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EDITORIAL

The Adversities and the Advent...

In the Church calendar, the month of December is significant as it is the advent season. What does advent mean in our life?

The coming of Jesus was described as a joy to the world by the angels. At the same time, it is also mentioned in the Gospel of Mathew as being a dreadful experience for the Emperor Herod. While the common people expected a Messiah, who would liberate them from the tyrannical rulers, the rulers perceived the birth of Jesus as a threat. The insecurity of the emperor caused the death of male children below the age of two in Bethlehem and surrounding places. It also led to the family of Jesus becoming migrants in Egypt till the death of Herod, the Emperor.

The Emperors and their insecurities complicate the life of the subjects. When their power is continually at risk of being stripped away, they fill people with fear or phobia. In other words, the phobia of an Emperor not only manifests itself in the public sphere, rather it can easily permeate into the community life, family life and even to individual life systems. It can cause annihilation of people, forced migrations, ethnic clashes, struggles for resources and religious rivalries.

We are living in a phobia driven society. Although we claim that the era of imperialism has ended, we all realize the presence of new forms of imperialism in the new global order which are mainly being constituted by new forms of monarchical organisations and are even operating through democracy. Its values appear before us through the values of authoritarianism and domination. These values are multifaceted and have different dynamics and therefore, its dwelling among us is subtle- by marginalising, discriminating and victimising many. The vulnerable, the poor, the disabled, the minorities, the coloured, the gendered, and the list of the subjects of victimisation goes on...

The Biblical description of Joseph and Mary with their child living in Egypt till the death of Herod points towards a reality that no structure of Empire will survive long and its death will come at some point of time. It is the hope and understanding that Christmas gives us today. The constructive alternative power emerged from a manger by

deconstructing the imperialistic forms of expression and their languages. Love, mutuality, equality, vulnerability and the option for the least and the lost were the alternative paradigms which surfaced from the manger. Let the advent season remind all of us about the death of Empires and the coming of an alternate Kingdom, where justice rolls on like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This issue of NCC Review discusses various concerns such as disability, HIV/ AIDS, religious minorities and their issues and the dynamics between religion and secularism. A Bible study on Christmas is also included. The writers deserve our appreciation since they have taken the time and effort to enrich the ongoing discourses on various issues that affect everyone's life.

As this issue of NCC Review comes to you we recognize the nationwide farmers strike which is mainly taking place in Delhi. The food producers of this country are pleading for the support of the Government in the process of food production while they want to keep their right to have autonomy on their products and its marketing. Their strike raises couple of issues related to the production, marketing and preservation of food grains and therefore the food security of this country. The question about the role of corporates and the Government in all these processes are in discussion. The simple demand for a dialogue in the process of decision making and policy making is a major issue that the farmers raise and hence it questions the practice of democracy in this country. National Council of Churches in India is concerned about the issues raised by the farmers and we stand in solidarity with their causes.

The pandemic this year spoiled many of our plans and curtailed our mobility. More than one and half million lives have been lost. Although it was a tedious experience for many, new avenues and possibilities also emerged. The world has witnessed new ways of cooperation and mutual support in the effort of preserving life. As we enter into a new year let us brush aside the negativities and anxieties. Let us be optimistic and hopeful as we travel with our GUIDE who is so willing to walk by our side.

- Rev. Dr. Abraham Mathew

The Executive Secretary

Policy, Governance and Public Witness



HIV: Lest We Forget!

- Ronald Lalthanmawia*

The whole world is facing an unprecedented pandemic due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and many have lost their lives within just a year. It is alarming how the world is coming to a standstill and being normal is redefined. But during this COVID-19 situation, other diseases whether communicable or non-communicable still exist and continue to affect many lives. The situation has worsened the access to diagnosis, treatment, facilities and care;¹ hindering services for other diseases due to various restrictions of movement to prevent the spread of COVID-19. HIV testing and treatment services have also found significant decrease in HIV testing services in nearly all countries². Researches have shown that there is increase in patients with acute HIV infections seeking treatment. In the midst of COVID-19, we need to emphasize our solidarity in ending AIDS by 2030 as reflected in the theme of World AIDS Day–2020: “*Global Solidarity, shared responsibility*”.

Significant variations of HIV infection in Asia

The Asia and Pacific region is home to an estimated 5.8 million people living with HIV in 2019.³ China, India, and Indonesia account for almost three-quarters of the total number of people living with HIV in the region. In 2019, 300,000 people became infected with HIV in the region. Three-quarters of these infections occurred among vulnerable populations and their partners.

While we see decreasing trend in of new HIV infection in many parts of the world, the UNAIDS data published in 2020 shows that there are

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¹ EM Abrams, SJ Szefer - The Lancet. Respiratory Medicine, 2020 - ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

²https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2020/october/20201013_covid19-impacting-hiv-testing-in-most-countries

³UNAIDS Report 2020.

many countries in Asia and Pacific like the Philippines, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia, and many other countries that show an alarming increasing in the number of new cases. The Philippines is experiencing the steepest rise, with new infections up by 207 percent between 2010 and 2019. Over the same period, new infections rose by 75 percent in Pakistan, 17 percent in Malaysia, 30 percent in Papua New Guinea, and it is increasing in countries like Afghanistan and Timor-Leste. (Figure 1)

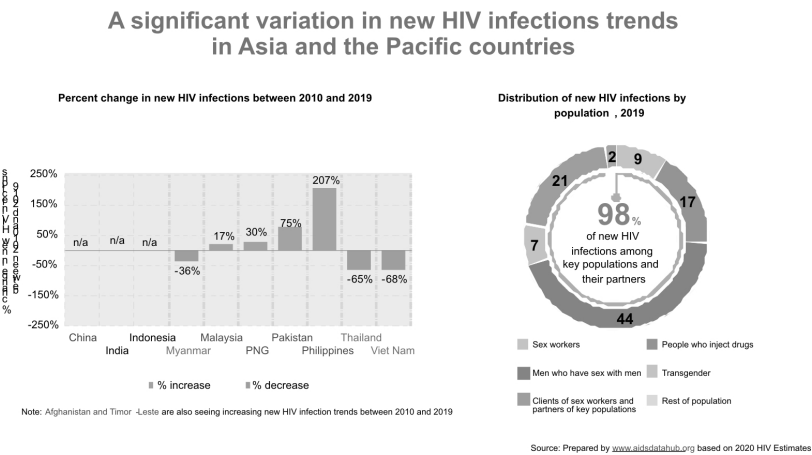


Figure 1

As we can see from the figure, risk behavior among men who have sex with men and transgender people, such as having multiple sex partners and low rates of condom use, need to be challenged, otherwise there will be rising epidemic among these groups. By 2020, almost 50 percent of all new infections in Asia could be among men who have sex with men, according to the UN Commission on AIDS in Asia. Also, of concern are growing epidemics among people who inject drugs in some countries, coupled with shrinking harm reduction services, reflecting an increasingly hostile environment to drug users.

Asia and Pacific region is falling behind other regions in its HIV response. The UNAIDS target of 90-90-90, which means 90 percent of those infected knows their status (testing), out of which 90 percent are on treatment (antiretroviral therapy), and 90 percent are virally

suppressed (undetectable viral count). In 2019, 69 percent of people living with HIV in this region were aware of their status. Among those diagnosed with HIV, 78 percent were on treatment of which 91 percent were virally suppressed. In terms of treatment coverage this equates to 54 percent of all people living with HIV being on treatment and just 49 percent being virally suppressed.⁴

This clearly shows that Asia as a region has a different challenge which must be addressed effectively. 83 percent of the infection is through sexual transmission that highlights the need for comprehensive understanding of sex and sexuality to a large extent. There are stigmatizing attitudes, discriminatory laws, and other legal barriers that push people to high risk behavior. Lack of understanding and acceptance of their differences creates barriers in access to any service, even in the pre-COVID-19 era,⁵ and much more so during the pandemic.

What needs to be done?

We need to recognize that HIV and AIDS are amidst us, even during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We are seeing a decline in commitment and resources allocated for HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support from various sectors.⁶ The increasing new infection rates across the region, coupled with the lack of engagement, can lead to an uncontrolled situation where more people are infected and affected, and the epidemic claims more lives.

It is crucial to ask ourselves whether young people have comprehensive knowledge about HIV prevention. In a report published by aidsdatahub.org, it is mentioned only 23 percent of a proportion of young people (15–24) have comprehensive HIV knowledge to protect themselves (Figure 2). This demonstrates that we need to strengthen our prevention messages. Building awareness, especially among the youth and young people, is still a priority. Comprehensiveness of our messages is also crucial when we are

⁴ UNAIDS Data 2020.

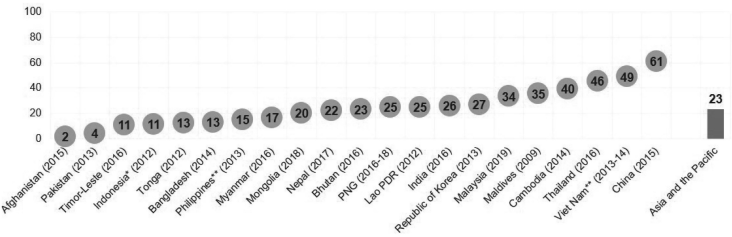
⁵ Allen LB, Glick AD, Beach RK, et al. Adolescent health care experience of gay, lesbian, and bisexual young adults. *J Adolesc Health* 1998;23: 212-220. [PubMed]

⁶ https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2019/september/20190926_finance

engaged in imparting knowledge and information on HIV. There are various aspects that we need to consider that contributes toward enhancing knowledge on HIV, such as basic science, prevention, better understanding of sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, encouraging safe practices, change of behavior from high risk, rights and responsibilities, and access to resources including testing and treatment. Most importantly it is important to inculcate values and principles without judgmental attitudes. We need to ensure that the messages related to comprehensive sex education, promotion of reproductive health, and improvement of our behavior is part of our campaign toward prevention of HIV infection.

Only one in four young people (15-24) have comprehensive knowledge of HIV to protect themselves

Proportion of young people (15-24) with comprehensive HIV knowledge in Asia and the Pacific, 2012-2019



* An average of young men and women comprehensive HIV knowledge data; ** Surveyed young women data

Source : Prepared by www.aidsdatahub.org based on Global AIDS Monitoring (GAM) Reporting; 2. Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) Reports; 3. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) Reports; and other population-based surveys

Figure 2

Figure 2

One of the main contributing factors of the steep increase of new cases in the Philippines is due to increased testing.⁷ The person may not have been exposed to the virus the previous year or even in the recent past, but due to the promotion of testing, cases are being identified and can be in the treatment regime. In order to end AIDS by 2030, it is crucial to find out those infected, promote testing, and reduce stigma toward testing for HIV. The stigma around HIV testing is not only from the

⁷<https://www.doh.gov.ph/press-release/doh-philippines-leads-in-testing-in-southeast-asia-increasing-cases-attributed-to-increased-testing-and-community-transmission>

society or the community but also self-stigma, especially for those engaging in high-risk behavior. There is a need to break the barrier and encourage everyone to get tested while ensuring anonymity in the society. Access to testing is another barrier which we can bridge by creating a conducive environment and ensuring that testing is closer to those who wish to get tested.

Another important aspect that we need to consider is the access to treatment. In a region where the generic production of antiretroviral drugs (ARV drugs) from India and Thailand, the access is only 60 percent with various ranges across the countries.⁸ The access is only 50 percent in India mainly because of the magnitude of those living with HIV. It is important for us to consider the reasons why people living with HIV do not have access to treatment. One of the most important factors is that the ARV drugs are available in government healthcare facilities where many persons living with HIV hesitate to access for fear of recognition from the society. People prefer to travel long distances in order to access to treatment because of the stigma and discrimination.⁹

Therefore, it is important to ensure stigma-free society so that persons living with HIV can have easy access to the treatment which is essential part of having a quality of life. We need to build an environment that enables person living with HIV to access treatment in the comfort of their homes without the fear of being labeled, identified, and discriminated.

