My Pilgrimage in Mission

Michael Amaladoss, S.J.

I was born on December 8, 1936, to Christian parents in Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, South India. My ancestors were Christians for about four generations. Both my father and my mother were teachers in government schools. Their jobs took them to various villages, largely Hindu. I grew up in a village of about 1,000 families, only three of which were Christian. For worship on Sundays we walked to a church that was three or four miles away. There was a popular temple of the goddess Mariyamman in the village. I grew up knowing more about Hinduism than Christianity. My friends and playmates were Hindus. It was a natural, human relationship, not hindered by ignorance or prejudice. My Christian identity was recognized and respected, as I respected their different identities. An open, easy relationship with other believers has its roots in these early experiences.

Jesuit Training and Studies

At the age of eleven I was put in a Jesuit boarding school in Tiruchirapalli, a large town. The school had celebrated its centenary in 1944. Here I grew up as a good Catholic boarder, with the daily Eucharist, regular evening prayers, practice of the sacraments, devotions to Mary, and celebrations of festivals. I used to volunteer to go to the surrounding parishes to organize games and teach catechism to children on Sunday evenings. Contact with Hinduism, however, did not disappear. We were still living in the midst of large temples and fervent popular religiosity. The temple bell sounded as loud as the bell of the church. The majority of the students in the school were Hindu, as were the teachers. Though the Jesuit priests spoke to us about “mission” and there was a colony of Brahmans near the school who had been converted forty years earlier, I did not notice any explicit “missionary” activity as such, though “mission Sunday” with exhibitions was celebrated enthusiastically every year. There were still some foreign missionaries, mostly French, in the Jesuit community. They were happy to witness to the faith in a friendly atmosphere. As a child in school, I had seen from afar two French monks dressed in saffron. They—Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux (who later took the name “Abhishiktananda”)—had founded a Christian ashram nearby in 1950.

I entered the Society of Jesus in 1953. During my novitiate I spent about two weeks with Fr. Ignatius Hirudayam, who was an expert in Indian culture and religion and whom I still consider my guru. He planted the seeds of inculturation in my heart and spirit, whichflowered much later under more favorable circumstances. After some years of spiritual and literary formation, between 1958 and 1961 I completed an M.A. in Christian (Scholastic) philosophy. It was a period of intense study. With access to a good library, I read the best books available on Indian philosophy and art. I did not neglect Scholastic authors like Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Maritain, and Etienne Gilson or other Christian authors like G. K. Chesterton and Christopher Dawson. I was initiating myself on my own to South Indian classical music. We formed a small group of students studying Indian art and culture to be able to use them to present the Good News to India, seeing Christianity as the fulfillment of Hinduism. But the unintended side effect was a growing appreciation for Indian culture and religion and a growing interest in inculturation. My M.A. thesis was a comparative study of C. G. Jung and Yoga. Then, from 1961 to 1963, I had a chance to

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do a two-year diploma in South Indian classical music, specializing in singing, in a professional school in Chennai (formerly Madras). I was the only Christian in the school—and only the second Christian student in the ten-year history of the school. (Later, after the Second Vatican Council, many more Christians joined the school.) I had teachers for whom music was not just an art but a life of devotion to the Lord. The songs I learned were 100 percent devotional and Hindu.

