

# **Contextual Hermeneutics: A Study in Method**

**by**

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## **1. Introduction**

My interest in this topic was aroused chiefly by a thought-provoking paper on ‘Current Trends in Indian Biblical Studies,’ presented at the conference of the Society for Biblical Studies in April 1998 at UBS, Pune. The playing down of the Authority of the Bible and the uniqueness of Christ on the one hand, and attempts to using Hindu scriptures and pluralistic philosophy in order to interpret biblical texts on the other, continue to be the ecumenical fashion in India. As I thought of addressing this issue, the idea of ‘metacriticism’ captured my mind as I taught a course on ‘hermeneutics’ at SAIACS. This is not entirely a new idea, but I found it helpful to argue that neither the authority of the Bible nor the uniqueness of Christ can be compromised in any context-relative hermeneutics. My aim in this paper, therefore, is two-fold: first is to offer a survey of different theories of interpretation (including Indian) to see whether the context/reader decides the meaning or are there certain universal principles governing biblical interpretation. Secondly, to explore whether these theories can be submitted to a ‘metacriticism’, a universal basis for their evaluation, and allowing, at the same time their contextual expression. Now the question is, ‘Are there some universal principles which could be applied anywhere and by anyone?’ How much of the Western religion and philosophy, and culture determine the meaning of the biblical text, and how much of the Indian religion and culture should play a similar role in understanding the biblical texts?’ The number on Hermeneutics published in the *Indian Journal of Theology*, 1982, and a number of studies followed thereafter were a brilliant effort by the Indian scholars to grapple with this whole issue of doing hermeneutics in an Indian perspective.

To explore this challenging topic, I shall follow the outline given below:

1. Introduction (as above)
2. Meaning of hermeneutics

3. Modern theories of hermeneutics and their contribution to the understanding of biblical texts
4. The specificity of hermeneutics in India and the resultant trends
5. Conclusion

## **2. Meaning of Hermeneutics**

The Greek verb 'hermeneuin' and its cognates 'hermeneuia', 'hermeneus' and 'hermeneutes' are used in a variety of ways. The general idea we get from these words is that of interpreting, or the one who interprets. The word 'hermeneutics' is used as 'interpreter' in Xenophon's *Anabasis* (ca. 401BC), and 'to expound' an obscure text in Sophocles (ca 468 BC), in Euripides (ca 441 BC) and in Plato (ca 399 BC).

In modern scholarship, however, 'hermeneutics' is variously described by different scholars. Some see no difference between hermeneutics and interpretation while others like to distinguish between exegesis, interpretation and hermeneutics. Achtemeier, for instance, believes that exegesis is an inquiry into the author's meaning to his original readers, interpretation is its meaning for today and hermeneutics devises the rules and methods that move from exegesis to interpretation. For many, however, interpretation simply means historical, textual and literary study of the texts with no special reference to their readers. Traditionally, the term 'hermeneutics' also was understood in a similar way where the focus was on the formulation of rules for the understanding of the text in its historical and linguistic terms. This presupposes that the texts are historically conditioned.

However, the term 'hermeneutics' has undergone a definite revision and expansion of its traditional meaning in the recent years. Accordingly, it is observed that there are two sides to this historical conditioning: both the ancient text and the modern interpreter have their own historical conditionedness which are conveniently described by Anthony Thiselton as 'the two horizons'. The task of hermeneutics is to facilitate a meaningful interaction between these two horizons ('fusion of horizons' according to Gadamer) so that a genuine 'understanding' takes place. Describing in a similar way, J.A. Sanders says that it is the 'science of understanding a thought or event from one cultural context to another, the art of making the transfer'. Such

idea of interpretation, it appears, is by no means alien to Indian thinking. According to Paul Gregorios, hermeneutics was highly developed discipline in India at one time. The principle of interpretation was called '*pramanavicara*'. However, Thiselton observes that the principle, that hermeneutics is two sided, relating to the ancient text and the modern interpreter, raises four distinct questions. First, there is something called the interpreter's 'pre-understanding' that plays a key role in interpretation. Secondly, 'pre-understanding' of the interpreter does not mean that the focus is now shifted entirely from the past to the present. This was the problem with the hermeneutics of Bultmann. Thirdly, the 'pre-understanding of the New Testament writers is based on particular theological angle, which is the Christ-event. This is going to be the key emphasis in this paper. Fourthly, the role of philosophy in understanding the nature and task of biblical hermeneutics. This last point is particularly important in our Indian context because the Indian mind is significantly attracted to philosophy. Thiselton concludes at the end of his detailed study that philosophy serves to define the task of hermeneutics, provides conceptual tools for the interpretation of texts and helps detect the interpreter's own presuppositions as well as enlarge his own critical capacities.

