

JESUS-INTERPRETATION IN ASIA

A Methodological Fragment

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The Fragmentary Character of Asian Jesus-Interpretation

The difficulty Asia experiences with the traditional approaches to Christology is that these approaches claim to offer a total and comprehensive interpretation of Jesus, allowing at the most the addition of some frills from other cultural areas. The Asian approaches instead follow a path consonant with experience. It is a path to totality by starting from fragments, from our experience, concerns and questions. I am reminded of a little story about a charismatic pastor who put up a huge banner on the entrance to his church which read "Jesus is the answer". The pastor woke up next morning to find to his amazement something scribbled underneath: "*But what is the question?*"

I would distinguish two kinds of fragments – mechanical and organic. The mechanical fragments are pieces apart, and could exist always as fragments without relation to the whole. The organic fragments are the ones which contain the dynamic potency towards an integrated whole – a whole which, however, is not fully defined but only adumbrated. The organic fragments have a dynamism of their own, and the way they grow through their own inner dynamics can be as much normatively laid down as a gardener can regulate normatively how a tree should grow and put out its branches and leaves, and bear fruit.

The Asian approach to Christology has been so to say through organic fragments, namely the questions and challenges that face us immediately in our experiences, which lead us to the horizon of the larger whole. It is in concrete and historically

situated acts of love and its practice that we begin to understand the mystery of love; so it is with the mystery of Jesus, namely that in discovering concrete facets of his person, teaching and life, we also begin the quest for a more fuller understanding of his mystery. The whole is not sacrificed; it accompanies as the horizon in our continuing quest.

Realization of Fragments

The fragmentary character has its consequences for the traditional Christology in relation to Asian cultures and traditions.

As in other areas of Christian life, so too in the understanding of the mystery of Jesus Christ, efforts have been made to inculturate it in the soil. In this endeavour categories such as *guru*, *avatar*, *bhakta*, *maha yogi* etc. have been employed.¹ Hypothetically if Jesus were born in India, it is with these titles he would have been designated by the disciples in their Gospels. But as a matter of fact the birth of Jesus in Palestine led the disciples to attribute to him the titles which were available in their culture and tradition – Messiah, Prophet, son of Man, Lord, New Adam, etc. It may not be easy to translate these titles into our languages and connote what these meant in the Jewish and Hellenistic traditions. No one single title or epithet attributed to Jesus is able to give us fully his mystery. They were important, even though fragmentary in character. If we expand the same, we would realize how each of the four Gospels presents some facets of Jesus; each one opens a different window to his reality. We cannot superimpose the four windows of the evangelists and imagine that thereby we have come to acquire the full vision of Jesus. The attempt to create a comprehensive explanation of Jesus and his mystery through piecing together the four Gospels in a universal explanatory system would be tantamount to creating a Christological Esperanto – if I may say so.

In this connection we may recall here that in early Christianity interpreting Jesus was not simply a matter of

¹ M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru. An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994; Felix Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges, Doing Contextual Theology*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2002, chapter 6; For a comparative religion point of view, cf. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation. A Comparison of Indian and Christian Beliefs*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1982.

elucidating his nature through concepts, or defining his person by way of titles. Do we not find the image of “shepherd” in the New Testament? There were also other images drawn from the cultural milieu. In art forms, Jesus was depicted in such a way as to suggest the figure of Orpheus and the poet Homer.² The mediaeval devotional and mystical tradition discovered many more such images.

We have other forms of referring to him in terms of metaphors. He is referred to as “crown” of humanity and as “horse-tamer” because he quells the human passion,³ and as the bird “pelican”. Obviously none of these images could be superimposed. Each one of them is fragmentary, and yet they reveal what other images are not capable of.

Hence we need not be hesitant to employ the categories and images of our culture to designate the mystery of Jesus, even though none of those categories and metaphors may express fully the mystery of Jesus Christ.⁴ It is important that the categories we employ resonate with our experience and reflect our cultural and mental grid. Similarly, even if Asian efforts to interpret Jesus Christ do not succeed fully, they may achieve more in terms of conveying to us the mystery of Jesus than a simple translation of some presumed universal formula. In fact, the Christian communities have nourished their faith in Jesus Christ through these fragmentary categories and images than by means of any abstract and universal formulation about his nature.

