

THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF THE SECULAR PRIESTS IN INDIA TODAY

- Dr. X.D. Selvaraj

- CCBI Centre, Bangalore

Introduction:

'There is no text without a context'- Paulo Freire. Hence, a brief sketch of the present-day context of India/the world and the church in India. The impact of colonialism and its extension of **globalization**, the emergence of a unipolar world, consumerism, the influence of mass media, cutting down of subsidies, homogenization of culture, production of luxury goods, artificially created needs, neglect of the minimum survival needs of the poor, denial of the rights of the poor to their livelihood, as a result the poor die of hunger, two thirds of them being Dalits and Tribals, shutting down of small scale industries, monopolization of raw materials and natural resources, debt trap, unequal trade relations, privatization, liberalization, the role of WB, IMF, WTO and the MNCs, the G.8., etc. have been severe.

Religious fundamentalism linked to political and economic vested interests of some to maintain their social status, power and wealth, ethnocentric superiority of Brahminic Hinduism which denies equality, democracy, freedom, minority rights, plurality of culture in a land of diversity, the caste hierarchy with its discrimination, Hindutva ideology etc. are rampant.

One **Indian church** is almost a myth. There are various images of the church in India, images through dynamic historical forces were/are being continuously constructed, reconstructed and deconstructed. The recent emergence of the Dalit Christians' movements, the patriarchal and hierarchically organized church denying equal participation to women, clerical domination marginalizing laity's active participation, highly institutionalized

church engaged more in social action and charitable work rather than in taking up justice and human rights issues, recent persecution of Christians by Sangh Parivar (RSS-BJP) especially in Gujarat, Orissa and M.P. are the issues at stake now.

In the midst of these fast and profound changes, how can the secular priests exercise their prophetic role is the question before us to address. In other words, in so far as the mission of the church is the continuation of the mission of Christ, how can secular priests incarnate Jesus' prophetic mission today? Or how can secular priests animate Christian communities live the prophetic dimension of Jesus' mission?

Biblical Background

Today's world and Indian situations resemble more of the situation in the period of kings in the Old and of Jesus in the New Testaments. In the history of the Israel, the kings in course of time wrote off Yahweh and took the reins into their own hands. As a result, God's people became king's subjects and, still worse, they became objects of commerce (Amos 8:4-6). Commercial interests supplanted covenantal care and concern. Judges appointed by kings became corrupt by receiving bribes (1Samu 8:1-3; Is 1:16-17, 21-23). Priests became flatterers of the kings, and they remained more loyal to the kings who appointed them, than to God. God was distanced and alienated from the common people and became the object of science in the hands of theologians (priests) in favour of the king against the poor. God was made the object of a cultic show and empty ceremonies in sanctuaries. Religion without spirituality became the burden of the poor on account of heavy taxes and offerings they had to pay to the temple. Naturally, many were made poor and the poor became destitutes and the destitutes were reduced to slavery. The worst form of injustice is done when it is done in the name of God or religion. Thus, when God was almost replaced by the king and betrayed in many ways by rulers and their close associates, He raised his prophets to safeguard his oppressed people.

Who are the Prophets?

- ◆ Prophets were God's messengers of shock therapy to his lethargic people, institutions and royalty; violent critiques to

bring them back to covenantal relationship.

- ◆ Prophets had a radically traditional (conservative) message. They did not preach a new religion but an old religion whose spirituality had been forgotten by the people of their time. They revived the Exodus-God-experience and the life of the 'contrast community' that went with it.
- ◆ Prophets were forth-tellers. They were exegetes of existence from a divine perspective, announcing God's will for a just, equitable and fellowship society and denouncing everything against it (Jer 1:10).

The Historical, Political and Social Involvement of the Prophets

Biblical prophets were men firmly rooted in the historical reality of their people and their life. It was in this rootedness they encountered God and felt called by him to proclaim his message. They discovered Yahweh not so much through introspective meditations and self-awareness, but in the cut, thrust and struggles of historical events.