With this understanding of the meaning and scope of hermeneutics, we shall now turn to the various theoretical models of modern interpretation and then we shall see how Indian endeavours in hermeneutics contributed to the understanding of biblical texts in general and furthered the mission of the Church in India in particular. I understand that 'hermeneutics' in the Western set up has been an academic discipline that encourages listening to one another, tolerance and mutual respect in a multi-disciplinary context. But I also agree with Thiselton that this multidisciplinary academic concern must not remain isolated from the practical and pastoral concerns of the Church at large. It is encouraging to see Thiselton devoting two whole chapters to 'The Hermeneutics of Pastoral Theology' in his recent magisterial work, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*. In fact most of the hermeneutical models of the West presuppose the centrality of the biblical texts in hermeneutics. The concern of the present paper is to examine the role of biblical texts and the Church's mandate as understood in the Indian hermeneutics.

### **3. Modern theories of hermeneutics and their contribution to the understanding of biblical texts**

In this section we shall attempt to seek answers for the questions already raised in our introduction. The chief among them would be the contribution of western philosophy for an understanding of biblical texts, the relationship between the hermeneutical theories and their contextual theologies and the role of biblical texts in contextual hermeneutics.

In this section I will be drawing heavily from Anthony Thiselton whose extensive contribution in this area makes him one of the chief exponents of the multidisciplinary subject 'hermeneutics'. It appears that before Schleiermacher, scholars appealed to hermeneutics only when they faced difficulties. In other words they expected interpretation and understanding were to take place automatically 'until some supposed meaning conflicted with their own prior expectations'. Thus hermeneutics served the purpose of preachers' prior agenda, whereas hermeneutics as 'a theory of interpretation and of understanding' seemed to have begun with Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who insisted that hermeneutics must be freed from private and 'regional' concerns. For him hermeneutics involved philosophy, art of thinking and formed the basis for understanding texts. However, only with the work of Bultmann and Fuchs that hermeneutics received its impetus and emerged as an independent discipline in theology in 1960s and 1970s and then attracted widespread attention through its vast literature in 1980s and 1990s. Hermeneutics is now concerned with 'philosophical issues about the nature of human understanding, linguistic questions about texts, theological enquiries about biblical texts, and social concerns about interpersonal communicative action,' and so forth. We shall look at some major hermeneutical theories which addressed these issues and then we shall see whether these theorists were concerned with some private context-relative problems or are they developing some universal principles applicable to trans-regional and trans-contextual issues.

### **3.1 Earlier theoretical models**

Until 1970, three major theoretical models of hermeneutics were said to be in practice. First, the Romanticist model of Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Betti. The major themes of the Romanticist hermeneutics may be summarised in four points: 1) to understand the texts the interpreter must put himself in the shoes of the author; 2) the meaning of the parts must be grasped in the light of the whole and vice versa; 3) the human

author must be seen as one who uses shared language; 4) the interpreter will seek to understand the text 'as well as and then even better than its author'. At this juncture the discipline seemed to be concerned chiefly with biblical texts and the hermeneutical key here is to understand the 'flow of life' and to 're-live' the authors' experiences through a historical reconstruction of their 'life-worlds'.

Secondly, the existential model of Bultmann, Heidegger and others. The existentialist hermeneutics is characterised by an emphasis on 'reader situations', or the 'world of readers', the language of 'self-involvement', human experience, divine address and so forth. The heart of Bultmann's hermeneutics is the relation between the self-involving functions of language and the language that asserts that certain statements have to be true. To put it bluntly, for Bultmann, the New Testament is to be viewed either from the point of history or of faith but not both. It is claimed that Bultmann was deeply influenced by Heidegger's existential philosophy and this comes out more strongly in his hermeneutics of demythologizing. For Bultmann, 'myth' appears to portray 'objective' events, such as atonement and resurrection, but in practice its form disguises its function. Thus the language functions only existentially and does not describe objective events. For instance, 'the language about the last judgment ... does not describe or make statements about, a future judgment; it simply *invites an attitude of human responsibility*. Similarly, ... "To believe in the cross of Christ does not mean to concern ourselves with a mythical process wrought outside of us and our world, with an objective event ... but rather to make the cross of Christ our own." Thiselton rightly concludes that Bultmann's hermeneutics is one-sided and would prove to be disastrous for theology. However, a way forward from here is to be seen in other scholars who show that 'self-involving language *pre-supposes*, ... the language which makes truth-claims about states of affairs or events'.

Thirdly, the hermeneutical system of Gadamer, whose contribution was seen as a turning point and the developments thereafter considered to be a response to his work. From here on, hermeneutics were no longer confined to biblical texts alone but began to embrace all human activity including art, action and all sorts of texts. It is observed that Gadamer, more than anyone else, was responsible for formulating a general hermeneutical theory as well as for the interpretation of biblical texts.

Gadamer argued that post-enlightenment rationalism insisted that ‘method’ was the means of grasping the truth, but “‘method’ presupposes an abstract generality.’ and a ‘hindrance to truth’, since it ‘tends to determine *in advance* the terms on which truth should be understood ... All human life, including action, art, and texts, invites understanding on its own terms, not in terms of some prior method predetermined in advance of engaging with the material.’ Gadamer emphasises on wisdom which transcends knowledge and ‘draws on tradition for transmitting reinterpretations and actualisation’s of truth in events. It does not merely “subsume the individual under a universal category”’. Gadamer also views tradition more positively than others. For him tradition ‘transmits wisdom [and] allows for a ‘formation’ ... which ‘builds’. It allows dialogue between people in different contexts, and encourages mutual respect and genuine listening to one another. This has serious consequences for theology and reason. For theology, it opens a new way to listen to texts, others and to God without imposing one’s own views. It warns reason that ‘reason alone is not enough; but credulity alone would not be ‘wisdom’. However, some questions were raised about Gadamer’s work which apparently promotes contextual relativism or/and postmodernism which offers ‘no criteria’ to determine what is ‘valid’, ‘appropriate’ and even ‘edifying’ apart from their own contexts.

