

# Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics

## Beyond the Contemporary Polarities in the Interpretation of Religious Traditions

One thing that is powerfully irrupting into the consciousness of the human community is the awareness that, in all that we perceive and understand, express and project, we ourselves are very much involved. This is true as much of the trivialities of daily life as of the most lofty creations human beings are capable of. That makes hermeneutics an all-pervasive and pivotal activity. In fact, there is no realm of human life and expression where hermeneutics is absent or does not play a very decisive role - no matter whether we are aware of it or not.<sup>1</sup>

Every religious tradition is made up of certain beliefs, norms for right ethical conduct and rituals - all of which calls for intense hermeneutical activity. It is required not merely to unveil the world of meaning behind sacred texts, symbols, etc., so that we understand them rightly. There is a more serious reason: Interpretation has momentous practical consequences affecting the lives of the individuals or of a group, or of the society at large.<sup>2</sup> Like legal texts whose interpretation can, for example, turn a person into a culprit or acquit him or her, so too, the interpretation of religious texts, traditions and institutions have serious practical implications.<sup>3</sup>

1. No wonder then, that hermeneutics is of central importance to the humanities. What experiments are to natural or physical sciences, hermeneutics is to the human sciences. Or, to use another analogy, what grammar is to a language, hermeneutics is to the humanities.
2. Cfr. W. Jeanrond. *Theological Hermeneutics. Development and Significance*, Crossroad, New York 1991, p 4
3. A typical example is the use of the text of Rom 13:17 made by the 'state theology of earlier apartheid regime of South Africa. It used this text-out of context, of course - to demand the Christians to conform to the existing political order, independent of any consideration whether it is racially a discriminative regime or not. The mere claim of being a civil authority, called for, in the view of the 'state theology', obedient response on the part of Christians. Cfr. *Challenges to the Church. A Theological Comment on the Political Crises in South Africa*, The Kairos Document, Delhi 1986 (Indian edition).

The universe of religious traditions present us an array of hermeneutical problems. In the first part of this article I limit myself to reflect on hermeneutics of religious traditions in terms of certain antinomies<sup>4</sup> which we experience in the hermeneutical activity. If we observe closely the contemporary religious scenario, we will notice a five-fold polarities at work: (1) Theocentrism and anthropocentrism, (2) universality and contextuality, (3) Theory and life, (4) Tradition and change, and (5) Transcendence and temporality. Religious hermeneutics would vary very much according to the degree in which one swings from one pole to the other.

Ultimately we are called upon today to go beyond these polarities towards a subaltern hermeneutics. "Subaltern" as per dictionary meaning refers to a situation "of inferior rank".<sup>5</sup> Subaltern hermeneutics, then, is one that emerges from out of the lowly, inferiorly or marginally placed situation of any group in society. We can concretely think of different categories of people who find themselves at the lower and lowest strata of the society—the tribals, dalits, backward castes and classes, fishworkers, landless labourers and so on. The situation of forced marginalization and powerlessness of the subalterns<sup>6</sup> is bound to have a radicality in religious interpretation which cannot be awaited from the dominant hermeneutics. The second part of the article will be, then, devoted to the reflection on the necessity of moving towards such a subaltern hermeneutics today.

4. I am using "antinomy" in this article not strictly in the sense of two contradictory propositions, each one of which can be proved, as in the case of the antinomies of speculative cosmology in the philosophy of Kant. I am using it rather to indicate strong conflict and polarity between two interpretative approaches which give birth to two conflicting types of praxis.

5. Cfr Concise Oxford Dictionary, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1981.

6. I am using the word "subalterns" to those who are found in the inferior and marginal situation in society.

**Part I: Hermeneutical Polarities****1. Theocentrism and Anthropocentrism**

What is meant by this antinomy can, perhaps, best be illustrated with an example from the Christian tradition. In modern Christian tradition, particularly, in Catholic theology, there came about a remarkable change when the Christian beliefs, practices, institutions etc., began to be interpreted with human person as the hermeneutical key. A typical representative of this orientation is the theologian Karl Rahner. His transcendental methodology is strongly anthropocentric. The meaningfulness of various Christian doctrines and practices are brought out by investigating the transcendental and a priori conditions inherent within human beings which enable their understanding of any particular truth of revelation.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, hermeneutics here is conceived as that enterprise which makes sense to the human beings out of doctrinal and symbolic realities of faith. Even more, any speaking of God and his manifestation is possible only with reference to human person. What is at the bottom of this hermeneutics is the reversal of theology and anthropology: Authentic anthropology is theology, and authentic theology is anthropology. Such a hermeneutics has quite far-reaching consequences when applied to Christian religious sources such as Scriptures and traditions.