The prophets' critique of religion and social protest were interconnected (Is 58:1-14; Eze 18:5-9; Hos 6:4-11). As spokesmen of Yahweh, they became social and political dissenters. They used their religious preaching to influence politics. Their oracles during the time of war (1 Kings 20:13ff) influenced the course of history and politics. They anointed and deposed kings. For example Samuel anointed Saul as king of Israel (1Sam 10:1). When God was displeased with Saul, Samuel anointed David as king at God's direction even when Saul was alive. Likewise, Elijah anointed Jehu as king of Israel (1 Kings 19:15ff) when Ahab was still ruling over the northern kingdom. Thus prophets became shapers of history and politics. They were instigators of divinely willed revolutions.

The social protest of Amos wells up from a particular religious ideology, namely, all Israelites should have equal share of the land (Num. 26:52; Lev. 25). But as a matter of fact, a great majority of them had no land. They had been reduced to slavery. So the prophets raised their protest-voice against this injustice done to the poor. In fact, the cry of the prophets from Nathan to Deutero-Isaiah was one of justice and

loving concern for the oppressed. It is to be underlined that their social protest was based on their religious conviction. In other words, their religious conviction took a social and political expression.

In our own country, India, we had Mahatma Gandhi who was basically a religious man. He saw that it was impossible for him to live his religious conviction without being political at the same time. To listen to his own words: "I.... who wear the guise of a politician, am at heart, a religious man."¹ "I can say without the slightest hesitation and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means".² Thus Gandhi's religious conviction was political and his politics was religious. Here one may also recall to mind how in the Philippines, Cardinal Sinn together with 17 Bishops, several major religious superiors and people protested against Ferdinand Marcos through marches, meetings, signature campaigns and celebration of mass in the public, etc. They did contribute to the deposing of Marcos' rule.

The Message of the Prophets

It was one of passionate love and concern for justice to the oppressed of their society. Like Yahweh their God, the prophets took up the cause of the poor with a certain passion unrivalled in the known religious history of humankind. It derives from the God-experience of the prophetic call. Some constant elements in the message of the prophets were:

- To champion the cause of the poor
- To plead for the purification of cult, and
- To demand justice in the rulers.

The theological basis for all this was that God was in favour of the poor and the oppressed and was working for their liberation. This is the meaning of biblical justice, over against the rather narrow understanding of it in the traditional moral theology as giving each one his due.

¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Mahatma Gandhi* (London: 1949), 36.

² John Dhi, *An Autobiography : The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Translation from the Original Gujarathi by M. Desai (Boston: Deacon, 1957), 504.

The prophets felt that cult divorced from justice was a trade between God and humans. It was an insult to and a mockery of God. It was an illusion, because it was carrying out of the business of humans under the pretext of God's will. It gave deceptive and false security, because one was feeling comfortable and all right with God on account of one's sacrifice while one was continuing to crush one's poor neighbors (Is 1:10-17).

The God of the Bible was and is more to be obeyed than to be adored. His deeds are more to be followed than to be merely celebrated. "*I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God and not burnt offering*" (Hos 5:6-8). "*He judges the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me?*" (Jer 22:15-16; Cf 7:3-10). Thus knowledge of God is to do justice to the oppressed. Without commitment to justice, there is no knowledge of God. Yahweh's people were to seek God through justice to his oppressed ones (Mica 6:6-8). Amos puts it beautifully when he says: '*Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*' (Amos 5:24). It means that the pursuit of justice is not something sporadic; it has to rather flow like a running stream, never to stop at any point. The kingly act of Yahweh was to see to the basic rights and needs of the poor who were helpless. His people had to follow his examples of deep compassion and radical concern for the poor and oppressed.

