

Hermeneutical Issues in Using Traditional Sources -Where Do We Draw our Spiritual Sources for our Liberation?

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Introduction

In the West the Church had to develop its hermeneutics in response to developments in science, philosophy and historiography and other secular movements. The Church in the West had no scripture of other faiths to take into account. Therefore, its hermeneutics inevitably had to be a mono-scriptural hermeneutics. Today, however, Christians in a multi-religious world cannot ignore other scriptures that provide spiritual support and ethical guidance to millions of their adherents.¹

- S.J. Samartha

Biblical interpretation in Asia to a large extent is still dominated by western model of historical-critical approach. However, one should realize that in Asia, we are not dealing with mono-scriptural hermeneutics but with multiple scriptures and religious traditions because ours is a context of multi-culturalism and multi religions. The Bible, scriptures and traditional sources both the written and oral traditions - it could be folklores, myths, dances, songs, ritual, etc., are developed within a social location, cultural background, economic environment and political situation. Therefore, in hermeneutical issues in Asia, the Bible, other faith scriptures and indigenous resources should be taken seriously to make the Bible contextual and meaningful to our people. Condemning other religious sources and cling to only Bible is a serious offence. The focus of the paper is not on the issue of written texts, rather I would like to concentrate on oral traditions of indigenous/tribal people of India, particularly from North East India thereby to show that traditional resources helps us to understand the truth of the Bible better for our liberation today.

Tribal religious traditions

The Tribals in North East India are different from Adivasis or tribals in other parts of India due to two reasons: (i) No Hindu caste casts influence particularly in the hill tribes, (ii) Racially different- ethnically, culturally and linguistically different from other Indians, may be closer to other Asian Indigenous people.

Tribal religion, known today as primal or indigenous religion does not have a written scripture like other religions. Though we did not have a written text, which could be

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¹ See *One Christ-Many Religions* (Maryknoll: N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 67.

called 'holy scripture', the oral traditions and customs are accepted as holy and authoritative for the faith and practice of the people.² The religious ethos is contained in the people's hearts, minds, oral history, myths and rituals. People themselves are a living scripture. For tribals, creation is a part of the scripture because creation is the exegesis of God.

Tribal religion does not have a founder or a reformer. Our religion is centered on earth/creation. For example, most tribes in North East India have the legends of their ancestors emerging from the earth, under earth or from the stones. Like other religions, the tribals too have a tradition of divine birth and manifestations, but they are not worshipped.³ Hence, our tribal religion is basically a community religion based on oral scripture. It is a distinct religion, having all the basic features of religious beliefs, practices and moral teachings based on oral traditions and customs.

How Bible was received in Tribal land?

Missionaries brought the Bible to us as the revealed authoritative word of God to our people and they condemned our living religions as devilish, our religion and culture as inferior, "heathens", a religion without any system of thought, devoid of morality and spirituality.⁴ The core beliefs of our people were rejected as devilish, our songs, dances, folklores and myths as paganistic. They looked down on our tribal worldviews as backward and inferior and promoted western culture as superior. They taught us what to do, and what to think. Hence, the present inherited reading and interpretation of the Bible do not take the tribal social and cultural contexts seriously. The present reading of the Bible is otherworldly, pietistic and male centered which fail to address the present realities of the people. As a result, the Bible continues to contribute towards alienation of tribals from our culture. The tribal theologians resist traditional interpretation of the Bible which tends to be an integrationist approach into a homogeneous and universal hermeneutics.⁵ God does not speak to us first and foremost through western theology. God accepts us as we are. Our people need to be free of the terrible burden of believing that they need to think and believe like westerners. We need to hear the Gospel expressed in our own language and culture.