### **3.2 Later theoretical models**

As we noted earlier, Gadamer’s work triggered off the hermeneutical inquiry into further theoretical models which may be described under two different categories, namely the socio-critical and the reader-text related theories.

#### **3.2.1 Socio-critical or socio-analytical approaches**

Hermeneutics of liberation, materialist, feminist and other such theories that address socio-political and socio-pragmatic issues may be grouped under this category. Due to constraints of space and also since some of these approaches (e.g., liberation/ materialist) are beginning to lose their force, we shall not discuss them in any detail.

The socio-pragmatic hermeneutics recognises the role of community in forming community-conventions and values in a given context and understands that all interpretations reflect the interests and the experience of the community. These theories presuppose that the traditional interpretations only serve the ideologies of the dominant traditions, such as the racist, imperialist or patriarchal communities. They first offer a critic of these ideologies then go on to show how their interpretation of texts serve their own interests. While these theories address those who under-estimate the role of the community contexts, it excludes any transformative conversations between the communities and reduce liberation to a power struggle where the oppressed fight with the oppressor's weapons and become oppressors themselves.

The socio-critical hermeneutics on the other hand recognises that social interests lie behind all interpretations and attempts to develop a critique that unmask oppression in any context and offers help in order that all may experience correction and transformation. Thus this theory goes beyond the contextual boundaries to become some kind of metacriticism.

Then there are 'psycho-analytic' models which are otherwise called 'a hermeneutic of suspicion'. Here the presupposition is that human mind (and heart) is deceitful and can subvert the truth in the interests of individuals or power structures. The critical tools developed by Freud for interpreting dreams are made use of by Paul Ricoeur for interpreting myths, symbols, metaphors, and other multi-layered texts. Ricoeur adds another dimension to the understanding of the text. He says that the hermeneutics must free itself from three historicist myths - the mind of the author, the original reader, and the original meaning. Ricoeur has overstated his case here although his insight about the text that grows in 'surplus of meaning' as it moves through the history of interpretation, and that the text's career escapes the finite horizon of its author and now means more than what the author meant, are valid. Similarly, Raymond Brown points out that the texts now mean more than the author's original intention because first, the author's book (or text) joined a collection called the Bible, which the author never would have foreseen, and this might seriously modify his intention. Secondly, the belief that Bible is God's word and that it is meant for people of all time would give a meaning to the text beyond what the author would have meant. However, it must be pointed out that the individual books/texts were regarded as the word of God before the Bible as a whole was considered as such.

The Eastern Church has recognised that the linguistic categories are not the only ones or even the sufficient ones for understanding and interpretation. Human mind cannot fully understand transcendent world and even material world. Whatever the hermeneutical categories- the community of faith, the event-text relationship, tradition- salvation ought to be the end of interpretation. And interpretation and understanding is not meant primarily for deeper epistemological and philosophical intelligibility. The Eastern tradition adds a new dimension of liturgy as an excellent medium of understanding, and of music, painting and dance as complements of understanding reality.

### **3.2.2 Reader-Text related theories**

We shall discuss here the theories of semiotics, reader-response and deconstruction. All of these approaches were born out of a deep dissatisfaction with the traditional approaches, such as source, form, tradition-history and redaction methods which, having been inherited from the enlightenment rationalism, left enormous gaps (through geneticism and atomism) in the understanding of the texts on the one hand, and failed to meet the pastoral and missionary needs (through questioning the obvious beliefs) of the church on the other. As early as 1969 James Muilenburg raised serious questions in his essay, 'Beyond Form Criticism', about the adequacy of these methods and proposed a 'new literary theory' which later came to be known simply as the 'literary theory'. A paradigm shift had taken place once again by treating the Bible as literature, a work of art, and hence ought to be approached on in its own right and not on the basis of what went behind. However, while this approach brought certain corrective to the previous approaches, it focuses solely on the literary aspects of the narratives, giving little or no attention to their history or theology. While it is legitimate to pursue this kind of inquiry, it does not do complete justice to the intentions of the authors. It is true that attention to the language, style and all the artistry of composition focuses on the given text rather than the supposed background, but this does not necessarily discern the overall purpose of the author. Like other methods which were preoccupied with origins and historicity, this method might become bogged down, this time with literary form.

Semiotics, reader-response and deconstruction share several common concerns with the 'literary theory'. Semiotics attempts to avoid, if not exclude, the author's context and generate meaning by a language system where, in practice, the interpretation of the texts is transferred to the readers. From here we move into the reader-response theories. Here the focus is on the goals of interpretation of a community's *routine* reading for a meaning that 'elevates' its own 'assumptions and practices to the supposed status of universal principles'. The deconstruction theories address the issues of obsession 'for a fixed dogma ... which can become an end in itself that even displaces faith and restricts personal growth by placing boundaries everywhere'. Deconstruction theories function as a prophetic voice 'where tradition has become *fossilised* and no longer serves the vision which it emerged to articulate, or in reader-situations where understanding has become exclusively tied to some *single controlling paradigm as a fixed centre*'.