The other pole of the spectrum is represented by Karl Barth, considered by far the greatest Protestant theologian of the century. He forcefully underscores the other pole - God - in the antinomy of theocentrism and anthropocentrism. His assertion that "God is totally the other", and his refusal to accept analogy of being, and his views on non-Christian religions amply testify not only to his theocentrism but as well to his particular brand of theocentrism. It means in effect that it is not we human beings who interpret the Scriptures - God's Word, but rather it

7. Thus for example the various volumes of his Theological Investigations, specially vol. IX, Darton & Longman, London-New York, 1972, pp. 28-45.

is God's Word which interprets us. All that we are required to do is to submit ourselves to the Divine interpretation of our life and history.

As for classical Hindu tradition, we may not find such clearly marked antithetical positions. This is due to the difference in the basic world-view. However, the dialectics between theocentrism and anthropocentrism is not absent. If the unitary and wholistic vision of reality in which the Divine, the human and the nature are organically integrated, there is another aspect of the classical Hindu tradition which creates the environment for the antinomy of theocentrism and anthropocentrism. I mean the contrast between the really real (*paramartika*) and the relative and transient (*vyavaharika*). By associating the Divine with the pole of the real, and the relative and transient condition with the human experience of the world and time, the religious realities tend to be placed on the side of the Divine. This could result in the neglect of concrete human life and day-to-day experiences.<sup>8</sup>

In almost all the religious traditions there is the polarity of theocentrism and anthropocentrism not only in regard to the claims of revelation from above (sruti, Qur'an as God's Word etc.); this polarity can also be found in regard to the normativity of human behaviour. The conflict is in interpreting the practical norms, laws and injunctions that govern the life of the followers of a religion.

By invoking that certain modes of behaviour and practices are part of the revelation from above, a stronger foundation for them is sought, which would not be the case if these laws, norms, etc., were of human making. A clear example is the discussion around *Shari'a* in the Islamic world in antithetical relation to more human and secularized vision of law. In Christian

8. I must immediately add that this neglect is not something peculiar to Hinduism, as often has been depicted specially in the context of Orientalism. In no less way, other religious traditions have fostered the neglect of the world, but on other basis and presuppositions.

tradition too contemporary examples are not lacking in which a stronger foundation is sought for conclusively and definitively prescribing certain things and forbidding others by invoking divine right (*ius divinum*), in contradistinction to the mutable ecclesiastical law.

## 2. Universality and Contextuality

The way the universal and the particular, the general and the contextual are inter-related constitutes another important issue in the hermeneutics of religious traditions today. The universalistic approach is one that enunciates, declares and defines what is true and applicable in terms of doctrines, laws and rituals, to all individuals, groups and people. This approach too employs hermeneutical tools. But these tools are mostly to confirm and ratify the doctrines, laws, rituals in their universal validity. Hermeneutics may be also employed in the process of applying these general and universal principles, norms, institutions, etc. But as we can see, here hermeneutics has no role as a basic and foundational activity for all understanding. Rather hermeneutics is being used; its instrumentality is availed of. In other words, hermeneutics is harnessed and domesticated for the purpose of what have been stated and declared as universal.

On the other hand, contextuality lays stress on what is particular, concrete and experiential. Hermeneutics plays a different and more basic role here. We could highlight at least two functions, corresponding to which we can have two different but inter-related understanding of contextuality: First of all there is the question of situating the various norms, doctrines, rituals, etc., in the contexts of their origin and evolution. This cannot but result in a certain relativizing of what are claimed as universal. In this process, one discovers that, what are projected and presented as universal are, in final analysis, what have been particular traditions, historically and geographically de-limited in their origins.

