalits" and not for non-dalits — not for Israel. The whole situation changes at Jesus' explosive words and we read, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong" (Luke 4:16-29). The Nazareth Manifesto then is really a manifesto for dalits.

Another episode from Jesus' ministry, full of significance for a Christian dalit theology, is that of the cleansing of the temple. The account is as follows:

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple. And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, My House shall be called a House of Prayer for all the nations?" But you have made it a den of robbers. And the chief priests heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teachings. And when the evening came they went out of the city. (Mark 11:15-19)

This incident is interpreted in various ways by New Testament scholars. The evangelists other than Mark tell us that Jesus was angry on this occasion. On the other hand they omit the words "for all the nations" in their account and leave the quotation from Isaiah incomplete. It has been suggested that the evangelists see in this passage a fulfillment of Malachi 3:1, Zechariah 14:21, and Hosea 9:15. All these passages refer to God's final intervention in history. Jesus' action then would seem to be that of the messianic king on his final visit to his father's house and people and embodying God's ultimate judgment upon the life and religion of Israel. The second suggestion is that Jesus' cleansing of the temple was in line with the prophetic antithesis between prayer and sacrifice and, like the prophets before him, upheld the first and condemned the second. The third suggestion is that Jesus' anger was directed against the greed and dishonesty of the dealers and the way they were fleecing the poor. But we must note that Mark omits any reference to Jesus' anger. The fourth and final suggestion comes from Lightfoot, who maintains that the incident must be understood in terms of its implications for the Gentiles. All the buying and selling and money exchanging took place in the part of the temple that was reserved for Gentile worship. It was the Gentile court. The Gentiles had no access to the inner precincts where the Jewish worship was conducted. The bazaar that was in the Gentile court thus effectively prevented them from conducting their worship in a peaceful and quiet manner. Jesus the messianic king thus restores to the Gentiles their religious rights. Lightfoot's interpretation makes sense to the Indian dalits, who had to struggle for the right to temple entry, and we know about temple

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entry legislation in the various states of India. Indian dalits know what it means to be denied the entry to temple and to be denied the right to pray and worship. Ambedkar and his followers had to agitate for the entry to the Kala Rama temple in Nasik. We know about many such temple entry agitations. In his act of restoration of the Gentile right to worship, we see a prefiguration of the vindication of the Indian dalit struggle for their prayer and worship rights.

There are many other examples of Jesus' sympathy for the dalits of his day. But his dalitness is best symbolized by the cross. On the cross, he was the broken, the crushed, the split, the torn, the driven-asunder man — the dalit in the fullest possible meaning of that term. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" he cries aloud from the cross. The Son of God feels that he is God-forsaken. That feeling of being God-forsaken is at the heart of our dalit experiences and dalit consciousness in India. It is the dalitness of the divinity and humanity that the cross of Jesus symbolizes.

The Holy Spirit

My treatment of a dalit pneumatology will be necessarily brief and sketchy, as I did not have enough time to work it out. In our understanding of the beneficial activity of the Holy Spirit, we will have to make use of the metaphors and images of the Holy Spirit. Read, for example, the story of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. "Can these bones live?" is the most important question. I am aware of the fact that bones in Ezekiel represent Israel. But Israel here is under dalit conditions. The bones are dead, dry, and lifeless. The Holy Spirit revives these dry bones, gives them life, unifies them, and makes an army out of them. For us dalits, then, the Spirit is the life-giver, unifier, and empowerer for the liberation struggle of the Indian dalits. In our dalit experiences, the Spirit is our comforter who "groans" along with us in our sufferings.

In the story of Cornelius, Peter says, "How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed..." (Acts 10:38). The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, heals all that are oppressed. While Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit descended on the Gentiles. The baptism was to come later. The Holy Spirit did not wait for the baptism of the Gentiles — the dalits — to descend upon them. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit on the side of the dalits.

This is a very brief statement of the triune nature of a Christian dalit theology.

In John 9:3 we read, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him." This is also true of ourselves as dalits. We have suffered in the past, and we continue to suffer in the present. This is not because of our own sins or the sins of our ancestors. We need not and should not subscribe to any doctrine of *karma samsara*. Our suffering and dalitness have their place in the economy of salvation foreordained by God. It is in and through us that God will manifest and display his glorious salvation. The sixth group of meanings associated with the term "dalit" is "manifested" or "displayed." It is through us that God will manifest and display his salvation. It is precisely in and through the weaker, the down-trodden, the crushed, the oppressed and the marginalized that God's saving glory is manifested or displayed. This is because brokenness belongs

to the very being of God. God's divinity and humanity are both characterized by his dalitness. God is one with the broken. God suffers when his people suffer. He weeps when his people weep. He laughs when his people laugh. He dies in his people's death, and he rises again in his people's resurrection.

This is one possible version of a people's theology — shall I perhaps say "No people's theology"? But there again, it is always the "no-people," the "dalits," who are the real people — God's very own people.