Having said that, we also need to realize the limitations in employing Indian images. First of all, given the cultural pluralism

² Cf. Rowan Williams, “A History of Faith in Jesus”, in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 220 ff.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The trouble with the Enlightenment-inspired quest for historical Jesus was that it presupposed that we could arrive at a single master picture of the real Jesus. This tendency and claim to present a single universal picture of Jesus has continued in the Western tradition, and could be seen as recently as in the writing of Hans Kung. See the chapter on “Real Jesus” in his *On Being a Christian*, Collins, Fount Paperbacks, Bungaly, 1979, pp. 145 ff. Underlying such attempts are a positivist approach that claims neutrality and scientific-type of “objectivity”.

and diversity in India, the images that are used in the name of inculturation may not bespeak to all the segments of the society. Therefore, the categories are fragmentary and partial, also in this sense. This is true particularly regarding the tribals and the dalits of our country. In fact, the critique of inculturated Indian theology on the part of tribals and dalits is that it is "Brahminic". Since Brahminism as an ideology of hierarchization has been the cause of their oppression, the dalits specially would not adopt the categories of their traditional oppressors to connote their (dalits') liberation in Jesus.

One may argue that other categories which resonate with the tribals and dalits could be employed. But that brings in a more radical question, namely whether epithets and attributes are the best way to understand and interpret the mystery of Jesus. Is not the conceptual approach to the mystery of Jesus itself something fragmentary? In this case, it may not be a question of finding other titles, but other modes of approaching Jesus and experiencing him. I have been struck by the statement of the African thinker Eboussi Boulaga, "I dance, therefore I live",⁵ which is best understood when contrasted with "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes). What Boulaga has done implicitly is to challenge the primacy of representation of reality through mental categories, and to bring in the bodily dimension of reality which is very close to African experience and way of life. The ubiquitous dance defines the African life and culture. Therefore, the titles we use in India in the name of inculturation should be such that it opens up spaces for dalits and tribals of India to express the mystery of Jesus and experience it through other modes, and not exclusively through titles and epithets. The same is true about the *minjung* of Korea and the *Burakumin* people of Japan.⁶

⁵ Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu. Authenticité africaine et philosophie*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1977, p. 56.

⁶ Cf. Kuribayashi Teruo, "Recovering Jesus for Outcasts in Japan", in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology*, Orbis Books, New York, 1994, pp. 11-26; David Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, Commission on Theological Concerns, The Christian Conference of Asia, Hong Kong, 1991.

Fragmentary Jesus-Interpretation of Our Neighbours

Christology in Asia is not a matter pertaining only to the Christian community. It is well known from experience that our neighbours of other faiths relate themselves to Jesus and his message, and they have tried to understand and interpret him. It may be disputed whether we can speak of a "Christology" of our neighbours. The terminological question need not restrain us from studying their approaches to Jesus and their testimonies about his person and message.

In this enterprise, the religious traditions of our neighbours is important, because it offers them the key to interpret everything divine and human, and consequently also to understand the message of Jesus and experience his person. To deprive them theologically of their religious traditions is to render it difficult, if not impossible, for the overwhelming majority of Asians to interpret Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, Asian interpreters have seen in Jesus the embodiment of the highest ideals they hold as Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and so on. Given this, many Hindu interpreters of Jesus believe that they have greater accessibility to him through Hindu religious experience. Their experience of Jesus cannot be thought simply in individual terms, dissociated from their collective religious experience as Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, etc.

Whether one looks at the issue of Christ as *avatara* or Christ as an ideal, there is a single thread that runs through Hindu views of Christ. This thread is the depiction of Christ as an Oriental or Asiatic. One might even be more specific and say that it is the depiction of Christ as the quintessential Hindu the one who lives Hindu ideals as they ought to be lived and teaches the essence of Hindu truth as it ought to be taught.⁷

For example, how could we presuppose that a Buddhist would be able to interpret Jesus Christ without his or her understanding of Buddha?⁸ Jumping to conclusion that any such

⁷ Ronald Neufeldt, "Hindu Views of Christ", in Harold Coward (ed.), *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1993, p. 172; Cf. also Chaturvedi Badrinath, *Finding Jesus in Dharma*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2000.