There is also a second sense in which contextuality as the other pole of universality acquires meaning. It relates to the present experience. The interpretation of the religious traditions, its sacred writings and other sources, is done from the particular historical context in which a person, a group or people find themselves presently. In this approach one reads one's religious sources such as the sacred writings from the present questions and issues being grappled with. The context then becomes the medium through which the text is read.

### 3. Ideals and Praxis

If there is one single issue which affects all religious traditions-without exception-it is the divide between the world of ideals and the world of actual praxis. Most of the time the theologians of the religious traditions function as artisans shaping and moulding the world of ideals. The ordinary followers of the particular religious traditions and their official guardians are so enamoured by the loftiness of these ideals, that they fail to turn their eyes to the naked reality of daily life which challengingly stares at them. Therefore for any human problem, they have answers in terms of sacred texts, traditions, etc. There is often the firm conviction that there are solutions to all our contemporary intricate human problems, because there *should* be solutions in the Sacred texts to all our questions.<sup>9</sup> It cannot be otherwise.

Any a priori dogmatism based on the ideal profile of religion harnesses the hermeneutical activity in service of maintaining its belief-system. Hermeneutics gets imprisoned within the fortress of hoary abstractions and theorizing. This state of affairs leads easily to a kind of self-deception.

9. One cannot but be reminded of some Christian fundamentalist sects who do not fail to find in the Scriptures all the modern scientific and cosmological theories, and of zealous Vedantins who find anticipated with as much of foreknowledge all modern scientific discoveries in the Vedas including quantum physics!

Gail Omvedt, in a recent work very succinctly brought out in relation to Brahminism what is the perennial temptation of all religious traditions when they move in the realm of mere theory and ideals. She notes that the essence of Brahminism is to believe that *a problem is solved in reality, because it is solved in theory*.<sup>10</sup> If that is Brahminism, we could say that much of it is present in every religious tradition today, and in Christian theology too! And there are many such "Brahmin" theologians in Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and so on.

The hermeneutics imprisoned within the belief-system of a religion is unable to exercise a critical function. As a result what we often witness is a series of contradictions. Such are, for example, to state that "Brahmin" is not really a caste; it is a spiritual quality or a state of high virtues, and therefore, any one, independent of the fact to which caste he or she belongs, could become a Brahmin. Such argumentations based on the ideal world is blatantly contradicted, for example, by a strongly stratified caste-society with centuries-old discriminations against the lower and backward castes and, especially the outcastes.

Another example would be the exaltation of "womanhood" and "motherhood" (hoary abstractions!) in most religions to the point of being romantic, while, in practice, denying them the basic rights and dignity as human beings. This is true of all religious traditions. Similar examples reveal how here hermeneutics is caught up within the realm of theory and is at its service. Such a hermeneutics has no reference to the other pole - the praxis.

In the antinomy of theory and praxis, the pole of praxis represents a challenge to the distance of theory from actual life-realities and experiences. A very telling example is the well-known standard argument against reservation to Christians of scheduled caste origin. It is argued that since Christianity does not believe in caste-system, there can be no claim for reserva-

10. Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions. The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*, Orient Longman, Delhi 1995.

tion. In this case we very clearly see how far removed from reality is such an argument based merely on the ideals a religion professes. There are innumerable other cases and instances (where it is not so evident, nevertheless equally true) which can illustrate how we move around within the world of principles, without caring to be confronted by the actual and concrete realities of life. This kind of theoretical self-enclosure is a shield, a mask and sometimes even a pretext to justify many unholy things. And that also explains the dynamics involved in the genesis of ideologies.

In recent times, in the Christian tradition, the various ideologies of liberation have highlighted the central importance of praxis in Christian living and theologizing. Ultimately the shape of Christianity, for that matter of any religious body, is to be judged by what the Christians and the Christian community do. This is the most crucial element. What Christian message is and what its ideals are, are not difficult to see. Therefore, concentrating simply on the interpretation of this message while failing to reflect on praxis and its interpretation can create a world of self-deception and ideological stubbornness.

