

Indian Christianity and the ethical concerns: A Pastoral perspective

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INTRODUCTION:

A paper on the Indian Christianity and the ethical concerns is a vast subject to be discussed in a small amount of time. A Pastoral perspective will surely bridle the subject to a greater extent but even then it is too large a piece to chew with an hour or two. In order to enhance a fruitful discussion, the size of the paper is shortened. Moreover instead of introducing some hard-core theological inputs, relevant ethical issues have picked up for careful scrutiny. A conclusion is not drawn purposefully in order to have the freedom to include all relevant points that emerge from the discussion.

THE POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS INDIA

India is a secular state. Although Hinduism is not declared as the state religion of our country, it functions almost like a state religion. According to the constitution of India, every religion has equal status. Unfortunately this is not true in practice. The constitution of India guarantees freedom of religion to all her citizens, but people from all religions do not enjoy the same constitutional protection without favor or discrimination. Increasingly we see a tendency among some a vested interest to use religion for personal and political gains. They exploit the religious sentiments of the ignorant, illiterate and the poor to achieve their selfish and narrow goals. They use religion to divide the people so that the communal tension and conflicts created on the basis of religion could be used to capture political power.

The land of India conjures up images of robed priests, rich history, delicious food and unusual customs. Behind these images lie people who have joys and struggles in life as those in Europe and United States. One major religion, Hinduism plays a major role in the lives of people. Christianity and Islam also found their inroad in the land. Nearly 14% of the people come under Islam and 3% under Christianity. Buddhism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism also have their adherents in a smaller scale. Like Hinduism, each of these faiths affects every aspect of life from family values to politics to culture.

INDIAN CHRISTIANITY POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

Though Christianity consists a small minority in India, the image non-Christians have of the churches is that of a powerful social institution. The churches are respected for their services. But the trend is changing rapidly. Religious groups and para-political organizations question the Christian sincerity. In many cases church is not given a right participation. Even if the church is allowed to render the services, every effort is made to hide their involvement or show it distorted. This was very much evident during the recent earthquake in Gujarat. Though born in Asia, Christianity is considered a foreign religion. It is linked with colonial origins, life style, its form of worship, its training of personnel, and above all its exterior super structure and dependence on the West even for day-to-day expenses increase the suspicion of non-Christians, and confirm them in their belief that the Christian churches are a threat (!) to national integration and cultural unity. The image of the churches as a spiritual force is not that clear to the people of India. Even the humanitarian and charitable services rendered by Mother Theresa are accused with conversion motive.

The Indian church also needs to be blamed for the present situation. Many times the responses from the Christians are very minimal. There is a lack of expressions over the grave concerns and problems. For example, there appeared a name recently called "Christian Brothers" on our billboards. This is not the name of a Christian organization or a religious group of any kind but it is the name of a foreign liquor company appeared in India in the year 2000. If there appeared any such name that has bearing upon Islam or Hinduism, the very next hour there will be reactions from all over India from these religions. No segments of Christianity put up any reactions because Christianity in India always sanctioned drinking ever since the colonial rule. Our Hindu brethren always looked upon Christianity associated with such immoral practices. Only the Pentecostals or such evangelical and charismatic groups consider this as a wrong practice and sinful.

God's people in India by Dr. John Webster Grant of Canada should be an eye opener to the Christian community in India. In that book he describes that Christians in India is not in the national stream or in Indian politics primarily because they are busy with church politics. In his narration a Christian was reading this book in a train journey and a Brahmin seeing the title of the book asked him who are God's people in India? The reader responded "We Christians". He disagreed with him and replied "we Brahmins are God's people in India; how dare you are to usurp that title?"

This encounter left me with the claims Christians make all over the world. The Bible makes the claim that Israel is the chosen

people of God. Christianity came with the same claim and such claim is continued by the Pentecostals. Even if the percentage of real believers (Christians) in a country is less than 10 percent, still we dare to claim that a Christian country, contrary to facts. In reality are we not negating the truth?