"The Bible does not speak to us of justice simply as a human virtue, but as justice of the Kingdom, the source of which is God, and the violation of which is not just social injustice, but above all, a sin against God".³

The Agony and the Assurance of the Prophets

The prophets belonged to a tradition-bound society. So it was not very easy for them to go against the social and religious conventions. But their passionate concern for the poor made them rise up against injustice (Amos 4:1-3). The result was that they suffered deeply from the rejection they experienced from the society. Driven by frustration and despair, Jeremiah complained to God (Jer 20:7). Jeremiah became a symbol of agony and a person of sorrow. Yahweh's only reply was: 'I

³ Segundo Galilea, *The Future of Our Past* (Manila: Claretian Publications, 1978), 47.

will be with you' (Jer 1:8). Jeremiah felt the assurance of the Lord's words when he said, 'The Lord is with me like a mighty warrior' (Jer 20:11). The experience of the Lord being with his people was deeply rooted in Israel's religious history.

Another example is Elijah who confronts Baal's priests and slaughters them at Mount Carmel (I Kings 18). Then he confronts king Ahab about Naboth's field (1 Kings 21). At the end of such confrontations the frightened Elijah, undergoing an emotional and psychological crisis, flees from Jezebel and seeks shelter in the wilderness. He is comforted there by God at Horeb (I Kings 19). Almost all the prophets shared God's agony over human perversion. It was a kind of divine pathos alive in the hearts of the prophets.

Jesus, Pre-eminently a Prophet

In line with the great prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus Christ emerged as the eschatological prophet of the New Testament. Both individuals (Jn 4:19; 9:17) and people as a crowd (Jn 6:14; 7:40) recognized Jesus as a great prophet. The people of his time did not primarily perceive him as a priest, or judge or king but as a great prophet (Mt 21:45-46; Lk 7:16; 34:19-20). When Jesus raised to life again the son of the widow of Naim, the crowd glorified God saying: "A great prophet has risen among us" (Lk 7:16). At Jesus' entry into Jerusalem the crowds said: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee" (Mt 21:11). The members of the Sanhedrin wanted to arrest Jesus, but they "feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet" (Mt 21:46). Jesus questioned his disciples about his identity (Mt 16:13-16). The response of the disciples, as they had perceived Jesus' ministry, was that he was a prophet in the line of Elijah, Jeremiah and John, the Baptist. Jesus himself accepted this claim (Lk 4:24). His conviction springs from his prophetic consciousness when he says that "a prophet is not without honour except in his own country" (Mk 6:4) and that "it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem" (Lk 13:33). Jesus continued the prophetic message of great concern for the poor (Mt 5:3; Lk 4:18-19; 6:20). The prophetic character is the key to Jesus' ministry and the term 'prophet' describes the Jesus of history.

Jesus was more than the prophets of the Old Testament. As an eschatological prophet, there was also discontinuity in his message. He

was more radical than the Old Testament prophets who were attempting to reform and purify the system, the monarchy, the temple and priesthood. They cried for justice, because they still believed in the basic validity of these institutions. But Jesus did not so much believe in them and so he rather wanted a radical solution to injustice. He wanted sharing instead of hoarding, equality instead of cutthroat competition, brotherly solidarity and service instead of domination, mercy and love instead of cult and sacrifice (Mt 5:23; 9:13; 12:7). Jesus wanted a new cloth, not to patch up an old garment. To put it positively he was for new wine to be poured into new wineskin (Mk 2:21-22). He wanted new structures and situations, which would be just and loving.

As the greatest of all prophets, Jesus took a stand for the poor and opposed the Sadducees and Pharisees. He announced a different Messiah, contrary to all their expectations. He condemned religious power by foretelling the destruction of the temple. All this had not only religious but also political and economic implications. For example, when Jesus spoke about the impossibility of serving God and money, the Pharisees who loved money scoffed at him (Lk 16:14). Jesus read and interpreted the realities of his time from the bottom of the society. In other words, it was a political reading. Naturally, the murder of Jesus came about as a coalition of Roman force and the Jewish social elite, because they perceived Jesus as a threat to the then existing unjust order. The Cross of Jesus is the radical condemnation of an unjust world. One has to either stay with the crucified Jesus on it or stand with the crucifiers. There is no middle way.