#### **4. Tradition and Change**

Many of the intra-religious problems and tensions today can be explained by this antinomy. The inner dynamics of a religious body is very much dependent upon how it views its own tradition and comes to terms with it. In a way, a religion can be looked at as a "cumulative tradition", namely a cluster of beliefs, normative behaviour, rites, symbols, etc., handed down from generation to generation. This tradition, evidently keeps on growing like a snowball. One could distinguish many layers of this tradition as it grew through the centuries. At times, some of the traditions could be left behind, while others are retained. It very much depends on the religion. In Hinduism, for example, there is practically no tradition that is discarded; everything is retained and they have their survival, and that is how Hinduism

is an amazing phenomenon with a plethora of traditions, schools, ways, practices, etc.<sup>11</sup>

From the hermeneutical perspective, tradition is a very crucial issue. This is connected with two important roles tradition plays in any religious group. The demarcation of the identity of a religious group, its boundary-building between the "we" and "they" depends very much on tradition. In some cases, it almost entirely determines the religious-identity of a religious body. The other important role tradition plays is the enabling of communication within a religious community.<sup>12</sup> It means, in other words, members belonging to a particular religion are held together by a common net-work of communication, system of symbols, common codes, etc., provided by the tradition.

Given such important roles, tradition like theory and [ideals divorced from praxis, could become the supplier of raw-materials for the ideological constructions. Religion backed by such a praxis-less theorizing and tradition, as I noted in relation to theory, can turn into instruments for control and domination. Such a control includes also the power to determine the identity of a religious group as well as to control and manipulate the system of symbols and the mode of communication within the religious community. Those who claim to possess the tradition of a religious body and its symbol-system become also its interpreters—the hermeneuts.

In view of the force tradition represents, it is understandable why change and innovation in every religion is met with resistance, particularly from those who reap the benefit of power and control through theorizing and by invoking tradition. In spite of it, when within a religion change takes place, a different kind of hermeneutics comes into play. We can observe at least three different dynamics: There could be a total *rejection* of tradition

11. Julius Lipner, *Hindus. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Routledge, London 1994.
12. Cfr Robert Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies*, SCM Press, London 1985, p. 105.

because of its ideological use for the purpose of control; secondly there could ensue a reform and renewal which is often based on a *re-interpretation* of its tradition and its sources as was the case for example with the phenomenon of Neo-Hinduism, or Vatican II. Change and innovation, finally, could come about by *external forces and stimuli*. But, very often what appears on the scene as new and challenging gets interpreted in terms of tradition and its resources.<sup>13</sup>

A very acute form of dialectics between tradition and change is observable when a religious group feels threatened by another religion or other social and political forces. Such a situation leads to another type of hermeneutical activity. The compulsion to safeguard one's religious identity occasions an interpretation of the present events in terms of what happened to the particular religious group in the past. Often what is involved is a re-interpretation and reconstruction of past history in terms of the present. This is what happened for example in the sensitive Ramjanmabhumi - Babri Masjid issue.<sup>14</sup> Another example would be the Sikh reading of the contemporary events happening in their religious community in terms of their past history, specially their relationship with the Hindu community. It is interesting to note how in the hermeneutic perspective of Sikh militants, their masculine tradition of a religious community has been threatened by the "effeminate" Hindus. And they wonder how Gandhi with his non-violence and spinning wheel, resembling more a woman, could be the *father* of the nation!<sup>15</sup>

13. A Classical example is the challenge represented by Buddhism to the Hindu tradition. Efforts were made to absorb Buddha and Buddhism within the the Hindufold, considering Buddha as an "avatar". This is not a matter of past history, but a matter of actuality. At the end of 1995, recently a con. n. on conference of Buddhism and Hinduism in Bankok had to be called off because of what was perceived as a subtle attempt to absorb Buddhism within the Hindufold.
14. Cfr Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.) *Anatomy of a Confrontation. The Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhumi Issue* Viking, Delhi 1991.
15. Cfr. Veena Das, "Counter-Concepts and the Creation of Cultural Identity: Hindus in the Militant Sikh Discourse" in Vasudha Dalmia - Heinrich von Stietencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism. The Constructoin of Religious Tradition and National identity* Sage Publications, New Delhi 1995, p. 363.

**5. Transcendence and Temporality**

A fifth antinomy is between transcendence and temporality. The polarities between spirit and matter, body and soul, heaven and earth, etc., are but expressions of one and the same paradigm. In all the religious traditions we can note the struggle between these two poles, and the ensuing hermeneutical conflicts. This is such a powerful antinomy that we can observe it in the area of world-view, spirituality, worship, symbols, formulation of belief, etc.