The hermeneutical theories surveyed in this section is necessarily brief since my intention here is not to discuss them in detail but to give a broad picture of various developments in biblical interpretation in order to find whether these theories are concerned with a private, context-relative and individualistic understanding of the Scriptures or with some universal principles which could be applied in both contextual and trans-contextual situations. All these models, I must say, admit in varying degrees the place of biblical texts in understanding the meaning of life although for some theories the Bible just like any other literature. All these models also offer a critique of various context-relative hermeneutics and address their misinterpretations or inadequacies but at the same time they themselves are not totally free from being influenced by the agenda of their own contexts. Can there be a more objective criteria of evaluation which takes both the perspective of the Christian scriptures and the readers' contexts seriously? Several scholars have shown that the cross and resurrection form the core of such a criteria which may be termed as 'metacriticism'. To this we shall now turn.

### **3.3 Metacriticism**

This is my chief contention in this paper that 'metacriticism' offers a valid criteria to evaluate hermeneutics in general and biblical hermeneutics in particular. With Gadamer, a paradigm-shift is said to have taken place

in the very nature of hermeneutics where it seemed to have reached itself of being a critique or meta-critique. In Gadamer, hermeneutics explores the basis of understanding and truth and thus forms a 'metacritical' or 'transcendental' basis for the theories of interpretation. Metacriticism is an evaluation of a critic's own programme of criticism; it concerns all human enquiry and foundations of knowledge. For Thiselton, the heart of metacriticism is the 'love of God in the cross of Christ'. The love of God, Thiselton argues, '*will constitute a new motive-force that re-defines criteria of relevance for the believer: ... The cross transforms present criteria of relevance: present criteria of relevance do not transform the cross*'. Thiselton arrives at this point largely through the philosophical arguments. A similar conclusion can be reached from the point of view of biblical hermeneutics and biblical theology. By biblical hermeneutics, I mean the tradition of interpretation attested within the Bible itself and the history of interpretation among the Jewish, rabbinic and early Christian (New Testament) traditions. Thiselton's philosophical arguments provide us with a basis to argue that human reason and philosophy has vindicated the verdict of the New Testament writers about the Old Testament interpretation. The NT writers believed that, despite the highly developed tradition of Jewish, Qumranic and Rabbinic interpretations, the Jewish religious authorities *misread* their Scriptures. They insisted that the Jewish Scriptures bore witness to Jesus (Jn 5: 39-47; Mk 12: 24), and declared:

Men of Judaea and all who live in Jerusalem, ... listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know-- this man handed over to you according to *the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, ... and of that all of us are witnesses Acts 2: 22-24, 32).

This must be a shocking message to the Jewish interpreters who were not only charged with misinterpretation but also with being guilty of innocent blood (cf. Acts 5:28). No wonder that Paul and other such pious Jews were determined to destroy the followers of Jesus! This and a series of passages in Acts and many other passages from the Gospels and about hundred quotation from Paul in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians strongly affirm that the death of Christ was not a 'political martyrdom or tragic miscalculation' but a definite plan of God and as such the OT itself ought to be interpreted in the light of this event and vice versa.

‘For Paul, the Old Testament is not in the first place something to understand; but *it itself creates understanding.*’ Thus the first and the foremost principle of interpretation for the NT writers results from this conviction that ‘the Jewish scriptures constitute a definite context’ for understanding the death of Christ and provide a ‘pattern of divine action’ already revealed in the scriptures (1Cor. 15: 3-5, Christ died ‘in accordance with the scriptures’).

Pentecost was one of the earliest post-resurrection events where OT prophecy (Joel 2: 28-36) was used as the frame of reference or context for understanding the event. Here the apostle Peter follows the example of his master, Jesus himself, who used in an earlier instance on Emmaus road both the law and the prophets, that is, the whole of the OT, as a definitive context for interpreting his death and resurrection. Then Luke seems to suggest that this principle also works backwards wherein Christ becomes a key to understanding the OT (Luke 24: 27, 44-47; Ign. Phila. 8:2-9:2). Several scholars argued that both these principles are affirmed in the Johannine literature- the Apocalypse, Gospel and Epistles. In other words, ‘each facilitates understanding by pointing to the other’. Following his conversion, Paul was fully convinced that Jewish scriptures bore witness to Christ. ‘Without Paul’s strong conviction that the scriptures are full of references to Christ, the Christian church might have set off on its career in history without a bible’. Paul, being most ingenious among the NT writers, used the OT in a variety of ways. He declared that OT is a ‘witness to a revelation of God’s righteousness apart from the Law’, but a veil remained on Jewish minds whenever they read Moses, and only faith in Christ can become a key to its understanding (2 Cor. 3: 14-17; cf. Rom. 15: 4, 5, 13). Similarly, Matthew weaves the OT ‘into the warp and woof’ of his gospel and insists that Mosaic law is fulfilled, not abolished, in Jesus (5: 17, 18). The author of Hebrews weaves a rich tapestry with OT threads to portray Christianity and Christ as superior to OT religion and that OT is ‘meaningless or obsolete apart from its witness to the New Covenant in Jesus’ blood.