⁸ Cf. Aloysius Pieris, "The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation", in R. Suigirtharajah (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus*, Orbis Books, New York, 1993, pp. 46-61.

effort is tantamount to equate Buddha and Christ cannot but be characterized as hasty. Besides it is insensitive to the religious experience and spiritual development of our neighbours. In matters of religious experience we cannot expect that the others interpret everything in terms of our categories. They give us an empathetic understanding of the person and message of Jesus that is born out of the realization of Jesus' Asiatic origins and the milieu of his life and teaching.

What I have said can be confirmed further by the fact that the varieties of interpretations of the mystery of Jesus from all kinds of Hindu backgrounds seemed to have revolved around the fact that Jesus was an Asian. This is true of Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, Muzumdar and many others.⁹ Keshub Chunder Sen refers not only to the Asiatic character in Jesus' appearance, manners, customs and the way of his relationships with people, but also sees the person and life of Jesus through the perspective of the Hindu belief in the ultimate divine character of humanity.¹⁰

Speaking of our neighbours, it may not be correct to limit ourselves to what they have to say about Jesus Christ through religious and philosophical categories. Their avenue to the truth of Jesus Christ has been through other avenues such as art. In fact, by delving deeper into our neighbours' artistic depiction of the events of Jesus' life, and especially his suffering and self-sacrificing death, we gain some inspiring insights into their encounter with Jesus.¹¹ Besides, there are a lot of popular forms of devotion to Christ on the part of our neighbours. This is true even of the Muslim rulers.

⁹ Cf. Harold Coward (ed.), *Op.cit.* p. 172.

¹⁰ Cf. Keshub Chunder Sen, *Lectures in India*, Navavidhan Publication Committee, Calcutta, 1954; Cf. also P.C. Mozoomdar, *The Oriental Christ*, Boston, 1883, Calcutta 1933.

¹¹ Cf. John F. Butler, *Christian Art in India*, C.L.S., Madras, 1986; Mathew Lederle, *Christian Painting in India*, Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture, Bombay, n.d; Herbert E. Hoefler, *Christian Art in India*, Gurukul Lutheran College and Research Institute, Madras, 1982; Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones. Reflections on the Theology of Indian Christian Culture*, Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore 1986, pp. 137 ff.

Both Akbar and Jahangir had their various places frescoed with Christian angels and saints; the latter had Christian pictures in his bedroom, and even said his morning prayers before pictures of Christ and the Virgin. He went so far as to adorn the tomb of his father Akbar at Sikandra with Christian frescoes...¹²

An important task the Christian community could do is to create the condition for our neighbours to be able to come in encounter with the person and message of Jesus. This is not done certainly by exclusive claims or by theological categories which are insensitive to the nature of the mystery of God and God's mediation. *The task of the Christian community and its theologians and church-leaders is not so much to persuade our neighbours about our interpretation of Jesus Christ, but rather help them to persuade themselves about Jesus and his mystery by their own discovery of him.*

There is another important reason why we need to listen attentively to our neighbours: It is the general identification of Christianity with the colonial experience. We should not undermine this fact, and wish away such a deeply ingrained impression about Christianity in the minds of our neighbours. We know that the identification of Christianity with colonialism is having its political consequences in the present situation in different countries of Asia. Any amount of distinction between the two (Christianity and colonialism) does not seem to convince our neighbours. A fresh encounter of Jesus with the peoples of Asia is facilitated when we free Jesus and the Gospel from colonial experience, and where avenues are opened up for our neighbours to discover Jesus and experience him by the inner illumination he brings in. And that will also mean the slow and sure dispelling of the mental and spiritual barriers caused in them by colonialism. In this regard, it is instructive to note the incidence Seichi Yagi of Japan narrates.