Another aspect of HIV intervention is viral suppression. In order to reduce the number of viruses in the body, the antiretroviral does help. But there is a large gap in improving the immune systems in our body to fight any external organism. Malnutrition, unbalanced diets, and vulnerabilities due to inadequate immune system have resulted in many conditions like tuberculosis, pneumonia, candidiasis, and many more.¹⁰ This is more dominant when HIV destroys the immune system in the body. We need to boost the system—and how can we do that? It is

⁸ <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/asia-pacific/overview>

⁹ Charles B, Lalthanmawia R. Providing HIV treatment closer to patient homes compared to more centralized treatment. *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health* 2013, 1(2): 94–95

¹⁰ <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/livingwithhiv/opportunisticinfections.html>

important to have proper nutrition and balanced diet in order for the immune system to develop. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 15 million people in the region have been pushed into poverty.¹¹ We really need to consider those affected by HIV and the pandemic in term of having a nutritious food daily in order for them build their immune systems to fight against various opportunistic infections.

“Global solidarity, shared responsibility”

Big words but important words! How can we be in solidarity as ecumenical bodies and churches? Many churches in Asia have taken the initiatives to address the concerns of vulnerabilities.

The National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), through the ESHA program, has empowered many theological educators, church leaders, youth, and lay leaders to understand sex, sexuality, and diversities. It is one of the important ways in which we can empower others to think differently, re-adjust our understanding, and also take positive action toward an inclusive and comprehensive society. It encourages those with diversity to be bold and take the necessary steps to shield themselves from any risk.

Churches in the Philippines have been instrumental in eliminating stigma around testing, particularly the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP). A poster campaign that shows pictures of a bishop, a priest, a pastor, a clergy member, a youth leader, a woman leader, and a congregant saying that they have been tested for HIV have been instrumental in increasing the rate of testing, which contributed to the sharp increase in testing throughout the predominantly Christian nation.

Churches in Thailand have ordained ministers who are openly living with HIV. Their testimonies have encouraged others to access to treatment and also lead a healthy life as persons living with HIV.

The Myanmar Churches Council (MCC) have a delegated wing on HIV and they are closely linked to the Myanmar Interfaith Network on AIDS (MINA) to ensure the solidarity of various faith bodies toward ending AIDS by 2030.

¹¹<https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/pandemic-pushes-se-asia-back-into-poverty/>

The Communion of Churches Indonesia (PGI) is reviving their HIV desk to address the alarming increase of HIV and address issues that they are not comfortable with, including human sexuality.

The Bhutan Network of Positives is reaching out to the faith communities to understand the holistic and comprehensive aspects of HIV as not just a physical issue, but a mental, psychological, social, and spiritual issue.

Let us pause here and reflect on the verses from Luke 14:12-24 when the master prepared a banquet and invited many guests to his home. All those invited made excuses, most of them are lame. When all those invited made their excuses, the master did not ask the servants to pack the food and start distributing them to the streets and the alleys, nor did he asked them to go to the roads and country lanes. But he asked his servants to invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, to urge them and compel them to come to the table in his house so that his house is full.

As Churches in India, we need to rekindle our actions and efforts towards the epidemic. We have responded effectively even before the government did. We need to continue our efforts and ensure that no one is left behind. We need to understand the urgency, we need to understand the need for solidarity, and most importantly we need to understand our role in this epidemic within the pandemic of COVID-19. Let us, as faith communities, voice out our concerns, empower the churches, and be in solidarity in ending AIDS by 2030. It is only possible when we all work together.



***NCCI Dalit And Tribal/Adivasi concern
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**"No One can serve Christ and Caste"
Practise of Caste is Sin, and Untouchability Crime**

Discrimination based on Caste in your Church?
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Resurrected (yet) ‘Disabled’ Christ: Resurrected Body and Disability¹

- Samuel George*

In Christendom, Resurrection is considered a state of perfection devoid of any ‘defects.’ This notion of ‘perfection’ in the resurrected state has adversely affected our Christian understanding of disability. We look forward to a time of which, renowned gospel singer, Jim Reeves popularized in his song – *Across the Bridge*. He sang (and we sing) “Across the bridge there’s no more sorrow. Across the bridge there’s no more pain. The sun will shine across the river. And you’ll never be unhappy again.”² Disability is seen as imperfect and defected, therefore, it does not have place in holy places. This imperfection or defect if it is not removed here on earth then there is an eternal hope that in ‘across the bridge’ it will not be there. There is a hope of an eschatological healing. Resurrection or after-life is seen as a state of perfection. And Christians look forward to that state of perfection.

This notion of resurrected body as ‘perfect’ and without defect is contrary to the state to which, Jesus was raised to. His wounds were still visible (and felt) even in the resurrected state. So, if the resurrected Christ has the wounds (symbol of defect) still visible, then why the emphasis on perfection (without defect) in the current state of our life. Why disability is seen as sin/curse, imperfect?

This raises fundamental questions about perfection, resurrection, and Christology. Here in this paper a humble attempt is made to Christologically look at the question of resurrected body and disability.

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¹ An earlier version of this article was published as Samuel George, "Resurrected (yet) Disabled Christ: Resurrected Body and Disability." In *Disability Theology from Asia: A Resource Book for Theological and Religious Studies*, edited by Anjeline Okola and Wati Longchar, 313-322. Kenya/Taiwan/Myanmar/India: EDAN-WCC/PTCA/ATEM/SATHRI/YTCS, 2019.

² Cf. Revelation 21:4.

Resurrected Body in the Christian Tradition

Christian hope of resurrection requires that the one raised be the same person who died.³ Candida Moss in her lecture “Heavenly Bodies: What does it mean to be Resurrected from the Dead?”⁴ rues that even though the writings of the Early Church and Jesus tradition talk about resurrection, there is very little exploration into the nature of resurrected bodies. This ‘lack of’ interest in the resurrected body has led to much speculation in our theologizing and spirituality. Deformity and imperfection are incompatible with the resurrected body. Out of this speculation arose the notion that (some Christian thinkers thought) it did not make sense to depict the resurrected body as feminine. Women who are resurrected are made whole by given masculine bodies.

Some of these ideas are borrowed from the ancient ‘pagan’ and Greek backgrounds. Among the Greeks there was an idea that the shape of a person existed even after their body decayed. It is from this view the ritual perfection of cremation emerged. The body needed to be buried intact, with the bones in place, lest this effect the body in the afterlife.

There was another perspective that was prevalent (which made it to the present Christian spirituality in a dominant manner), i.e., of eschatological healing, i.e., the dismembered/deformed body would be restored to ‘perfection’ by God in the afterlife. The resurrected bodies as heavenly bodies therefore, ‘perfected’ bodies communicate something about the relative values placed on gender, disability and non-disability. In the early Church, the resurrected bodies re-inscribed culturally-dominant norms that from a disability perspective were ableist in nature. They present a vision of a future in which the identities of existing bodies – actual people – will be reconfigured ‘perfectly’; where individual identities will be overwritten and differences will be eradicated from the heavenly kingdom.⁵

³ For more, Terrence Ehrman, “Disability and Resurrection Identity,” *New Blackfriars* 96, no. 1066 (November 2015): 723-738.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOCQJt92ScE&feature=youtu.be> (accessed November 06, 2018)

⁵ Candida R. Moss, "Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church " *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 4 (December 2011): 993.

Christian understanding of resurrected bodies is very dominantly influenced by the theology of Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 15). It speaks of the resurrected bodies will be like Christ's (the first one to be resurrected); resurrected bodies will not be "flesh and blood" (as it is in the present). It will have continuation as well as discontinuation with the old body, like a seed to a plant. He offers a glimpse of that life with the description of the risen body as a spiritual body (*soma pneumatikon*). What is sown perishable, in dishonour, in weakness, and as a physical body (*soma psychikon*) is raised imperishable, in glory, in power, and a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:42-44). He is not speaking about the composition of a body, whether earthly or heavenly, but of different 'temporal modes' of existence, i.e., a *soma psychikon* is a type of person subject to sin and appropriate to 'this age' in contrast to a *soma pneumatikon* who is a type of person transformed by the Spirit and fitting for the 'new creation.'⁶ According to Moss, Paul is talking about embodiment.⁷ For him, spiritual body does not deny physicality, but it does tell us that the future body is different from the present. We are yet unaware of the 'material' of the spiritual body.

The early Christians were content with the resurrected body of Jesus with scars but for general resurrection of the believers (at the end) they believed that disability would be removed from the world. Christian understanding of the resurrected bodies took concrete shape in the post-apostolic period, especially within the context of the intellectual challenges from the Greek philosophies. Resurrection became the litmus test for orthodoxy in the early Church. Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr (*De Resurrectione*) were some of the early thinkers to write on resurrection from a Christian perspective. One finds similarities between these perspectives and that of Paul especially the notion of continuity as-well-as discontinuity. To the Greco-Roman ideas that the characteristics of a person's body are important for his/her identity even after the body itself has died, pseudo-Justinian positions vociferously counters:

⁶ Cf. Andrew Johnson, "Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15: Apocalyptic Epistemology, the Resurrected Body and the New Creation," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (2004): 291-309.

⁷ Moss, "Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church," 993.

.... For if on earth He healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection, so that the flesh shall rise perfect and entire. In this manner, then, shall those dreaded difficulties of theirs be healed.⁸

Resurrected bodies, will be ‘whole’ and ‘perfect’. Disability is not a part of someone’s identity, it is part of the irrelevant corrupt matter that is discarded in the resurrection. Eschatological cleansing will transform the body so that it is no longer decaying and useless.⁹ Irenaeus argued that Jesus healed and raised people from the dead in order to demonstrate that in the afterlife too God will heal people in their bodies. He reinforces the New Testament connection between healing and salvation, able-bodiedness and divine order. Accordingly, the continued presence of disability in the world is an indication that salvation is incomplete. Therefore, disability is a corruption – a hindrance to finding God. Human identity, as a reproduction of the divine image, is only fully present in the non-disabled. For Irenaeus, disability is the sinful residue that tarnishes God’s highly refined and polished creation.¹⁰ Augustine, insists that anything “naturally present” in human bodies will be present at the resurrection but this will not include ‘deformity’ and ‘infirmity.’¹¹ At the resurrection, the body will be perfectly subject to the soul; mortality, sickness, and pain will be replaced by incorruptibility.¹² There is an erasure of deformities in the eschaton.

Cues from the Resurrected Body of Jesus

John 20:24-29 has this uniquely surprising story of the resurrected Jesus with wounds/scars. Scholars point out that they are part of the resurrection apologetics who also point out that John’s gospel is a gospel of exaltation. The story of the resurrection should therefore, should be viewed from the perspective of Jesus being exalted through resurrection.

⁸ On the Resurrection, ANF 1:344.

⁹ Moss, "Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church": 1005.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1008.

¹¹ *City of God*, 22.20.1152.

¹² Ibid., 22.21.

Thomas decided “unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (v.25). Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand put it in my side” (v.27).

Paul argued (in 1 Cor. 15), that every resurrection (after Easter) is patterned after the resurrection of Jesus. Our resurrection, like Christ’s, entails both continuity and radical transformation that is a new creation; it is creation, however, not from nothing (*ex nihilo*) but from the old (*ex vetere*) matter of this present age.¹³ In that case, we need to address some of the questions being raised about the resurrected body of Jesus. What kind of body he had (and we will have)? Had he had the same physical pre-Easter body? If so, why was the ‘wound’ still visible on his resurrected body? If eschatological healing is what we all look for (in the resurrection body) then what about the body of resurrected Jesus? For John, it was more a scar than a fresh wound. A scar that is visible and felt. Two aspects can be construed from this passage for Christological and disability studies.