Today, one of the great obstacles to the right understanding of Jesus is to have depicted him in the past, primarily as a priest and not as a great prophet. The role of the priest and the king became institutionalized. But the role of a prophet was and is extra-institutional and/or anti-institutional unlike that of the priest and king. Prophets belonged to the charismatic leadership in Israel. The prophets initiated a protest movement by appealing to the covenant to form a contrast community. For the prophets, true worship of Yahweh implied doing justice to the oppressed.

The New Testament ranking of various ministries, places prophets after the apostles (cf. 1 Cor 1:27-28; Eph. 2:19-22; 4:1). In a way all those

on whom the Holy Spirit came down were prophets (Acts 2:16-21). All the same, some were specially called to play the prophetic role. They announced God's will in a particular historical context, denounced all that was against it, called people to conversion and injected hope into them in hopeless situations. They were thus trying to build up people into a new society or a community of believers through various gifts, ministries and exhortations (cf. 1 Cor 14:1-3; 1 Pet 4:11). In this sense Paul and Barnabas were also prophets (Acts 13:1). But sometime in the third century prophets began to vanish. Preachers and lawyers (sermons and law) replaced them and gained greater prominence. The official church also had been tamed and it domesticated them.

Prophetic Jesus, Model of Secular Priests

In keeping with his promise after his resurrection (Mk 16:14-18), Jesus continues his ministry through the community of his disciples and the church is to be at the service of the world with his prophetic spirit. The secular priests are those who live right in the midst of the people in the world. Hence the vocation of the secular priest is to make present the prophetic ministry of historical Jesus in today's context. This is not in anyway to deny or neglect the other priestly or kingly ministries.

The council of Trent visualized the priest's primary function as the celebration of the Eucharist against the background of Reformation. But II Vatican Council opened up a new vision of the church as God's people with threefold functions. Pope John XXIII's prophetic insistence on "reading the signs of the times manifested in this world" runs through the entire pastoral constitution of the church in the modern world.

The decree on the ministry and life of priests emphasizes the paramount importance of prophetic ministry of preaching the word of God. "The People of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God...It is the first task of priests...to preach the Gospel of God to all humans" (PO 4). But even 39 years after the Council, this prophetic function has not yet been sufficiently translated into actual practice. Even today in the ordination service, the chalice with wine and the paten with host are given to a Deacon on whom the presbyterate is conferred. This ceremony brings out the importance of

the priestly function and not so much the paramount importance of the prophetic function, which is very much needed to respond to today's Indian context.

One important aspect of Jesus' prophetic ministry was his social consciousness (today there is a progressive eclipse of social consciousness) born of his 'abba' experience. As a prophet he freely chose his solidarity with the oppressed and deprived of his society. Jesus' mingling with them especially his oft-repeated table-fellowship (Mt 2:13-17) gave them the experience of human dignity (which is being destroyed today) and being accepted by God." The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around".⁴

After the example of Jesus, the secular priests should identify themselves with the oppressed so as to give them their stolen human dignity. Like all the prophets, they are to interpret today's existential situation to Christian community entrusted to them from divine perspective - a salvific reading of history. To respond to our conceptualized situation today is very essential to their image as secular priests who belong to this world ('seculum') but not of this world. They have to animate and educate the laity to interpret and proclaim the word of God at the centre of today's historical situation. To this effect Pope Paul VI, through his apostolic letter '*Ministeria Quaedam*' in 1972, instituted lay ministries of acolyte and lector. It is the ministry of the laity to consecrate the secular arena like leaven (LG 31).