To cite an example from the realm of worship in Christian tradition, liturgy could be viewed as the earthly reflection of the glory and honour offered to God in heaven by angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim and so on - a view very strong in the Orthodox Christian tradition. It could be interpreted and performed as symbolic actions effecting real and integral transformation and liberation. In the same line, as an affirmation of the earthliness of our existence and the materiality of our body, celebration of life etc., one may introduce dances into the liturgical celebration. That would be to underline the earthly dimension of sacramental action.

Whether hermeneutics swings to the pole of transcendence or temporality can be seen clearly in another important issue. The Kingdom of God - the central message of Jesus - could be interpreted as a transcendent reality above our concrete historical life and its vicissitudes. Or, it could be interpreted as something with deep historical roots and with eschatological movement towards fulfillment. These two interpretations cannot simply exist side by side in real life. In living out Christian message in a community of faith there is bound to be conflict of these two interpretations and the praxis, the liturgy, the theology each one of them inspire. Therefore Christians have to come to terms with these polarities of interpretation.

There is the general tendency among the religions and religious agents to favour the transcendence as the realm of the

spirit. In modern Christian theology one has tried to interpret anew transcendence in terms of future. In terms of space, transcendence is not something above but something below in horizontal position; it is the goal and direction of a linear movement. Some of the forms of modern Christian theologies inspired by secularization adopted this kind of interpretation of transcendence.

From another world of experience and concern, the various theologies of liberation have highlighted against a too long history of alienation from the world (*"fuga mundi"*), the central importance of the material and physical basis in the Christian faith-understanding. Even the sources of Christian faith—specially the Scriptures have been interpreted from this perspective.<sup>16</sup>

As for the Hindu tradition, its history can be written through the optic of this antinomy. In fact, [there are traditions which emphasize the earthliness, the materiality as much as the transcendence. From a philosophical perspective this is characterized by the contrast between *purusha* and *prakriti* - the spiritual and material principle. There seems to have been a continuous stream of thought in the Indic tradition which has the material principle, the *prakriti* as the key for the approach to and explanation of everything else.<sup>17</sup>

## **Part II : Some Perspectives on Subaltern Hermeneutics**

The conflicts and tensions in these five polarities we have seen are also conflicts and tensions in the hermeneutical enterprise. Each of the poles in these operate with a particular hermeneutics, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not. After going through these five types of polarities, my purpose is not to conclude by advocating a hermeneutics based on the second

16. For example the work of Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, Orbis Books, New York, 1981.

17. Cfr. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Indian Atheism. A Marxist Analysis*, People's Publishing House, Delhi 1991; T. N. Ganapathy, *The Philosophy of the Tamil Siddhas*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1993.

poles, namely anthropocentrism, contextuality, praxis, change and temporality. I think we need to go beyond the terms of discussion constituted by these polarities.<sup>18</sup> And that leads me to comment upon the necessity of developing today a proper subaltern hermeneutics in the interpretation of religious traditions. I do not claim to be able to even sketch the outline for such subaltern hermeneutics. For the present, I want only to underscore the need of recognizing such a hermeneutics in the present scenario of religious interpretations and make some brief reflection along these lines.

### **Who is the Interpreter?**

A subaltern hermeneutical perspective on religious traditions should start with the fundamental question: who is the interpreter. The hermeneutical polarities we saw above do not really address this key-issue. The assumption behind them is that there are "experts" or those invested with authority who interpret religious texts, traditions, etc. for others. They may employ certain tools in this enterprise. Among such interpreters there could be differences of view, of orientation as for example, theocentric and tradition-based orientation or anthropocentric and change-oriented interpretations. Nevertheless, it is always some who interpret religious realities for the majority of others.