1. Disability studies tells us that impairments are integral for recognizing Jesus then they are integral for everyone else.
2. It is anti-Docetic affirmation. The body of Jesus is important. “Mark of the nail” and to touch him is to prove that he is not a ghost.

Yes, we do agree that removal of physical infirmities was one of the outcome/purposes of the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, the Christ. However, the perpetuation of the idea of resurrected bodies without infirmities is similar to the idea of Gospel of Thomas where a perfect resurrected body must be male (“for every female who makes herself will enter the Kingdom of Heaven”).

Scars on the resurrected body of Jesus debunks this notion (of physical perfection in the afterlife). Infirmity is part of our identity. The scars of the wound Jesus endured in his body is his identity. He retained his scars of the wounds. Lest he wouldn’t be recognized by those who have

¹³John Polkinghorne, “Eschatology Credibility: Emergent and Teleological Processes,” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed., Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 50.

seen and experienced him. But could they not have recognized him through other means?

Implications for Disability Theology

Disability theologian Nancy Eiesland, was an embodied being and her disability was an integral part of who she was. To the suggestion “Don’t worry about your suffering now – in heaven you will be made whole” she wondered, “My disability had taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge? Would I be absolutely unknown to myself in heaven, and perhaps even unknown to God?”¹⁴

1. Redefining Perfection (strength, healing)

PWDs are made to feel that their impaired/disformed bodies are ‘not perfect.’ They are the outcome of sin, curse (“... who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”). This notion of disability as imperfect (therefore sinful/cursed) has impacted the lives of PWDs so negatively that even religion does not help them in anyways. A Disability-inspired-reading of the Bible helps us to re-look some of these negative notions.

God's idea of perfection differs from ours. God's perspective on perfection is succinctly portrayed in his chiding of the prophet Samuel when he went to choose the new king of Israel. “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

The scar on the resurrected body of Jesus suggests that disabled bodies are still vehicles of God's glory and resurrection life. Chong writes, “If the resurrected Jesus is the ultimate image of God (Col. 1:15), and he bears the marks of impairment, then people with disabilities are also fully image-bearers.”¹⁵ Eiesland too says, resurrected Jesus’

¹⁴ Nancy Eiesland, “Encountering the Disabled God,” *The Other Side* (September & October 2002), 12-13. <http://www.dsfnetwork.org/assets/Uploads/DisabilitySunday/21206.Eiesland-Disabled-God.pdf> (accessed November 10, 2018).

¹⁵ Shiao Chong, “The Disabled Savior,” *The Banner* (March 3, 2017), <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2017/03/the-disabled-savior> (accessed November 10, 2018).

impairment marks reveal “the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.”¹⁶

The question of perfection also raises the question of healing. What is healing? What if one is not healed here but there is hope of an eschatological healing?

Mark 9:43-48 talks about being deformed in the Kingdom of God “... it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell” (9:47). According to the above passage, if amputees (being deformed therefore, a symbol of sin and curse) can enter the kingdom of God, does that mean disability and deformity too will inherit the kingdom? This passage alludes that there is disability in the hereafter too. There is no eschatological healing as it is promised in our theology and spirituality. There is a continuation of what is here and now and the afterlife. Mark subverts the idea that ‘able’ and ‘beautiful’ are virtuous. He insists that deformities enter heaven, whereas ‘beautiful’ and ‘whole’ is cast into the hell. In the divine scheme the unnatural becomes natural. Amputation (deformity) in earthly life will save from eternal damnation. If so, where is the question of being disabled means being damned?

2. ‘Disabled’ Jesus: a Christology of Solidarity

‘Disabled Jesus’ is a contextual Christology. Eiseland writes, “it is contextualized in that the disabled God emerges in the particular situation in which people with disabilities and others who care find themselves as they try to live out their faith and to fulfil their calling to live ordinary lives of worth and dignity.”¹⁷ It is at the resurrection, the disciples understood the significance of the person of Jesus. Eiseland further writes,

In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important words was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the *imago Dei*. Paradoxically, in the very act commonly understood

¹⁶ Nancy L. Eiseland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 100.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

as the transcendence of physical life, God is revealed as tangible, bearing the representation of the body reshaped by injustice and sin into the fullness of the Godhead.¹⁸

The resurrection of Jesus points to the incarnational promise that he is the Emmanuel (God with us and will be). He is with us as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. The impaired resurrected body of Jesus points to the fact that the resurrected Christ is revealed as the disabled God. This has implications for our salvation too. The resurrected Christ calls his followers to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their own salvation.¹⁹ Resurrection of Jesus does not posit that suffering and loss are triumphantly eradicated, but rather that they are transposed into the promise of a fullness yet to come.²⁰

The resurrected body of Christ is not merely a resuscitated or reanimated physical corpse. Neither it is an apparition or some spiritualized and fleshless pseudo-body. It is a transcendent body, appearing and disappearing abruptly. But it is the body of Jesus. He appears bearing wounds from the cross. His risen body demonstrates the extent to which God affirms the created and whole person.

Liberation for new life confirms the goodness of creation, the goodness of the *imago Dei* in its embodied form, but it does so by transforming it into a heavenly form. Hence, redemption is not *from* bodily existence, but *for* bodily life in all its capacities – that is, creativity, relationality, and availability – the richest possibilities of which lie in communion with God.²¹

At the cross Jesus subjects himself to disability, and his resurrected body continues to bear his scars as a sign of God's solidarity with humanity. His disabled body represents one who understands by embodying disability even in his transformed, resurrected body. It also

¹⁸ Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁹ Ibid., 100.

²⁰ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), 206.

²¹ Ibid., 207.

suggests that disability indicates not a flawed humanity but a full humanity. Our bodies participate in the *imago Dei* in and through vulnerability and its consequent impairments, not despite them.²²

The resurrected Christ thus embodies the blessed contingencies and dependencies of human life and places these in the heart of God. The impaired body of Christ is an icon of the disabled God, a God whose vulnerability is thus palpably real.²³

The resurrected Christ as disabled challenges the ‘suffering servant model’ and ‘conquering Lord model’. It means moving away from the vision of redemption and promised new life in terms of homogeneity, wherein all people are normalized according to the ideal non-disabled body. Jesus’ risen body marks God’s identification with human vulnerability, such that differences are confirmed rather than pressed into ghost-like conformity. There is no assimilation into normalcy in the new life to come. Of course, we will all be transformed and changed (1 Cor. 15:51), the sting of suffering taken away in a way that we cannot imagine. Even so, however, we shall remain who we are, not standardized and folded into a homogenised common stock.²⁴ The resurrected body of Jesus also makes possible a renewal of hope for PWDs, not a utopian hope (of erasure of all human contingency) but a recollection and projection that even our nonconventional bodies, which oftentimes dissatisfy and fail us, are worth the living.²⁵ Ehrman writes,

The resurrection brings the harvest of our life – experiences, history, virtues, memories – to a new bodily pitch in Christ. We enter into a new situation of God’s love that is continuous yet discontinuous with the former situation. In the resurrection, we shall finally be in our element and in action, transformed in God’s love and grace.²⁶

²² Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, 101.

²³ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, 208.

²⁴ Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris, *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability* (London: SPCK, 2002), 73.

²⁵ Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, 103.

²⁶ Ehrman, “Disability and Resurrection Identity,” 738.

Resurrected body of Jesus also points to the acceptance of the disabled God who enables the PWDs in finding peace and reconciliation with their own bodies and Christ's body the church. The impaired resurrected body of Jesus alludes to the fact disability becomes a new symbol of wholeness and a symbol of solidarity.²⁷

Conclusion

Asian context is predominantly the context of poverty, religious plurality, caste discrimination, and gender inequality. It is also the context of extreme ableism. In such a context, Jesus, as the resurrected (yet) disabled Christ becomes paradigmatic for Christologizing. He stands in solidarity with the disabled even in the resurrected state.

The portrayal of 'disabled' Jesus Christ provides a provoking yet powerful image for Christologizing in the Asian context. He is the 'Human One' who identify with the sufferings of the marginalized, the *ochlos* (the masses). Such image would inspire us and energize us to imagine, provoke our commitment and conviction to 'walk, talk, see' with Jesus. This Christology is done by getting implicated in the struggles of the people and experiencing the suffering of the people as God's Son did it on the Cross and in his resurrected form he bear the marks of that suffering. In and through his life, ministry, death and resurrection the 'disabled' Jesus Christ identifies with the suffering humanity. This Christology, therefore, is not triumphalist, interventionist and imperialistic but inclusive and challenging.

An attempt was made to understand the resurrected body of Jesus and its implications for disability theology. Two things stand out: the question of eschatological healing is to be re-imagined and resurrected Christ stands in solidarity with PWDs. This has serious significance for our theologizing and spirituality, which is predominantly based on an 'ableist' ideology. The resurrected Christ calls us again to "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand put it in my side." It is in that 'touch' we experience the healing, wholeness, liberation and transformation. And it is in that 'touch' Jesus' resurrection finds its meaning and purpose, i.e., he lived, died and rose again to be in solidarity and communion with humanity – the disabled humanity.



²⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, 101.

Religious Minorities and their Rights in India

- Robin Christopher J.*

The constitutional bench¹ of the Supreme Court has laid down that the Indian State has no official religion and this doctrine becomes the foundation for secularism. Democracy in India foresees a pluralistic society and so draws from this doctrine of secularism urging citizens to inculcate a sense of open-mindedness and to encourage a culture of dialogue for continued harmony and to co-exist with different religions, cultures and identities. The words of K.T. Shah during the discussion on article 25 in the Constituent assembly debate sheds light about how the constitutional framers imagined the future road map when he said that “the possibility of all religious institutions being accessible and open for all communities is a very healthy sign, and would promote harmony and brotherhood amongst the peoples following various forms of beliefs in this country”.²

Article 25 of the Indian Constitution states that all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and have the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion. For the sake of convenience, there is a need to dissect and examine each of these concepts as encapsulated.

a. Freedom of Conscience

The concept of freedom of conscience emanates from the neutrality of the secularism doctrine. The sense of neutrality is to ensure that the government is neutral and has no role in interfering in the belief of a person, as this belief is situated in the conscience of that person. So, the constitution instructs the government to have an attitude of indifference and further bars it from discriminating against individuals based on their faith. But,

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¹ Ismail v. Union of India 1994

² <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1933556/>

in practice the Freedom of Religion Acts³ have enabled governments to interfere with the beliefs of a person, by setting up procedures such as, issuance of notice, appearances before a magistrate and an inquiry wherein the government gives the District Magistrate the role of evaluating the reason why a person has changed his/her faith. This method is a deviation from the doctrine of secularism as it violates the neutrality of the state with regard to choice of religion and, thus, seriously hampers the spiritual journey of a citizen.

Further, through the Freedom of Religion Acts, the government destroys the autonomy of a person as it assumes the role of decision-maker for that person using the pretext of ensuring that there is no coercion, inducement or fraud. On the other hand, in public view such an approach to faith and belief has caused public imagination to be cautious about minorities and their acts and this has in turn negatively impacted the psyche of the minorities, who are now straining to ensure that their acts are not only morally upright, but stand scrutiny and appeals to the feelings of the majority. Also, the notion of tolerance as elaborated by the Court⁴ towards the free exercise of the right to freedom of religion falls short of satisfaction.

b. To Profess and Practice

Article 25 uses the words profess and practice to capture the acts or expressions that are relevant in the context of religious freedom. The word “profess” has to do with a person expressing the faith that he or she belongs to. It accompanies an exhibition of faith in the form of worship, teaching or observance. Practice on

³ India’s Freedom of Religion Acts or “anti-conversion” laws are state-level statutes that have been enacted to regulate religious conversions. The laws are in force in eight out of twenty-eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand. While there are some variations between the state laws, they are very similar in their content and structure. All of the laws seek to prevent any person from converting or attempting to convert, either directly or otherwise, another person through “forcible” or “fraudulent” means, or by “allurement” or “inducement.”

