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READING THE BIBLE IN THE INDIAN/ASIAN CONTEXT

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This article begins with preliminary observations on biblical hermeneutics in general, followed by an assessment of the Indian biblical hermeneutics in particular. The article proposes *rootedness in and fidelity to* the biblical text as well as *sensitivity to and relevance for* the Asian contexts and world-views as hermeneutical keys for an Asian reading of the Bible.[1]

Preliminary Observations

As Lucien Legrand observes in his review of the book *Waters of Fire*, "Christian theology itself is the outcome of an encounter between the

[1]This article is a revised version of the keynote address given at the International Conference on "Doing and Teaching Biblical Studies in East Asian Contexts" organized by Loyola School of Theology (LST) and the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines (CBAP) at Ateneo de Manila University Campus, July 15–17, 2010. It was first published in the Felicitation Volume on the occasion of the 25th year of service of the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) in collaboration with the Federation of the Asian Bishops Conference (Vimal Tirimanna, ed., *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil: Twenty Five Years of the OTC/FABC* [Bangalore: ATC, 2011]).

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message, culled in the thought patterns of the Semitic world, and the thinking of Greece, of Rome, of successive ages, and now of the age of modern science, sociology, psychology and already of the computer era."[2] Going back to the New Testament times, let us take the example of Saint Paul who was trained to interpret the Torah and belonged to the group that was responsible for the ongoing interpretation of the Torah and its faithful transmission (1 Cor. 15:3). Paul was convinced that "the word of God is not chained/imprisoned" (*ho logos tou theou ou dedetai* [2 Tim. 2:9]) by time and space or by any culture, language, or people, and can be experienced and interpreted in a variety of ways. This is what Paul was doing after his encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus—reinterpreting the Torah in the light of the Christ event (Gal. 3; Rom. 4) and interpreting the Christ event in the light of the Torah as well as the new pastoral concerns of the growing church in the Gentile world (Gal. 3; 1 Cor. 15; see also Acts 17). Paul was therefore a key figure in extending membership of the church to non-Jews, in defining Christian identity through his law-free gospel and in developing an inculturated Christian theology.[3]

Similarly, the four evangelists interpreted the Christ-event differently. Although we have only one historical Jesus, we have four gospels giving us four different faces of Jesus. Each evangelist interpreted the story of Jesus in response to the needs of their respective communities. For example, by presenting Jesus as the *logos*, the fourth evangelist uses a concept that is familiar to the Jewish, Samaritan and Greek Christians, and reinterprets the meaning and significance of the Christ-event for the Johannine community.[4] The mystery of the

[2]Lucien Legrand, "Book Reviews," *Indian Theological Studies* XIX/2 (1982): 172.

[3]Rekha M. Chennattu, "Challenges of St Paul to the Mission of the Church in Asia-Pacific," *East Asian Pastoral Review* (2009): 46–58.

[4]Rekha M. Chennattu, "The Word Became Flesh (John 1:1–18): A Cross-cultural/religious Expression of the Divine," in *Cross-cultural Encounter: Experience and Expression of the Divine*, eds. Mohan Doss and Andreas Vonach (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2009), 43–51.

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Incarnation transcends the boundaries of Hellenistic philosophical thought and Jewish religious traditions and becomes a cross-cultural and inter-religious expression of the Divine. Therefore, Saint Paul and the four evangelists seem to be good biblical models for reading the Bible in the Asian context. On the one hand, they remained faithful to the experience of the Christ-event, and on the other they made it meaningful to the new members who embraced the WORD by being sensitive to their cultures and religious traditions. I think we are called to do the same thing.

There is a growing awareness among biblical scholars today that the biblical texts are not unbiased, that biblical interpretations are not neutral, and exegetes are not without their presuppositions. We no longer regard the historical critical method as an objective, neutral and scientific approach to the Bible which can provide correct and meaningful interpretation of the text. This is so because in biblical interpretation, we are dealing with words/expressions—the articulations of human experiences which are conditioned by history, cultures and traditions. So one cannot talk about an Asian chemistry, but can talk about an Asian exegesis.[5]

Asia is blessed with a great diversity of religions, languages and cultures. Almost all great religions originated in Asia and lived side by side peacefully for many years. Among other things, most of the Asian countries also suffer from massive poverty and gender discrimination. In an Asian Biblical Hermeneutics, one reads the Bible with an Asian pre-understanding, shaped by Asian realities and spiritualities as well as Asian exegetical traditions. In other words, an Asian reading should either use Asian methods of interpretation or be guided by the concerns of Asian cultures or provoked by questions emerging from the contemporary socio-political realities of Asian society.