The subaltern hermeneutics, on the contrary, is one in which the question who interprets occupies the centre-stage. Many things depend on that. If hermeneutics is a critical function-as it ought to be in every religious tradition - then, this function becomes truly critical when the subalterns become the inter-

18. These certainly have greater affinity to subaltern religious experience and hermeneutics. However, these affinities still remain within the parameters of a basically theoretical discourse.

interpreters of religious traditions, its tenets, its history and so on.<sup>19</sup> It is the first critical act in religious hermeneutics. By being the interpreters the subalterns will exercise in their own way another important hermeneutical role, namely ridding the religious realm of its ideological load. We have a typical example in the Dalit interpretation of traditional Hinduism, initiated by Jotiba Phule.<sup>20</sup> Their condition of being marginalized, disprivileged and discriminated against places them to be truly critical—a critique not deriving from the world of conceptualization — but from the actual life-world. Through their concrete experience of oppression and subjugation, there takes place, to use the expression of Jacques Derrida, a “de-construction” of the religious tradition. As we can see here the question goes far beyond theoretical discussions regarding anthropocentrism or theocentrism.<sup>21</sup>

### **A Different Religious Experience—a Different Hermeneutic**

A second important question is the very understanding of religion itself. We know that there is such a lot of discussion about the definition of religion, about the Western character of the expression, etc.<sup>22</sup> My point here is not to contrast the difference between a Western approach to religion and other Asian

19. This is true not only of religious traditions, but also of other areas. I may cite here an example from history. The presentation of the National Struggle for Independence is made in such a way that one tends to conclude that it is the achievement of a few heroes and leaders. But the fact is that there have been continuous struggles of marginal peoples — the tribals, the peasants, workers etc., — who through sustained struggles and revolts, exercised pressure on the colonial regime leading to national independence. For a number of case studies, cfr Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies*, vol. I - VI, Oxford University Press, 1982-1985.

20. Cfr. Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, op. cit. pp. 17-24.

21. Of course, there is room to speak about anthropocentrism in subaltern hermeneutics. But the “anthropos” here is not abstractly defined “human being” without profile, but concrete and contextually located people with clear features.

22. One may refer the classical work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, on the origin and evolution of the concept religion, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. SPCK, London, 1978.

traditions, for example. What I want to highlight here is the difference in the perception of religious reality—a difference that cuts across religious borders, and which derives from the *difference in social location*.

While for some - and they are mostly the elites religion is identified primarily with the belief-system, code of conduct, world-view etc., for the subaltern groups, being religious is a matter of performing a series of rites and rituals very much tied up with their life, its moments of joy, its situations of danger and threat. Besides, a fundamental difference in religious experience seems to derive from the world-view of the subalterns. In fact, we can discern among the subalterns certain commonality in perception of the reality and approach to it, etc., which make us think of a shared world-view. A characteristic feature of this world-view is, to speak in images, not so much to seek explanation from heaven, but rather through earthly experiences, actions and performances interpret the "heavenly", the mysterious, the sacred etc.<sup>23</sup> That leads me to the next reflection.

### **Subaltern Hermeneutics as Hermeneutics of Earthliness**

The subaltern peoples and groups may belong externally to a particular religious tradition. But in fact their world-view very often does not tally with the religious tradition to which they appear to belong. Like a subterranean current, their religious experience follows its own course, unimpeded by the conventional demarcations of the various religious traditions above the ground. Their life and religiosity coalesce to form one single experience, which gets reflected in their hermeneutics. Their religiosity is made up of the very stuff and fibres with which life is made.

I must immediately add that this earthliness is different from the temporality to which I referred earlier speaking of the

23. It is seen also in their imaging of gods and their place in life. Cfr My forthcoming article on "Subaltern Religion: Between Continuity and Discontinuity".

fifth antinomy (transcendence - materiality). This will be evident from the reflections below. While in the latter case, an alienating interpretation of transcendence may be contrasted with the affirmation of temporality, the world, the body etc.<sup>24</sup> as part of a discourse on world-view, earthliness in the religious experience of the subalterns indicates an immediacy and directness with which it is bound up with the material and physical realities and needs of real life.

### **Religious Interpretation through Rice**

Let me highlight the earthliness in the religious experience and interpretation of the subalterns from a different angle through an example drawn from the Christian Community. It is common place to refer to certain segments of Christians - specially the lower castes and outcastes - as "rice Christians" and "wheat Christians". The implication of this kind of appellation is that there are some people who became Christians for very noble and "spiritual" motives whereas these people became Christians for the rice, the material benefits they received from the Church.