This paper concentrates mainly on ethical issues. Ethics is a reflection on the basis of moral action says Dr. K.C. Abraham, Professor of Ethics at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India. Why I ought to do, what I ought to do? The "why" becomes the reflective part and it provides the distinctive character to the discipline of ethics. Morality is a descriptive term, but ethics is a reflective, scientific study. Christian ethics is therefore, reflection on the Christian basis for moral action. Faith in a compassionate God sensitises us for caring action. Precepts and praxis go together. Praxis includes the historical context of a particular faith tradition as well as an imagination for its future. The process is holistic inviting both rational and affective capacities to bear on the behaviours of persons and organizations. It is the current practice of ministry in the light of the Scripture.

The praxis of Pentecostal leadership also does not occur in a vacuum. They share the same context with leaders of other Christian denominations. Honest leaders are lacking today in the Pentecostal circles in India. Members of the churches do not believe them. Many people feel disappointed and disenfranchised. People look for leaders who are exemplary, who stand for principles, and who can help believers set and achieve goals. The leader whose calling is to care for others, according to Thomas Oden, "must not be a slave to one's own unexamined passions. Otherwise the souls entrusted to one's care may be subject to manipulation by the supposed carer, whose passions are projected on to the relationship"(Thomas Oden, *Becoming a Minister*, New York: Crossroad, 1987, p.12). History is full with stories of Christian leaders, both great and small who have fallen prey to their unexamined passions. The personal life of a leader, if ignored, can lead to catastrophe for the leader and the organization alike.

What Paxton Hibben said is true:

Excuses for moral delinquency are, therefore, usually processes of self-deception. At first they may not be; but at length a man who tries to deceive himself comes into that state in which he can do nothing else but to deceive himself. A man can put out his eyes, inwardly, so that at last he will not see that a lie is a lie and a truth a truth. Deceit may be known to be so at first. It then becomes less and less noticeable and finally the mind is falsified and lives with out frankness, openness, truth or purity. And nothing is more common than that men may be in that state and with a certain kind of exterior morality making them noticeably good in exterior matters while they have actually lost power of moral discrimination in respect to their own inward habits.(Paxton Hibben, *Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait*, pp.188-89, cited by Roger Heuser, *Reflections on Leadership*).

On the other hand we do have authoritarian leaders who consider leadership is management, administration and power. They do not have the passion for the people but have passion for position. They can never give their best for the ministry or for the kingdom of God.

Since this is a Pentecostal Conference, the place of the Pentecostals today in the Christian community is to be highlighted. Recent statistics show that the Pentecostals are the fastest growing religious body in the world. One of the reasons pointed out is the pastoral care given to the members. Weekly house visiting, weekly bible studies, cottage prayers and personal care given to the individuals are highly appreciated by the believers. Mainline churches do adopt these methods now to block the erosion of their members from their churches. If the pastor is gifted with extra-charismatic gifts, then the possibility of the growth of the church is enhanced. These gifts include healing, prophecy, visions etc.

There is a Christian Pentecostal periodical published from the state of Kerala in India. The editor is a Pentecostal pastor, an ordained minister of a Pentecostal denomination. He started his periodical with the purpose of correcting the irregularities of Pentecostal leaders, pastors and churches in Kerala. His prime attention was given in the field of biblical truthfulness and ethical life. Most of the people to whom he targeted were crusade speakers and administrative heads who were unfaithful in their theology, finance and sexual life. As a result some of them approached him for a good settlement He attained the result of his efforts and today the atmosphere is more clean and holy than the past although perfection is not attained.