The second most important principle of interpretation is that only the Jewish scriptures are considered as a framework for interpreting the Christ-event, not any other tradition. This is important for us because the early church experienced phenomenal growth not on Jewish soil but on the Gentile soil where religious pluralism was the order of the day (Acts 17: 16-34). Yet, Paul and other Christian interpreters only saw certain points of

contact in other religions but never used them as frame of reference for understanding the Christ-event. Interestingly, Paul's contact point at Athens was an altar to an 'unknown god', not the gods people knew! On the other hand they categorically denied any salvific revelation being present in other religions. Therefore, Christian interpreters have no freedom to substitute or reject the OT, like Marcion did, for any other tradition in order to understand the Christ-event, nor are they free to interpret the apostolic testimony in order to support 'new systems of thought', like the Gnostics did. The Marcionite and the Gnostic challenges forced the early church, especially Irenaeus, to formulate further interpretive principles for understanding Christian faith. First, they affirmed the apostolic testimony as the only valid 'context of understanding for biblical interpretation'; secondly, the totality of scriptures that is, the Old and the New 'as a comprehensive theological horizon'; and thirdly, 'the biblical and ecclesial witness to Christ as the "centre" of the biblical texts and their subsequent interpretation'.

It must be noted, however, that the early Christian exegetical methods may appear to be dubious or arbitrary to many Christian and most Jewish readers, but the 1600 and odd citations and many more allusions of the Old Testament in the New and their considerable unanimity regarding their interpretation of the OT about Jesus and the church, can 'hardly be a coincidence'. Their methods may be questioned, so also modern methods of interpretation. Earle Ellis helpfully observes:

But then, our modern historical-critical method also is deficient: although it can show certain interpretations to be wrong, it can achieve an agreed interpretation for virtually no biblical passage. "Method" is inherently a limited instrumentality and, indeed, a secondary stage in the art of interpretation. More basic are the perspective and the presuppositions with which the interpreter approaches the text.

In other words method serves the purpose of one's perspective and presuppositions. It is obvious that the NT writers studied the OT intensively in the light of their changed perspective about Jesus and his resurrection in order to understand his role in the plan of God. Further, Jesus' own interpretation might have influenced the early Christian exegesis, although scholars still dispute as to where his interpretations end where the church's

begin.

The foregoing discussion on the principles employed by the NT writers and the early church about the OT underlines the fact that the decisive factor in understanding biblical texts, and ancient or modern traditions is not the highly developed scribal interpretative technique or the so-called scientific ‘method’, but the Christ-event, although these methods have their legitimate part in understanding this event. In other words, the message of the cross is not merely context relative, but offers a universal critique even though it was given in a particular socio-religious context. If the NT writers believed that their predecessors, the Jewish interpreters, misread the Scriptures, it follows from this that some contemporary modern, pluralistic and post-modern approaches to biblical texts and traditions, ancient and modern, might equally be faulty. I shall argue in the remaining part of this paper that the evangelicals having inherited the NT faith must expose the inadequacies of modern trends in theology and mission which deny the centrality of the cross and seek to find meaning in human reason and experience. But before we do this we must show how the cross of Christ or the Christ-event will become a metacritique of all theories of meaning. The following arguments further support the interpretative methods of NT writers discussed above.

Thiselton advances three arguments to claim that Christian theology must offer ‘a *universal critique* of life and thought, and even a *metacritique* of other criteria of thought, understanding, and action.’ First, the cross of Christ demands iconoclasm and ‘establishes new criteria of relevance’. The theology of the cross shatters any ‘context-relative or ethnocentric understanding’ of its message. It ‘reverses all contextual traditions of wisdom including scribal authorities, wisdom traditions, philosophical world-views, and religious hunger for pragmatic criteria (1Cor. 1:18-25).’ It transcends ethnic, social and gender barriers and criticises and reforms both the church and the society (1Cor. 1: 13; 10: 16, 17; 11:26; 2Cor. 5:17; Rom. 6:3-11; Eph. 2:15; 4:4,5; Mk 10:38). This comes out perhaps most powerfully in the theology of J. Moltmann for whom the cross offers a critique of self-seeking, manipulative structures and transforms the very concept of power. Moltmann sees ‘sharing in the cross as leaving “behind the circle of those who share and re-inforce” one’s own opinions or corporate self-preservation at all costs’. ‘The power of the cross lies precisely not in rhetorical self-assertion or manipulation (1 Cor. 2:1-5). ... [it] does not lie in what merely overwhelms us as

impressive (2 Cor. 8 through 13). It is power-in-weakness (1 Cor. 1:23-25) because it is derived from “a Christ crucified:””

Secondly, Thiselton argues that the integrity and the straightforwardness of the biblical texts elevate them to the status of being ‘*illocutionary acts of address, promise, commission, decree, praise, celebration, pardon, liberation, and authorisation*’. While these assertions are true for a ‘believing reading’, others may not see them in this way, and in fact the non-Christian might dispense them as speculative and subjective. Nevertheless, they do not depend on the beliefs of the readers but on the basis of ‘*what status and authority stands behind the text*’. For instance, Rom. 1:3,4 declares that God has appointed Jesus Christ as Lord at his resurrection, therefore the Lordship of Jesus remains valid irrespective of people’s response to it.