⁴ *Bijoe Emmanuel & Ors vs State Of Kerala & Ors* 1986

the other hand denotes the use of overt acts such as ceremonies, rituals, processions, assemblies, and gatherings for praise and worship.

In the domain of professing, the religious identity of a person has come under challenge and it has been a subject of struggle for scheduled castes and tribes to plead with the government for continued recognition as the Presidential Order of 1950 strips them of their scheduled caste and tribe category status. In the domain of practice, the ritual of cow slaughter has seen some major challenges and the courts have ruled against the Muslim community by declaring that slaughter is not an essential practice and it is also not required as part of a religious ceremony⁵. While the court examined this question, it has put forth the ‘Essential Practices test’ as a qualifying method to determine if a religious practice must get the benefit of Article 25 or not. The test essentially allows the court⁶ to decide that for a ritual or a practice to get the protection of Article 25, it must satisfy that it is in consonance with the conscience and is an essential tenet of the community to the satisfaction of court. But on what basis the court assumes this role and how the courts distance themselves from the interplay of power between communities itself becomes important as these decisions can have adverse consequences on how communities engage, exchange and grow.

c. To Propagate

Propagation as a right to freedom is understood as sharing with others of what one has learnt/experienced. The court⁷ has defined the expression to mean conveying one’s own beliefs to another by exposition or persuasion without any element of coercion. But in reality, the activity of propagation of faith is treated with mistrust extending to active harassment by vigilante groups as they impede occasions of distribution of literature, gospel sharing and prayer gatherings. The courts have defined

⁵ Mohd. Hanif Quareshi & Others vs The State Of Bihar 1958

⁶ N. Adithayan vs The Travancore Devaswom Board 2002

⁷ Rev. Stainislaus vs State Of Madhya Pradesh & Ors 1977

conversion in the negative by saying that conversion is bad and the failure to define what conversion is, has created a vacuum which is misused to halt even peaceful expressions and acts of propagation that involve no coercion or blandishment but merely comprise attempts at persuasion and appeals to conscience.

Freedom of Religion Acts

The objective of Freedom of Religion Act is intended to prohibit conversion by use of force, inducement, fraud or coercion. The act lays down the procedure by which a person can change his/her faith. This procedure is arbitrary as it intends to regulate the process of conversion and violates both the autonomy and privacy of individuals as they are forced to dissect their choices to allow the government to evaluate them. The act is specifically invoked when citizens choose to convert to the minority religions and so it is also used politically to exploit and corner those citizens. This is antithetical to the doctrine to secularism and democracy as it adopts a sectarian approach to conversion.

The Indian Penal Code is adequately equipped with provisions to deal with fraud, cheating and inducement, and therefore there is no requirement for such laws. And the mere existence of these laws, allow third parties to interfere and raise questions about a deep personal choice a citizen makes thereby forcing him/her to explain it.

U.P. Ordinance to regulate unlawful conversion

The 2020 ordinance passed in Uttar Pradesh relating to unlawful conversion for the purpose of marriage is just another kind of Freedom of Religion Act which has very similar provisions. The ordinance intends to make the choice of conversion at the time of marriage, a serious area of contestation by allowing any person to allege unlawfulness. It also lays down the procedure for such marriages, hampering the right to marry a person of one's choice and forcing the individual to give reasons for the decision, thus shifting burden of proof on to the individual. The police are also allowed to conduct enquiries into these reasons, which makes the entire process a way to harass the parties involved. In the light of campaigns such as love jihad, this law comes as a boon for vigilantes to misuse it for political

gains and ultimately the victims are stripped of their right to marry a person of their choice, and also stripped of their dignity and respect by rendering them vulnerable to harassment.

The Proposed Cow Slaughter Bill in Karnataka

There has been a spate of attacks in Karnataka on transporters of meat, especially beef, by vigilante groups. In many of these incidents, vehicles transporting cattle to and from farms and cattle melas (fairs) for various purposes are attacked on the road and people in them assaulted brutally, resulting in injuries and even deaths of Muslim drivers. The vigilante groups claim that the cattle are being led to slaughter houses. It is in this context that the proposed law is framed, as earlier the ban was only on cows and calves of cows and she – buffaloes (as per the Cow Slaughter Act, 1964) but slaughter of oxen, buffaloes and bulls were permitted by law. But the new law has expanded the definition of beef to include even oxen, buffaloes and bulls with no exception. The Cow Slaughter Act, 1964 prohibits the export of cattle from the state but the new law intends to prohibit all export, import and inter-district cattle transport. The new law only allows for cattle aged above 13 years to be slaughtered and the law fails to provide a rational explanation for the same. This approach not only violates the right to food of choice but also the freedom to carry out business, while at the same time subjecting the vulnerable to the malice of those who perpetrate violence against minorities.

Rule of Law and Violence

The nexus between the vigilante groups and violence perpetrated against the minorities must be examined closely. As per the Violence Monitor Report⁸, up until the month of October 2020, 225 incidents of violence which are in the nature of physical assault, intimidation, threats, harassment and social ostracization have been faced by Christians at the hands of these groups. The challenge to law has been one of accountability as these groups evade prosecution. Also, the lack of will on the part of the state governments to act against vigilante groups has created a favorable atmosphere for them to target the minority communities.

⁸ <https://mapviolence.in/incidents/>

So, rule of law becomes an important point of reference to address the issue. The report also states that out of 225 incidents only about 25 cases are registered as First Information Reports against perpetrators. The difference in the number of incidents and cases filed highlights the issue of non-accountability. The struggle to uphold rule of law is faced with hurdles, often resulting in victims failing to file complaints coupled with procedural hurdles. However, there have also been circumstances when the courts have stepped in, upholding the doctrine of secularism and proactively directing for protection of religious freedom and security of life.

One such instance was in the case of *Jeganathan Israel V. State of Tamil Nadu*⁹, wherein the police had issued a notice to a Christian asking him not to conduct any prayers at his house with his friends and relatives and even sought an undertaking to the effect. The notice issued by the police was challenged in court and the court was compelled to decide the question of whether a person is required to take permission to conduct a prayer meeting in a private house and under what circumstances can the police or authorities intervene in the name of public order. The court ruled that there was absolutely no need to obtain prior permission from any authority to conduct prayers and the court imposed a pre-condition upon the authorities that they must come to a point of subjective satisfaction on the basis of concrete evidence and a failure to do so would result in violation of fundamental rights. In another case of *Shivram Poyam and Others V. State of Chattisgarh and Ors*¹⁰, the Court stepped in to ensure that the 16 families whose houses were demolished and who had to flee from villages of Kondagaon, Chattisgarh, because of their faith, were safely allowed to go back to their villages and further ensured that their houses were rebuilt under police supervision. The court also ensured the establishment of a police post nearby.

Debate on Secularism

There is a need to examine the early debates on secularism to pinpoint the exact point of departure from a holistic approach of respecting and tolerating of all faiths to unfairly targeting and regulating the lives of those who choose to change their faith. While India continues to be a

⁹ *R. Jeganathan Israel v. State of Tamil Nadu and Ors* 2019

¹⁰ *Shivram Poyam and Others V. State of Chattisgarh and Ors* 2020

constitutional democracy, its vision of a pluralistic society continues to be confronted by challenges. The judicial pronouncements on secularism have highlighted the neutrality of the state as the defining factor. But that explanation is insufficient to explain the phenomena and so there is a need to look at constitutional secularism in a broader way and especially in terms of how it originated and evolved.

The views of intellectuals have been a rich source to understand the phenomena. Partha Chatterjee while examining secularism in India recognizes three principles of liberal democratic doctrine as its defining characteristics namely liberty (right to freedom with the right to profess, practice and propagate but also enabling the state to regulate activities associated with religious practice), equality (the prohibition on the state to discriminate on the basis of religion and right to equality), neutrality (state has no official religion). He identifies that the application of secularism in India has been contradictory.¹¹ Amartya Sen strongly criticizes the practice of secularism in India since the Indian state fails to fully embrace secularism in a political sense.¹²

T.N. Madan who has defined secularism as an interreligious understanding and has called it an alien cultural ideology in India outrightly dismissed it¹³ as a failed project. Sociologist Veena Das has also criticized the neutral, secular state as imitating the western common sense¹⁴ and even Ashish Nandy has argued that secularism is a western and colonial concept¹⁵ and thereby saying that it is a failed project in India. These criticisms about secularism are something even the intellectuals of vigilante groups have subscribed to in order to establish their arguments against secularism. Whenever and wherever they get an intellectual space to expose the limitations of secularism they do it highlighting an alternative concept of Hindutva and a Hindu nation.

Those who argue for the Indian version of secularism identified it as unique because it has no strict separation of religion and public

¹¹ Chatterjee 1998

¹² Rajeev Bhargava 1998

¹³ Madan 1987

¹⁴ Das 1989

¹⁵ Nandy 1992

policies but rather prepares a platform for diverse cultural expressions and belief systems to play their role in mutuality. Therefore, academicians like Zaheer Baber argue that the state has to be secular in its orientation. Baber further articulates that the political process is one of making concessions and accommodating a wide variety of religious demands and pressures from all religious communities and that the actions of the state are not meant to purge religious values from life. But he agrees that the failure of the state to be sufficiently secular as it disregards upholding the rule of law has led to the rise of vigilante groups¹⁶.

Going forward with the realization of Religious Freedom in India, firstly there is a need to consciously engage with the concept of secularism as part of reaffirming and reimagining the ever evolving pluralist ethos of the nation and paying serious attention to the changes in social structures, religious ideas, institutions and practices. The political parties who stand for secularism and the Government agencies who promote secularism should take care of the changing scenario as part of their attempt to project themselves as neutral players as far as the religious sentiments are concerned. Secondly, it is imperative to restore the ‘agency’ of an individual which, in various narratives and campaigns such as love jihad and forceful conversion, is often brushed aside as either being non-existent or western or incapable. Counter narratives based on individual freedom and choice have to be developed and propagated. Thirdly, we need to function as watch dogs to continuously examine the co-relation between religion, social memory and history and their deployment at appropriate times by the communal forces to stake claims that strike at the heart of Article 25. Fourthly an attempt to examine and document violence against minorities should be initiated. Finally, it is equally important to undertake a critical review of the modes by which political and economic powers become the driving forces of violence against minorities in our times.

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Religions in the Era of Secularism – Some Reflections

- Cheriyan Alexander*

In 1844, Karl Marx made his famous observation that religion was a palliative illusion which humanity would soon outgrow, once the working classes of all lands became the masters of their own destiny:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.¹

Marx's critique may be read as the culmination of nearly three centuries of growing secularization in European society. Behind him and leading on to him stand thinkers like Schleiermacher, Jefferson, Paine, and Voltaire, all of whom were engaged in the quest for a rational, idealist and ethical religion shorn of the supernatural, the magical and the superstitious. By the Eighteenth century it could be said that while religion itself was still a strong component of social life in Europe, it was a far cry from what it had been in the Middle Ages, when an unassailably totalitarian church practiced absolute thought control over the entire population. It was during the Renaissance (14th to 16th Century) that a secular space slowly emerged, gaining a further boost from the Reformation of the early 16th century. Following the Roman Catholic Church's last major attempt to reassert control through its indictment of Galileo for heresy in 1610, there was simply no stopping the juggernaut of secularization. The Enlightenment movement of the 18th Century soon laid the foundations for modern

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¹ Marx, Karl, "Toward the Critique of Hegel's Theory of Right", Marx & Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis. S. Feuer (New York: Anchor Books, 1959) p.263

nation states, democracies and constitutional governments. Religion was eventually confined to the private and personal realm while separation of church and state became one of the most cherished principles of modern secular democracies. By the middle of the 20th Century, religion itself was on the wane all over Europe as evidenced by steep declines in church attendance. The situation in many parts of Europe today remains pretty much the same, barring the surge in religiosity among immigrants from Islamic countries and religious revival in some eastern European nations that freed themselves from Soviet hegemony in 1989, particularly, staunchly Catholic Poland.