But if we look at the phenomenon through the eyes of the subalterns, things look very different. People who have been denied bread, freedom, human dignity, turn to any direction from where they possibly hope to get these. Rice or wheat is something so very essential for life. The Japanese Christian thinker Masao Takenaka has a little book with a significant title: "*God is Rice*".<sup>25</sup> The lowest strata of people in our society, the poorest of the poor interpret religious realities with challenging earthliness. This has been so in the past as well as in the present times. Interestingly this has been a point of scandal and

24. One may think here of the theology of the world, theology of temporal realities etc. which emerged in the past decades as a counterposture to the one-sided other-worldly and transcendentalist explanation of religious realities.

25. Masao Takenaka; *God is Rice*. Asian Culture and Christian Faith. The Fisk Book Series, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1986.

frustration for many missionaries in the past<sup>26</sup> and many others today who equate faith with its intellectual contents.

The seeds of a subaltern hermeneutics was present in the acts of the subaltern peoples in their quest for a religious affiliation which would respond to their needs for rice, wheat, security and other material necessities. Today this hermeneutics is unfolding itself with greater incisiveness and force. The growing critique by the subalterns of the religious traditions for denying equality of treatment, freedom and dignity is a further elaboration of their hermeneutics of religion through "rice" - a symbol of all that a human being requires to live and to live with dignity. This critical earthliness forces the religious traditions to find their true bearings in a politically, socially and culturally situated praxis.

### **Subaltern Hermeneutics as Oral and Performative Hermeneutics**

What we have seen above, leads us to another aspect of the subaltern hermeneutics. The plethora of studies and reflections on hermeneutics being made today have the written "text" as their focus of attention and central preoccupation. All the intellectual energies and resources are invested on such objectives as unearthing the meaning hidden in the text by decoding its symbol-system, letting the text speak for itself, studying the inter-relationship between the text and the reader, and so on.<sup>27</sup> In

26. We have an interesting example in the person of the famous missionary Abbe Dubois. Cfr his *Letters on the State of Christianity in India, in which the Conversion of Hindoos is Considered as Impracticable*, 1823 (Asian Educational Services, New Delhi-Madras 1995).
27. Cfr K. Kunjuni Raja, *Indian Theories of Meaning*, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras 1977; K. Satchidananda Murty, *Vedic Hermeneutics*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi 1995; P Ricoeur *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and Surplus of Meaning*, The Texas Christian University Press, Fort Worth 1976; Id., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985; E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics; Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1969; Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics. Development and Significance*, Crossroad, New York 1991.

fact hermeneutics has become almost identical with the science of interpreting written texts. In Hindu tradition, for example, the beginnings of hermeneutics go back to contradictions that arose in interpreting the meaning of Vedic texts. Hermeneutics offered the guidelines as how to resolve these contradictions and arrive at the right meaning.<sup>28</sup> While the present-day intense hermeneutical enterprise has made some important contributions, at the same time, their obsession with written texts have also brought the life of the followers of the religious traditions, so to say, under the imperialism of texts - revelational, doctrinal, legal, moral, liturgical, etc.

Instead, what we find in the religious experience of the subalterns is the *primacy of the oral*, which is very evident in their mode of communication, interaction and transmission.<sup>29</sup> The oral character responds to the performance trait of their religious experience and expression.<sup>30</sup> The oral carries with it the feelings, emotions, moods, etc., which derive from the power of sound and the spoken word. Textuality tends to refine and restrain these realities and experiences.<sup>31</sup> Besides, the oral tradition has a strong collective character, in as much as access to knowledge of religious realities is not through texts and interpretations imposed on it from without, but rather through participation in the collective, communitarian performance. By performing in and with the community one comes to the knowledge of reality. There is a whole "theology of emotions" in the religious experience of the marginal peoples.

28. Cfr. Krishna Roy, *Hermeneutics in Indian Philosophy*, in *Phenomenology and Indian Philosophy*. Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi 1992, pp. 290 - 302; cfr. also K. Satchidananda Murty *op cit.*
29. For a deeper study on orality, cfr. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy The Technologising of the Word*, Routledge, London 1993 (5th edition).
30. Cfr. Felix Wilfred, "The Challenge of Folklore to Indian Theologizing. Some Preliminary Reflections", in *Jeevadhara*, January 1994, pp. 60-80.
31. Cfr. G. Patrick "A Descriptive Study of the Dynamics of Oral Traditions with special Reference to its implications for Contextual Theological Hermeneutics" (A dissertation written under my guidance and submitted to the University of Madras for the award of the degree of M. Phil.), Madras 1995.