Thirdly, the cross and resurrection of Christ once again form the basis for God’s promise of an eschatological transformation of the universe. God’s promise, as Thiselton argues, has a significant hermeneutical dimension here:

In contrast to reader-response theory and to socio-pragmatic models of hermeneutics, it does not “create” by facilitating mere human “construction” of meaning from unrealised inner resources of corporate or individual imagination and anticipation or projection. Once again, in this connection we recall Ricoeur’s warnings about projections of interpretation which can be *idolatrous*. By contrast, divine promise transforms the world-as-it-is in accordance with the word of promise.

It becomes clear from the above discussion that while Christ and his cross embedded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition form the key to understanding meaning, the message of the cross is not merely context relative but offers a universal critique even though it was given in a particular socio-religious context. If this is so, how does this apply to the particularity of the Indian hermeneutics and its aims and objectives. Can there be a particular hermeneutic that addresses all Indians? Can it stand the test of a ‘meta-criticism’ where Christ and his cross remain the heart of understanding? To these issues we shall now turn.

#### 4. Specificity of Hermeneutics in India

Theories of knowledge are also known to be highly developed in the Indian Brahminical hermeneutics and the ideas of theories of knowledge and understanding that we see in the Western systems are also present, but they are not properly developed or articulated. There are elements in our systems that are not found in others. There are three different schools. The Nyaya School has three pramanas to perceive reality *pratyaksha* (sense perception), *anumana* (inference) and *shabda* (testimony). The *Vaisesika* school has only two, *pratyaksha*, and *anumana*. The *Sankhya* school has more elaborate theory. It agrees with Gadamer's idea of subjective element in understanding. It also agrees with the Eastern Christian tradition that a total apprehension of reality is possible by the purity of the knower. And it insists that through *Yoga* such purity can be attained. *Yoga* is the special contribution of the Indian tradition to the hermeneutical debate. However, it remains to be seen as to how far these traditional models have carried the conviction of the Indian Christians.

##### 4.1 The particular Indian context

This raises several important issues. Who is an Indian? Is he the one who lives within the geographical confines of the country? What is his identity? What is the identity of an Indian Christian? These questions are of utmost importance in the light of foregoing discussion on understanding, explanation and tradition. What is common to all the Indians? I think, national integrity, socialism and secularism are perhaps the aspects on which all Indians agree (Punjab, Kashmir and parts of Northeast India cannot be counted in this respect). Otherwise, there are varieties of cultures, languages and religious traditions. Apart from this, the abject poverty of millions, illiteracy and the diabolic caste system (even in the Church), make it impossible to develop a common Indian Christian hermeneutic. Perhaps that is the reason why Christopher Duraisingh suggested a variety of hermeneutical principles with varied goals resulting in 'pluriform theologies'.

In this respect I would think that a relevant hermeneutic can be developed only in a particular people group who share a common language, culture and other social realities. Perhaps the Dalith Theology' which is being developed over a decade might give an authentic identity to the Daliths in India.

Our Indian scholars have rightly pointed out that for centuries only the Hindu Vedantic tradition is taken as the main context in doing theology. The fact that the work of Christ on the cross-explained in Judeo-Christian juridical terms is meaningless to Chenchiah and Krishna Pillai, does not really matter for a Dalith to whom casteism, poverty and an authentic identity in the midst of these would really matter. Otherwise I would have to see reality (Christ) through Hinduism! Even today a Dalith's identity in the village is by virtue of his caste. Scheduled castes that embrace Christianity cannot enjoy reservation benefits in our so-called secular country today. The Indian Government's developmental projects for the scheduled castes are carried out by discrimination and not by integration of them into the main stream society ( e.g. the housing provided for them are outside the city/town). Therefore, the question of whether to use *Vedantic* categories in our sophisticated hermeneutical debate on language and understanding is irrelevant to the illiterate Dalith masses in our country. Koyama's 'Water Buffalo Theology' may be more relevant to them than anything in the *Vedantic* philosophical categories. M.V. Abraham rightly says that you cannot simply 'equate India with Hindu as if nobody else matters in India'. He raises the question 'what do you mean by Indian culture?' And he adds: 'How complicated it is to have a biblical theology to fit the Indian ethos'.

India has the second largest Muslim population in the world (first being Indonesia). Yet this important factor has been totally left out in the Indian hermeneutical debate of the *Indian Journal of Theology*. Are they not an essential part of our Indian society? How does this factor affect our hermeneutical principles?