[5]George Soares-Prabhu, "Interpreting the Bible in India Today," *The Way Supplement* 72 (1991): 70–71.

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Indian Readings of the Bible

It seems appropriate now to focus on one of the Asian contexts, namely the Indian tradition. The quest for an Indian biblical exegesis is not a recent phenomenon. Many attempts have been made to revive the ancient Indian hermeneutics of "story telling" and to work out a methodology for an Indian biblical hermeneutics. Indian traditional methods were mostly synchronic. As Lucien Legrand puts it, "India has rich traditions of exegesis which have never fallen victim to the lures of diachronic interpretation."[6] The Indian tradition seems to be closer to the Semitic tradition on this point. For example, the Aramaic versions of the Old Testament (*Targums* or *Targumim*) are not literal translations of the Hebrew Bible, but colourful retellings of the old biblical stories for a new life context in the history of Israel. Similarly, for ages Indian *gurus* (religious teachers) have been using hermeneutics as a means of retelling the sacred stories for new generations.[7]

Some fifteen years ago, the late George Soares-Prabhu (an Indian biblical scholar) identified four ways (a list that is indicative or illustrative rather than exhaustive) of reading the Bible from an Indian perspective which are very significant for our discussion. Soares-Prabhu wrote:[8]

[6]Lucien Legrand, "New Horizons in Biblical Exegesis," *Indian Theological Studies* 21 (1984): 205.

[7]The works of the great missionaries like Robert de Nobili (1577–1656) and Constant Joseph Beschi (1680–1746) show that they have followed the Indian tradition of "story telling" and "retelling of old stories" for a new audience living in a different context. Following the example of two of the Hindu Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, Beschi wrote an Indian Christian epic, a poetical work on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, called *Thembāvani* (*The Unfading Garland*) in which St. Joseph is portrayed as the hero.

[8]George Soares-Prabhu, "Editorial," *Jeevadhara* xxv/146 (1995): 104.

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An Indian reading of the Bible might mean any one of the following:

1. Reading the biblical text using traditional Indian methods of interpretation (like *dhvani*).
2. Reading the Bible in the light of specifically Indian concerns (like poverty or caste).
3. Reading the Bible with an Indian mind, that is, with the sensibilities of the great or little traditions of India (like the *vedantic* reading of John or a tribal reading of the Exodus).
4. Reading a biblical text along with a parallel text from an Indian Scripture—not to compare their respective religious world-views, but to gain new insights into the biblical text from its similarity to or difference from its inter-text.

I shall briefly deal with the three methods which are more common: 1) The use of the Indian traditional methods; 2) The *dhvani* interpretation; 3) Readings based on Indian realities and concerns.[9]

The Use of the Indian Traditional Methods

This reading goes back to the Vedic or Upaniṣadic experience of God and tries to understand the biblical symbols and narratives from the framework of the Indian religious mind. In this process, biblical symbols are placed on a par with Indian ones or replaced by Indian symbols from the Sanskrit literary tradition. Examples include the works of Krishna Mohan Banerjee, who found similarities between Vedic texts and biblical narratives and claimed Indian Christians as the spiritual heirs of Aryan Hindus[10]; Swami Abhishiktananda,

[9]For reading a biblical text along with a parallel text from an Indian Scripture, I suggest the article of Soares-Prabhu on "Two Mission Commands" which interprets Matthew 28:16–20 (the mission command in Matthew) in the light of a Buddhist text (*Biblical Interpretation* 2 [1994]: 264–82).