When we turn our attention to other parts of the world, however, it becomes evident that Marx's prophecy about the eventual decline of religion has simply failed to come true. All over the developing world and in many parts of the developed nations such as the United States and Canada, religion is alive and well and positively growing. In the developing world, the two religions that have witnessed the most significant increases in the number of adherents have been Christianity (of the Pentecostal or Evangelical variety) and Islam (primarily of the Saudi-sponsored conservative, Wahhabi variety). In Communist China, evangelical Christianity is winning large numbers of converts every year, most of whom congregate not in churches but in homes. The rise of these "house churches" is a sociological phenomenon without precedent in that part of the world.

This new hunger for religion in spite of increasing modernization and globalization still awaits comprehensive theorization. In what follows, I wish to briefly present a few personal reflections in the hope that they may stimulate further debate and discussion.

It now appears that the intellectuals who embodied the spirit of the Enlightenment overemphasized the centrality of reason as a driving force in human behaviour. Marxist theoreticians too were being reductionist when they explained the wellsprings of human action and motivation as largely a matter of economics. There are many more complexities and nuances at play in human affairs which such explanatory frames leave out of the reckoning. It is clear that religion meets psychological and social needs that are unaddressed even by material wellbeing.

A relevant illustration of this is the increasing religious revivalism among second generation Muslim immigrants in Britain and the United States. Coming from fairly comfortable homes, many youngsters among them increasingly embrace a more intense and visibly Islamic religiosity as a badge of assertive identity which helps them stand out against the largely secular lifestyles of contemporary multicultural Britain and America. Among many such immigrant families – and this includes both Hindus and Muslims in Britain and the United States– the fear of assimilation into the easygoing secularism of Western culture, with its privileging of individualism over family and communitarian values, leads to an even higher emphasis on religious observance than is the norm back in their countries of origin. This trend is, however, not without its problems chief among which is the risk of radicalisation by fundamentalists who espouse violent strategies of the “holy war” variety.

As globalization advances and as societies increasingly face the risk of being reduced to economies, it looks like capitalism, ironically, is well on the way to accomplishing the central tenet of Marxist philosophy – the claim that only a materialist conception of the meaning of existence can explain reality. The reassertion of ethno-religious identities in many parts of the world can, to a significant extent, be explained by nervousness in the face of the rapid encroachment by scientific, technocratic and commercial worldviews of spaces that had hitherto been constituted by non-rational, “transcendent” paradigms of life and its meaning.

Benedict Anderson’s famous definition of nations as “imagined communities” could just as well be applied to religious identities. A religious community can quite effectively be defined as a group of people who gather around a story, revelation, teaching, or vision that radiates meaning and coherence for their lives. Religions often work by equipping adherents with a set of “eternal”, “transcendent” referents with which they can assess and evaluate the uneven and unpredictable flux of everyday existence. It is only natural then that much of the content of these referents is generated not so much by empiricism and rationalism as by faith, religious imagination and idealism. A good deal of it, when viewed through the lens of modern science, can only be described as “mythological”. Nevertheless,

paradoxical though this may seem, many people, even some who have had a modern scientific education, find it necessary for their psychological and spiritual well-being to hold on to such a worldview alongside their acceptance of scientific explanations for most things. They do this because of what they see as the tangible benefits of such a choice. According to the psychologist Jerome Bruner, “in the mythologically instructed community there is a corpus of images and models that provide the pattern to which the individual may aspire, a range of metaphoric identity.”² One must add to this psychological fulfillment the many other tangible and even material benefits that flow from the sense of belonging to a distinct community. These range from inspiration, encouragement, and affirmation at the spiritual/psychological end of the spectrum to things like emergency financial assistance, medical care and disaster relief at the material end. It is to these factors then that we are compelled to attribute the remarkable resilience of religion even in the teeth of modernity and scientific progress.

The history of the evolution of secularism as a principle of governance in modern democracies holds valuable lessons for all who are followers of the different religions today. If today we see fairly good conditions for peaceful co-existence between adherents of religions characterised by mutually incompatible beliefs, it is in large measure a result of the secularization of the polity of nation states within whose boundaries these diverse groups live. History shows that even from ancient times the default condition of human religions has been plurality. In fact, even the most seemingly monolithic faith traditions – Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam – display a range of divisions into sects and schools stretching back even to their earliest phases. Conflict has often erupted not just between these traditions but also *within* them across long stretches of historical time. Often the conflicts have been fraught with violence and, in some cases, catastrophic. These have included conflicts such as those of the Shaivites versus Vaishnavites, Sunnis versus Shias, and Protestants versus Catholics, among others. The conflict *between* major religions is of course too well-known to need elaboration here.

² Bruner, Jerome.S. “Myth and Identity”, *Daedalus* Vol. 88, No. 2, Myth and Mythmaking (Spring, 1959), p. 349

The most revolutionary piece of legislation aimed at addressing the problem of religious conflict, arguably, has been the so-called “establishment clause” of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, (passed in 1791) which was the fruition of the aspirations behind earlier more minor legislations aimed at strengthening religious tolerance. It has since been adopted by a host of secular democracies that have taken birth all over the world since then. (India is no exception and the constitution of India reflects this clearly). The clause was so named because it contained the key word, ‘establishment’: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

It is worth looking at the historical context of this utterly transformative piece of legislation. Over in Europe, religious wars between Protestants and Catholics had raged on for over a century by the time the US constitution was framed, leaving hundreds of thousands of people, of both groups, dead. Because the European states by and large had no church-state separation, minorities lived in fear and were often subject to harassment by state-supported vigilante groups. In states that were officially Catholic, the Protestants were victimised and the reverse was the case in states in which Protestantism was the faith established by the state. In the case of the infamous Inquisition, a little earlier, anyone who championed a doctrinal position that varied from that of the official church was condemned as a heretic, subjected to brutal torture and even executed with approval from the state.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the American Constitution was responsible for the clean break between the state and religion. It ushered in, as a key principle of governance, the state’s neutrality with regard to religion. Under its terms the state henceforth would neither promote nor suppress any belief system or faith tradition but would protect the right of each one to exist without fear of harassment from either the state or from other religions. It also protected the right of citizens to remain unaffiliated to religion if they so wished without fearing the oppression of those who were religious. Thus, freedom *for* religion and freedom *from* religion were both protected. Also protected were the right to leave a religion and the right to embrace another religion. Each religious group or sect had the right

not just to profess its faith but to propagate it. It was left to the citizen to decide which faith he or she should follow or abandon. Switching allegiance or remaining neutral or even creating one's own eclectic blend by mixing and matching elements from different faiths – all these became possible for free citizens of a secular democracy. The state's role in all this was that of a neutral umpire – ensuring that no group used any kind of coercion or threat against any other. Ever since, this framework has clearly proved its efficacy in enhancing the all-round progress of democratic societies. At the same time, far from causing the extinction of religion, it has created the conditions for numerous faith traditions to bloom and flourish and evolve.

Secularism has indeed taken many forms in many countries and has been implemented in varying ways in different nations. It must be noted, however, that there are situations when religions, far from seeing secularism as a guarantee of religious freedom, tend to see it as a threat. In the United States, for example, alongside the increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity brought about by waves of migration from Asia and Africa, there has been a growing perception of threat amongst sections of the Christian majority, particularly among evangelical Christians. There is the feeling amongst these sections that the state through its secularist policies is helping erode the broadly Christian ethos of American society. A case in point is the question of public prayer in schools funded by the government – the public schools. Until the fairly recent past, these schools had prayer as part of the school assembly. The prayers were specifically Christian in nature. As diversity increased in the American population, objections began to arise here and there, owing to discomfort among some who belonged to religions other than Christianity, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism among others. Many states began ending the practice of school prayers, arguing that publicly funded schools were answerable to all taxpayers, not just to Christians, and hence it was better to keep these as religiously neutral spaces. Defenders of this policy argued that religious freedom was not being violated since it applied only to publicly funded schools, while schools run by Christian missions out of their own funds were in any case absolutely free to have Christian prayers. It was understood that the non-Christians who sent their kids to such schools did so on the understanding that the prayer sessions were obligatory for all. The same freedom could be enjoyed by schools

funded by Islamic or Hindu or Jewish organizations, if they wished to have the prayers of their respective religions recited in school assembly.

Another worry about secularism, especially in Christian circles in the West has to do with the perception that secularism has its origins in atheism and hence is essentially hostile to a religious worldview and by extension is erosive of traditional values and morals that are contingent upon belief in God. It is perceived to be reductionist and amoral and hence not a worldview that nurtures and sustains a life imbued with meaning and purpose. In this context it is worth examining in some detail a specific case of conflict between the religious, specifically Christian, worldview and the secular perspective as it unfolded in the United States. In recent years, there have been heated exchanges between biology teachers and evangelical Christian groups in the southern United States. In some states like Tennessee, parents' associations have put pressure on schools to scrap the teaching of evolution or at least to include Special Creation (by God) as a rival theory. Science educators are alarmed at this development and argue that it amounts to unconstitutional interference in the process of education. "Teach the kids all the religion you want in the Sunday School classes at church", they argue, "but leave biology teaching to biology teachers." The parents on their part are saying that it is their right to bring up their children in their own faith tradition, and the teaching of the theory of evolution – a theory they consider to be false –ends up indoctrinating their kids' with erroneous ideas that run counter to their most cherished beliefs.

It is worth analysing this debate even from an Indian point of view because it has implications for the freedom of educators to design curricula free of interference from those with specifically religious perspectives. There have been cases in the recent past here in India of attempts to insert majoritarian religious worldviews into the curriculum of even science subjects in schools. A case in point is the attempt a few years ago by certain vested interests to declare astrology an exact science and to get universities to offer MSc programmes in astrology. Secularist minded educationists have opposed this tendency but those of a majoritarian persuasion in this regard are still engaged in the attempt, under the pretext of national pride and patriotism.

Going back to the American debate then, it is important to take stock of the spectrum of perspectives that the issue has thrown up. It would of course be incorrect to represent this as a conflict between Science and a given religion - Christianity in this case. Christianity is far from being a monolithic religion today as there are hundreds of denominations, representing tremendous diversity in matters of doctrine and scriptural interpretation. There is simply no opposition to the teaching of evolution on the part of a large and significant section of Christians. These include the Roman Catholics, the Episcopalians, the Presbyterians, the Orthodox, the Lutherans and a few others. The opposition to the teaching of Evolution comes mainly from ultra-evangelical denominations such as the Southern Baptists and a few Pentecostal groups. They exert a dominant influence in the southern states - often referred to as the 'Bible Belt'. Denominations like the Southern Baptists are characterized by their extremely literalistic interpretation of the Bible. In their view, almost all of the Bible is meant to be taken literally and they disagree with other Christian denominations which argue that some parts of the Bible are meant to be taken as symbolic and metaphoric representations of spiritual truths rather than as literal fact.