The Outsider's Interpretation of Tribal Resources

Until recently the interpreters of the tribal/indigenous resources were outsiders. Many missionaries, Anthropologists, Sociologists came to our land and through their little research on tribal people claim ownership of the tribal ways of knowing. Most of the outsiders doing research on our tribal people and culture ignored everything we own- our tribal likes and dislikes, our hopes and fears, our struggle and aspiration, our intellects, our values, tradition, etc- but at the same time assumed to know everything possible about the tribals, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of the tribals. Non-

² Renthly Keitzar, "A Study of the North-East India Tribal Christian Theology," in *Good News for North East India: A Theological Reader* ed. Renthly Keitzar (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 34.

³ A. Wati Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Traditions in North East India* (Jorhat: Author, 2000), 4.

⁴ A. Wati Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Traditions*, 6.

⁵ K. Thanzaupa, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Aizawl: MTC, 1997), 96.

indigenous people claimed their rights on indigenous people based on their research and indigenous voices have been silenced or Othered in the process.⁶

Most of the outside researchers, came to our tribal land with an attitude of western scientific method as ‘serving good for humankind’, or with ‘saving them’, and ‘rescuing them’ attitude. However, in such works one see how outside researchers look at the research problems through the eyes of the invaders. This is so because whether it is travelers’ tales or other academic research, all have contributed as much to the West’s knowledge of itself as has the systematic gathering of scientific data, without having even an iota of how damaging their research and records are for our tribal peoples’ dignity and history.⁷

From outsiders’ interpreter, one of the supposed characteristics of our tribal people was that ‘the tribals could not use their minds or intellects’, could not invent things’, could not create history’, nothing worth can be learned from us. In other words, for outsiders, the tribals did not practice the arts of civilization. Since human is measured from such biased worldview and standards, and by lacking such virtues, our people disqualified themselves in terms of our tribal values, our tribal standards, beliefs, language and worldviews, etc. In short, we were told and we too believed that we were not ‘fully human’⁸ In this regard, tribal religion was called “Animism”, “Primitive religion”. This type of popular western value judgment places the tribal religion at the bottom of the supposed line of religious evolution and creates inferiority of tribal religion as underdeveloped and primitive.⁹

Having the consciousness of how our tribal history and culture has been researched and written by outsiders with superior mindset itself is the beginning of doing research in tribal cultural studies from our tribal perspective. In any interpretation process of tribal resources we need to ask: ‘Whose interpretation is it?’ ‘Whose interests does it serve?’ ‘Who will benefit from it?’ ‘Who will interpret it and for whom?’ ‘How will its interpretation be disseminated?’ It is crucial to re-read, re-right, and to re-write, i.e. to set right the tribal history, resources from the position of the tribal. There is a need to decolonized the western scientific research methods.

Hermeneutical issues in Asia

It’s a fact that the Biblical interpretation in Asia is influenced by western model. The Bible has not only been constructed as a western text and used as an instrument of colonization, but also that the predominant method of Western biblical interpretation since the Enlightenment, historical criticism, has itself colonized the Bible by constructing the books of the Bible as western texts.¹⁰ Bible reading and interpretation are never a value-neutral but reflects the values of its readers. Since both the text and its

⁶ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 139.

⁷ L. Imsutoshi Jamir, “Developing Tribal Face in Tribal Cultural Studies: Few Footnotes” in *JTCA*, No.. 6, 2007. 26.

⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

⁹ A. Wati Longchar, *The tribal Religious Traditions*, 6.

¹⁰ Edgar W. Conrad, “How the Bible was Colonized”, in *Scripture, Community and Mission*, edited Phillip L. Wickeri (Hong Kong: CCA/WCC, 2002), 92.

readers are social products manifesting the ideologies encoded in their respective social worlds, reading of the Bible cannot proceed in a detached and singular manner.¹¹

God speaks to different people in different contexts. It must be recognized that the sacred text(s) is culturally conditioned by socio- religious traditions of a given context. So, there is no absolute and only one way of interpreting the scripture, no single reading strategy and interpretive method which can be applied to all contexts in all times. Each context needs a particular method for a particular people. Each context needs to read the Bible from his/her own perspective. Hence, the tribals must read the Bible from tribal perspectives.