[10]Krishna Mohan Banerjee, *The Relation between Christianity and Hinduism* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1892). As Kaj Baago puts it, Banerjee "tries to prove two propositions: (i) that the Christian doctrine about salvation

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who presented the Gospel of John as a Christian Upaniṣad[11]; T. M. Manikkam, who studied both the literary evolution of the *Dharmaśāstra*[12] and the Pentateuch and compared the teachings of Manu with the laws of Moses from philosophical, social and religious perspectives[13]; Bede Griffiths, who interpreted the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in the light of the *advaitic* (non-dualistic) experience of *Saccidānanda*[14];

finds a remarkable counterpart in the Vedic principles of primitive Hinduism in relation to the destruction of sin and redemption of the sinner by the sacrifice of Prajapathi, the Lord and Saviour of Creation. (ii) That this Prajapathi is Jesus Christ" (*Library of Indian Christian Theology: A Bibliography* [Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969], 9).

[11]Swami Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart* (Bombay/Bangalore: IIC/CISRS, 1969). See also his *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974).

[12]*Dharmaśāstra* is the name for a traditional (ancient) Hindu text or book that contains laws or codes (corresponding to the Catholic Canon Law). There are several such *Dharmaśastra* books; the most important are the codes of Manu and Yajnyavalkya.

[13]T. M. Manikkam, *Dharma According to Manu and Moses* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 1977). Manikkam also presents the thematical scheme of the laws of *Dharma* in Manusmrti and that of *Sedāqā* in the Pentateuch; see pages 328–40.

[14]See Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1978); *The Marriage of East and West* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1983). *Saccidananda* is one of the later definitions or descriptions of Brahman (or the Supreme Being) in the *Upanishads*: *Saccidanandam Brahma*. Brahman is Being, Consciousness, Bliss. These characteristics or qualities are identical with Brahman, who is one Person. However, Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, in his hymn *Vande Sac-cit-anandam* which appeared in the monthly journal *Sophia* in October 1898, established a correspondence between *Saccidananda* and the Christian Trinity (which is three Persons): *Sat* refers to the First Person (Father), who is Being, since the First Person is the "Creator"; *Cit* refers to the Second Person, the Logos, the Word, the Son; *Ananda* refers to the Third Person, the Holy Spirit. Cited in George Gispert-Sauch, "The Sanskrit Hymns of Brahmabandhav Upadhyay," *Religion and Society* 19:4 (1972): 60–77, especially 65–77. For a scholarly explanation of the hymn, see also Julius Lipner and George Gispert-Sauch, eds., *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay* I (Bangalore: The United Theological College, 1991), 125–45; Julius J. Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 199–204.

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Vandana Mataji, who studied the Johannine symbol of *logos* in the light of the Upaniṣadic concept of *aum* and the symbol of water in the light of Hindu scriptures and traditions[15]; and Corona Mary, who used the Tamil Śaiva-Siddhānta tradition to interpret biblical texts.[16] Such readings require an in-depth knowledge of both Hindu and Christian Scriptures to do justice to both traditions.

The Dhvani Method of Interpretation

The *dhvani* theory goes back to the 9th century linguistic studies in India and was first proposed by Anandavardhana of Kashmir in his work, *Dhvanyāloka*.[17] Anandavardhana argues that beyond the primary meaning (*abhidhā*) and the secondary meaning (*lakṣanā*) of a word, there is something real and beautiful which he calls "*dhvani*," the suggested or evoked meaning. Anandavardhana further explains the *dhvani* theory through similes and metaphors; he compares *dhvani* with the charm in a young woman. This charm is not identified with any individual part of the body or with the ornaments she wears, but it stands out. Similarly, the suggested meaning or *dhvani* shines above the individual words and their meaning. The suggested or evoked meaning creates an ambience of pleasant surprise among the readers or hearers.[18] In the words of A. Amaladass, "*dhvani* is something like an echo or resonance creating newer and newer echoes (*anuranana*). The popular etymology of the word

[15]Vandana Mataji, "The 'Johannine-Upanishadic' Experience: An Indian Meditation on John's Prologue," *Indian Theological Studies* 16 (1979): 153–68; see also her *Waters of Fire* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1981).

[16]See Corona Mary, "Divinization through Grace: Understanding a Johannine Theme in the Light of Śaiva-Siddhanta," *Jeevadhara* 25 (1995): 161–72.

[17]Anandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, trans. K. Krishnamurthy (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974).