The core area of controversy is the interpretation of the account of the creation of the world by God that is found in the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. These early chapters describe how God created the heavens and the earth, by literally speaking them into existence, how he created the plants and animals and the first human couple, Adam and Eve. They also contain accounts of a great global catastrophe, a flood that covered the entire planet and was caused by God as a way of punishing the wicked descendants of Adam and Eve. They go on to narrate that God allows one man, Noah, to save himself and his family and a pair each of all the animals on the earth, by gathering them all in a mighty Ark that Noah builds to God's specifications and which floats above the deluge. The interpretation of these and other accounts of the first era of the earth and of humanity has been the subject of hot debate among Christians, especially since the birth of modern science.

The literalists argue that the six days of creation as narrated in the Genesis account are meant to be taken as six literal 24-hour days. Some of them also argue that we live on a very young planet and that by

calculating from the time references in the Bible, we cannot but conclude that the creation happened a mere six thousand years ago. They further claim that species are mostly fixed and continue their lineage in an uninterrupted flow of generations from the moment of creation six millennia ago. They object to the teaching of evolution in schools, arguing that it imposes false teachings on impressionable young minds, thus violating their right to religion.

Such rigid and combative literalism with regard to Biblical interpretation is a relatively recent phenomenon in Christianity. It doesn't go back further than the beginning of the previous century. In contrast to this, allegorical interpretations - of the Bible as a whole, and of the book of Genesis in particular - go all the way back to Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish scholar of the First Century (in Judaism) and St. Augustine of Hippo (in Christianity) in the Third Century. Modern theologians like the Jesuit paleontologist and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and, more recently, Raimundo Panikkar, have reconciled evolutionary biology with Christian perspectives. In interpretative frameworks of this kind, texts like the creation accounts in Genesis are viewed not as scientific papers but as deeply spiritual poetry about the great mystery of the marvelous world of nature and human life flowing out of the action of the divine Spirit (God) upon matter. This is the position taken by the Catholic church today and by most of the liberal Protestant denominations. Meanwhile the tension between biology teachers and young earth creationists continues, with the former telling the latter: "We don't interfere in the religious teaching you impart to your kids in church. Return the same courtesy by allowing us to teach science as science in the classroom."

In the case of India, the civilisational ethos has by and large been favourable to the use of religion even in civil society spaces and fora and this has continued to be the case even after the modern nation-state, the Republic of India, came into being in 1950. This stands in sharp contrast to the secularism of most nations of the West. For example, there is in India usually no objection to the display of framed pictures of Hindu deities on the walls of government offices. Verses from the Koran or from the Bible can sometimes be seen in the office cabins of Muslim or Christian government officers. A situation like this would be unthinkable in the government offices of countries like France, which practice the classic textbook model of secularism as it

evolved in much of the West. Thus, secularism when imported to India through the constitution was modified to suit the civilisational ethos prevailing here. The Indian form of secularism is thus more accommodative of the presence of religion in the public fora and of its expression therein through ritual, iconography, dressing, and symbolism. The philosophy, in its ideal form, appears to be one that advocates equal proximity to all faiths rather than equal distance from all faiths. This is evident in the number of public holidays in honour of religious festivals and commemorations. India has a great many more of them compared to France or even the United States. To cite an obvious example, neither France nor the US has a national public holiday for Good Friday, but India does. The civilisational basis of such an approach was best exemplified in the ashrams of Mahatma Gandhi where there were prayer sessions of an eclectic nature, with readings from the holy scriptures of the major religions of India. It is a little worrying that this spirit of tolerance is at risk owing to the increasing religious majoritarianism that one gets to see in many parts of India nowadays.

All in all, it can still be asserted that under the broad protective umbrella of religious freedom and tolerance that only the modern secular state can offer, most people are able to tap into the beneficial aspects of religion without dreading its potential for punitive oppressiveness, which was so much a part of many religious structures in the pre-secular era and which continues to prevail in nations that are under theocratic regimes even today. Despite the ugly recrudescence of militant religious fundamentalism in some parts of the world today, modern democracies would do well to hold on to their commitment to protecting the pluralist ethos of their respective societies and to be especially proactive when it comes to the rights of vulnerable religious minorities within them. History bears witness to the fact that there is no other recipe for building peaceful and creative societies.



CHRISTMAS MESSAGES

PRESIDENT'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

John 1.14 NIV

Dear Beloved members of the large family of NCCI,

There cannot be a more relevant Bible verse for Christmas this year than John 1.14, where our great yearning is met by the assurance of the Word of God. The reason is obvious. We live in a world torn apart by the attack of the great pandemic. COVID19 is not just a serious health hazard only. It is a plague which has affected our courage, mental peace, family life, economy, spiritual life, educational system, job security and future planning in all areas of life. We are suffering for almost 10 months now because of the devastating pandemic taking away the lives of many and leaving many disabled. The whole world is running around looking for the discovery of vaccine as well as for other ways of escaping from the pandemic. If someone who has the power and courage can come and live with us to heal us, comfort us and restore us, that is what we require urgently. The word of God says, that in the birth of Jesus, that is accomplished fully. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He is very much present among us as Immanuel, “God with us.”

I am happy to note that the NCCI secretariat took up the challenges of COVID-19 and organized many programmes and activities through Webinars, Zoom meetings and other virtual techniques. Churches accompanying Distressed Migrants to Life, Church and Women during COVID-19, Six Webinars of “We the people:”, deliberation on our Constitution, Pastoral Care During COVID-19, Sustainable Environment, Affirming Human Rights and intercepting Human Trafficking, 70 years of Dalit Discrimination, Interfaith Dialogue for gender equity, and COVID-19 and LGBTQI people are some of them. I congratulate the secretariat for their commendable work. It is encouraging to see that churches are getting used to the virtual techniques and participating in all church related activities through them.

10th December is Human Rights Day. It endorses the justice principle that all human beings regardless of race, colour, religion, sex, language, political or other opinion, national or social origin, have equal status and rights. 2020 theme of Human Rights Day observance is, “Recover Better - Stand Up for Human Rights”. This is an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of human rights in healing and re-building the world which is torn apart by the attack of COVID-19. The UN has declared 2021 as the “International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development”.

In spite of the limitations of COVID-19, we will observe the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity from the 18th to the 25th January 2021. This year’s material has been prepared by the Monastic Community of Grand champ in Switzerland. The theme is, “Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit” (John 15:1-17). The Grand champ sisters are inviting churches across the world to enter into their tradition of prayer and silence. I request all NCCI churches to cooperate with other denominations in their locality to organize ecumenical worship on all 8 days. We will observe Sunday, 24th January as NCCI Sunday and support NCCI with our special offertory.

This year Christmas is going to be much different from the many Christmas seasons we have celebrated in the past. We have to give importance to the basics of Christmas and forego many elaborate celebrations. I have shared the following suggestions with my own Church, the Church of North India, and my Diocese, the CNI Diocese of Jabalpur:

1. Rediscover the real meaning of Christmas. The basics of Christmas is about celebrating the advent of Christ. It means ‘coming’ of the savior of the world. His coming brought us hope, peace and joy. No Corona virus can take away the hope, peace and joy of this great event. We have to reassure ourselves that God in Jesus has forgiven our sins and redeemed us.

2. Observe Christmas in a simple way. Spend the Christmas evening with your family and have a simple meal sitting around lighted candle. Do not spend more than you require. Let the decorations and trees in your churches be modest.

3. Share Christmas joy with those who cannot afford. Let us focus our attention on the less privileged people around us. Let us share food packets and clothes with them in this cold season. The spirit of Christmas is also about love and serving. When we reach out to help others, it will reduce our pain and frustration and bring peace and joy in our heart. That kind of sacrifice is the true spirit of Christmas, and God truly honors such lives. May this Christmas make a difference in our life!

Year 2020 has been a year that we do not want to remember again because of the trauma through which all of us passed. Yet, we want to thank God for being with us while we walked through the valley of the shadow of death. The COVID-19 account may not be closed in our lives for some more months. We have to continue living with it taking care of others and ourselves. May God bless you with his accompaniment in all your life situations during the New Year.

Wishing you a Blessed Christmas and a New Year of great Healing and Hope.

The Most Rev. Dr. P. C. Singh
President, NCCI

2nd December, 2020



Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Unity Octave)

from 18 - 25 January, 2021

Theme: “Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit”
(based on John 15: 1-17)

24 January - NCCI Sunday

All the Churches, its local Congregations, Regional Council of Churches, Related Agencies, Theological Seminaries and other ecumenical organisations are encouraged to be part of this global endeavour by conducting ecumenical prayer meetings to celebrate ecumenism locally.

GENERAL SECRETARY'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

Astounding wisdom of Christmas, growing weak through every passing year...

At a time when the Roman power was at its peak, the Greek philosophy was flourishing and the Jewish religion looked upon itself as the only revelation of the one pure God, the birth of Jesus comes crashing in as an alternative to the status quo of a disempowering power, disorienting wisdom, and distancing religious experiences.

In the birth of Jesus the nomadic sheep-farming community finds something worthwhile to proclaim to the world. The wisdom of the east identifies in the birth of a baby, and comes seeking, the deliverance of the world. At a time when philosophic, religious and government nexus wielded power to the extent where an alternate could not even be dreamt off, deliverance was identified in Jesus by the belittled, poor, despised nomads, and the citizens of the east.

When hope seemed hopeless the voice in the wilderness identified Jesus as the Messiah of the times. The woman who supposedly lived with many men ran into the city with the message of hope that she had found the Messiah. A visually challenged person Bartimaeus discerned the Messiah in Jesus. The roman soldier who was put on guard until Jesus died cried out that Jesus is truly the chosen one of God. Through the ages and in every generation peoples of no noble birth and nondescript persons have identified redemption and redeemers from among them that can redeem the world. Such astounding wisdom which comes alive in every age and time has the potential to transform peoples into flourishing communities of hope. This we need to celebrate lest it wane into oblivion.

At the close of a stressful year that no one wants to remember and at the threshold of what was expected to be a better year, we are met with a strain – a new strain of the virus that has dashed hopes of respite in the New Year. Wisdom and scientific temper, human understanding and intellect, are all stretched to the limit. The virus mutates and still evades us. Depressed and disappointed the world is aghast with desperation.

Christmas reminds us that agrarian and farming communities and the wisdom from eastern traditions have much to offer for renewal and recouping. Their wisdom in identifying Jesus as the Christ has stood the test of times – for more than 2000 years of Christian witness through successive generations. There is immense wisdom in the farming community, the poor, the worker, the young, children, women, people with disabilities, persons of different gender identities and sexual orientations, and all such despised persons and communities.

Christmas beckons us to get back to the drawing board, evaluate structures and systems that have betrayed us and, on the terms of and along with victim and vulnerable communities, work on building sustaining and life flourishing communities. It is a call to be prophetic and pragmatic. Let us therefore bow before the manger of this astounding wisdom; the wisdom that exemplified at the first Christmas, was relevant through the ages, and that which stands out as the hope of any possible future.

May we be blessed at Christmas and all through the New Year.

Rev. Asir Ebenezer
General Secretary,
National Council of Churches in India

Christmas Eve 2020



NCCI Women's Concern promotes

THURSDAYS IN BLACK

Campaign

in Churches and Christian/Ecumenical Organisations

To address

GENDER INJUSTICE

particularly Domestic Violence and Rape

Need Help?

