

AN INDIAN QUEST FOR A RELEVANT CHRISTOLOGY

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During the homily on the Epiphany a question was thrown to the people, "In which continent was Jesus born"? Among the 200 present, many said, "He was born in America", and some "He was born in Europe". The reason they gave was that Christianity came to us from the West and therefore that Jesus must have been a westerner by birth.¹ If Christians think that Jesus was born in a western country, certainly, we can not expect the ordinary Hindus and others in this country to know that Jesus was born in Asia. However this is an indication that many in India, both Christians and non-Christians still hold Christianity as alien to the Indian soil.

Though Christianity has a tradition of 2000 years in India, it is still considered foreign and not rooted in the Indian soil. People have such perceptions due to the western character impressed in our church buildings, in theology, doctrines, rites of worship and way of life. The dependence on the West for finance, leadership

¹ The author of this article put this question to 200 persons on 5-1-2003, in a village called Chinthalakottai, near Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu.

and guidance give room for suspicion about our national credibility. Accusations are also there that the commitment of the Churches to the Indian society is only shallow and peripheral because they keep their permanent moorings only outside India. This western face of the churches has been a hindrance for people in the East, especially in India, to come closer to the high ideals of dharma preached by Jesus and find him relevant to their lives.²

The current situation prevailing in India which disadvantages Christianity to function as a 'missionary-religion', has created a fear complex among most of the church organizations about their future survival. Therefore the most important agenda for any church institution seems to be economic stability, self-sufficiency and regular income on the one hand, and a self-protective and defensive attitude on the other. Secular functionaries and progressive forces are often viewed with suspicion.³

The open and dialogical attitude advocated in the Second Vatican Council and the option on behalf of the poor talked-about under the influence of liberation theologies in the 70's and 80's is all fading in their effectiveness and sharpness. The shadow that pervades the Indian churches seems to be globalization and liberalization policies. As a result, a kind of pragmatism, typical of the market-economy, has become the hidden-norm behind decision making policies.⁴

As a result, Christianity is not able to present the original concerns of Jesus to the Indian masses and make them relevant to their lives. The human and dynamic Jesus reaching out to the suffering and the needy without counting the costs and losses, is eclipsed and distorted. Jesus who was totally immersed in the life

² Cf. Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, Mary Knoll, 1988; George Soares-Prabhu, *Inculturation, Liberation, Dialogue*, Pune, JDV, 1984; Robin Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*, New Delhi : ISPCK, 1989; Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations*, Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, 1994; Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000; Amaladass, Gispert-Sauch T. K. John, *Theologising in India*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981.

³ M. Amaladoss, "Our Mission in India Today", *Vaiharai* 6 (Sept. - Dec. 2001) 3 - 18.

⁴ M. Amaladoss, "Our Mission in India Today," 3 - 18.

of the suffering masses stands alienated from them, due to the western face given to Him by the Indian Churches, the institutional weight loaded on Him and the business-like relationship assigned to Him.

There have been several attempts in the past as well as in contemporary times to read the life and message of Jesus from the Indian social and cultural contexts.⁵ But most of them proved inadequate due to lack of right starting points and right methodologies. At this juncture, the Christological method of Sebastin Kappen, an Indian theologian, can throw some fresh insights in the attempt to interpret Jesus validly to the socio-cultural challenges in India today. Therefore a brief study is made into the method followed by Kappen in making Jesus relevant to the Indian context.

Methodology of Sebastin Kappen

The methodology followed by Kappen in the interpretation of Jesus to the Indian situation is contextual and historical. It is contextual in the sense that it does not start from a general academic concern or historical curiosity about Jesus. But it emerges out of a commitment to the Indian situation and reads the life and message of Jesus from this specific contextual platform. It is historical in the sense that there is an attempt towards going back to the times of Jesus, in view of re-discovering or re-capturing the radical spirit of Jesus. In other words, Sebastin Kappen follows a method called 'creative-fidelity' to find the point of relevance Jesus in the Indian soil. This calls for rediscovering the radical nature of the message of Jesus, remaining at the sametime faithful to His original spirit, to interpret the message with creativity and commitment to the current situation.⁶

⁵ For a detailed and systematic study on the past efforts on Indianisation, both by the Catholic and Protestant sides, Cf. Robin Boyd, *Indian Christian Theology*; Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations*.