In the Meiji era, there was in Kyoto a famous Zen-master named Gasan. One day he read the Bible. He began with the first page of Gospel according to Matthew and, having read the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5 -7), he said, "These are really the

¹² John F. Butler, *Op.cit.*, p. 68..

words of a great master". Then he called his disciples and warned them, saying that they should not speak ill of Christianity. The words of Jesus awaken, call forth, and activate in their hearers the reality of the primary contact...¹³

We Christian believers will be mistaken if we were to think that because our proclamation of Jesus Christ through our categories and expressions are not responded to, Jesus is not met by our neighbours. Jesus who is divine mediator between God and human beings is not encapsulated within the world of our interpretative categories. The mediation could take place in our neighbours through an interior illumination or revelation. After all, Christian tradition has held that God is the inner master who teaches us from deep within us. Paul himself notes that God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

In considering the approaches to Jesus-interpretation by our neighbours we need to be aware of the asymmetry that exists between our ways of doing theology and those of our neighbours. As the Hindu theologian Parimal Patil points out, whereas in the Christian tradition, theology today is being pursued in the academy and institutional context, this is not the case with Hindu theology.¹⁴ Therefore, it would be wrong to expect from our neighbours that they bring out from their perspective *interpretation* of Jesus Christ. In fact, all those insights and intuitions on Jesus and his mystery by our neighbours are not from the academic and institutional context, but from life-experiences. And that is precisely why they are bound to be fragmentary. There is no pretension of offering a comprehensive interpretation of Jesus Christ, which perhaps might have been the case, if their interpretation were to emanate from any institutional space.

¹³ Seichi Yagi, "Christ and Buddha", in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus. Op.cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁴ Parimal G. Patil, "A Hindu Theologian's Response: A Prolegomenon to Christian God, Hindu God" in Francis Clooney, *Hindu God and Christian God*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, pp. 185 - 195.

Varying Grades of Encounter with the Mystery of Christ

The mystery of Jesus Christ cannot be reduced to our mental categories. This is to state the obvious. However, this needs to be said, because of our constant temptation to identify logic and consistency of our language with reality and truth.¹⁵ The experience and encounter with the person and message of Jesus is bound to break our cherished concepts and mental frames.

Taking into account the “Christology” of our neighbours means that we do not rule out different grades and modes in their encounter with Jesus Christ and his mystery. This is to realize in a different way the partial and fragmentary character that accompanies all our encounters with Christ. From the New Testament we know that there was a wide variety of patterns in the discipleship of Jesus. There were the twelve who were constantly in the company of Jesus, and the seventy-two disciples who followed him, women who were accompanying Jesus, and the few who were present at his crucifixion.. Then we have Nathanael who, perhaps, out of curiosity (cf. Jn 1: 45-51) wanted to acquaint himself with Jesus, and Nicodemus who visited him at night, and the centurion who was so very impressed by Jesus that he uttered something which has been recorded as part of the faith of the early Christian community: “Truly, this man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15:39). Then, we have Joseph of Arimathea who came in touch with the wounded body of Jesus, even though there was no need for him to concern himself about the burial of Jesus. How poor the Gospels would be if we were to reduce them to only what the twelve disciples had to say about Jesus Christ. The various disciples of Jesus did not experience him in the same way or in the

¹⁵ In this connection I would add that, though logic is meant as a tool to the comprehension of reality, what has happened is a divorce between the two, in such a way that logic and mental representation of reality were allowed to have their own formal world of inhabitation, cut off from the actual reality and experience. In this regard, it is instructive to note that in Indian tradition we have an elaborate system of medieval logic which in some of its basics seemed to have originated from the medical practice of *Ayurveda*. The connection between illness and the inference of its causes (diagnostics) seemed to have been at the basis for the logic of causality, as well as the theory of inference. Cf. “Did Logic Originate in the Discussions of Ayur-veda Physicians?” in Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 2000 (reprint), pp. 392 ff.

same degree; there was a *difference* among them in the way and in the degree.

If we believe that Jesus continues to be with the humanity (Emmanuel) through his Spirit, how could we discount the ever new encounters of people with him and his teachings. In Asia we can be happy of an enrichment of "Christology", because it is not only the small community of Christians, but a large number of devotees of Jesus Christ continue to encounter him, and their experiences lead us to understand new depths in the inexhaustible mystery of Jesus. It is also important to note that the encounter with Jesus and his message has transformed people, and for them what is most important is not a conceptual definition of the reality of Jesus as narrating vividly their deeper experiences. These narrations and experiences could become an important source for Jesus-interpretation.