The secular priests need to build their Christian communities into the covenant contrast communities which will be prophetic witness in India today. To some extent this is being partially realized in Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). But many BECs are often satisfied with the celebration of the Eucharist without realizing its prophetic thrust. Unless these communities open themselves up in a spirit of dialogue to the people in the world to form Basic Human Communities (BHCs), they may eventually become sectarian. Over and above, these communities should be radically committed to the liberation of the oppressed and deprived (Lk 4: 18-19) when globalisation forgets them

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

and excludes them to the point of eliminating them.

To respond more effectively to our situation, the secular priests besides streamlining their traditional and formal types of ministries, should create alternative ministries needed by the context towards the formation of alternative society (Pope Paul VI, *OA*, n. 4). "Prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice".⁵ Creation of an alternative society is possible only with the active participation of the laity networking with people of other faiths, ideologies and good will. "If we have been summoned to the same destiny, which is both human and divine, we can and we should work together...in order to build up the world in genuine peace" (GS 92).

Violence seems to be in the air in the world including India where innocent people are being mercilessly killed. Among the many and varied causes of violence, religious fundamentalism (Hindutva, also fundamentalism inside the church...) is one. Against this background the secular priests have to evolve a secular spirituality going beyond religion and become agents of reconciliation and peace. To work for reconciliation and peace is also to work for justice. For real peace is based only on justice in love. "Justice goes hand in hand with peace and is permanently and actively linked to peace".⁶

Eucharist, the Symbol of Prophetic Spirituality

Religion without spirituality will eventually tend to be oppressive and exploitative of the poor.⁷ There is too much of religion and exercises of piety in the church today, but not enough spirituality. Spirituality has to do with Gospel values and quality of one's life manifested in the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). "The church's public life even today (for all the good will which is not to be questioned) is dominated to a terrifying extent by ritualism, legalism, administration, and a boring and resigned spiritual mediocrity continuing along familiar lines".⁸ The Eucharist is the centre and climax of the Catholic

⁵ W.Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 110.

⁶ Pope John Paul II, "Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace," *Origins* 27 (1998), 467.

⁷ Swami Agnivesh, "Social Spirituality," *Vidyajyoti*, 64 (2000), 166, 170.

⁸ K.Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1974), 83.

religion and life. To listen to the Eucharistic spirituality of Fr. Pedro Aruppe:

In the Eucharist, we receive Christ hungering in the world. He comes to us not alone, but with the poor, the oppressed, the starving of the earth. Through him, they are looking at us for help, for justice, for love expressed in action. Therefore, we cannot properly receive the Bread of life, unless at the same time we give bread for life to those in need, wherever and whomever they may be".⁹

The historical Jesus, before he was killed, left the whole of his life in the Eucharistic symbol as his last testament. The spirituality of the Eucharist calls us to effectively address the hunger and poverty of the poor so that the poor may have food in a dignified way. Nay, it is even more. The Eucharist is a provocative symbol that invites us to demolish and dismantle the unjust structures and systems of exploitation and oppression of our Indian society on the one hand. And, on the other, it calls us to build a just society based on love, equity, sharing and fellowship. Hence, Eucharistic spirituality is not a flight from the world in search of ecstasy. Rather, it empowers us to fight hard against all evils and dehumanising systems that kill the poor. Eucharistic celebration needs to become more prophetic and challenging. It is through active participation in the various struggles for human dignity, equality and justice like the historical Jesus, the real meaning and spirituality of the Eucharist becomes real.¹⁰

Hence the Eucharist becomes the celebration of the subversive and dangerous memory of Jesus' passion, murder and resurrection. In this celebration we remember and announce the whole of Jesus life in order to appropriate it and live the real meaning of its prophetic thrust today. To proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ in it is to hope that love and justice will triumph over hatred and injustice.

Coming Back to the Context

Every Eucharistic celebration/participation should make us feel

⁹ Pedro Aruppe, 'The Bread for Hunger and Evangelization' - Address to Forty-first International Eucharistic Congress 1976," *Catholic Mind* 74 (1976), no.1307, pp.8-9.