In Asia Bible, other faiths scriptures and oral traditions are existed together. Recognizing the dissonance between the kind of biblical interpretation we inherited and the Asian reality we are facing, we need to develop new hermeneutical principles to connect between the Bible and our lives.¹² All reading and interpretation are contextualized and perspectival that multiple voices, multicentered and multilingual must be emphasized.¹³ Hence, biblical interpretation in Asia must create a multiple ways of reading. Kwok Pui Lan says, “If the Bible is to work for liberation instead of domination, biblical themes can be allowed to interact with Asian resources in a process of “dialogical imagination.”¹⁴ Folk tales and legends cultivated for centuries among the common people “have the power to illumine many biblical stories.” Our fellow Asians who have other faiths must not be considered as our missiological objects, but as dialogical partners in our ongoing search for truth. Reading the Bible in a multi-cultural and multi religious world means that no one community can co-opt the meaning of the biblical text. To touch the other faiths we have to strengthen the power of theological imaging. This can only be done when each one of us takes seriously the Asian reality, the suffering and aspiration of the Asian people, so that we can share our religious insights to build a better society.

Resources in Traditional Religion

Next to Africa, Asia has the highest number of adherents of traditional religion. Though the traditional religion is the oldest religion in the world, as mentioned above it does not have a written sacred scripture yet it continues to survive. Unlike other religions of the world, it does not have a founder(s) or a reformer(s), and yet this religion has provided and continues to provide spiritual support and ethical guidance to millions of their adherents till today. One cannot ignore the spiritual heritage of indigenous people if we have to look for a new way of doing theology in the context of globalization, poverty, economic injustice, gender issue, fundamentalism, ethnic crises and ecological problem.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹² Kwok Pui Lan, “Discovering the Bible in the Nonbiblical World,” in *The Bible and Liberation, Political and Social hermeneutics*, eds. Gottwald, Norman K & Horsely, Richard A. (Marknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 22.

¹³ Segovia, Fernando F., *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View From the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000), 90.

¹⁴ Kwok Pui Lan, “Discovering the Bible in the Nonbiblical World,” in *The Bible and Liberation, Political and Social hermeneutics*, eds. Gottwald, Norman K & Horsely, Richard A. (Marknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 17.

I would like to draw our attention to Myths and folklore and culture for our deliberation here.

Oral tradition is a literature: Oral traditions are considered as the foundation of literature. It serves as one of the most valuable sources of information about people, their lifestyles, belief systems and of their experiences of the manifestations of supernatural powers.¹⁵ For the tribals, oral tradition is the 'sacred scripture' because it serves as the sources for tribal history, religious beliefs, social ethos and mores and cultural milieus. Therefore, oral trait is a text and a literature which should be considered seriously.

Myth/Folklore and Gospel: For the tribals, the myth and folklores are the foundation of religion. Their whole religious ethos is embedded in myths, oral history and rituals. They teach how the Sacred Being works and reveals his/her mysteries through creation; it uncovers the place of the animal kingdom in this universe. Thus myths and folklore are their scripture and creed. Mercea Eliade says that,

Myths narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the beginnings Myths tells how through the deeds of Supernatural Beings a reality came into existence, be it, the whole of reality, the cosmos or only fragment of realities –a species of plants, a particular kind of human behaviour, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation', it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only what really happened, which manifested itself completely. The actor in myths are Supernatural Being.¹⁶

Similarly, David Scott also explains that,

A myth is a story that is sacred to and share by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or, more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered Myth, then, is a story ... about the sorts of question and religions ask, stories about such things as life after death, supernatural/divine intervention in their lives, transformations, the creation of the world and of human nature and culture – and, basically about meaning itself.¹⁷

Myth/Folklore simply means 'people's expression'. There are varieties of folklores some folklores explain the mysteries of the supernatural, some teach about the mysteries of the world and some contain ethical values. Folklore is people's expression of faith, beliefs, struggles, sufferings, fears and hopes. Therefore, it is an inevitable tool to understand a society/community – its past, its traditions, culture and worldview.