The Indian hermeneutical debate has rightly focused on the tribal perspective of the Northeast India. But I would think the tribes of Northeast India are entirely different from the other tribes found elsewhere in India. The tribal belt of central India, from parts of Bihar to Gujarat, following through Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Maharastra (a tribal crescent!) are totally different from those of Himachal Pradesh and Northeast India. Moreover the Christianity of the Northeast India is more westernised than Christianity of the rest of India. How are we going to account for this diversity in our search for an 'Indian Christian Hermeneutic'?

#### **4.2 Religious pluralism in India**

I understand that the idea of religious pluralism is not the comparative study of religions. As Raimundo Panikkar says there is no quantitative parameters to compare the religions and there is no neutral vantage points to do this. Instead, the idea of 'religious pluralism' is assumed where religions are not compared but a multivoiced philosophy is accepted in which different problems are allowed to express themselves according to their own categories, contexts and self-understandings. This he calls 'dialogical philosophy'. David Scott, in a similar vein, says that all religions are syncretistic in the most literal sense of the word, therefore a hermeneutic in this context need not demand a 'foolproof system' but a direction in which certain viable types of approach can be found and none can be made obligatory. And others suggest a 'hermeneutical dialogy' which transcends dialogue and clears away semantic space for the emergence of divine truth. All these efforts, it appears, reveal a concern that in our struggle to understand people of other religions, we might not reduce their phenomena to our pattern of thinking. This is a valid concern, but this adds to the problem of our particular concern for an Indian hermeneutics.

If these criteria are applied to the living religions of India, what can be our hermeneutical principles? In our search for an Indian hermeneutic, how shall we take into account the broad spectrum of religious people like Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain and a host of tribal beliefs? This survey of our context and religious plurality shows that there can be no valid hermeneutic for the whole of the Indian context. But can we think of any models from which we can make our own?

### **4.3 Hermeneutical models of India**

Missionaries from the very beginning saw the need for contextualising the Gospel in order to communicate its message relevantly. The hermeneutical methods developed subsequently both by missionaries and early converts may be summarised under two categories.

#### **4.3.1 Traditional Hindu categories**

First, 'story-telling': This method was used by early Christian missionaries like Constantine Beschi and Robert de Nobili in South India. The idea is not 're-reading' but 're-telling' the stories of the Bible following the model of the Hindu religious gurus. Soon the Hindu converts followed suite but this time their leanings were toward their own traditions. Krishna Pillai, for instance, used his *Vaishnavite* traditions while Appasamy both *Vaishnavite* and *Saivite* traditions; others used popular literary traditions like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*. Some, finding connections between Vedas and the Bible, preferred to replace OT with Vedas and asserted that Vedic Hinduism is identical with Christian spirituality. But these models were set aside due to their cyclical and digressive patterns, probably since these methods remained undeveloped partly due to Western thought and partly because of the missionaries' insisting on reading the Scriptures not just listening from others.

Secondly, the Brahminical models: Many high-caste converts, like Swami Abhishiktananda, H. Sharma and Hemraj, T. Manikkam and Sister Vandana tried to interpret the Bible following Sanskrit literary traditions, while Paul Gregorios advocated hermeneutical principles from the Indian philosophical schools of *Nyaya*, *Vaisesika* and *Sankhya*. However, not many were attracted to these methods probably due to the ignorance of the majority of the Christians of these philosophies and also due to the poor response to the Gospel from the high-caste Hindus. P. Sampathkumar maintains caution for reading Bible in these categories chiefly because of the nature of the Hindu Scriptures and their emphasis on mysticism.

#### **4.3.2 Indian contextual readings**

*Dhvani* Reading: This method claims to use traditional Indian ways of interpretation where a thorough knowledge of Hindu scriptures is not required. The word *dhvani*, as we all know, literally means sound, echo or tone but when it applied to a way of reading texts it refers to different 'evocations' aroused in the reader according to his/her background and culture which may not necessarily be the intentions of the author. This comes very close to the semiotics we discussed earlier. *Dhvani*'s pre-requisite is a sensitive reader, *sahridaya*. However, even if this expectation is to be met, this method could still lead to a subjective reading because the

meaning is subject to the context of each individual and his background and no two readings could be the same. This does not mean there will be no room for creativity.

Socio-political reading: This method is similar, if not identical, to the Latin American Liberation theology. It takes India's abject poverty, the de-humanising caste system and the oppression of the Jamindaris seriously. Since the victims of all these forms of oppression are the *daliths* it came to be identified as '*dalith* reading' or '*dalith* theology'. Although number of studies were produced to address these issues, their readings are no more than Indian version of the Liberation Theology.

Along these lines, I think M. M. Thomas' theology is more relevant to the Indian context than any one else's that I come across so far. It is interesting to see M. M. Thomas connecting secularising and humanising processes to the Gospel ferment in the traditional societies. The '*Sarvodaya Movement*', which he calls a 'new anthropology', is a result of the Christian missions. His '*Karma Marga*', or a 'Loving diakonia' is an excellent, but somewhat syncretistic, attempt of Indian Christian hermeneutic. He is convinced that humanisation is inherent in the message of Salvation, and the Gospel of Salvation will work in the realm of politics, history and in the struggle for human dignity. So the task of a theologian for him is to walk on the razors edge between the kerygma and its demythologisation with a view to remyth its truth for our pluralistic society.