[18]Anandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka,* 6.18–19; cited by A. Amaladass, "'Dhvani' Theory in Sanskrit Poetics," *Biblebhashyam* 5/4 (1979): 262–75. See also his book, *Philosophical Implications of Dhvani: Experience of Symbol Language in Indian Aesthetics* (Vienna: Gerald & Co, 1984), 79–80.

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dhyanyate brings out this aspect, 'that by which the real meaning (of the poem) resounds'."[19] Unlike the primary and secondary meanings, *dhvani* thus provides new meanings to new readers. Amaladass further explains the role of *dhvani* with the traditional, stock example of *Gangāyām ghosah* (literally "the village on the Ganga" [Ganges river]) which suggests or evokes an ambience of serenity, peace and holiness associated with the sacred river.[20] George Soares-Prabhu regards *dhvani* as a metaphor because *dhvani,* like a metaphor, "does not communicate a lesson, but evokes a limit experience—an experience of the transcendent which is so utterly beyond conceptualization."[21] The Indian *dhvani* reading comes very close to the semiotic analysis of the West.[22] The *dhvani* method pays special attention to the evocative process at work through various factors like structure, style, diction, intonation or gestures.

Readings Based on Indian Realities and Concerns

The contextualized readings display a special sensitivity to the Indian social realities like mass poverty, social discrimination and

[19]Amaladass, "'Dhvani' Theory in Sanskrit Poetics," 262. See also Francis X. D'Sa, "*Dhvani* as a Method of Interpretation," *Biblebhashyam* 5/4 (1979): 276–94.

[20]Amaladass, "'Dhvani' Theory in Sanskrit Poetics," 263.

[21]George Soares-Prabhu, "And There was a Great Calm: A Dhvani Reading of the Stilling of the Storm (Mark 4:35–41)," *Biblebhashyam* 5/4 (1979): 301.

[22]For a discussion of semiotic analysis and *dhvani*, see Joseph Pathrapankal, "The Way to the Kingdom of God: A Semiotic Reading of a Markan Pericope (Mark 10:2–16)," *Jeevadhara* 25 (1995): 120–22. Among scholars who tried to interpret the Bible using the *dhvani* method include George Soares-Prabhu, Matthew Vellanickal, Anand Amaladoss and R. J. Raja. See George Soares-Prabhu, "And There was a Great Calm: A Dhvani Reading of the Stilling of the Storm (Mark 4:35–41)," 295–308; Matthew Vellanickal, "Drink from the Source of the Living Water," *Biblebhashyam* 5/4 (1979): 309–18; Anand Amaladoss, "Dhvani Method of Interpretation and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Indian Theological Studies* 31 (1994): 199–217; R. J. Raja, "Seeking God, Sought by God: A Dhvani-Reading of the Episode of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:10)," *Jeevadhara* 25 (1995): 139–48.

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political corruption. Among these readings, two perspectives stand out: (1) Social and political perspectives (e.g., *dalit* readings from the point of view of the socially marginalized outcasts or *dalits* [literally, "oppressed"] and tribal readings from the point of view of the Indian tribal communities); (2) Feminist readings from the point of view of the experience of women in India who are victims of a double discrimination in society.

Social and Political Readings

The biblical stories were looked at from social and political perspectives. Following the principle of equality and justice, biblical texts have been interpreted from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. The late George Soares-Prabhu, Samuel Rayan and the late Sebastian Kappen were pioneers in this field in India.[23] Indian social readings emphasized both personal conversion and structural change to bring about a just society that makes God's reign visible here on earth. A *dalit* reading is an Indian offshoot of the social reading as it interpreted the Bible in the light of the experience of the *dalits* (one of the most discriminated against

[23]George Soares-Prabhu, "'Good News to the Poor'; The Social Implications of the Message of Jesus," *Biblebhashyam* 4 (1978): 193–212; "Jesus and Social Justice," in *Jesus for Our Times: Towards a Spirituality of Social Action* (Manila: FABC Office of Human Development, 1986) 34–52; "Class in the Bible: The Biblical Poor a Social Class?" in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 147–71; Samuel Rayan, "Jesus and the Poor in the Fourth Gospel," *Biblebhashyam* 4 (1978): 213–28; "Jesus and the Struggles of the Masses in India," *Third Millennium* 11 (1999): 18–31; Sebastian Kappen, *Jesus and Freedom* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1977); *Jesus and Society: Selected Writings of Sebastian Kappen S.J.* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002). See also L. Legrand, "'There is neither Slave nor Free, neither Male nor Female': St Paul and Social Emancipation," *Indian Theological Studies* 18 (1980): 135–63. See also Simon Samuel, "The *Kairos* of the *Galilaioi*: An Indian Liberationist Reading of John 1–7," *Jeevadhara* 25 (1995): 149–60. More than a decade ago, I did a political reading of the good shepherd metaphor in John's Gospel when India celebrated the 50th anniversary of her independence from British rule. See Rekha M. Chennattu, "The Good Shepherd (Jn 10): A Political Perspective," *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies* 1:1 (1998): 93–105.