I think the Christian community should learn to appreciate and value not only the experiences and encounters of its neighbours with Jesus Christ, but should also realize the widespread influence of these encounters on the larger society. I think of a person like Sri Ramakrishna who was an illiterate but a great mystique. No one has influenced the contemporary religious life of India as this illiterate mystique. He narrated his own mystical experience of Jesus, so much so when the Ramakrishna Mission was founded on Christmas day, it is said that the monks took the oath to be "Christs". Who can deny the influence of the teachings of Jesus on Ram Mohan Roy, the influence of the self-sacrifice of Jesus and his sermon on the Mount on Gandhi? ¹⁶ The great modern social reformer Jyotirao Phule derived much inspiration through his acquaintance with the Gospel and the person of Jesus.¹⁷ In the light of these and similar instances, I think it could be stated without exaggeration that, what our neighbours of other faiths have learnt of Jesus and from his message exerted

¹⁶ Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Christians amidst Other Communities", *Jeevadhara*, 31 : 181 (2001) 69 – 85.

¹⁷ Cf. Dhanjay Keer, *Mahatma Jotirao Phooley* [sic]. *Father of Indian Social Revolution*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1974; Cf. also Uma Chakravarthi., *Rewriting History. The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women, Delhi 2000.

far greater influence on India than the preaching of Jesus done by the Christian community during two thousand years. It may not be proper to say that our neighbours should learn from Christ and the Gospels only what the Christian community teaches! If they learn more than what the Christian community can teach them, are they to blame?

Political Consequences of Totalizing Claims

The recognition of the fragmentary character in our approach to the mystery of Jesus Christ and our partial encounters are but invitations for an ever more intense and fuller encounter with him. If from epistemological, theological and biblical perspectives we understand the fragmentary and partial nature of all our interpretations of Jesus, we need to pay also serious attention to the political importance of such an approach. Formulations and claims in exclusive terms about Christ do not end up with words and expressions. They have serious *political consequences*, especially in view of the burden of colonial history identified with the religion of the colonizers. To say this does not imply giving up the prophetic dimension of Christianity.¹⁸ On the other hand, if as Christians believe that the mystery of God's communion with humanity is manifested in Christ, how could it be that the proclamation of this communion, takes place by alienating and excluding people? That would be to set the mystery of Christ in contradiction. Therefore, there should be a way by which Christ is proclaimed so as not to exclude our neighbours who believe in other mediations of grace and salvation. This is a challenging and indeed an exciting task, and here would lie the originality of an Asian or Indian Christ-interpretation.

What is happening in our continent is something which affect the shape of the Christology to come. Let me highlight but one element of this contribution. There was a time – it was not long ago – one of the questions debated was about the salvation of “holy pagans”. One may remember in this connection the contribution of a theologian like Jean Danielou, who wrote precisely on “the holy

¹⁸ Cf. Felix Wilfred, “Martyrdom in Religious Traditions”, in *Concilium* 2003/1.

pagans".¹⁹ The theology had to accommodate to the fact that there are saintly people outside the confines of the Church. Subsequent developments led to a rediscovery of the patristic thought on *logos spermatikos* (seeds of the divine word) spread all over the world. What the Asian theology has done in the issue of theology of religions – consequently in Christology – is to push the question further to new frontiers.

New Horizons

First of all Asian theology has raised the question of the salvation not only of individuals outside Christian economy, but the role of religions themselves in regard to ultimate salvation. Secondly, it has raised the question which is indissociably related to the first, namely about mediators of salvation in other religious traditions.

Thirdly, it has developed a theology of religions rooted in the actual experience of the *reality* of relationship and dialogue with peoples of other faiths, different from a kind of "speculative" theology of religions which is caught up in the cage of *mental representation* and its categories. Fourthly, the theology of religions Asia has developed is such that it cannot be reduced to one more theology leaving all the traditional theological approaches and treatises as they are; it rather impels us to revise all the branches of theology because of its far-reaching implications for other Christian doctrines. The most debated area of theology consequent upon the Asian theology of religions is Christology, though other areas of theology need also to undergo a significant rethinking and consideration.

Pedagogy of Encounter

The fragmentary approach to Jesus-interpretation as well as the Asian theology of religions, call for some practical measures. I would like to highlight three such measures: Pedagogy of encounter, developing of appropriate language and finally

¹⁹ Cf. Jean Danielou, *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament*, Green & Co, London, 1957; ID., *The Salvation of Nations*, London, 1955. Danielou spoke of the Cosmic Covenant of God with humanity of which the covenant in Christ is the fulfillment.

overcoming the chasm between the theological developments and pastoral realities. We shall go into these aspects in the following pages.