⁶ A. Maria David, *An Indian Quest for a Relevant Theology: A Study into the Theology of Sebastin Kappen in the Context of India Today*, (unpublished M.Th. dissertation) (Pune : JVD, 1989), 42-83.

Re-discovering the Radical Nature of the Message of Jesus

To attempt to explore the original message and spirit of Jesus, the historical-critical method is employed. It is true that neither it is possible to enter totally into the person and world of Jesus, in spite of the advanced biblical scholarship today, nor is it an absolute necessity for faith in Jesus.⁷ According to the present hermeneutical understanding when a text is freed from the author it becomes independent and is open to new interpretations depending on the new contexts it meets. Therefore it may not be necessary to unearth the intentions of the author or the person of the author for a valid interpretation.⁸ However, historical critical approach still remains valid in biblical interpretation and serves as a protective tool to check the intentional or circumstantial deviations and distortions. Kappen claims that the Jesus portrayed by Christianity is mythical and theological. Therefore he follows the historical-critical method before venturing into the interpretation of Jesus in the Indian context. In this process, first the historical distortions are pointed out and then a proper understanding of Jesus is spelt out.

A Distorted Understanding of Jesus and His Mission

When we have a critical look at the gospels and the developments in the early Christianity one notices that a gradual distortion has taken place regarding the understanding of the life and message of Jesus. Jesus who was part of our history was replaced in Christian piety by the risen Christ, regarded as above history, as eternal and immutable. As a result he is seen as one

⁷ Serious objections were raised by J. Kottukapally about the attempt of Kappen to base his interpretation on the historical Jesus. Cf. A.M.Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998), 192. To the objections of J. Kottukapally, A. M. Mundadan replies, "I get the impression that he wanted to go beyond and behind this Kerygma for a reinterpretation of Jesus' mission to suit an existential need of the present", A.M.Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology*, 193.

⁸ G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "Commitment and Conversion: A Biblical Hermeneutics for India Today- A Proposal for Discussion", (unpublished paper presented at the XIV Conference of the SBS) (Bangalore, 1990), 4-5; J. Susaimanickam, "Tamizhaga Choolalil Viviliya Porulkoliyal," *Marai Aruvi*, 24 : 3-4 (2001), 47 - 66.

separated from the human level and restricted to the divine level. Myths and cults arose around him making him a celestial and sacred power whose concern is to cherish the rituals and sacrifices and who never taints himself with the everyday concerns of the toiling people.⁹

He was also reduced to mere dogmatic concepts such as "Son of Man, the Word Incarnate, the Messiah, the Redeemer and so on,"¹⁰ which robbed him of his humanity and buried him further into the ideological world of the intellectuals. Therefore one of the major concerns of Kappen is to collaborate with "all those who cherish the vision and hope of Jesus to set him free from the prison-house of cult, dogma, and institutionalism so that he can freely go about pointing , as of old, his accusing finger at the scribes, Pharisees, elders, priests, and Herods of today."¹¹

When one looks back to the origin of this process of degradation, its traces are found in the New Testament itself. On many instances Matthew waters down the radicalism of Jesus to accommodate the message to his situation. For example, Matthew modifies the original words of Jesus 'Blessed are the poor' (Lk 6:20), into "Blessed are the poor in spirit", (Mt 5:3). The words of Jesus to the rich young man, "Go, and sell what you have, and give to the poor"(Mk 10:21), are made into a conditional demand when he changes them to "If you would be perfect, go, sell....." (Mt 19:21). Further, while teaching about law, only Matthew has these words, "whoever then breaks one of the least of these commandments and others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven"(Mt 5:19). In Mark and Luke this addition is not found. The same trend can be found in the writings of Paul too.