¹⁵ Sashikaba Kechutzar, A Discursive Reading of the Oral Traditions: A Tribal Woman's Perspective," in *No More Sorrow in God's garden of Justice* ed. Limatula Longkumer (Jorhat: ETC-WSC, 2007), 64.

¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Rality* (London: George Allen & Uniwin Ltd., 1963), 1

¹⁷ David C. Scott, "Stories as Methodological Issues in Primal Visions", A Paper Presented at the National Seminar on Theological Implications of the Primal Vision, Sponsored by BTESSC/Gurukul (9-12 eptember, 1993, Madras), 7-8.

A peculiar character of myth/folklore is that it does not have an individual author. It is a collective creation of the folk. People themselves are interpreters of it; people do not depend on the experts to interpret for them. It is a common people's property and folk themselves control over it. Thus, a myth/folklore loses its credibility when it loses its communitarian character. It is never a static and fixed. It undergoes changes according to the context, performance and the audience.

For the tribals, there is a myth/folklore behind every object, every event, every name, every character, every sound, every shape, every sickness, joy and sorrow. Some myths/folklores are long, some are medium, and some are short and some may be just one sentence. Yet they all convey meanings to the community. Till today myths/folklores have very strong influence among the people. However, if we apply modern scientific method of interpretation to understand tribal/indigenous myths, their true meaning will be dissipated. The use of modern hermeneutical tools are crucial in the discernment of the truth, but this is not adequate to undercover the full truth. Few myths

God-human-nature relationships.

A human, a tiger and Spirit lived happily, ate together and lacked nothing when their mother earth was alive. In those days, human beings knew nothing of death or fear of death. God, human and animal spoke the same language.

Human represents humanities, the tiger represents creatures, spirit represents the Creator, the sustainer and the cosmic power. They all had a mother and that mother represents the land, the nourisher of all living beings and the symbol of unity of all life including the Supreme God.¹⁸

In the tribal religion the concept of God appears both in feminine and masculine genders. Feminine concept of like *Ukepenoupfu* in Angami Naga and *Ma'gipa Jagring* in Garo which means mother image who perceived to have given birth to all creations.

God as nurturer, caring and loving God, God as sustainer and eco-friendly are found in many myths. Myths, folk tales, and legendary stories shared from generation to generation among the common people, have the power to illuminate many biblical stories and other theological motifs. C. S. Song said that Asian resources can provide a very rich impetus to understand the depths of Asian humanity and God's action in the world.¹⁹ Using our own resources radically appropriates our own history.²⁰ Use of one's cultural and religious tradition indicates the respect and pride of one's heritage. Hence, it is authentic to draw as a source for theologizing.

Culture and Gospel: "Culture" is the worldview of the people. While the Gospel frees people from their bondage, it is culture that sustains and nourishes people's identity. In spite of its ambiguous nature, the work of God is imminent in all culture. God's presence is manifested in land and in every culture, albeit differently and imperfectly. There are no people and culture without God and every culture possess some forms of divine

¹⁸ A. Wato Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology* (Jorhat: TSC, 2000), 73.

¹⁹ C.S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 16.

²⁰ Kwok Pui Lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Nonbiblical World", 22.

manifestations. Therefore, culture is one of the most important resources for doing theology. There is no authentic theology without culture.

As other communities, the indigenous people also uphold a very distinctive cultural value system. Culture has both liberative and oppressive elements. The task of theology is to challenge and transform the oppressive elements, recover and affirm, and integrate the life affirming values into our life. The indigenous worldviews differ from one community to another; however, it may be relevant to point out a few common elements of traditional culture to show the importance of culture in doing theology.