When church-leaders, theologians and Christian communities are bent on bringing to others their faith-understanding of Jesus Christ, one thing they often fail to pay attention to is that there is something like the pedagogy also in matters of faith. By and large the regrettable absence of this pedagogy in Christian mission history has caused enormous harm and difficulties in our relationship with our neighbours. Cross may be a “stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (I Cor. 1: 23). This, however, has not been the case with the neighbours in our parts of Asia. What has been really scandalous is that the supreme message of love and compassion of Jesus could be proclaimed through the centuries of mission history with so much insensitivity and lack of understanding for the spiritual experience of others and their religious traditions. The present-day openness that we find in the attitude of the Churches to other religious traditions need to be accompanied by a pedagogy of encounter. The basic lesson I learnt in pedagogy was that it is not a matter of *making others do* what we want, but rather leading others *to wish* what is best for them. This calls for respect for the intellectual, inner and spiritual development of each person and groups.

Our approach to truth and reality cannot be in terms of black and white. There is something like the *grey zone* which needs to be taken into account. This grey zone is not something to be regretted about, but something to be viewed as enriching. For, it is the terrain where we encounter the other. Here we may find the intersection of our experiences with those of others and the conjunction of our perspectives with the persuasion of others. Moving on the grey zone is not a weakness or compromise, but a sign of spiritual maturity. The borderlines on the grey zone cease to be walls or fences but become source of creative possibilities. The pedagogy of encounter means that the Christian community is equipped with *the art of negotiating the boundaries* between its experience of Jesus and the religious experience of others regarding God’s mediation of salvation. If this pedagogy of encounter becomes a part – as it should be – in the Christian communities, any fear or feeling of threat would become unfounded.

We can look at the matter from an anthropological perspective as well. The capacity for language and expression inherent in human beings is not limited to a single language. Theoretically, the human potentiality for language is infinite. It is this which makes possible for a human person to reach out and to be able to learn other languages – each one of which is a new and refreshing encounter. Learning the language of the other does not amount to the loss of one's own language, compromising it, or confusing the two. If the ultimate and abiding reality is love, it would be anomalous that precisely the language of religious experiences should divide us from others. Our experience of Jesus Christ as God's embodiment of love will spur us on to meet the other in what he or she values as most important in their lives – their deep spiritual and religious experience, which includes also their belief in mediations. What we have said has its pastoral implications.

Developing an Appropriate Language

The conceptual language, which is but one mode of human communication, has claimed the prerogative of explicating the mystery of Jesus. One of the challenges we face in Asia is to develop the kind of language that will speak to us more intensely about him. There have been a lot of symbols which functioned as windows to the understanding of the reality of Jesus. The love for images, and metaphors in the Asian ethos need to be brought to bear upon also in our approach to the understanding of the mystery of Jesus. Stories are also powerful means through which we come to realize important truths. We cannot wait for a total story; all our stories are only fragmentary and partial, and yet they have a power to carry us to the realization of truth. This is something which the one-time vogue programme of "demythologization" did not take into account. This is also the case with the protracted discussions regarding Jesus of history and Christ of faith, that has been so very central in modern western Christological debates.

What we have in Asia (specially speaking of realities that go beyond our rational categories) is a blending of symbols and interpretations, history and myths. These are not placed in opposition to one another. Consequently any programme or debate that would go into Christology by making neat distinction between

Jesus of history and Christ of faith would not find any vibration in our cultures and traditions. All this is enough indication of the need to develop the kind of language that will bring the mystery of Jesus closer to our context and experiences. Language is much more than a simple tool for communication. Language structures the way we perceive the reality and make sense of the world. In this connection, we need to also mention the importance of art which overcomes the dichotomy between subject and object, reality and representation. Art does not simply copy the reality; there is a process by which the representation of reality passes through the subject and his or her experiences. In fact, as I noted earlier for our neighbours, art has been an important avenue for the approach to Jesus. Every piece of art is fragmentary, and yet it opens up infinite horizons of meaning and signification.