But some passages in Luke give us a clue to re-discover the humanness of Jesus and the prophetic nature of his message. In Luke 2:52 we find, "As Jesus grew up he advanced in wisdom and

⁹ S.Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1977), 175.

¹⁰ S. Kappen, *Jesus Today*, (Madras: AICUF Publications, 1985), 175.

¹¹ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom* , 23.

in favour with God and man", which shows that Jesus was not provided with a blue print for action right from the beginning of his public life, but had to gradually grow in awareness of his mission by reading the signs of the times. In the beatitudes instead of the interpreted version of Matthew which reads 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (Mt 5:5), Luke has it as "Blessed are you poor" (Lk 6:20), thus hinting at the direct and radical approach of Jesus to his contemporary situation.¹²

While analysing the causes for the decline of prophetic spirit and revolutionary urge in Christianity, Kappen points out that the failure of Christianity to translate its project of hope into a historical praxis has landed it on an exclusive spiritual plane and substituted radicalism with institutionalism. The project of hope should be given a historical expression. It should take hold of the affected persons and groups who use it as a theoretical weapon for political action. In the absence of such a historical expression or praxis, they would find alternatives in a religiosity of escape entrusting to God the task of changing the conditions of exploitation and domination.¹³

According to Kappen, this process of substitution has taken place, in three phases, all connected to each other.

The early Christian community had expected that the reign of God will be established very soon. But there was no symptom of immediate coming of the Kingdom. So they took to alternative interpretation and concluded that God has already come in Jesus and that the Church was the Kingdom of God.¹⁴

The alliance of the Church with Greco-Roman cultures and the wealthy classes added to the strengthening of the institutionalized character.¹⁵

¹² S. Kappen, *Jesus Today*, 176.

¹³ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Cultural Revolution* (Bombay, Bandra: The Bombay Industrial League for Development, 1983), 32.

¹⁴ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Cultural Revolution*, 30.

¹⁵ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Cultural Revolution*, 32.

The decline of prophecy came to a climax when "in the fourth century, Christianity was adopted as state religion by emperor Constantine, thus opening an era of unholy alliance between the Cross and the imperial sword".¹⁶

A Right Understanding of Jesus and His Mission

While pointing out certain distortions in the message of Jesus, both in the New Testament as well as during history, Kappen also underlines some aspects in Jesus which reveal him in right perspective.

The Human Jesus Rooted in His Situation

The distancing of Jesus from his very person and mission and his absorption into the Greco-Roman traditions totally eclipsed the human dimension in Him. He was depicted as one descended from above and far removed from the human plane. A descending Christology was operative and gave a celestial flavour to every aspect in Jesus and in the life of the Church. Such a celestial Jesus, though remains an attractive personality, nevertheless, is alienated from the human beings.

But the Jesus pictured in the Synoptic gospels, according to Kappen is, "a man among men, a member of the family of men",¹⁷ and he was seen as, "rooted in the soil, as inserted in the current of history".¹⁸ Here divinity and humanity in Jesus are not viewed as polarities, rather, as well integrated and inter-related aspects. He was so thoroughly human and intensely involved in human affairs that people could glimpse the divine in him through his ordinary human actions¹⁹

Often Kappen is misunderstood for his explanation of Jesus as a human person. Accusations are also there that he denies or

¹⁶ S. Kappen, *Liberation Theology and Marxism*, 13.

¹⁷ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 19.

¹⁸ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 25.