However, Thomas could not avoid the trap of taking the Hinduism as the main context when he advocates the challenging relevance of Hindu-Christian dialogue at three different levels. Thomas' theology does not take the Indian caste system, Muslim society, and the illiteracy of the masses seriously. Yet this is a brilliant effort to grapple with the national issues theologically.

The So-called Integrated Christian Reading: This method was first proposed by Soares-Prabhu and then later fully endorsed by Fr Sampathkumar. The assumption here is that the Indian social realities like poverty, oppression and discrimination, and its philosophical and popular religious traditions are interconnected; the one expresses India's struggle against evil forces while the other its religious quest. However, neither

Sampathkumar nor Soares-Prabhu admit that the reasons for India's social evils and its resultant discrimination could be its own religious traditions since they endorse, if not justify, those evils through their elaborate caste system.

Nevertheless, they both agree that an Indian reading of the Bible in its post-modern context must always be liberative. This must include the liberation of the Asian religions (including Christianity) of their pre-critical dogmatism and fundamentalism through 'critical exegesis which achieved this in Europe and its 'enlightenment' needs to be extended to traditional Asia too'; '...the social liberation of the marginalised and the oppressed; and the '...spiritual liberation of the individual from the bondage of inordinate attachments, which is the primary goal of the non-Semitic religions of Asia'. They further urge that the principle of *niskama karma* of *Bhagavadgita* (2:47; 4:18-20) and the *shantam* of *Dhammapada* (6:7; 7:7) 'must be analysed in biblical way.' And '... that without such spiritual freedom, attempts at other kinds of liberation will inevitably end in further bondage. The "enlightenment" of Kant must be completed by the enlightenment of the Buddha, the liberation of Marx with the liberation (*moksha*) of the Gita. An interplay of these three freedoms form the basis for this integrated Christian reading.' Here one may see the post-modernist and the syncretistic tendencies of the Hinduism coming together.

These tendencies become most explicit in their comparative analysis of the Great Commission passage of Matt. 28:16-20 and a similar text from the *Mahavagga* of *Pali* Buddhist canon. It is observed that these two texts describe the mission of their followers to preach the gospel/*dhamma* to all. However, the Buddhist text is shown to be more explicit in its message of 'the ultimate liberation of humankind', and its aim as more clear of its 'passionate desire for the welfare of all beings'. In Matthew, it is pointed out, the welfare of the nations is not mentioned as 'they are referred to merely as objects of mission', but the command to 'baptise', which is not found in the Buddhist text, implies such welfare of the baptised. 'But this is not explicit in the text and can easily be forgotten.... In this context the Buddhist inter-text draws our attention to a dimension of the Christian text:... While the mission in Matthew is universal which includes "all nations", the Buddhist mission is more conscious of the unity of humankind than of the national differences within it. It does not distinguish between "nations", but between "gods and human beings". In this aspect also the Buddhist

inter-text enriches our understanding of mission'. Commending Soares-Prabhu's exegesis, Fr Sampathkumar concludes:

The integrated reading of the Bible thus focuses upon in bringing into light the impact of the various Indian insights drawn from its rich traditions as well as stressing on the need of understanding India's present social, religious and political problems. In this respect this reading stands out as important mile-stone in Indian hermeneutics.

Several observations can be made on this exegesis. First, as Sampathkumar himself admits their disparate origin, these texts cannot be compared with one another because while Matthew's text comes from a coherent literary unit and the resurrected Lord, the Buddhist text comes from various collected sayings from different situations of Buddha's life. Secondly, if one can draw a coherent message from a loose collection, it is equally legitimate to look for a coherent message of Matthew from other Gospel writers who add material, social and universal dimensions to the message. Thirdly, Sampathkumar's reading of the phrase 'all nations' in Matthew to mean the national differences is unconvincing. If such inter-textuality is to be followed, NT has more to say on the 'human solidarity in Christ' than any other religious text. And fourthly, which is fundamental to our argument in this essay, any interpretation that does not take Christ and his cross as a key to understanding the meaning of life cannot be Christian and, as such misleads the followers of Christ. This is similar to the second century gnostic teachers using the NT language and ideas to support their own systems of thought to which Irenaeus strongly opposed.

## **Conclusion**

This survey of hermeneutical models of the West and India show that by and large the western models seek to develop scientific methods focusing either the text or the reader and thereby attempt to make the readings trans-regional and trans-contextual. Further, most of these methods have been applied and tested for various texts although no single method seem to answer all questions. The Indian models on the other hand, do not seem to measure up to the discipline or rigour displayed in the Western models. Instead, they exhibit cyclical

and digressive patterns and are characterised by subjectivism and individualism or influenced by syncretistic religious traditions of India. Some of these theories may sound Christian like the gnostic teachings of the second century but they may actually undermine the uniqueness of Christ and the authority of the Bible. NT writers considered the religious scholars of their day who failed to recognise Jesus as Christ as those misunderstood and misread their scriptures. Similarly, any reading, western or Indian, that does not take the centrality of Christ and his cross as a hermeneutical key cannot do justice to Christian faith revealed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of the Bible and therefore must be considered 'mis-reading' of the scriptures.

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