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groups which are said to be outcastes, i.e., considered lower than the lowest caste).[24] It developed a spirituality of confrontation against the enslaving social structures that perpetuate unjust and unequal relationships in society. Biblical texts are also interpreted from a tribal perspective. In an interpretation of Exodus 1–15, for example, Peter Haokip tried to show parallels between the exodus story of Israel and that of the tribal people of North East India.[25]

Indian Feminist Readings

Although many attempts have been made to develop an Indian feminist theology,[26] we have not done much in articulating a biblical hermeneutics from an Indian woman's perspective. Pauline Chakkalakal is one of the pioneers who contributed to this area by reading the biblical texts with special sensitivity to the patriarchal bias in the Bible.[27]

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[24]See for example, A Maria Arul Raja, "The Authority of Jesus: A Dalit Reading of Mark 11:27–33," *Jeevadhara* 25 (1995): 123–38. For *dalit* theology in general, see for example Peter Arockiadoss, *Equal and Free*, ed. Michael Amaladoss (Dindigul, India: Vaigarai Publications, 2010).

[25]Peter Haokip, "A Tribal Reading of Exodus 1–15," *Jeevadhara* XL/236 (2010): 89–108. For tribal theologies, see also the *Journal of Tribal Studies*; James Massey and Shimreingam Shimray, eds., *Dalit-Tribal Theological Interface: Current Trends in Subaltern Theologies* (Jorhat: TSC/WSC and Delhi: CDS, 2007).

[26]For example, see Pearl Drego, "The Place and Role of Women in Church and Society in the Light of Vatican II," in *Quest for an Indian Church: An Exploration of the Possibilities Opened up by Vatican II*, eds. Kurien Kunnumpuram and Lorenzo Fernando (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1993), 181–212; Shalini Mulackal, "Political Economy of Participation: Women in the Life and Mission of the Church," in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*, eds. E. Monteiro and A. Gutzler (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 184–94. See also R. S. Shrivastava, "Women Empowerment: Some Critical Issues," in *Modernity, Feminism and Women Empowerment*, eds. A. Avasthi and A. K. Srivastava (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2001), 171–81; Mary C. Grey, *A Cry for Dignity: Religion, Violence and the Struggle of Dalit Women in India* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2010).

[27]See Pauline Chakkalakal, *Discipleship: A Space for Women's Leadership* (Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 2004). Rekha Chennattu, "Women in the Mission of the

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What is the unique and distinct way in which Indian women respond to the present situation of cultural alienation, religious deprivation and male domination? The following observation seems timely and relevant. The conventions such as "being submissive" or "to cultivate a capacity to endure suffering and humiliation" still reflect in many ways what Indian women were taught (and still believe) as the most natural, normal and noble way of behaving in society. What seems appropriate in handling these issues is the strategy of constructive dialogues in view of challenging and changing the gender stereotypes in the Church and society, of being sensitive to the echoes of the deepest aspirations of Indian women. Theological illiteracy is indeed one of the reasons for the subordination of women in the Church. Adequate biblical and theological formation will empower women to play their rightful role in the Church.