I did my philosophical studies in Kurseong, in the Himalayas, from 1965 to 1969. The Second Vatican Council had happened in the meantime, almost unnoticed by us, though the effects soon became visible. We began worshiping in the local languages. Theology now was taught in English, not Latin. There was a new approach of dialogue with other religions and cultures. In 1967 I went on a pilgrimage for a month with two other Jesuit students to the sacred places of Hinduism and Buddhism in North India: Rishikesh, Haridwar, Mathura, Brindavan, Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, and Sarnath. We stayed in Hindu guest houses, visited Hindu temples, attended their rituals, and met Hindu sannyasi. It was interesting to be told that one was ripe for sannyasa (renunciation). One such meeting lingered in my memory even today. A friend in Mathura took us to meet a Hindu sannyasi who had lived through a two-year period of absolute silence, alone with his scriptures and in meditation. I have never seen such joy and brightness on a human face either before or after. I realized that God, after all, is present and active even in the people of other religions. I plunged into a study of Indian spirituality. My first published articles (in English) were a comparison of Indian and Ignatian spirituality and a study of Gandhian spirituality. During our pilgrimage we had visited the Christian ashram of Murray Rogers, an Anglican, which brought me into contact with the giants of Hindu-Christian dialogue at the time like Raimondo Rogers, an Anglican, who also had been my teacher) and Samuel Rayan. During this time there was a lot of talk about inculturation and dialogue. I used to meet Swami Abhishiktananda in his last years whenever he passed through Delhi. In the interests of inculturation and contextualization I facilitated the launching of the Regional Theological Centres for Jesuits, in which theology is taught in the local (Indian) language, in close touch with the living situation of the people in different parts of the country, but academically associated with the college at Delhi. This has been a successful experiment. At the national level I participated in theological reflection concerning the possibility of considering the scriptures of other religions as inspired and therefore of using those texts in our prayers and even in the official liturgy, in an effort to develop an Indian Christian spirituality and sadhana (methods of prayer), in explorations into a method for doing Indian theology, and in introducing some little adaptations like gestures and symbols into the Roman liturgy of the Eucharist to give it an Indian flavor. I attended an Asian mission congress in Manila in 1979, which exposed me to the thought and experience of other countries in Asia, especially East Asia.

In 1983 I moved to Rome as one of the counselors to the superior general of the Jesuits. While my work involved advising the general on all administrative matters, I also had to keep an eye on all that concerned mission in the Society of Jesus. This period in Rome (1983–95) pushed me, rather accidentally, into the area of missiology proper. In early 1983 I gave a paper on dialogue, “Faith Meets Faith,” in a congress in Baltimore of the U.S. Catholic Mission Association. It received some criticism, so I began developing my thought on mission and dialogue in a series of articles, partly to explain and defend myself. Given my position in the Society of Jesus, I became a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and to the Pontifical Council for Culture. I was also one of the seven Vatican representatives in the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. I became a member of the Executive Committee of SEDOS, an organization that serves a group of religious congregations involved in mission. It publishes a bulletin and conducts periodical seminars. The SEDOS assemblies, in which missionaries with many years of experience in the field take part,
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were a good sounding board for new ideas. I was also involved in mission reflection in the Society of Jesus and helped prepare the discussion in its Thirty-fourth General Congregation. I was getting recognized as an Asian (Indian) theologian in Rome and was invited for many international meetings. These involvements meant opportunities for encountering people and problems in various continents. My responsibilities at the Jesuit Generalate were not heavy enough to deter me from pursuing my theological interests, writing, lecturing, and participating in conferences. While in Rome, I kept up my contact with India and Asia by annual visits and conferences both of the Indian Theology Association and of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. Criticisms of my theological views from official quarters were not long in coming, but they have only made me clarify my own thinking further. I was invited to respond to a paper at the Rome Congress of the International Association of Mission Studies and was promptly elected its vice-president. Eventually I served a term as its president. I continue as a member of the editorial board of Spiritus, a French review of mission. Still I would prefer to be known, not as a missiologist, but as an Indian theologian who is also interested in mission and dialogue, inculturation, and liberation.