What has been said about the oral performance and strongly emotional character of the religious experience of the subalterns only reinforces the need of a distinct subaltern hermeneutics, different from the textual one. Such a hermeneutics is implicit in the performative nature of the subaltern experience itself. For performance is "a behaviour mode of organizing meaning"<sup>32</sup> in immediate relationship to context and the life-world. It is in performance in a particular context that the communicative potential of the oral tradition manifests itself. Performance-in-context is the stage where oral tradition gets interpreted.<sup>33</sup>

It would lead to a total misunderstanding if the oral tradition of the subalterns are subjected to a hermeneutical analysis in the way of a written text. For, in the subaltern tradition of orality and performance, more than what is said, the "saying" is important, more than the content, the *how* it is said, performed is important.<sup>34</sup> Subaltern hermeneutics, therefore, is not something parallel to the textual hermeneutics centered on meaning. The logic and dynamics of performance as well as of subaltern hermeneutics are of a quite different nature. Therefore, there does not arise the question of laying down general principles of

32. Cfr Blackburn - A. K. Ramanujan, *Another Harmony. New Essays on the Folklore of India*. Oxford University Press, Delhi 1986.
33. What A. K. Ramanujan gives as an example in a slightly different context, may serve as an illustration of this point as well. "It is dark under the lamp" is a proverb (oral tradition) found in Karnataka and in Kashmir. This very same statement has however two different meanings: In Karnataka it means a virtuous man, like a lighted lamp, may have dark, shadowy places, hidden vices", whereas in Kashmir it has a political connotation, meaning even "a beneficent king may have evil henchmen; a good-natured king may have evil counsellors". Cfr A. K. Ramanujan, *Folktales of India*, Viking, Delhi 1993, p. xix.
34. Cfr. A. K. Ramanujan, "The Relevance of South Asian Folklore", in Peter J. Claus, J. Handoo and D. P. Pattanayak (eds), *Indian Folklore II*, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore 1987, pp. 79-156.

a subaltern hermeneutics. True to the strongly contextual character of the religious experience of the subalterns, there will be a wide variety of hermeneutics; depending upon the different situations and concrete performances. All that we can do is to discern certain common patterns, trends in the religious experience of the subalterns.

What has been said also indicates that the various rituals and symbols of the subalterns are not something to be decoded and interpreted in order to distil a world of meaning; rather, *these rituals and symbols themselves are interpretations of life, world, society, the divine all in one*. Therefore, the access to them cannot simply be through the cognitive tools of the dominant contemporary hermeneutical traditions. It is by entering into these rituals and in the innumerable actions and interactions in daily life in which these rituals and symbols are enveloped that one experiences and participates in the subaltern hermeneutics. Here hermeneutics shifts from the cognitive realm as interpretation and meaning to an *interpreted experience of the world and society*. Hermeneutics is not a second moment, but something concomitant with life itself.

### Conclusion

Today, the terms of hermeneutical discussions in religious field seem to move along the five polarities described above. We may find these polarities in varying degrees in the different religious traditions. We gain completely a different and radically new perspective when hermeneutics of religious traditions begins from the subaltern religious world and experience with the marginalized as the subjects of interpretation. We need to direct our attention to this subaltern hermeneutics today whose dynamics is very different from the one which revolves around the text.

Subaltern hermeneutics is not simply one more field of hermeneutical enterprise, nor is it simply a completion or correc-

tive to the dominant hermeneutical project. It is a hermeneutics, so to say, "from below". Naturally, this kind of subaltern hermeneutics will disconcert the conventional hermeneutics employed in the various religious traditions. What the consequences and challenges of subaltern hermeneutics could be is implicit in the reflections we have made. But explicitating these would require a separate inquiry, and it goes beyond the scope of this article. What I have tried to do here is to simply highlight the need to move towards a subaltern hermeneutics.

**Fr. Felix Wilfred**