Jesus' vision of God's reign (Luke 4:16–21), Paul's dreams of an egalitarian society (Gal. 3:28) and the significant roles played by biblical women have been a source of inspiration for Indian women. Courageous biblical women (e.g., the midwives in the story of the Exodus, the mother of Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Judith, Ruth, Esther, etc. in the OT, Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, as well as the four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew in the NT) not only reflect the socio-cultural reality of the biblical world but also foreshadow the ideals, aspirations and struggles of contemporary Indian women.[28] Sandra

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Church: An Interpretation of John 4," *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection* 65 (2001): 760–73, or "Les Femmes dans la Mission de la Église: Interpretation de Jean 4," *Bulletin de Litterature Ecclesiastique* CVIII/3 (2007): 381–96; "Asian Feminist Christology," in *Asian Faces of Christ: OTC Theological Colloquium*, ed. Vimal Tirimanna (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2005), 183–202. See also the whole issue of the journal, *Jesus and Women, Jeevdhara* XL/237 (2010): 175–252.

[28]See Rekha Chennattu, "Biblical Women as Agents of Justice and Peace," in *Word of God: Source of Justice and Peace*, ed. A Peter Abir (Tindivanam, India: CBF, 2008), 124–58; Evelyn Monteiro, "Re-imaging Woman and Reshaping Her Destiny: An Indian Feminist Reading of the Bent Body," in *Body and Sexuality: Theological-Pastoral*

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M. Schneiders discusses a three-fold mission of the Feminist biblical hermeneutics which is very relevant: it has the mission of liberating 1) all oppressed in general and 2) the Church from a gender biased world-view which alienates women from decision-making bodies as well as 3) the text from its own participation in the discrimination against women.[29] An integrated approach that focuses on a liberating God-experience leading to the empowerment of women (at the personal level) and social transformation will be the hallmark of Indian feminist readings of the biblical narratives.

Towards an Asian Biblical Hermeneutics

We begin with a discussion of the Hindu world-view (one of the Asian religious traditions) which will hopefully help identify the hermeneutical key for an interpretation of the Bible in Asia today.

Asian/Hindu World-view

The focus here is the impact of Asian/Hindu (major or *brahmanic* tradition) understandings of God's word and the Asian/Hindu world-view on the Christian appropriation of God's word and reading of the Bible. Lipner makes a helpful distinction between Hinduism and "Hinduness"—while Hinduism stands for "a family of religious traditions," Hinduness refers to the distinctive characteristics of the family of Hinduism, viz., "a particular orientation in the world, a specific way of being, a distinctive *mentalité*."[30]

Perspectives of Women in Asia, eds. Agnes M. Brazal and Andrea Lizares Si (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007), 139–50.

[29]Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 126–34; Sandra M. Schneiders, "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989): 3–10.

[30]Lipner, "Ancient Banyan: An Inquiry into the Meaning of 'Hinduness'," *Religious Studies* (1996): 112.

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The Hindu mind generally believes that God upholds the values that sustain and preserve the universe and is at work in human history. In the words of Vensus A. George, "the concept of the *avatāra* of Lord Viṣṇu in Vaiṣṇavism and the concept of *śakti* of the Lord Śiva in Śaivism point to the immanent aspect of the supreme God as active in the world respectively."[31] It seems that the fundamental unity pervading the Hindu traditions consists in a world-view that propagates the sacredness of the universe. Some Hindu schools like Śrī Vaiṣṇavism or Viśiṣṭādvaita (or Ramanuja and others of this school) regard the whole universe as the body of God. Vensus A. George refers to this unity as a "spiritual perspective with which the whole universe is viewed and understood" in Hinduism.[32]

The Asian tradition seems to consider that, more than the accumulation of information and speculation on dogmas of faith, the purpose of the study of the Scriptures is enlightenment or liberation (*mokṣa*). In the words of Sister Vandana, "reflection and commentaries on the Scriptures—*bhashya*—are the normal mode used in India for a growth in the spiritual life, for that is the goal of all theologizing —coming closer to God till we are one with him."[33] The knowledge sought after in the Scriptures, especially in the Upaniṣads, "is not that of ritual techniques or even of ritual-based homologies, but a graspable, revelatory and experiential knowledge of the self as one with the ultimate reality. In the early Upaniṣads this experience is formulated as the realization of 'ultimate connection,' the oneness of *Ātman-brahman*, a connection knowable only in the context of communication from *Guru* to disciple."[34] The exegetes are called to experience the divine

[31]Vensus A. George, *Paths to the Divine: Ancient and Indian*, Indian Philosophical Studies XII (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 294.

[32]George, *Paths to the Divine*, 295.

[33]Vandana, *Waters of Fire*, xvii.