**Writings—and Insights**

My writings (24 books and about 340 articles, as of 2006) reflect my varied interests: mission and dialogue, the theology of religions, liberation, inculturation, Indian Christian spirituality, methodology in theology, sacraments, and Christology. A few indicative titles are *Making All Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism, and Evangelization in Asia* (1990); *A Call to Community: The Caste System and Christian Responsibility* (1994); *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (1997); *Beyond Inculturation: Can the Many Be One?* (1998); *Making Harmony: Living in a Pluralist World* (2003); and *The Dancing Cosmos: A Way to Harmony* (2003). My latest book is *The Asian Jesus* (2005), which explores the images that Asians perhaps would have used to understand Jesus if Christianity had spread toward Asia rather than toward the West, such as the Sage, the Way, the Guru, the Avatar (divine manifestation in human form), the Satyagrahi (fighter for Truth), the Servant, the Compassionate, the Dancer, and the Pilgrim. Because of my training in music I have been able to compose about 100 hymns and bhajans (repetitive devotional chants for prayer) for the liturgy, a two-volume “teach yourself” book on South Indian music for beginners, and songs on Christian themes for Bharathanatyam (the South Indian classical dance tradition), thus balancing intellectual with emotion.

I have learned that mission is primarily God’s mission through Jesus and the Spirit. It embraces the whole universe and all history. The goal of mission is the building up of the reign of God and of the church as its symbol and servant. In Asia this goal is achieved through a threefold dialogue of the Gospel with the poor, the cultures, and the religions. Dialogue is mutual prophecy. Through our witness to Jesus others may be called to become his disciples. The other religions become allies in this endeavor, the real enemies being Satan and Mammon. Dialogue today should be collaboration.

The fact that I have not been tied to a faculty of theology may have enabled me to wander far and to be creative and free. I have not produced scholarly volumes that would delight specialists, a choice I do not regret. The attempt to create contextual theology in India may have also saved me from being a prisoner of Euro-American “systematic theology.” Even now, we Asian (Indian) theologians resent the implication that our reflections are not systematic if they are not a dialogue with the Euro-American “system.” We are convinced that no serious Indian (Asian) theology will emerge as long as we are tied to the apron strings of a Euro-American system. We can correlate our experience to the Gospel without the mediation of a theological system, which we see ultimately as a game of power and control. Unfortunately, any reflections on the theme of the dialogue of the Gospel with cultures and religions are suspect today if they do not conform to the Euro-American system, which is thrust on us as normative. No one seems to imagine the damage this attitude is doing to the credibility and relevance of Christianity in Asia today. This issue may seem to be a special problem of the highly centralized Roman Catholic Church, but in fact is relevant to all Christian theology. Colonialism of all kinds dies hard. I am sure that Asian theologians will soon assert their creative freedom.

I returned to India in 1995 and continued teaching in Delhi. In 2001 I moved down to Chennai to become the director of a new Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions. This institute is the new form of an ashram (founded in 1973) that focused on an ashram way of life and on inculturation of spirituality and liturgy, as well as interreligious dialogue at a spiritual level. The guru, however, died in 1994. A new team took over the center after some years and sought to focus on dialogue in the context of interreligious violence. It was then decided to move into research concerning the real causes for the violence, the ways of promoting peace, and so forth. I have been associated with this new orientation. Dialogue is not merely an “I’m OK, you’re OK” kind of phenomenon. I have found it more difficult to dialogue about contentious issues like violence. I also see that the Hindu elite may not like the violence, but neither do they condemn it, trying rather to “understand” it as an inevitable response to provocation, even though such provocation may prove on inquiry to be more rumor than fact. Educated Hindus often ask me, “Why do you want to convert us?” We do not realize that a person who feels that he is an object of an effort at conversion may feel hurt that he or she is considered religiously inferior and may resent such an implication as an attack against him or her and against God. In such a situation any dialogue that goes on without any reference to interreligious suspicion, fear, and violence seems hypocritical. So the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, which I am now directing, aims at doing research to find out the real causes of interreligious violence and to explore ways of making peace.

In the process, interreligious dialogue is taking a new shape. If I respect the freedom of God, who reaches out, and the freedom of the humans who respond, dialogue is the only way of encountering the other. At the same time, my own self-awareness has also changed. Hinduism is no longer an “other” religion for me. I see it as the religion of my ancestors. It is also part of my inheritance. I become a Hindu-Christian. Interreligious dialogue then becomes intrapersonal. I must integrate my multiple roots and render them transformative.

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**The center sought to focus on dialogue in the context of interreligious violence.**