¹⁹ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 25.

minimises the divinity of Jesus.²⁰ But Kappen's explanation of the divinity of Jesus emerges from a contextual concern and echoes the subaltern or popular traditions of India. In the popular traditions, divinity is not considered totally otherworldly or descending from above, but while experiencing or acknowledging transcendence, it is seen as related to history, nature and to the life situations of people.²¹ The experience of the presence of the divine is also not a silent or passive moment, but an in-breaking or explosive moment, which is being celebrated collectively. Such an understanding of divinity highlights the importance of socio-cultural relationship as a window to divine encounters.²²

Depth Dimension in Human Relationship

The rootedness of Jesus in human situation and his identification with the oppressed of the society was not merely peripheral and shallow. It had a depth dimension as shown by his table fellowship with the outcasts. Normally, dining together was an expression of social intimacy in any culture, and much more for the Jews. The upper class Jews scrupulously avoided sharing meals together with the so called sinners and the impure. But Jesus freely shared table fellowship with the outcasts and the despised, which

²⁰ Cassian R. Agera, "Counter- Culture: Ideas and Ideologies", *Indian Missiological Review*, 10:4 (1988), 414 – 415.

²¹ In the subaltern traditions persons who have performed heroic deeds and died, persons who sacrificed their life for a common cause or killed unjustly, or young women who are killed or have committed suicide on some account are all considered deities. During festivals a particular person is considered divinely possessed for some time. The concept of the Divine as eternal and immutable is not found in the popular traditions. Cf. Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1991; Wilson, B. *Protest and Absorption Process in Devasahayam Pillai Folk Drama Performed in the Villages of South Travancore*, (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation), Chennai: University of Madras, 1994; A. Maria David, *Hindu-Christian Relationship and Basic Christian Communities in the District of Kanyakumari* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation), (Chennai: University of Madras, 1999), 26-28.

²² For an enumerative-description of folk-deities among the *Arunthathiar* people, Cf. Mark, *Arunthathiar Vazhum Varalaru*, Palayamkottai: Department of Folklore, St.Xavier's College, 2001.

irked the Jewish hierarchy and thus led to further confrontations with them.

According to Kappen, it is in this depth dimension of human relationship that Jesus meets God. "Like the prophets before him Jesus knew only one way of meeting God, namely through loving one's neighbour."²³ The human encounters not only became divine encounters for Jesus, but they also radiated divinity in Him. His stubborn refusals to be lifted to the heavenly realm and firm determination to be fully human, a man among men, son of Mary and Joseph, reveals the divinity in him.²⁴ "It is the millions who call him 'brother' that constitute him as son of God. For God is not outside the human community. He is the depth dimension of the love that binds the many into the one".²⁵ Thus it becomes clear that in the life of Jesus, experience of humanness in relationship with others becomes the experience of God and it enables Him to embody and emanate the Divine.

The Radical Nature of the Response of Jesus to His situation

While dealing with any particular situation or problem Jesus did not approach it marginally with a mere momentary concern. He searched deep to find out the structural cause behind any problem and to eradicate it by its root so as to create new conditions for the emergence of new values and new relations. Jesus' teaching, miracles and his attitude towards the religious and political structures of his day reveal the radical approach of Jesus in dealing with any situation.

Regarding the religious matters, though most sensitive and central to the whole edifice of Jewish life, Jesus was overtly critical of its practices. "His radical interpretation of the Law, his rejection of the distinction between the sacred and the profane, his re-affirmation of the primacy of love over cult, and his prediction of the destruction of the temple, undermined the religious authority

²³ S. Kappen, *Jesus Today*, 127.

²⁴ S. Kappen, *Jesus Today*, 187.