- a) The land is the basis of all realities – human selfhood and identity. Perceives all realities from creation perspectives;
- b) No sharp dualism. There is no clear cut distinction between sacred and secular, religion and non-religion, etc. Holistic in thinking;
- c) The self of the Supreme Being is seen in creation and an inseparably relationship is maintained;
- d) No historical person in which their religion is centered. The earth is the focal point of reference and all religious activities are centered on the soil;
- e) Though oldest religion, there is no scripture or creed. The earth is sacred and central for life;
- f) We cannot perceive the Supreme Being apart from creation. God is in creation;
- g) Person orientation. Relationship between individuals in society is more important than the simple performance of tasks. Cooperation is valued more. Giving over saving;
- h) Adaptation to environment. The world is sacred. It is our mother. How can we sell and exploit our mother!;
- i) Highly group-oriented.

Such view of life is not primitive and uncivilized. It is just a difference of emphasis and priority. The indigenous people give more priority to community and preservation of land/space. These values are also not mere abstracts concepts, but part of people's life and existence. In spite of the process of Christianization and modernization, such value systems continue to liberate, sustain and nourish life. Those cultural resources by creatively co-relating with Gospel can empower, transform people in their historical struggle for social, political, economic justice and identity. Honestly speaking, the indigenous scholars have not given sufficient attention to cultural values in doing contextual theologies. This neglect has been one of the most serious obstacles for the churches in their attempt to be truly rooted in land and people. Theology will still remain a stranger among the indigenous people without integrating those liberative traditions. The challenge is great for us.

Cross-cultural Interpretation

Having described the above mentioned traditional values, we realized that it is not possible to interpret the scripture without taking into consideration of Asian cultures and traditions. In a multi-cultural, religious context where we have both sacred written

scripture and non-written scripture, Archie Lee proposed “Cross-textual interpretation”.²¹ I would prefer ‘cross-cultural interpretation’ since it will undermine non-written scripture traditions. Besides putting two cultures side by side, also denotes the enlightening of one culture by using the point of view of others. Through ‘encounter’ and ‘interaction’, new meanings can be discovered. Such meaning and view-point may never be found by reading or listening only one text or culture alone. Archie Lee further noted that “interpretation will not stop at one ‘crossing’ for there can be many crossings, nor will it start from only one text (culture) and end with another.”²² The use of multiple crossings does not aim at merely comparative studies but to reach transformation and enrichment. In this, the transformation of the whole life is involved, a process of self-discovery. The end result turns out to be an “enrich-transformed existence.”²³ By doing so, the vitality and spirituality of Asian Christians be made more distinguished in their context, which in turn provide the resources for coping with social and political complexities and help to humanize Asian societies and beyond.

Many Asian scholars argue that biblical interpretation from Asian perspectives must not be a mono-scripture oriented hermeneutics. We need to develop a cross-scriptural approach that allows “scriptures” or even unwritten traditions to enter into dialogue to facilitate the transformation of the two or more ‘scripture’.

The interpretation of the Bible in Asia will take a different shape and be enriched by the effort to take into account the scriptures and oral histories of other living religions. This calls us that Biblical studies in Asia cannot be separated from the study of Asian religions and culture.

Changing Asian context

Asian societies are now in a new context. The most outstanding sign of our times is the suffering and cries of human persons and other living beings throughout the world, as their victimization proceeds in a systematic and unprecedented manner under the global market regime. The global empire and the greed of global capital are making tremendous impact on geo-politics of the world, and destroying and threatening all life, especially the poor and marginalized like the indigenous communities. In today’s world, ‘growth’ is considered as the only principle for liberation in the capitalist economy of globalization. The concepts of ‘care for one another’, ‘just economy’ and ‘(sabbath) rest for creation’, etc. are considered as non-productivity and the root of all human problems from poverty to sickness to political instability.

One may argue that everything that touches the life of all living beings, from spirituality to sexuality, ethnic politics, the oppressed communities’ resistance movement, ecological movement, human rights movement are inter-related to capital control. They intensify more conflict among various religious and ethnic groups, nations, and gender oppression.

²¹ Archie Lee, “Plurality of Asian Religio-cultural Tradition and Its Implications for Asian Biblical studies” in *Doing Theology with Tribal resources*, ed. By Wati Longchar and Larry Davis, Tribal Study Series No. 3, (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1999), 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 36.