In his evaluation, these church leaders have betrayed their followers by using their position to deceive in order to serve their own unethical ends. This caused many, inside and outside the church to hold all Pentecostal leaders with increasing suspicion. Since sex is a very sensitive issue in India, any one can be marred with this issue whether there is any truth in it or not. The image of a leader is spoiled forever if he or she is even part of a scandal. Indians are not open on this issue like people of the West. This being the bright side of the story, the other side is so painful. Almost all the Pentecostal churches and main leaders turned against him and even formed a society to see that he is out of the ministry. They spent a great amount of money to buy people who were his supporters. His life has been threatened many times with the blessings of some Pentecostal leaders. His family was put under watch and children were to be protected from kidnapping. Bad stories were spread against his daughter. He had to pay a great price for a genuine and courageous cause.

More than sexual scandals, financial misappropriation is the cause of the lack of integrity among many Indian Pentecostal leaders. Here again the philosophical and religious context of India may have a great bearing upon their lives. In India a person is considered guilty only when he or she is caught in the act. For example, a person can go on stealing and still he could be righteous before the

people because he is not caught in the act. He can perform all his duties and be applauded for his actions. But a believer knows that the very thought of stealing is sinful according to what the Lord has taught. This is true also of other issues like envy, bribery and so on. To sanction their unethical ends, leaders and pastors bribe each other either in cash or in kind. To pull some one from his position, money is used in the large scale not seriously thinking that he is destroying the very foundation of Christian ethics.

Promotional literature: Mission promotional literatures are spreading like epidemics among the Christian community in India. Most of them find their harvest field in USA and Gulf countries. Evaluating them for a period of last ten years, any one will be tempted to conclude that there are thousands of churches in all over north India and north India is nearly evangelised. But the truth of the matter is that in north India the percentage of Christianity is less than .5%.

Church Politics: Indian church is more interested in politics than in promotion of the gospel. Most of the leaders spend more time to establish their position by all the means they have at their disposal. Quite often, this is done in an unjust manner and by pulling some one's leg. To achieve this end, new groups are formed every month and change their position from one group to another without any policy or biblical justification.

Cultural difference: Any culture has its own strength and weakness. One of the major drawbacks of Indian Christian setting is that we are part of the Indian system of thinking and culture. Once a person is declared guilty in the community, the chance is less for that person to come to the forefront during his life- time.

Theological Credibility: Christianity in India is made up of Catholics and Protestants. The spokesmen of Protestant Christianity are mainly liberals. Graduates coming out of liberal theological schools are highly recognized over their evangelical counterparts. As a result, Christian ministerial candidates like to be trained in liberal theological schools. This is the case with the Pentecostals too. Today at least 80% of the teachers of the Pentecostal theological colleges including me are graduates from liberal tradition. This poses a great threat to the churches as well as to the theological positions including the authority of the Scripture.

The challenge of Christian Unity: By and large up-to-now the Christian churches had some success among the tribal people of India, and among the marginalized. The great religions of India still remain impenetrable to Christian missionary work. The tendency to identify nationality, religion and culture as well as the politicisation of religion by vested interests further complicate the religious scenario of India. The rise of fundamentalist groups and the proliferation of religious sects make the situation still more complex. For the churches the question of inter-religious dialogue is no more an option.

It is in this context the Christian unity becomes very important. It is a known fact that Indian Christianity is divided on the basis of theology, leadership and affiliations. A divided Christianity can never enter into effective dialogue with other religions. Although there were some attempts for the unity among the Indian Christians, so far the churches in India have been not able to reach the unity. It is risky, many consider, because the churches are unwilling to be vulnerable.

Why the ethical devaluation? In my evaluation, the Indian Christian community as a whole came from a lower stratum of the society. When the modern missionaries came to India, they found it easy to work with the lower caste. Except the state of Kerala and northeast India, Christianity is looked down because of their social status. The early converts were financially poor, dependents of the high caste people worked as sweepers or servants. They were people with insecurity and lack of self- confidence. They only knew how to obey the commands and never knew how to command. A real conversion did not take place in their life. They only changed their religion because of various factors. The true Christian discipleship did not have a place in their life.

CONCLUSION: To be emerged out of discussion.