Feel Free to call: 9455059522 / mail us your concern:

jyoti@ncci1914.com; ncci@ncci1914.com

BIBLE STUDY

Christmas: Confession of Faith and Reverence of Life

- Shibu Kurian*

St. John 1:1-14

Existence produces essences and the essences decide the quality of the existence. The Johannine community affirms the essence of their faith through the proclamation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing, one may have life in His name. This faith proclamation, Jesus is the incarnate Word of God is emphasized in the prologue (St. John 1:1-18) is in the form of a poem. It is a faith credal hymn which is the foundation of the Johannine gospel and the community. This faith credal hymn challenges the cosmic pre-existence of the Word and Word's relationship to the world. The pre-existent Word became human and challenged us for the reverence of life. This faith affirmation expelled the early Christian community from the Jewish Synagogue, because for a Jew God to become human is a negation of the Jewish faith. The community believed in Jesus the Christ in the midst of the Jewish and Roman persecution proclaimed and affirmed that Word in the creation is the Word in the incarnation. They confessed their faith that Jesus Christ is the God Himself.

1. The incarnated God is the God Himself

The eternal word entered into the time bound world (Gal.4:4). That means the Word is what God is and the Word does what God does. It affirms the oneness of the Word and the God. The infancy narrative is the story of God Himself. It provokes the wonder of creation, the gift of life, the power of the Word and celebrates the mystery of revelation that transcends covenantal limits of time and space. It means, He is the *eschaton*, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*. Christmas is the message of the *eschaton* and through this celebration, the Church is looking into the *eschatology*, the coming of Christ. Therefore, Christianity is not an ideology, but it is a faith community which affirms Jesus Christ is "God Himself." He is the only One in this world to be born without sin. One who is perfect and complete in the humanity. His incarnation challenges us for the reverence of life.

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2. The incarnated God is the God of History

Incarnation is a glorious historical event. The Word becoming flesh is a decisive event in the human history. This historical event changes God's relationship to humanity and humanity's relationship to God. Through the incarnation human beings can see, hear, and know God in ways never before possible. Becoming flesh means en-fleshment. Flesh in the Bible refers to the whole human personality in its frailty and vulnerability. The Greek word *egeneto* means that a person or things changes its property and enter into a new creation, becomes something that was not before. The Greek aorist tense *egeneto* indicates that the becoming was a single decisive event in history. Hence history is important for a faith community. Engaging in the history is the need of the hour. The Hebrew word for Word is *dabar*, it is not a static word, but always active and dynamic. Incarnation, the light of the world, which is active, and dynamic is engaging in the history to remove its darkness. The incarnation challenges us to engage in the history with the incarnated One for annihilating the culture of death in and around us.

3. Incarnated God is indwelling among us for the reverence of life

The word "dwelling" is a verb rich in the Hebrew Scripture. In Exodus 25:8, "and let them make a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst." It recalls God's promise to dwell with God's people. God choose to live with humanity in the midst of human weakness, confusion, and pain. His self-revelation is not outside human experience but belongs to human experience. The incarnation is the source of life and light for all people. The transcendent, metaphysical, and invisible became immanent, practical, and visible for His creation. His incarnation is for the reverence of human life. In the time of the birth of Jesus the Christ, the society was under a third- military dictatorship. It was a society where everyone was coerced. The socio-political-religious elite has the right to enjoy the life. They churned the non-elites, especially the women and the children. As an agriculture society, the farmers had no right in their crops. The life of the common people was in miserable condition because of the brutal nature of the socio-political-religious authorities. The vast majority of the community lived between the fine line of hunger and assurance of subsistence. They were stratified based on their economic and purity pollution mapping of the religious life. The incarnated One – Jesus the Christ- through His ministry challenged the aristocratic community both in political and religious circle. He gave His life for the reverence of the life of "others."

The existence of the Johannine community produced good essence in their living spaces. They affirmed Jesus Christ is the God Himself, He is the history and He indwelled among us for the reverence of life. Graham Kendrick, a prolific English Christian singer, songwriter, living in Tunbridge Wells, England wrote a poem with title “Meekness and Majesty.” In his poem, he wrote “Meekness and majesty manhood and deity, in perfect harmony the Man who is God. Lord of eternity dwells in humanity. Kneels in humility and washes our feet. O what a mystery meekness and majesty. Bow down and worship for this is your God. This is your God” He is explaining the incarnation, His humility, and the meekness and majesty of our God. His incarnation is for the redemption of life from the death.

Today we lack Christian discipline and Christian ethics. We are celebrating Christmas without remembering the Christ event, the death, resurrection, ascension and His coming. Christmas is not a mere festival among other seasonal festivals. It is remembering and retelling the great event that happened in the history, the birth of the Messiah, the Saviour. Therefore, Christmas is the time of confessing the faith in Jesus the Christ and to celebrate the reverence of life. We are living in a world of which neglects the co-existence and praising of asymmetrical relationship. The arrogant bureaucratic nature of the political leaders and their method of using the religious life of the people to enhance the conflict in the society where the marginalized have no right to live in this world. The gap between the rich and poor is widening. The poor farmers have no right in their agricultural products. The religious fundamentalism destroying the harmony, meaning and the life of the society. The politicisation of religion is the danger of the hour. The women are pictured as a commodity for pleasure. The socio-economic disparity is increasing. We are living in the absence of the presence of the world. The world we are living is not responding ethically good in manner. The harmony of the society is stratified and scorned the life. In this ridiculous condition, the role of the Christian believer is to live as an aroma of Christ for the reverence of life. We are called to proclaim the human dignity in the midst of annihilation of the life. The confession of the faith will lead to protection and promotion of life. Our responsibility is a harmonious connectedness with nature and with the fellow human beings in the world. Respecting and preserving the nature for the future, the taste of the coherence of the life and the co-existence are our pressing priorities. The God Almighty will strengthen us to confess the faith in Jesus the Christ and reverence of life for the Glory of God and the extension of His Kingdom.



LITURGY: Disability Advocacy Sunday 2020

INDIAN DISABILITY ECUMENICAL ACCOMPANIMENT (IDEA) OF NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN INDIA (NCCI) DISABILITY ADVOCACY ONLINE WORSHIP

3 DECEMBER, 2020, 5 PM

THEME: DISABILITY AS DIVERSITY IN THE DESIGN OF GOD

Call to Worship:

L: Welcome sisters and brothers as we have gathered to celebrate God's presence in our midst.

C. We have gathered in the name of Christ, God with us.

L. Welcome to this online worship as we gathered together as a Church to make the Church as an Inclusive Community, where the Life and Witness of the Disabled Disciples are recognized and welcomed, where the disabled are treated equally along with the abled people.

C. We have come in the name of the Divine Spirit, the living God within us.

Opening prayer

O LORD, the source of living and non-living, white and black, able and disable and everything on this earth, we have gathered here as your children to observe a day for persons with disability who often are unnoticed, rejected, and considered as curse. We pray that You will help us to observe this day with owed acknowledgement of our failures in understanding disability and our owed responsibility towards the issue. Open our hearts to receive Your Word, and may our prayers be answered by You. In the name of Jesus Christ who inspires us to accept everyone as they are, we pray. AMEN

Hymn: Blessed Assurance – video song

- 1 Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine;
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.*

- 2 Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.
- 3 Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Savior am happy and blest;
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God the Creator who created all human beings, whether abled or disabled, in His own image (Genesis 1:27).

Since all of God's creation is good, we affirm God's good design in all human beings, whether abled or disabled.

We believe that all human beings, whether abled or disabled, are fearfully and wonderfully made by God (Psalm 139:14).

We affirm that disability is the design of God. We believe in God's declaration (to Moses in Exodus 4:11) "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who made them deaf or mute? Who gave them sight or made them blind? Is it not I, the Lord.

We believe in Jesus Christ, the suffering, crucified and disabled God who took on the limitations of humanity and lived among the disabled

and declared that disability is not a result of sin, but to manifest the works of God in the persons with disabilities (John 9:3).

We believe in the Holy Spirit who is at work in the Church to make it an inclusive community.

We believe that without the persons with disabilities the Church is incomplete and that the Church is of all and for all.

We thus aspire to make the Church a disabled friendly Church in structure, theology and praxis. We also aspire the Church to be a fully accessible Church where the persons with disabilities are welcomed and where they can actively participate and fully involve in the Church.

Prayer of Confession

Day to day, I was proud of my image in the Mirror as the normative perfect beautiful image. My choices were skewed with this view. I regret this prejudiced view of mine that has broken the hearts of the differently-abled. I am penitent for the pitiful looks that I had on them. I bewail for denying seeing the beauty in them. I remorse for being rigid and hesitant not seeing the wholeness and perfection in them.

(Silence)

My world view of considering that I am and those like me are the ones who are all abled and the differently are disabled and perceived them as objects to be pitied and objectified them with a priori that I am the only one who is to share, care and love them. I grieve for this my grave objectification of the differently-abled.

(Silence)

God has created the world with beauty and wholeness. Wholeness is the virtue of God. I have considered that those who are mentally challenged are a flaw in God's creation. At times I have thought that it is better for them to die than to be a glaring disturbance for my faith affirmation. I have demeaned them as insignificant and reduced the purpose of their creation. With a contrite heart, I confess that I have sinned.

(Silence)

For acclaiming and affirming a binary that people like me are the only perfect normative being and therefore those who do not fit into these definitions are differently-abled. By doing so, we have degraded them for our entertainment, sympathy, charity, and support. I bemoan for these misconstruing thoughts of mine.

Absolution by PLWD:

Perfect Lord, who is perfect, is not in any means similar to our idea of perfect. Help our friends to transcend the normative singularities of our society. The God who stands by our side when we get humiliated, mocked, belittled, isolated, marginalized, pitied and objectified will definitely forgive you when we forgive you. Be in peace and love justice.

Information about Disability Helpline**Intercessory Prayers**

Creator God, help us to understand the wonders of your creation that every creature (person) whether able or disable, man or woman or trans person, is your design. They carry your thought in their body.

Lord we plea your mercy to understand the diverse nature of your creation,

People with disability have a purpose in their life as like every able person think and claim. May they be given due respect space and provision to function as they are like any human. Empower them as an instrument of great change in the society.

Lord we plea your mercy to help them in their struggle for respect.

Person with disabilities have good leadership qualities like any able person. Moses led Israelites in to Canaan, Paul courageously transformed the gospel to Gentiles and many other in the bible displayed great leadership qualities. We pray that the church and its institution reserve employment opportunities and even to the ministry of the Altar.

Lord we plea your mercy to accept them as they are.

We are grateful to the families, fellow workers, church leaders, children and spouses who turn into a welcoming community and stand with Person with disability without showing discrimination.

Disable God, May our churches be inclusive and leave no one outside its fold. May our attitude towards person with disability turn to be empathetic then to be sympathetic. May we understand that they are your design. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Bible Reading: John 9:3

Reflection:- *Topic: "Disability is to Glorify God"*

Introduction

Who created people with disability? Do people with disability have the privilege to say that they carry the image of God? I know these are very delicate questions deliberately avoided in many daises for in-depth discussion. If we say disability is God's choice of creation then why we denounce the People Living with Disability (PLWD) privileges in the churches. Why the church is unmindful about their presence? Even if we say that they are created in the image of God it reflects our sympathy because our theological terms affirm the concept of God as king, omnipresent, omnipotent, perfect etc. such concepts cannot speak to disabled people.

People with disability say that their being is not their choice hence they call themselves as the image of God. They imagine their God as Disabled. This definitely disturbs the imagination of the church as the church believes God is perfect hence aims to propel their members towards this perfection. A theological elucidation is essential on this topic.

The traditional attitude of the society is similar to the attitude recorded in John 9 but Jesus revolutionized that idea and added that the work of God is manifested among People with disability. To the question of his disciples on a visually disabled person on the street "whether he is born disabled due to his sins or his fore parents "sins" Jesus emphatically replied he is born to **"glorify the Lord"**.

This text explains us the misconceptions Jewish constructed about PLWD and Jesus's responses.