Theologically Fat and Pastorally Starving

The third measure in the fragmentary approach to the mystery of Jesus is to overcome the gulf between theology and pastoral praxis in the Christian communities.

It is a fact that the overwhelming majority of Christians in Asia is brought up with little or no knowledge about the faith of their neighbours and their belief in divine mediations. For many pastors and priests any positive reference to other religious traditions remains a taboo, and if they venture to speak in a positive tone about other religious traditions, and divine mediators, they risk their position on account of the reaction of the Christian communities entrenched in deep and centuries-old prejudices. This being the case, it may not be wrong to characterize the overall praxis of Christian communities as exclusive ones.

One may argue that there has been a change in the attitude of Christianity towards other religious traditions. This is certainly true if we examine the official documents of the Roman Catholic Church and those of the World Council of Churches. In spite of these statements, and debates and controversies involving theologians and Church-leaders, what has not happened – at least not in any significant way – is the change in the ground reality. The political consequence I mentioned earlier derives from the position of Christian communities, their attitudes, and not from the changes in the official statements of the Churches – assuming, of course, that these are open enough. The situation is one in which the

official statements are becoming theologically fat, so to say, whereas the Christian communities are allowed to starve.

This anomalous situation needs to be changed. This is possible when ways and means are devised and effective measures are taken to feed the Christian communities with the religious experiences and insights of our neighbours of other faiths, their faith in mediations and their insightful interpretations of the mystery of Jesus. This involves also the efforts to introduce them to the truth that entering into the world of the religious experience of our neighbours and their faith in divine mediators, does not contradict the faith and commitment of Christians to the person of Jesus. The future development of the theology of religion in Asia needs to take into account this pastoral responsibility and should be able to respond to these needs. What point is there to imagine that we have an Asian Christology, if we speak of Jesus in terms of avatar, guru etc., when the Christian communities have the faintest notions of what these categories mean in the experience of the neighbours of other faiths? Further, the Christian communities need to be led to appreciate the fragmentary approaches of our neighbours towards Jesus, his person and message. The Christian community should not belittle these approaches, as though it were in possession of an exhaustive understanding of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

This article is an invitation to appreciate the fragments in Jesus-interpretation, as a methodology. I have tried to avoid, as far as possible, the terminology of "Christology" for fear that what has been said may fall short of a comprehensive interpretation of Jesus as is expected by this term. In a multi-religious context like the one in Asia, it is important to focus our attention on our life-situations and read through them the person and message of Jesus Christ. When we do so, we see innumerable images of Jesus in relation to our different experiences and contexts.

Similarly, our neighbours of other faiths have their own appreciation for Jesus and paint their own images of him. We will be mistaken to view these images of Jesus by our neighbours as though they are simply humanistic. The kind of contrast implied therein, namely human and divine is a distinction which Asia shuns to make. For, it is the general conviction among the Asians that anything deeply human shares in the divine. In this sense there is more than mere humanistic approach to Jesus-

interpretation in our neighbours. The way they understand him and experience him shows their faith in his divinity. Did not one of the great Asian seekers of Jesus, Keshub Chunder Sen, speak of Jesus' "*divine humanity*"? The mystical experience of Jesus by Ramakrishna has much more than a mere humanistic interpretation of Jesus. Is there not an element of "faith" as well in their approach to Jesus Christ?

The attitude with which we the Christian communities need to approach the neighbours in their interpretation of Jesus is not one of possessing a full understanding of Jesus, whereas the others have only partial understanding of him. It cannot be also an attitude which would say we Christians have faith in Jesus Christ, whereas the others do not have. Is it not true that the Christian community itself is also in a deeper quest for Jesus Christ? The fragmentary and plural character of all our approaches calls for as a practical measure the development of a pedagogy of encounter with our neighbours. This is very different from the imposing attitude which might say, "This is how Jesus Christ is explained. Take it or leave it. On your decision will depend your salvation or damnation". This is certainly not the way Asians approach ultimate realities. There needs to be also the development of an appropriate language that would vibrate with the experiences of our neighbours, and which would respect their "faith" in him. Finally, a good beginning will be made in this direction, if the openness towards other religious traditions contained in the various documents are translated into pastoral practice, and the gulf between the two is bridged.