[34]Alf Hiltebeitel, "Hinduism," in *World Religions: Selections from the Sixteen-Volume Macmillan Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 488.

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presence and then to clarify the vision of the divine word (*vāk*) which had been experienced by the ancient authors.[35] In Hindu exegesis, reason and revelation are regarded as complementary. Reason alone is empty and powerless when it comes to revealing and possessing the knowledge of the divine, but reason is necessary to remove doubts and obstructions.

The Hindu *mentalité* (to use an expression from Lipner) encourages open-ended inclusion and healthy relativism. It usually prefers a "*both-and*" to an "*either-or*" approach to reality and doctrines. Hindu traditions maintain an overall integrity and interrelatedness.[36] Asia's relativistic and inclusive world-view is expressed in the logical axiom of *sive-sive* "be it this way, be it that" or in other words "this as well as that," which coordinates rather than dissects. Julius Lipner shows that the analogy of a magnificent banyan tree explains well the polycentrism as well as the organic oneness of the diverse religious traditions grouped together under the umbrella of Hinduism.[37] The Hindu mind is characterized by an integrated diversity that upholds both unity and pluralism.

Hermeneutical Keys for an Indian/Asian Reading

As one of the Asian traditions suggests, the purpose or goal of interpreting God's Word is not mere knowledge but rather enlightenment or transformation because our interpretation strives to lead "the reader to a depth-meaning which is experienceable but

[35]Harold Coward, *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 122–28.

[36]Tinu Ruparell, "Hinduism," in *Encountering Religion* 2nd ed., eds. Ian S. Markham and Tinu Ruparell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 167.

[37]Julius Lipner, "On Hinduism and Hinduisms: The Way of the Banyan," in *The Hindu World*, eds. Sushil Mitta and Gene Thursby (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 9–34, esp. 24–25. See also Rekha M. Chennattu, "*Verbum Dei* nel Contesto dell'Induismo," Paper presented at the Settimana Conclusiva dell' Anno Centenario del Pontifical Biblical Institute on May 5, 2010 (Rome, Italy).

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not expressible."[38] To achieve this, when the exegetes deal with the Gospels, the interpreter needs to take into consideration *the world behind the text* (Christian communities responsible for the Gospels), *the world of the text* (the plot in the Gospels) and *the world in front of the text* (the contemporary Asian context).[39] The interpretation needs to be rooted in the biblical traditions as well as be relevant to the Asian contexts. *Rootedness in and fidelity to* the biblical text (the *centripetal* aspect of Asian reading) as well as *sensitivity to and relevance for* the Asian contexts and world-views (the *centrifugal* aspect of Asian reading) should function as hermeneutical keys for an Asian reading of the Bible.

Rootedness and Fidelity

In order to make an Asian interpretation of the text a Christian reading (which is different from a Hindu or Buddhist reading, for example), the interpretation should be faithful to the religious experience that is being communicated to the reader. The reader meaning (what is understood by the reader) should be in continuity with the author meaning (what is meant by the author). This process demands rootedness in the biblical tradition and fidelity to the text under consideration. Mastery of the biblical languages such as Hebrew, Greek, Syrian and Latin is crucial for an informed reading of biblical texts. Considering the richness and diversity of biblical texts, exegetes need to use a variety of complementary methods. Integration of various diachronic as well as synchronic methods becomes imperative.

An Asian reading should use different scientific methods to ensure the fidelity to the text. Textual criticism helps one to deal with issues

[38]D' Sa, "*Dhvani* as a Method of Interpretation," 279.

[39]See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999). See also Rekha M. Chennattu, "The *Svadharma* of Jesus: An Indian Reading of John 5:1–18," in *Seeking New Horizons: Festschrift in Honour of M. Amaladoss, S.J.*, ed. Leonard Fernando (Delhi: Vidyajyoti Education and Welfare Society & Indian Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 2002), 317–35.