²⁵ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 135.

of the High Priesthood".²⁶ So he did not consider cult, rituals and laws as necessary pre-conditions to commune with God. But he introduced an entirely new criterion to commune with God, "namely, rectitude of the heart measured in terms of brotherly love"²⁷

In opposing the oppressive religious practices, laws and traditions, Jesus did not limit his protest to individual violations and arguments, but he questioned the very power centres which perpetuated such meaningless and inhuman religious practices. The cleansing of the temple is a telling evidence of Jesus' challenge to the whole hierarchy of religious powers which used religion as a means to exploit the people. One can notice that the prophetic protest of Jesus also contains, "a prophetic call for a new kind of religious symbolism geared to the creation of a world of beauty, truth and love, in response to the challenge of the living God of history".²⁸ Thus a double dimension in the radical approach of Jesus, called, 'constructive-subversive praxis', is seen where Jesus' critique of religion is at the same time the inauguration of a new form of religion that has its focal point in man's encounter with the living God who acts in history.²⁹

The radicalism of Jesus towards the political structures and aspirations of people finds special relevance in the thinking of Kappen. The attitude of Jesus differed greatly from those who expected him to become king in order to overthrow the Roman rule, as well as from the Zealots who wanted to bring theocracy in Palestine by the use of violence. But Jesus was not indifferent to political slavery during his time. But "his very commitment to the kingdom as community of freedom brought him into conflict with the political power not only of Rome but also of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem and of Herod in Galilee."³⁰ A wider application of the response of Jesus would mean that Jesus' attitude remains a threat

²⁶ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 114.

²⁷ S. Kappen, *Jesus Today*, 121.

²⁸ S. Kappen, *Jesus Today*, 129.

²⁹ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 130.

³⁰ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 114.

to all states, institutions, structures and persons who use authority to dominate and belittle others.

The description of the radical approach of Jesus as 'creative-subversive praxis' finds a right expression in the miracles of Jesus. The miracles of Jesus indicate the in-breaking of the reign of God. His determination to reach out to the afflicted disregarding the Jewish laws, rituals and traditions reveal the subversive character of the response. The joy of healing and the experience of wholeness and freedom by the sick, the afflicted, the dead, and those in various needs are nothing else but the experience of the joy of the reign of God, which is the creative aspect of the radical response of Jesus.³¹

Relevance of Jesus in the Indian Context

Re-interpretation of the Message of Jesus in the Indian Context

The effort to find the relevance of Jesus in the Indian context has some difficulties or limitations. One is the historical distance of Jesus and the other is the drastic change in the world-view from the time of Jesus to this day. Therefore, in this process the historically conditioned aspects in the life, words and deeds of Jesus are distinguished from the perennially valid ones. Here the basic factor is that as Jesus responded to the call of God revealed in the historical situations of his time, we too respond to the call of God which comes to us through our situations today. For our response, we take the radical response of Jesus as our norm.³²

In the life and message of Jesus we witness the emergence of a new force in history for the liberation of man, a force at once human and divine, subversive and constructive. Relevance of Jesus today requires a re-interpretation of this liberative message of Jesus and an identification of the 'subversive-constructive' forces in contemporary society. Thus we are basically faithful to Jesus' concerns and make him relevant to today's situation. This process is called 'creative-fidelity'. In this process we free Jesus' message

³¹ S. Kappen, *Jesus Today*, 34-39.

³² S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 175.

from its historical conditioning and translate it into today's language. In other words, we make it possible for him to go beyond himself and discover his true identity in our age.³³

Wrong Methods in the Re-interpretation of Jesus in the Indian Context

Kappen points out certain wrong approaches often taken by theologians in finding the relevance of Jesus in Indian traditions. Efforts in the past have depicted Jesus as one among the many Indian 'class Gods' and promoted Indian ritualistic practices around Him.³⁴ This happened because "theologians" often started with the assumption that Christianity is a cultic religion and then proceeded to integrate into it elements from Hindu rituals. Thus the estrangement of the prophetic movement of Jesus into a cultic religion is further accentuated on the Indian soil³⁵

The idea of 'Cosmic Christ', which holds that Christ is present invisibly in other religions and the idea of 'anonymous Christians', which absorbs the good values present in non-Christian religions as part of Christianity have to be seen critically. This is Christian imperialism under a new guise, seeking to annex the non-Christian world through an act of ideological aggression, as though to offset the bankruptcy of the theology of conversion.³⁶

A Right Starting Point

Our starting point for a meaningful approach to the Indian or Asian situation must be the Gospel, already re-interpreted from the standpoint of the historical Jesus and his radical response. When we relate with this open attitude, we need to keep in mind two factors. One is that the Indian society does not depend solely on the Christian presence for transformative action, because long before

³³ S. Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom*, 28.