¹⁰ George Therukattil, MCBS, *Eucharist: Energizer of a Spirituality for the Third Millennium* (Aluva: Jeevamrutha, 2000), 68.

guilty that we belong to social structures and systems that perpetuate injustice and hunger that kills hundreds of innocent children everyday. This calls us for our continuous conversion. Conversion that does not begin with an individual never begins; but if it ends with an individual, it is not complete. It has to make an effective intervention also in the unjust structures and systems around us (cf. Mica 6:8).

Jesus' identification with the deprived people is powerfully expressed by his Incarnation. The other side of this identification is his confrontation with the powerful (Mk.2-3: 6) symbolized by the Cross. "A spirituality of identification with the poor and of confrontation with the rich and the powerful leads inevitably to the conflict that culminates in the cross."¹¹

Today we need to resist and protest against all the ill effects of globalization, religious fundamentalism and caste discrimination, both in the society around us and inside the church. For this we need to sharpen our ears to listen to the cries of the oppressed victims who suffer the evil effects of the society. This will help us to identify ourselves with the longings of the masses for a new social order.

That people at the periphery are voicing their protest against these evils the world over is our hope today. God is at work in the upsurge of these subaltern people. An alignment of the oppressed people at the periphery into a counter-cultural (new social) movement to fight for a just and humane society is the need of the hour. Passion for the Eucharistic Lord in the passionate love for his poor should become our hallmark as it was for the prophets.

The Church should realize that a part of her prophetic role is to denounce the evils of society and some times even protest against the bottlenecks, structures, blocks and corruption in administration. Whatever risk this may involve, the Church must always, without equivocation, take a stand with the oppressed, contrary to any tendency of aligning herself with oppressive structures".¹²

¹¹ G.Soares-Prabhu, "The Sprituality of Jesus as a Spirituality of Solidarity and Struggle," in J. Vattamattom and others (eds.) *Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society* (Hyderabad: A Forum Publication, 1991), 155.

¹² CBCI communication on Evangelization for the Synod of Bishops, prepared at the Patna Consultation, No. 36.

The church in India will become meaningful mainly through a prophetic commitment to the oppressed people.

Prophetic announcing of a new world order and denouncing all that goes against it must become the umbrella under which all other activities including the priestly and kingly functions should operate (*Justice in the World*, Nos. 58-59). In other words the priestly and kingly functions are to be subordinated and integrated into the prophetic function. If so, in our unjust world, the promotion of justice must be the prime concern which will inspire all forms of our services/ministries. "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us a constitutive element of the preaching of the gospel" (*Justice in the World*, No.6).

It was said that faith without work is dead. Now in our unjust world and situation, we have to say that faith without justice is dead. The struggle for justice is to be nourished by faith today. Struggles and celebrations apparently look opposites, but in real Christian life they are necessarily integrated. Where the secular priests find life, love, beauty, sharing, human concern etc, they celebrate them and through them rejoice in the mystical presence of God. But when they find the opposites, they struggle against them moved by the same God who says a definite 'No' to them, the evil forces of death. Thus a mystic becomes a prophet and a prophet becomes a mystic. In other words real prayer leads to involvement in the world and real involvement in the world leads to genuine prayer. Thomas Merton becomes an example in point.¹³

Conclusion

It may be appropriate to end this tentative, modest and incomplete write-up with an Old Testament episode. At the direction of Yahweh, Moses gathered seventy elders around the tent. The Lord put his spirit upon them and they prophesied. Eldad and Medad were in the camp. The spirit came equally upon them and they too prophesied. This was reported to Moses. Joshua wanted Moses to forbid them. But Moses said, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets?" (Num 11:16-17, 24-30). Our wish also is: Would that all secular priests were prophets today and make others too prophets!

¹³ Katherine Marie Dyckmann and Patrick Carroll, *Inviting the Mystic Supporting the Prophet: An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, (Mumbai: St Paul's Publication, 1984.)