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concerning the variant readings of the passage under consideration. Grammatical criticism responds to the questions pertaining to the biblical languages in general and the syntax of the sentences in particular. Literary criticism deals with style, character, compositional technique and the rhetorical patters of the given text. The literary context or the location of the passage and its function within the larger literary units are important for the interpreter to be in continuity with the author meaning. Rhetorical analysis explores how biblical texts employ literary devices to persuade their readers. The Bible contains a rich diversity of literary genres and forms such as hymns, parables, allegories, prophetic speeches, pronouncement stories, miracle stories, diatribes, type scenes and metaphors, to mention a few. Questions concerning the literary forms and genres constitute the field of form criticism. Redaction criticism seeks to understand the changes the text might have undergone in the editorial process and focuses on the final form of the text under consideration.[40] Moreover, biblical exegetes need to revive the ancient Asian hermeneutics of "story telling" by exploring narrative criticism and reader-response criticisms.[41] The exegetes need to learn to ask right questions and learn to answer them in a coherent and meaningful way.

Sensitivity and Relevance

In order to make an Asian reading more meaningful and relevant for our times, the interpretation should be shaped by Asian social

[40]See Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Subsidia Biblica 22 (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2008). For these criticisms in detail, see Wilhelm Egger, *How to Read the New Testament: An Introduction to Linguistic and Historical-Critical Methodology*, ed. Hendrikus Boers (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996). See also Horacio Simian-Yofre, ed., *Metodologia dell' Antico Testamento* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1995).

[41]Jean Louis Ska, "*Our Fathers Have Told Us*": *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*, Subsidia Biblica 13 (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990); Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1993).

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realities as well as the Asian world-view and spiritual quest. Asian biblical hermeneutics should therefore take care of the relevance of the interpretation for the Asian readers.[42] An integration of a variety of readings such as tribal, dalit, feminist, political, cultural and social perspectives will bring out the richness of biblical texts for Asia.[43] A dialogue between the biblical world and Asian socio-political realities and religious traditions becomes imperative in the process. It challenges the interpreter to be deeply rooted in and sensitive to the Asian realities and worldviews in order to make the interpretation relevant and meaningful.

Asian sensitivity demands an inclusive approach which upholds the dignity and right of women and a social sensitivity that takes care of the poor and less privileged sections of society as well as the sustainability of the universe. The interaction with the Word of God brings about both personal conversion (*metanoia*) and social commitment to build up a more just and humane society. As George Soares-Prabhu puts it, "'Liberation' for the Asian psyche is not only liberation from poverty, but equally the liberation which leads to that 'poverty' which is freedom from illusion, attachment and greed."[44] It implies an integration of biblical exegesis, theology and spirituality. The primary purpose of biblical hermeneutics for Asians should be an encounter with God which results in personal *metanoia,* brings about social transformation

[42]See Soares-Prabhu, "Interpreting the Bible in India Today," 77–79; R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006).

[43]See for example R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

[44]George Soares-Prabhu, "Inculturation—Liberation—Dialogue: Challenges to Christian Theology in Asia Today," in *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today: Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J.* I, ed. Isaac Padinjarekuttu (Pune, India: Jnanadeepa Vidyapeeth, 1999), 56. See also Samuel Rayan, "Asia and Justice," in *Liberation in Asia: Theological Perspectives*, eds. S. Arokiasamy and G. Gispert-Sauch (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987), 3–16; Kurien Kunnumpuram, *Towards a New Humanity* (Mumbai: St Paul's, 2005), 131–57.

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and protects the cosmos for future generations. This personal experience of God in the process of exegesis empowers the interpreters to share in the life of God, leading them to become instruments of God's reconciling or redemptive work (2 Cor. 5:18–21).

Conclusion

The real challenge is to get all the three horizons—the biblical traditions, ancient Asian traditions and the contemporary secular contexts—to interact with one another and enter into a process of dialogical engagement.[45] An Asian reading of the Bible is therefore characterized by both *centripetal* (maintaining rootedness and continuity) and *centrifugal* (encouraging sensitivity and diversity) aspects of hermeneutics. On the one hand, the interpreter needs both the historical and the literary critical methods in order to be rooted in the biblical text and to be faithful to the religious experience transmitted to us by the early Christian community. On the other hand, the interpreter needs to be familiar with ancient Asian traditions and be sensitive to the realities of the contemporary Asian society in order to make his/her interpretation relevant to the modern readers of Asia.

[45]See for example the editorial and articles in Rekha M. Chennattu, ed., *Towards an Indian Biblical Hermeneutics*, *Jeevadhara* XL/237 (2010): 87–168.

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