²³ *Ibid.*

It would be appropriate to give some examples how hegemonic power and mammon intensify conflicts by reducing people and nature as mere commodity.

Growing Religious Fundamentalism and Conflicts: The escalation of tensions between the Muslim world and the West, as well as terrorist activities sponsored by religious sectarian groups in Asia and elsewhere, and the revival of many sects, with a fundamentalist tendency within the living religions and cultures, stand witness to rising religious fundamentalism. Some political leaders consider indigenous people's resistance movements in Asia as Christian instigated movement by Western Christians. Prohibition of religious freedom and the state sponsored religious terrorism testify to this reality. They all continue to challenge us in the way we think and act as Christians.

Gender Justice Issues: Militarization and globalization intensify marginalization of women. In some places, rape is a part of war-games. The expanding international tourism accompanies the increase of sex tours of men of many countries²⁴ with many young boys and girls sexually abused and cruelly treated. Globalization has opened the door for many women to leave their home countries to work as domestic workers, factory workers or entertainers. There are many stories of violence, and even killing of those migrant workers.

Environment Degradation: The greed for capital leads to control and manipulation of strategic economic locations like Iraq, Palestine and so on. The uncontrolled and one-sided exploitative economic development projects have brought with them various ecological crises. The rape of Mother Earth manifests in uncontrolled logging, indiscriminate use of chemicals in agriculture, inconsiderate disposal of non-biodegradable waste, and human beings' many other 'ecocidal' acts due to negligence, ignorance or greed destroy the ecosystem. The indigenous communities who depended on earth's resources are the most affected people.

Loss of Spirituality: With the increasing influence and impact of materialism, secularism, and liberalism in the postcolonial era, the indigenous people continue to experience challenges and stagnation in spirituality. These include loss of focus in discipleship and spiritual formation, loss of indigenous wisdom, character and values, and infiltration of western culture and ideology through the neo-Pentecostal and new religious movements influences. The information technology and military power contribute to the decline of the indigenous cultures and discrimination against minorities.

Identity and Power Struggle: Most communities in Asian countries have experienced and continue to experience identity crises through history. In the process, some develop a 'meeting-place' identity in which post-colonial nation-state and economic policies have denied justice for many indigenous communities leading them to armed resistance. Ethical problems such as corruption, abuse of power, and prostitution, communal problems such as ethnic conflicts, racial tensions and breakdown of family structures and

²⁴ It exposes not only the issue of gender discrimination but also that of North-South inequality. Recently, the demand for younger women and girls as targets for prostitution tourism is remarkably increasing, due to the fear of AIDS.

continued marginalization of poor people continue to rise in such a 'meeting place' identity.

All of this is our reality. The future of contextual theologies in Asia such as indigenous people's theology, dalit, minjung theologies will determine in its ability to create counter movements and theology against hegemonic power and life threatening free market system.

Protection of Cultural Life – Integrative Principle of Interpretation

Contextual theologies call for a life-centered theology in contrast to the old and dominant theological discourse which supported imperialism. From the time of Constantine, the theological metaphors developed supported the male rulers and oppressors. In other words, the theological concepts developed under the imperial regime not only legitimized a religion for the one who is the master and the ruler, but also sanction to exploit and manipulate all segments of God's creation for extraction of maximum profit. There is no place for the people who have been ruled and oppressed for centuries and protection of Mother Earth. This dominant theology includes its *concept of God*. The dominant images of God that developed during the imperial power were images such as Ruler, Lord, Master and Warrior. All patriarchal, political and military images made Christianity a religion of, and for, the ruler, elite and the upper-class. They are not capable of liberating the poor and marginalized people from unjust system and practice. Such ruler's theology supported colonial governments, war, invasion and unprecedented exploitation of earth's resources. The imperial construct of the concept of God will not be able to liberate the people and earth who have become the victims of power.