³⁴ The reference here is to the Sanskrit interpretation of Jesus and Christianity done by the Christian Ashram movements and inculturation attempts. Cf. D.S. Amalorpavadoss, *Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981.

³⁵ D.S. Amalorpavadoss, *Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, 44.

³⁶ S. Kappen, *Liberation Theology and Marxism*, 48-49.

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the Christians took the lead in social struggle the people of India have drawn inspiration from the oppressive situations themselves as well as from the religious and secular ideologies.³⁷ The other one is that when we involve in the Indian situation we have to be aware that it is not the established and the institutionalised religio-cultural traditions that are agents of transformative and radical change. But it is the socio-political movements of protest and dissent, starting from Buddha up to the present age that are counterparts of the radical 'constructive-subversive praxis' of Jesus in India.³⁸

Drawing inspiration for a meaningful presence and interpretation of Christianity from the Indian traditions of dissent does not undermine or devalue Jesus or His message in any way. The message of Jesus can bring to the scene its own power to illumine and to inspire. Its role is one of reinforcing the energies of the new age that are already fomenting in Indian society³⁹ As practical steps to find a meaningful presence of Jesus in the Indian situation today, those who claim to be the disciples of Jesus and servants of the Kingdom, need to shed off monopolistic attitudes and closed outlooks. With an open mind, the churches must transcend the limits of our parishes and dioceses and collaborate with all the movements, religious and secular, working towards the transformation of the society. Thus we may accelerate the realization of the ideals of Jesus.⁴⁰

³⁷ Among the secular ideologies, Kappen deals extensively with Marxism. He discusses the critique of religion by Karl Marx in his book *Marxian Atheism*. He offers his critical outlooks on Christian theology from Marxian perspectives and Marxism from Christian perspectives, highlighting positive and negative elements in both, in his book, *Liberation Theology and Marxism*. Cf. A. Maria David, *An Indian Quest for a Relevant Theology*, 57-62.

³⁸ A.M. David, *An Indian Quest for a Relevant Theology*, 48-59. Among the socio-religious movements of dissent Kappen mentions Buddhism, Bhakti movement which started in Tamil Nadu, the Maharashtrian movements such as the Manabhav sect founded by Chakradhara in the 12th century and the movements by other Maratha saints Namdev, Gora, Choka Mela and Tukaram. Cf. S. Kappen, *Jesus and Cultural Revolution*.

³⁹ S. Kappen, *Liberation Theology and Marxism*, 49.

⁴⁰ M. Arokiasamy, *The Christian Life and Ministry in the Diocese of Kottar*, (Pastoral Letter) (Nagercoil: Bishop's House, 1986), 10.

Conclusion

Sebastin Kappen is a pioneer in venturing into an Indian interpretation of Jesus. He has dealt with several themes in detail. I have not done a comprehensive presentation of his reflections here. I have only briefly and succinctly highlighted his interpretation of Jesus in the Indian context. Some of his reflections are also controversial in nature.⁴¹ The purpose of this article is not to enter into the doctrinal aspects of his reflections, but to underline the existential nature of his interpretation which stems from the experience of the complex Indian situation and the reluctance of the Christianity to respond to it meaningfully.

One needs to pay attention to the fact that Kappen's effort is not merely an intellectual gimmick or an academic exercise. But it is the result of concern and commitment to the situation. His interpretation of Jesus evokes the same commitment in others and above all, makes Jesus relevant and Christianity meaningful to the Indian situation.

⁴¹ A.M. Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998, 171-197; Cassian R. Agera, "Counter-Culture: Ideas and Ideologies", *Indian Missiological Review*, 10:4 (1988), 414-415.