1. *Glorifying God Beyond Discrimination:* Jewish thought people with disability are curse and disgraceful and can never glorify the Lord. Jewish people also thought they are the only people on this earth who are chosen by God to glorify His name. They sourced an idea that God's creation would be perfect and without infirmities. We have constructed our theological ideas as dominant ideas. Cultural factors like paternalistic, exclusion from participation, and uneasy feelings of the majority due to their own complex over the PWD make the situation difficult for the PWD. There are cultural and theological reasons for this phenomenon. Both these factors emphasize the importance of "perfection", "power", "might", etc. Therefore, society has no place for the „disabled“. Cultural symbols affirm might and power. We need to re-symbolize the divine power not as dominating and controlling power but as liberating power and love. Thus, the symbols and metaphors used should resonate with disable people experiences.
2. *Glorifying God Beyond Human Assessments:* It is their fate that they are born due to their previous sins. In fact, all our thoughts and beliefs about God come from our imagination. These imaginations are exclusively prepared by dominant able-bodied people. These imaginations are justified with purified scriptures. In our imagination about God, human beings, sin and the story of salvation we made people with disability a victim of fate and curse. Jesus justified the theory of fate is untrue. Dr. Abraham reflected on the theme, "Broken God in the Midst of Broken People." Instead of a "success-oriented gospel", obsessed with cure and miracles we need to give expression to the gospel of a suffering God, suffering in solidarity with others. People with disability reveal God's diverse design of creation. Hence people with disability takes the pleasure of addressing their god as disable.
3. *Glorifying God Beyond Visual Recognition:* Disabled man recognizes Jesus as Son of David. We think vision is more

important to recognize but here the man who was visually impaired used his other faculties to recognize Jesus. We create facilities in our church that suits only for able people. For example, people with hearing difficulty cannot attend church services as there are no sign language available in the church while churches invest hugely on audio (Dolby) system. Jesus went in search of the lost sheep. Lost by the able-bodied manipulated systems. We notice children with autism and mentally challenged worship the lord in their style. This will not meet the parameters for worship we have designed.

Led by Rev. S.D. Deva Jothi Kumar, ESHA NCCI

Closing Prayer:

Benediction:

May the grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of us to make our churches an inclusive community by accepting disability as diversity in the Design of God.



NCCI-IDEA campaigns for

**Rights of persons with Disability, and
Accessibility and Inclusion in Physical and Mind space**

Need HELP?
Call **7028 400 222**
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REPORT: 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence

NCCI's Women's Concern campaigns against the Gender Based Violence

November 25 - 10 December 2020

The 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is an annual international campaign that starts on 25 *November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and runs until 10 December, Human Rights Day*. This year the 16 days of Activism to end Gender Based Violence started with enthusiasm and exhaustive planning despite the hurdle of restrictions on physical gathering. The challenges posed by the pandemic were turned into an opportunity as we moved beyond the present limitations to have a campaign where all were involved and motivated for the cause. NCCI Women's Concerns Desk under the guidance of Rev. Asir Ebenezer, General Secretary, NCCI provided the energy to the consolidated campaign and efforts required.

Taking cue from the UN Secretary-General's UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women NCCI's campaign marked the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence under the global theme, **"Orange the World: Fund, Respond, Prevent, Collect!"**. NCCI's initiative sought to join in the UN Women's Generation Equality campaign and help in amplifying the call for global action against GBV during the COVID-19 crisis, primarily focussing on the awareness and prevention part to improve the life of women and girls.

This year is like no other. Even before COVID-19 hit, violence against women and girls had reached pandemic proportions and with the pandemic followed by enforced lockdowns it reached still greater heights. According to UN Statistics, globally 243 million women and girls were abused by someone close in 2019. This was when, less than 40 per cent of women who experience violence report it or seek help. What COVID-19 further perpetuated was an unprecedented rise in both the scenarios.

As countries implemented lockdown measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus, violence against women, especially domestic violence,

intensified – in some countries, calls to help lines have increased five-fold. In others, formal reports of domestic violence have decreased as survivors find it harder to seek help and access support through the regular channels. School closures and economic strains left women and girls poorer, out of school and out of jobs, and more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, forced marriage, and harassment. By April 2020, as the pandemic spread across the world, the UN Secretary-General called for “peace at home”, and 146 Member States responded with their strong statement of commitment. Till recently 135 countries have strengthened their actions and resources to address violence against women as part of the response to COVID-19. Yet, much more is needed.

These 16 days brought out many take away for all to be started in our churches. Few things that came out strongly were as follows:

- Need for Harassment Policy, Work Place Policy and Child Safeguarding Policy in our churches and institutions.
- Help desk for Domestic Violence safeguarding and counselling help.
- Preaching and addressing from Pulpit the issues related with GBV.
- Workshops and awareness camps on issues of GBV.
- Asking men and clergy to join the campaign.
- Networking for stopping rape, harassment and issues related to GBV.
- Women Safety must in our churches and homes.

All these main takeaway were the outcome of 16 days of educating, advocating and activism campaign that started on 25th November by a webinar focusing on ***From War Zones to Peoples Home, We can and Must Prevent Violence Against Women during these times of COVID19, Leave NO One Behind.*** In this webinar we focused on Christian theological understanding of Violence and how can we rectify it in our own churches and home, followed by what do we understand by GBV and how can we address it in our homes. Our speakers from various fields of life made the session interactive and contextual, instigating a sense of ownership for the event.

On 27th November **NCCI-URM** brought to our attention through another webinar on the reality of GBV in the areas of Organised and Unorganised sector of works and how we can handle the situation of harassment in work place.

28th November marked starting of various events by Salvation Army. The Territorial Commander visiting their various territories and engaging with women to speak up against GBV.

On 30th **Tamil Nadu Council of Churches** brought their people together for a talk on GBV in situation of COVID-19 and how we can network and participate in resistance against GBV by organising Prayer movements. Again on 30th November and thereafter on 1st December **Mennonite Central Women Organisation** brought their women leaders to train them to say No to GBV and how we can provide counselling and support to GBV survivors.

On 2nd December **CNI SWFCS** brought their women together to talk about counselling help for families of church to combat GBV.

3rd December **CSI Mahila Samajam** organised a webinar for their Women Leaders where they talked about GBV and our response in times of COVID and how can we address it during the time of Christmas.

4th December marked the call from **ISPCK** in bringing together of various NGO's and Christian institution to talk about the relevance of Work Place Policy for Women safety and the reminder for all the institutions to have one.

5th December brought an opportunity for us to bring budding theologians from **Tamilnadu Theological Seminary** who had elaborate discussion on "Revisiting Power and Resignifying Resistance".

6th December the women of **UCC & SCC** had their programmes on GBV and the difficulty women face in life.

7th December with the understanding no one should be left behind we had a webinar for theme "Women with Disability & Gender Based Violence", was organised by **NCCI, IDEA and Engage Disability** who came together to address the issues involved.

8th & 9th December were marked by Theological Academic discussion on the theme "COVID 19 Impact on Women: Theological

Challenges and Prospective”, jointly organised by **NCCI, Gurukul Theological College & Research Institute** and **UELICI** to talk on issue from the point of view of interfaith aspect, ecology concern, migration issue, Dalit & Tribal women concerns and theological response from the Christian Scripture both OT & NT.

10th December, the Human Rights Day, was the final day of webinar which was organised under the theme “**Caste Based Gender Violence**” it was jointly organised by **NCCI-Dalit and Tribal concern** and **NCCI-Women Concern** coming together to talk about it and caste phenomenon being a defining and formative influence which nurtures and furthers gender violence in our society, marked by rapes and atrocities done to Dalit Women.

Today, although the voices of activists and survivors have reached a crescendo that cannot be silenced or ignored, ending violence against women will require more investment, leadership and action. It cannot be sidelined anymore; it must be part of every country’s national response, especially during the pandemic crisis.

We, at NCCI are in constant engagement to help the survivors and also to enlighten and empower our churches and institutions to make them aware, address and rectify the evil of GBV in our context. We at NCCI believe that 16 days was the preparation of 365 Days of ACTIVISM to end Gender Based Violence.

Ending Gender Based Violence is our Social and Spiritual Response to eliminate the evil of discrimination and violence against women in our society.

Be a part of it in big or small level in your own context.

By

Rev Jyoti S Singh Pillai
Executive Secretary
Women’s Concern, NCCI



NEWS : Churches Challenged to Commit to Uphold Gender Rights of Dalit Women

The churches and its institutions should work towards ensuring the dignity and safety of Dalit women working in healthcare and care-giving sectors. There is also a need to open other available professions and ventures in order to encourage Dalit women their participation and representation. Ms. Hannah Dhanaraj, a dalit feminist professional, one of the panelists spoke thus in the webinar conducted by the NCCI Dalit and Tribal/ Adivasi Concerns and the NCCI Women's concerns program clusters to commemorate the International Human Rights day on Thursday the 10th December 2020. She also said that the church should be aware that the Dalit women are made to work only on certain sectors of labor as in life-sustaining work and as caregivers. She also said that strategically the choice for dalit women professionals is limited and also are underpaid.

On the same note Ms. Deepthi Sukumar co-convenor of the Safai Karmachari Andolan mentioned that a major effort is required to address the safety and protection to women working as sanitation and health care workers. She also mentioned that Churches should take note and involve in rebuilding, restarting and reworking strategies on eradicating and challenging caste atrocities and forcing dalit women and men to dangerous works such as manual scavenging. She also said that churches can involve in advocacy, lobbying, researching new forms of untouchability practices that have emerged during the pandemic and post-pandemic situations.

Speaking from the Human rights angle Ms. Cynthia Stephen, social activist and human rights defender spoke of the need to devote resources to uplift the dalit women in order to make them economically and socially empowered. She said that the task of the church is to bring out special provisions in the way of giving leadership to the women priests and clergy. She also said that the challenge is for the churches, its institutions and clergy particularly male clergy is to distribute and encourage the sharing of resources to the Dalit women. She also mentioned that there is a desperate need to become a part of the system that upholds the rights and dignity of Dalit women.

It is to be noted that caste system is the most heinous social structure world has ever seen. Caste-based discrimination involves massive

violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Dalit women are one of the largest socially segregated groups in our country. The dominant caste groups (oppressors) use sexual abuse and other forms of violence and humiliation against Dalit women as tools to inflict “lessons” and crush dissent of labor and other movements within Dalit communities. Hathras case is one of the recent examples of such violence.

Although both Dalit men and women suffer under the same traditional taboos, Dalit women are confronted with these more often and are frequent victims of sexual abuse. They are discriminated not only by people of dominant castes, but also within their own communities, where men are dominant. In such perilous times the significance of Human Rights in the context of Caste based Gender violence constraining to the women in the margin becomes a dire need of the hour. Human Rights is the fundamental right of every human being to live, sustain and thrive on earth and betrayal of a person’s human right is a serious attempt to shatter the person’s dignity and right to life.

The theme for the international Human Rights Day 2020 suggested by the United Nations say “Recover Better – Stand Up for Human Rights.” The theme speaks volumes towards a praxis-oriented step to rebuild, rethink, restructure and rework from the past to form a brand new present which sojourns by taking everyone together without any form of discrimination or differentiation.

The National Council of Churches in India – Dalit and Tribal/Adivasi Concerns and Women’s Concerns organized the webinar to mark the Human Rights Day and also conclude the 16 days of global activism against gender based violence. The webinar was yet another opportunity to reflect and emphasize effective and praxis-oriented activism. The Churches in the membership of the NCCI must stand with the Dalit women who are fighting for rights, fighting for justice, and together push for eradicating caste and caste based gender discrimination.

Pradip Bansrior

Executive Secretary

Dalit and Tribal/Adivasi Concerns, NCCI

December 12, 2020





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