Likewise the *understanding of mission* fails as the discourse on God as ruler and master reinforced a success oriented or triumphalistic mission. Language like 'Mission Crusade', 'Mission Campaign', 'Home Penetration', 'Mass Evangelization' etc. are all military language and concepts. Christians, by and large, engaged in denominational expansion rather than God's mission. Success was measured by how many churches have been planted, converted and baptized. Mission became very exclusive and never recognized God's revelation in other religious traditions. But, mission is God's mission. God is the owner of the mission, but not the churches. The churches are sent to be missionaries to witness compassion and justice with the poor and the victims. We are called to witness compassion and justice with the poor. But Christians have manipulated and acted as if we are the owner of mission.

Finally, in the *understanding of creation* is another seed of imperialism. Western Christian interpretation of creation is anthropocentric – humanity is the reference point of all realities. Nature exists for human. Apart from rational beings, the other segments of God's creation cannot come under the scheme of salvation. There is no sacred and mystery in nature, but it can be manipulated and controlled for the benefit of human beings. To exploit nature is divine will. This one-sided theological interpretation justifies expansion of colonial power and exploitation of nature. The ideology of globalization and the expansion of global capital market are deeply rooted in this interpretation. The

unprecedented exploitation of nature and present ecological crisis testify of the failure of the Christian understanding of creation.²⁵

Therefore, we need a new theological paradigm in which God is perceived as fellow sufferer, a great comforter, divine power and not as a dominating or controlling power. This must not be understood as a dialectical power in weakness but as liberating and transforming power that is effective in compassionate love, care and service. Mission is also to be understood as 'servant-hood' in God's liberating act.

Discourse on Asian theology can make a difference in our times by turning and rerouting to the Jesus of Galilee movement. In the Jesus movement, we see a decisive reversal from power and money to people in pain, from ruler to ruled, from oppressor to the oppressed. Jesus' movement was life-centered movement against the power of destruction and death. He stood for a different value system - peace, love, service and liberation of poor and earth were the message of Jesus, but not of power in the sword and in mammon. Jesus became the voice of the oppressed and voiceless. Jesus' paradigm was life-centered theology. This option, for protection of life as the locus of people's theology, requires sacrifice and a radical departure from power, institution and mammon.

Summary

Theology is Doing: How?

1. Theology of People based on Social and Historical analysis from Asian perspective.
2. Based on struggle and experience with the people.
3. Considering local culture and beliefs
4. Must be biblical
5. constructed with the people especially with the poor
6. Cultivating the spirituality of people in struggle
7. Enabling to give answer to the issues of injustice
8. Promoting human and inter faith living

How to communicate theology?

1. Through love, concrete action and struggle for justice and peace
2. Using people's story and drama
3. Using and considering local environment and nature
4. Using oral and media
5. Practicing in daily life and attitudes

New ways of doing Theology

1. New ways of seeing church: No as institution but movement
2. New ways of understanding salvations: not personal but all God's creation
3. New ways of understanding sins: not personal but also social
4. New ways of seeing reality: Not status quo but social transformation

²⁵ For more details refer to my work on *Tribal Worldview and Ecology*, and *Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1997)

5. New ways of understanding mission: not propagating dogma but action by faith
6. New ways of reading the Bible: not caught up by the written word but discovering the meaning of Bible in daily life, not only past story by also present experience and reality.

Abstract

Tribal religion does not have a written scripture like other religions, but oral traditions and customs are accepted as holy and authoritative norm. The religious ethos is contained in the people's hearts, oral history, myths and rituals. Therefore, the hermeneutical issues in Asia must go beyond cross-textual or inter-textual approach because cross-textual approach has no room for indigenous people who does not have a written scripture. Hence, the Bible, other faith scriptures and indigenous resources-oral traditions should be taken seriously to make the Bible contextual and meaningful in Asia. Hence, cross-cultural interpretation approach is important from tribal/indigenous perspective.

Key words

Hermeneutic, tribal religious traditions, outsiders, liberation, cross-culture, contextual theologies, doing theology, Asian theology